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Bard of Modern Ireland: Perspectives on Voice and Mask within the Poetry of Brendan Kennelly

La voix et ses masques: approches de la poésie de Brendan Kennelly dans le cadre de la tradition bardique irlandaise

VOLUME I/II

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12 septembre 2008

Declaration

I, Sandrine Michelle, hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Ph.D. is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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For my family

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Abbreviations

Throughout this thesis, the following abbreviations have been used:

ATFV	Brendar	Brendan Kennelly, A Time for Voices: Selected Poems 1960-1990.	
	Newcas	stle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1990.	
В		_, Begin. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998.	
BOJ		_, The Book of Judas. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe,	
	1991.		
BS		_, Breathing Spaces: Early Poems. Newcastle-upon-Tyne:	
Bloodaxe,	1992.		
BW		, Blood Wedding: New Version. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe	
1996.			
С		_, Cromwell: A Poem. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe,	
	1981.		
CC		_, The Crooked Cross. Dublin: Moytura Press, 1989.	
G		, Glimpses. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2001.	
JIJ		_, Journey into Joy: Selected Prose. Ed. Ake Persson.	
	Newcas	tle-upon-Tync: Bloodaxe, 1994.	
MA		_, Martial Art. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2003.	
MMOR		_, The Man Made of Rain. Newcastle-upon-Tyne:Bloodaxe,	
	1998.		
MUAAI	_	_, Moloney up and at It. Dublin: Mercier Press, 1995.	
N		_, Now. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2006.	
PMA		_, Poetry My Arse. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1995.	

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the question of masks and voices in the work of Brendan Kennelly within the bardic tradition in Ireland. It starts by examining the different types of bardism one encounters throughout Irish history, and the extent to which they relate to the poetry of Brendan Kennelly. For instance, although the poet has inherited from the pre-Christian bards their way of looking for inspiration through subconscious states, he rejects the materialist approach to poetry typical of the medieval fili, and turns instead to the freedom of the bairds, a subcategory of the bardic order at the same period.

What Brendan Kennelly has in common with all these bards is that he is a performing poet. This means that the second chapter of the present thesis examines the question of orality. It demonstrates how Kennelly draws upon the ballad, and the epic tradition, in particular by adapting the violence of the epic to our modern age. However, one also notes that Kennelly, both in his written and his performed poetry, vindicates orality at the expense of the analytical that dominates modern society.

The last chapter examines how his performances have allowed the poet to shape a number of masks which answer one another in his works. Behind these masks a number of distinct voices have been identified, thus linking Kennelly to the earliest bards once more, but also suggesting schizophrenia. A close examination of Kennelly's discourse reveals a number of contradictions that correspond to a dichotomy between the public mask and a more private version of himself. A facet of this mask that is less often perceived shows the poet as a tragic and self-sacrificial figure.

Key words: Brendan Kennelly, Irish poetry, voice, mask, bard, orality

Résumé en français

Cette thèse a pour objet la question de la voix et de ses masques dans la poésie de Brendan Kennelly, ici étudiée dans le cadre de la tradition bardique irlandaise. Nous commençons par nous attacher aux différents types de tradition bardique, en observant leur influence sur l'écriture de Kennelly. Bien qu'il ait hérité des premiers bardes connus un mode d'inspiration en quête d'états subconscients, il refuse le matérialisme des *fili* du Moyen-Âge et lui préfère la liberté des *baird*, une classe inférieure de l'ordre bardique de la même époque.

A l'instar des bardes, Brendan Kennelly récite ses poèmes lors de performances publiques. La deuxième partie de cette thèse examine donc la question de l'oralité. On montre alors comment son œuvre hérite de la tradition des ballades mais également de la tradition épique dont le poète a su adapter la violence au monde d'aujourd'hui. Néanmoins, on note que par-delà des qualités communes d'ordre formel et thématique, Kennelly défend l'oralité aux dépens de l'esprit analytique qui régit notre société actuelle.

Notre dernière partie s'attache à montrer comment les performances poétiques de Kennelly l'ont conduit à adopter des *personae*, des masques qui prennent différentes formes et se font entendre à travers différentes voix. Ces voix, dont certaines ont été identifiées, rattachent Kennelly à la tradition des tous premiers bardes mais laisse également planer sur son oeuvre l'ombre de la schizophrénie.

Une étude attentive du discours de Kennelly révèle un certain nombre de contradictions qui correspondent à la dichotomic entre le masque public et une version plus intime du poète. L'une des facettes de ce masque laisse apparaître le poète sous le jour tragique d'une figure sacrificielle.

Mots-clés: Brendan Kennelly, poésie irlandaise, voix, masque, barde, oralité

Intitulé et adresse des laboratoires où la thèse a été rédigée

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Introduction

"Hear the voice of the bard!" Blake wrote in the introduction to his "Song of Experience." This would be a fitting introduction to any poetry performance by Brendan Kennelly who has been called "the bard of Ballylongford," "the bard with Dancing Dimples,"4 and "the bard of the people."5 It has often been taken for granted that he is the bard of contemporary Ireland because of the many poetry readings and recitals he has given since the early Sixties, that is the way he uses his voice and stages his poetry. However, throughout Irish history there has not been only one type of bardism but a number that changed and evolved through time. The status of poets, the nature of the audience and the technical format of their performances have also undergone a transformation. The purpose of this study is to examine the question of masks and voices in the poetry of Brendan Kennelly, which aspects in his work and aesthetic views can be called "bardic" and to what type of bardism they relate. Being a "bard" in early Christian times, in the 18th century and of course in the 20th and 21st century clearly does not mean the same thing. Context has to be taken into account and for this reason this thesis has been entitled "Bard of Modern Ireland: Perspectives on Voice and Mask within the Poetry of Brendan Kennelly."

In that regard, the present approach is positioned at odds with Gerold Sedlmayr's choice of ignoring Kennelly's background, which I believe is essential to an understanding of the poet's *oeuvre* both written and performed. The decision to undertake this study and

¹ William Blake, *Blake, Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 210.

lhid.

³ John B. Keane, "The Bard of Ballylongford," in Persson ed., 1996: 61-65.

⁴ Marcse McDonagh, "The Bard with Dancing Dimples and a Mischievous Smile," Kerryman, 07 February

⁵ Thomas Myler, "Ireland's Uncrowned People's Poet." Ireland's Own, 08 July 2005, 7-10, 8.

investigate the Irish tradition has been made despite the fact that in common with Gerold Sedlmayr, my knowledge of the Irish language is next to non-existent. I compensated for this weakness of mine by consulting more learned scholars in the area and in particular I am strongly indebted to Professor Alan Titley. However, it is my belief that mastery of Irish might have been beneficial to this study but not necessary, in the same way as it might be beneficial but not necessary to the study of many other Irish writers.

In order to access and understand the texts of Irish bards from the earliest times to the 18th century, translations have been consulted in a similar way as Brendan Kennelly himself consulted and relied on translations for writing *Antigone*, *Medea*, *The Trojan Women*, *Blood Wedding* and *Martial Art*, and also for his appreciation of a number of poets whose language is neither English, nor Irish such as Fernando Pessoa, Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud and others.

This study takes into account the totality of Brendan Kennelly's published works, including his plays and his translations in so far as they are relevant to this project. However, greater attention is granted to his longer poems: Cromwell, The Book of Judas, Poetry My Arse, and The Man Made of Rain because they are most pertinent to this exploration and were indeed the literary soil from which the impetus sprang to investigate the question of masks and voices in Kennelly's work by studying it in the light of bardic heritage.

Since one cannot speak of bardic poetry without taking into consideration its performing aspect, audio-video and audio recordings have been used to better determine Kennelly's poetic approach. This type of material has the particularity of being open to misinterpretation – maybe even more so than a written text because it can be very easy to convince oneself that what is being said is other than it is. This is the reason why when such sources have been used, particularly in the case of interviews, cross-checking has

been carried out by playing the recordings to third parties a number of times in order to reach the greatest possible objectivity. Throughout the four years of research that have led to this thesis, I have attended many readings and recitals by Brendan Kennelly, during which I have taken notes and made some recordings. These personal compilations have complemented and come to complete a significant amount of public recordings. A good number of personal interviews and communications have also taken place. The information collected on such occasions has only been taken into account when confirmed by other sources or when the person interviewed has subsequently repeated the same data content. Again, the purpose of this method was to achieve results that would be as objective as possible.

As far as text analysis is concerned, a theoretical method has been used, but only when it was relevant. This decision was made in order to give primary attention to the text and its performance, and to avoid the temptation of forcing poems into matching an analytically well constructed theory. This means that just as sources of various natures have been used to shed light on the many dimensions of the poet's work, and the creative vision behind it, a variety of methods have been used to back up and confirm subjective readings. In particular as I entered the slippery but extremely fertile area at the cross-roads of literature and psychology opened by Julian Jaynes, the risk of seeing my results dismissed seemed pretty high. I consequently turned to forensic linguistics in order to see whether some more scientific proof could be obtained to substantiate my conclusions. This approach involved putting my subjective reading to the test of a severe objectivity. By so doing I was running the risk of having the full edifice of my interpretation collapse, but the linguistic experiment was successful: the many voices of the bard were heard and recorded.

As the bardic background to Kennelly's poetic work was being explored, various types of bardism had to be distinguished according to their time period. When Kennelly's poems are observed in comparison with the earliest types of Irish bardic writing that have come down to us, similarities appear in terms of form but also in terms of creative approach, that is confirmed by testimonies written by witnesses contemporary to the period observed. The earliest type of bardism was closely related to magic. In prayers and in curses, poets and their audience believed in their power to act upon the reality around them. Words were equated with deeds, a belief that was long-lived even though the form of bardic poetry evolved. Formal traces of this early poetry can be found in Kennelly's work. However, the influence of the early bards in Kennelly's work can also be perceived in their mode of creation. Trance and subconscious states were often involved in poetic composition. Through these states, bards believed that they could access the realm of the divine and return with meaningful if mysterious verse. Echoes of this mode of composition can be found in Kennelly's approach to poetry. These special states of the mind that can be called "inspirational" or "visionary" and that lead to the only form of poetry acceptable to Socrates, are essential to Brendan Kennelly who values his dreams as a well-spring of poetry.

Poles apart from this type of bardism, the medieval *fili* were technicians concerned primarily by the complex form of their verse. They were organized in a hierarchical order and acted in the service of a Lord. In such a system, self-promotion was essential. Brendan Kennelly satirizes Irish contemporary poetry in *Poetry My Arse* where he targets features that were developed by the medieval *fili*. He consequently denounces a materialist type of poetry that treats words as "things" and voids them of any power to relate to a superior realm, invisible and divine. This is the reason why Brendan Kennelly has so often quoted the Bible by saying, "In the beginning was the Word," a formula that reminds his listener

of the transcendental potential of words. The materialistic approach to poetry is characteristic of some poets - medieval bards, but also some modern poets according to Kennelly – whose creative motivation is grounded in their interest to promote themselves and to obtain social and economic advantages. This leads to the question of patronage that guaranteed the sustainability of the bardic order until its collapse at the end of the 17th century. Brendan Kennelly associates the question of the corruption of the Muse – among other things - with poets in groups. If collegiality can provide fertile ground in so far as poets can offer each other constructive criticism, it can also lead to "politicking" within the group that can be detrimental to the development of the individual's own creative potential. This is one of the reasons that led Michael Longley to distance himself from the Belfast Group. By taking the initiative and denouncing the danger of being caught up in a group of poets, Kennelly assumes the role of the bard as freedom fighter as was depicted by William Blake, but he also asserts a form of freedom that in medieval ages was much more in keeping with the baird than with the fili. The period that follows the collapse of the Gaelic order saw the poets' independence increase, both at a social level since they were no longer dependent on patrons and at the level of their art when their poetry shifted from syllabic to stress pattern. This was a time during which the Munster poets flourished. Because these poets had a lot in common in form and in spirit with Robert Burns's verse, when English was introduced in the Munster area the Scottish poet became a favourite. Burns and the Munster poets who composed in Irish from the 17th to the 18th century provided the region with a rich corpus of verse that was still being orally transmitted at the time of Kennelly's childhood in North Kerry in the 1940s. They also contributed in elaborating the image of an archetypal poet on which it would appear Kennelly modelled himself as a bard and which had a significant impact on his poetic creation. However, the

⁶ The Poetry Programme, RTE Radio, 09 July 2008.

⁷ The distinction between bards and baird will be explained in due course.

extent of this influence demands closer attention and will be investigated further within the thesis.

The fact that poetry was commonly being performed – both in the form of songs and of recited poems around him – when he lived in Kerry had a decisive impact on Kennelly who remembers in his teens writing ballads for emigrants who were leaving Ireland for America. The first traces of his poetry performances appear in the newspapers in the late 1950s. In common with bards of any period, the performing dimension of his poetry is a touchstone for an understanding of his work. Peformance contributes to rooting Kennelly within the oral tradition of Ireland and orality also seems to affect his text in this way but how can one speak of orality about a perfectly literate poet who has achieved the highest academic status in Ireland? One possible answer is that Kennelly occupies a hybrid position between written and oral poetry. Such a claim would follow the theory of Paul Zumthor according to whom orality is always a matter of degree. But in that case, the nuances of what belongs to written poetry and what partakes of oral literature has to be examined. This will be done in a second chapter of the thesis that observes Kennelly's work in the light of orality and that begins with exploring the extent to which his poetry draws upon the tradition of Irish lays and ballads.

"Violence is the begetter of sweetness and gentleness" Kennelly writes in his essay "Poetry and Violence." And indeed his own poetry can be called a violent poetry where echoes of ancient Irish epics can be heard. In particular with characters such as Ace de Horner, his hero who is called "a poet terrorist" and his dog Kanooce, a pitbull terrier who savagely attacks any dishonest man, Kennelly locates his work within the tradition of the Irish epics. Like these epics Kennelly's work often associates violence and humour in

⁸ Anonymous, "An Irishman's Diary," "New Poctry," Irish Times, 7 December 1959, 6.

⁹ Paul Zumthor, Introduction à la poésie orale (Paris : Éds du Scuil, 1983), 35.

¹⁰ JIJ, 32.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 23-46.

grotesque scenes where readers and listeners derive pleasure from dynamic descriptions of savage massacres. In Kennelly's long poems, bodies are traumatised, mutilated, tortured and dismantled but savagery and excess are combined with grotesque humour that cancels out any shade of pain. Thematically and formally Kennelly largely draws on the Irish epic but reconceptualises it to suit a modern audience and fit the modern world.

However, Kennelly does not subscribe to the modern analytical mind of logic and coherence. For him preconceiving the epic involves targeting the analytical mind and defending the oral mind. 12 In their purest forms, these two modes of thinking could be represented as the opposite ends of a line, the first extreme corresponding to the purest form of literariness and the second as the purest form of orality. Of course this representation is nothing but a model for reality, just as Zumthor explained orality as a matter of degree.¹³ The best representatives of the oral and the analytical minds are the wise man and the philosopher. The first leads his audience to wonder and provides answers in the form of mysterious, open and often puzzling formulae while the second resolves mysteries with systems and rational construction. Both share a love of wisdom but this love is expressed differently. The former speaks and the latter writes...

At a poetic level, Kennelly draws upon this rich opposition between the oral and the analytical mind, and he uses the language of the wise man to mock that of the philosopher. Most interestingly this opposition is not limited to the level of the text but also appears in performances and in Kennelly's attitude towards his own creation and ideas. Like bards of any time, he has always shown himself extremely generous and open towards his text (oral and written), letting it be freely borrowed if not utterly stolen. But the notion of copyright and intellectual property is something that belongs to modernity, a notion which does not make sense in an oral society. For instance, the title to his next

Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Blackwell: Harvard University Press, 1963), 288-289.
 Zumthor, 35.

collection of poems, *Reservoir Voices* has been chosen by the publisher and not by the poet himself who initially wanted to call it *Voices from the Reservoir*. ¹⁴ The latter is foremost, a pleasure to the ear with a familiar rhythm whereas the former is difficult to pronounce because of the concussion of the consonantic [v]s and refers to the visual world of films in its connotation of *Reservoir Dogs*.

The fact that Kennelly early became a successful poetry performer drew the attention of the media so that radio and television have played a decisive role in the dissemination of his poetry. However like for any successful public figure, success unsettles the self, provokes interrogation of one's sense of identity and in Kennelly's case resulted in the wearing of masks. Although there is no documentation about this phenomenon in relation to earlier bards, there are strong indications that something similar occurred. Interestingly in Kennelly's case, the process can be witnessed in the way the poet signed his books. In the Sixties he autographed his work by crossing out the printed designation, "Brendan," which he replaced by "Tim" that is his official first name. Later on when "Brendan" became a fully established public character, "Tim" disappeared and the books were signed "Brendan." Modern devices such as television, radio and newspapers offered Kennelly the opportunity to construct his own public figure. He became a "mediatic poet," that is, a popular poetry performer, which any successful bard is bound to be. But most significantly, the voices of different masks worn by the poet can be heard in his poetry through characters with very distinct voices. The fact that Kennelly has often claimed to hear voices entices the reader's curiosity and acts as an invitation not to dismiss this claim but on the contrary to look into it more closely. In this regard Julian Jaynes's

¹⁴ In communication with Brendan Kennelly 07 July 2008.

study The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind¹⁵ proved most useful to this study; indeed the interpretation that first presented itself of Kennelly's voices as a multiplicity of distinct voices was subsequently confirmed by forensic linguistics and is detailed within the thesis. These results backed-up and supported the already felt proximity between the technique of composition used by pre-Christian bards and that of Brendan Kennelly

By becoming a popular figure Brendan Kennelly is in line with the tradition of the Munster poets but also with the *bairds*, in as much as is known today about this category of medieval poet. In a lecture he gave in the late Sixties Kennelly indirectly alluded to the consequences for him of becoming a public character:

The main danger to the writer in Irish society [is] the Irish passion for turning the writer into a character ... Once he is referred to as a gas bloody man he starts to become a gas bloody man, and he's on the road to hell. ... This [is] a simpleton's stratagem. It [is] a crime against what [is] most sacred to a writer: his privacy ... My plea is for privacy and thoughtfulness. 16

Nonetheless it seems that after a while Kennelly no longer resented having become a character but on the contrary decided to actively fuel the living myth into which he was turning.

The result is that he became a celebrity and joined the world of show-business rather than the literary world. In so doing he used his unusual position to challenge modern expectations towards poets and poetry. His popularity also resulted in a good number of friendships with powerful and famous figures and one notes that despite his satirizing the Irish upper class and the corrupting power of money, he very often entertained with poetry performances the same people that he attacked in his books. Similarly whereas he denounced the effect of advertising, he became even more popular by selling his image as

¹⁵ Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (London: Allen Lanc, 1979).

¹⁶ Anonymous, "Society Prone to Destroy Writers, View at TCD Talk." Irish Times, 15 November 1969, 17.

a famous poet in television and radio commercials. This leads the reader to question the paradox, to try and understand how in such a situation written poetry could combine with performed poetry. Could it be that like the *fili* he seemed to denounce, he too had become a Chief's poet?

A most interesting consequence of Kennelly's success in show-business lies in the books themselves in which he plays with some of his characters who appear to be caricatures based on his public mask that is itself a caricature. The poems become the place of a complex interplay between the different masks of the poet, but also the place where the myth of the public mask is denounced and where a more intimate portrait is revealed as suggested by the recurrence of a number of biographical episodes. Brendan Kennelly has always claimed that poetry is honesty and indeed it could well be that since the public mask was so rigidly defined the poems offer an outlet to what the public figure could not reveal. By becoming a bard of modern Ireland Kennelly limited the public space of his expression but opened and explored a most fertile space within the realm of his own verse where a multiplicity of voices can be heard.

Brendan Kennelly and Irish Bardism: Background

Brendan Kennelly, has often had the epithet "bard" applied to him. There has however been no investigation as to the precise meaning of this term, which has habitually been used simply as a general (and, it must be said, vague) term to signify "oral poet." This chapter will look into how the status of the Irish bards changed through history, across a spectrum of pre-Christianity to the 18th century in order to determine what characteristics of the bards Kennelly has inherited in his poetry and in his approach to poetic creation. As far as pre-Christianity and early Christianity are concerned our knowledge of the period essentially relies on a mixure of history and of mythical stories. There are many ways in which Brendan Kennelly could be discussed as a bard. With view to clarifying what type of bardism is at stake when considering certain characteristics, this study will distinguish between "bard" as a general term to refer to poets composing in the Irish language until the time when English was introduced to their countries and the term "bard" (baird in the plural) from the Irish that designates a lower rank in the order of poets as opposed to "file" (fili in the plural) that designates the upper rank. Although the distinction existed long before the 13th century, it becomes particularly obvious from the 13th to the 17th century when the work of the fili becomes particularly conservative. Since the Irish language offers the opportunity to distinguish between different approaches to poetry where English tends to use the term "bard" more loosely, this study will use Irish terms (baird and fili) where appropriate in order to clarify as much as possible the characteristics that belong to each type of poet according to their time.

I Back to Origins: Words and Deeds

1) Poetry and Magic

I.1.1 Poetry, Magic and Prayers

1.1.1.1 Druids and Bards

Nora Chadwick calls attention to the fact that in Ireland, at its remotest origin poetry was

closely connected to religion. ¹⁷ In its essence poetry seems to include an ability to perceive

reality beyond what is commonly given to our senses. Yet if both Irish druids and bards

were inspired in the sense that they were the recipients of divine images and words, they

also had the power to invoke the gods. Hence, the creation of a dialogue with the divine

was a privilege shared by druids and poets. From the earliest times, the acts of praising and

blaming were among the most important functions of the Irish druids and bards. It may be

worth noting here that in the Latin Middle Ages throughout Europe, the single, dominant

definition of "poetry" was as an ars laundandi vituperandique, ie., an art of praising and

blaming. Praise certainly performed a social role in that it acted as a form of flattery for the

person to whom it was dedicated; however, because the poet's words were thought to be

endowed with magical power, verse of praise was also felt as a protection against divine

wrath and discontent. 18 The poets' power to act through words in influencing the gods in

pre-Christian Ireland led them to enjoy an important political role. Indeed, on the day

preceding an important battle, poets were called upon to sing for their people's victory and

incline the gods in their favour.

Poetry My Arse opens on a pastiche of "The Song of Amergin" which is one of

Brendan Kennelly's favourite poems and is known as the oldest song in Ireland. Before the

¹⁷ Nora Kershaw Chadwick, *Poetry and Prophecy* (Cambridge: The University Press 1942), 14.

¹⁸ In the case of Brendan Kennelly, this practice might also have been influenced by the Litany of Praise that was commonly recited after the rosary in Catholic families in the 1930-60s in Ireland.

¹⁹ Robert Grave, The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth (London: Octagon Books, 1972), 205.

Milesians landed in Kerry, in about 1500 BC,²⁰ Amergin, their druid, appeased a magic storm and, as he set foot on the Irish shore, uttered an incantation now remembered as "The Song of Amergin." Composed before the battle against the Tuatha de Danaan, the song aimed at protecting the warriors defended by Amergin and according to the legend ensured the Milesians' victory.²¹ The song was orally preserved and transmitted down to circa the 7th century when it was written down. Several versions of the texts exist but some of the lines remain very obscure.²²

Amergin can be viewed as a father-figure for certain Irish poets. His song demonstrates the poet's sense of being at one with the world but also the belief in the poet's capacity to act upon this world through the power of his magic verse. Beginning a book of poetry, *Poetry My Arse*, with such a song consequently infers a wide range of implications. It places the hero of this work, Ace de Horner, in the wake of a tradition for which the poet's words – because they are connected with superior forces – will supposedly have an effect on reality (possibly the reader's personal world but also his social world), beyond the imaginary realm of the book. This interpretation is endorsed by the fact that Ace's second name is none other than "Amergin":

Shambling through the parody of parodies Ace Amergin de Horner Dives into a box of Bewley's Handmade chocolates²³

The opening of *Poetry My Arse* also suggests that the warlike background that was the original context of "The Song of Amergin" will not be totally estranged from Ace's situation in Kennelly's book.

²⁰ The date remains uncertain.

²¹ Paulist Fathers, Catholic World: A Monthly Magazine of General Literature and Science, 1904, 726.

²² Robert Alexander Stewart Macalister, "Ogham," *The Celtic Seers' Source Book: Vision and Magic in the Druid Tradition*, ed. John Matthews. (London: Blandford, 1999), 216.
²³ PMA, 238.

Verse of praise was generally addressed to patrons: the O'Donnells, the Maguires, the O'Kellys etc... Despite the fact that verse of praise was oral and, unlike written verse, was thus necessarily transient,²⁴ there was an irreversible quality to any song of praise. Once it had been uttered, even if the poet's feeling about his subject had changed, the effect of the praise would not be modified unless its author wrote a satire. The poet was master of positive as well as of negative forces, but his art, resorting to the divine through his verse, was the only way to have a magical influence on the addressee of his songs. Through verse of praise, divine protection was exchanged for money, riches and honours that were due to the poet for his composition. For instance a chief's poet was allotted land and among other privileges he had the right to sit on the right of his chief and to share his bed.²⁵

Traces of the belief in the connection between poetic verse and action, in other words in the magic and performative power of verse, long lingered in the Irish minds. This sustained belief in the magic powers of verse led to suspicions against poets in Patrick Kavanagh's townland Inniskeen where, due to his poetry, he became something of a pariah. However, beyond the power of satire, Patrick Kavanagh claimed that poetry should consist in praising creation and thus participated in the continuation of the belief in a verbal link between the human and the divine. Through his art the poet magnifies its subject as he inclines God's favour towards it, hence Kavanagh's invitation to poets to be lovers of creation: "So be reposed and praise, praise, praise," for "Lovers alone lovers protect." Both Brendan Kennelly and Patrick Kavanagh came from a country background

²⁷ Ibid., 118.

²⁴ Nonetheless a good number of such verse has come down to us from Early Modern Irish (13th to end of 17th centuries) and Middle Irish (10th to 12th centuries). *Cf.* E.C. Quiggin, *Prolegomena to the Study of the Later Irish Bards 1200-1500* (London: Oxford University Press, 1911), 3.

²⁵ Padraig A. Breatnach, *The Chief's Poet* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1983), 40.

²⁶ Patrick Kavanagh, Selected Poems, ed. Antoinette Quinn (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 123.

where the oral tradition prevailed and where the influence of bardic²⁸ poetry long persisted. The influence of the tradition of praise can be felt in the poem "Praise" by Brendan Kennelly:

I will praise your name forever, Janey Mary

though you haglaugh in my face read me like *The Evening Press* curse me soon as bless

I will praise your name forever, Janey Mary. ...²⁹

"I will praise your name Janey Mary" opens and closes the piece and, like a mantra or the chorus of a song, returns after every stanza. The reader notes the slight exaggeration in the number of times (no less than six) the line is repeated. This is increased by the assertion of a timeless praise through a rhythmic pause when eternity is evoked – "forever" is placed immediately before the comma that preceeds "Janey Mary" and in the last stanza:

because praise is right for you it's what I will always do strive to praise the fiercely true

Such excess is reminiscent of bardic³⁰ praise in which the poets had no scruple in using the most extravagant comparisons and conceits to celebrate their patron's glory. In the last stanza of Kennelly's "Praise," in "it's what I will always do," one also marks the equation of praise and action. Praising and doing become one in a stanza that calls attention to its peformative nature. The reader also marks the emphasis laid on "do," whose position in the rhyming end of the middle line suggests that praise could lead to a realisation of truth in a world where "strive" and "fiercely" hint at the obstruction of truth. As "I will praise your

²⁸ In the sense that bardic poets had a duty to perform verse of praise and blame.

²⁹ PMA, 313.

The word is used here in a broad sense but this statement is particularly true of *fili* from the 13th to the 17th century.

name forever" is taken up through the pronoun "it," "I will praise your name forever" and "do" are related by the reduced form of "be," that equates praise and action. The position of "do" in the rhyming end of the middle line suggests that praise could lead to a realisation of truth. However, between praise ("do") and truth ("true"), "strive" and "fiercely" indicate that the road from poetry to truth is paved with obstacles and difficulties.

I.1.1.2 Bards and Clerics

Satires were mainly spoken rather than written. When they wrote them down Christian monks supposedly reduced the magic power of satires. The belief in the magic effect of words spoken and written remained deeply rooted in Ireland. However, one notes that with Christianisation such power was no longer the privilege of bards but also became shared by priests. Regarding the performative power of words, according to a kinship that goes back to the defence of poets by Saint Columcille in 574 AD,³¹ bardism and Christianity often proved both rivals and allies. Under the Penal Laws, from 1691 until the mid 19th century, the Church was left with no abbeys. Bardic schools, which were in decline, offered the clergy the unofficial opportunity to train in Greek and Latin seminarists who were also taught in Gaelic along with young poets. Following this common teaching of poets and priests a striking number of poets appeared to be also Churchmen such as Geoffrey Keating, Pádraigín Haicéad and Nicholas O'Donnell.³² Michelle O'Riordan also calls attention to the concern of poets for the Church in the 17th century.³³ The link between religion and poetry goes back to the most ancient (that is pre-Christian) times and the proximity was underlined by the poet Dafydol ap Gwilym in the 14th century in his address

³¹ Charles de Kay, "The Old Poetic Guild in Ireland," Bardic Sourcebook, 333-342, 333.

³² Daniel Corkery, The Hidden Ireland: A Study of Gaelic Munster in the Eighteenth Century (Dublin: Gill and Son, 1967), 97-98.

³³ Michelle O'Riordan, *The Gaelic Mind and the Collapse of the Gaelic World* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1990), 287.

to a Churchman: "I must of necessity write poems as you must preach, and it is right for me to wander through the land and sing as for you to beg alms. Are not hymns and sequences also poems? And are not the psalms of David the Prophet poems to holy God?" Centuries later this proximity led Arthur Rimbaud, who loathed catechism, to complain in a letter to Paul Verlaine that he could only write "prayers." Similarly, Blake who had a decisive influence on Kennelly and who saw himself as a bard wrote: "Prayers is the study of Art. Praise is the Practice of Art." In a prayer the faithful turn to God to ask their wishes to become true, that is, enacted but the wish has to be uttered for action to happen. Utterance of the wish in the form of praise (or satire) supposedly leads to action, hence William Blake's assertion: "Praise is the Practice of Art." Another trace of the Irish belief in the performative power of words lies in the Irish common practice of blessing. By proffering a blessing – "God bless you" is still heard on an ordinary basis – a person both asserts approbation of their addressee and calls on God for his protection.

Given these traditional connections in Ireland between the world of poetry, religion and the belief in the magical power of words, Kennelly's friendship with religious people, Catholics and Protestants, seems to follow an ancestral line dating from pre-Christian Ireland when druids were both poets and priests and continued after the collapse of the Gaelic order in 1691 when poets and Churchmen were trained in the same schools. Thus among numerous common points, Brendan Kennelly shares with the 17th century poet Owen Roe O'Sullivan fellow-feelings with members of the Church. This was testified by a priest's exclamation when Owen Roe died: "I would rather the best priest in the diocese were dead." A similar admiration can be discerned in Reverend John McCarthy's testimony and in Sister Stanislaus Kennedy's when they express their perceptions of

34 Corkery, The Hidden Ireland, 97-98.

³⁵ William Blake, William Blake: Selected Poetry and Prose, cd. David Fuller (Harlow: Longman, 2000),

³⁶ Corkery, The Hidden Ireland, 98.

Brendan Kennelly. Sister Stanislaus Kennedy uses the following words: "Brendan Kennelly is a spiritual poet. He can put us in touch with 'the still point, that centre within us where God's name's written." In an interview about his Christian faith Kennelly explains how the Gospel statement: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God," was for him the basis of a "life-long reflexion on words, their power and connection to God."

In Ireland, the conjunction between religious matters and the potential of words to impact upon life was inherited from bardic pagan times and this association continued in the Christian Irish faith. Kennelly's preoccupation with this continuity is best exemplified in his long poem Mary, translated from a piece written by Muireadach Albanach O'Dalaigh in the 13th century. Michael O'Ruairc comments upon the translation in these terms: "This version captures the prayer-quality of the poem ... Kennelly captures the urgency and the rhythm of the original - not a poem about the Virgin Mother but an address to Mary the mother, the eternal woman, alive and pulsating with passion." This poem shows that Kennelly's Mary is not the disembodied and submissive woman sometimes pictured by the Catholic Church but in various aspects she recalls the ancient Celtic Goddess. 40 sensual and powerful. The association of Celtic and Christian traditions is also perceptible in the name of Ace de Horner's muse. "Janey Mary" indeed associates the double influence in hyphenizing "Janey," a cursing phrase⁴¹ in Ireland which also recalls Yeats's Crazy Jane, and "Mary," the Christian Mother. When this is taken into account the reader realises that a poem like "Praise," which reads like an "hymn to Janey Mary" can also read like a "prayer" lauding Janey Mary, who stands for the two sides of

³⁷ Sister Stanislaus Kennelly, "Kerryman and Poet," *This Fellow with the Fabulous Smile*, ed. Ake Persson (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1996), 71-74, 72.

³⁸ Zoppi, Elizabeth. "The Road for Home," The Word, May 2007, 10.

³⁹ Micheal O'Ruairc, "Controlled Mastery of the Poetic Craft," Fortnight: An Independent Review for Northern Ireland, June 1988, 24.

⁴⁰ Claire French, The Celtic Goddess: Great Queen or Demon Witch? (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2001).

⁴¹ Dubliners often used the word "Janey" or "Janey Mac" as an expletive in place of "Jesus, Mary" or more precisely, "Jaysus, Mary."

the Virgin Mary. Supporting this interpretation, the last section of the book, to which "Praise" belongs, is entitled "Holy Mary, mother of God, / plants a laugh in this poor sod."

I.1.2 Transformations

Primary bards⁴³ such as Fionn Mac Cumhaill, Taliesin, Myrddyn possessed the power of words but they were also supposedly gifted with the ability of changing shape by use of magic. Gnomic poems with such characteristics are numerous in what remains of Taliesin's poetry. According to John Matthews, they "are sometimes jokingly referred to as the 'I have beens' because of the anaphora that opens each line with "I have been":

I have been a sow, I have been a buck,
I have been a sage, I have been a snout,
I have been a horn, I have been a wild sow,
I have been a shout in battles.
I have been a gushing torrent,
I have been a wave on the long shore
I have been a gentle rain.
I have been a speckled cat in a forked tree.
I have been a circle, I have been a head,
I have been a goat in an elder tree.
I have been a cranc-bag well filled,
— A sight to behold.

Fionn Mac Cumhaill's poems are similarly full of magic and so are Myrddyn's whom John Matthews believes was none other than the enchanter Mcrlin. 46 Echoing Fionn's transformation after eating of the Salmon of knowledge, Taliesin in his first incarnation as Gwyon Bach tasted of the magician Ccridwen's magic potion that was

⁴² PMA, 231.

⁴³ From the pre-Christian era, cf. Robert Alexander Stewart Macalister, ed. and trans. Lebor Gabála Érenn: The Book of the Taking of Ireland, and The Bardic Source Book: Inspirational Legacy and Teachings of the Ancient Celts, ed. John Matthews (London: Blandford, 1998).

⁴⁴ John Matthews, "Introduction: The Story of the Bards," in *The Bardic Source Book*, 11-22, 19.

⁴⁵ Ibid., trans by William Forbes Skene.

⁴⁶ John Matthews, "Introduction: The Story of the Bards," in *The Bardic Source Book*, 15.

destined to her son and was endowed with both power of foreseeing the future and of changing shape. Gwyon's acquisition of magical powers is followed by a magic chase, Ceridwen changing form to catch Gwyon and Gwyon transforming to escape. Gwyon successively turned into a hare, a fish, a bird and eventually into a wheat grain before Ceridwen ate him, became pregnant with him and gave birth to him in the form of a beautiful baby: Taliesin.⁴⁷

As shown in the instance of that tale, magical transformation often occurs in a warlike context. It was also widely used in competitions between rival magician poets.

Brendan Kennelly draws upon the tradition of magic transformation in bardic early history
both as a form and as a theme. Many among Kennelly's heroes who embody the poetic
voice possess the bardic powers of changing form and of travelling in time. These two
striking features, in his characters Judas and Ace for instance, often puzzled commentators,
especially as regards time compressions and anachronistic combinations of historical
events. The Book of Judas thus opens a meeting place for Hitler, Judas, Pilate, Marylin
Monroe and Judas becomes the voice of money, businessmen, children, women, priests
etc... Similarly Ace Amergin de Horner, who is regularly referred to as a bard, possesses
the ability to change his shape and merge with the elements: as in "Way":

Ace is a leaf in the river today. The river flows him where it wills until the riverway is the Aceleafway.⁴⁸

In terms of form, taking objects as a source of perceiving consciousness where the poet identifies with the object, Brendan Kennelly's frequent mode of internal focalisation places the poet in the tradition of ancient bards. Such a poetic attitude – at work in

⁴⁷ David Annwn, Hear the Voice of the Bard! Who Present, Past, and Future Sees: Three Cores of Bardic Attention: the Early Bards, William Blake and Robert Duncan (Hay-on-Wye: West House, 1995), 11-12.

⁴⁸ PMA, 34.

"Shell," "Sea," "Book," "House," "Crow," "Bullet" etc. and in every poem of *The Singing Tree* – appeared at an early stage of his career. In this respect "Bread," a much celebrated and frequently anthologized piece, presents a most interesting instance of this poetic device. Kennelly wrote the poem as a homage to his grand-mother and to his mother whose hands, when baking, fascinated the poet. Although a Christian interpretation might feel tempting, when compared with the myth of Gwyon's metamorphoses, the poem reveals its relation to the magic of ancient times. The theme of re-birth often surfaces in Kennelly's poetry. It appears in "Bread" but also in "Moloney and the Dust":

But that tricky hoor of a Shannon wind Blew it straight back into my mouth And I swear to God before I could tell What had happened, I could feel The dust slippin' down my throat

In the blink of an eye, after all my pains, I had swallowed Mike Nelligan's mortal remains Or a large part o'them, anyway."56

In "Bread," the reader hears the bread's voice: "Now I am re-created." In Gwyon's story the source of re-birth also originates in the magician-queen's kitchen where Gwyon was employed to stir the cauldron. In "Bread" as in the story of Taliesin, and this is also the case in "The Wooing of Etain" (referred to in "Being humans" eating and pregnancy are closely related. The shape of the bread recalls the roundness of a mother's belly, while "The form that I shall bear / Grows round and white / It seems I comfort her," "bear," "round," "white" and "comfort" bring to mind the maternal side of pregnancy. Yet,

⁴⁹ FS, 425.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 426.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 431.

⁵² Ibid., 432.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 442.

⁵⁵ Nutt Alfred, The Celtic Doctrine of Re-Birth (London: D. Nutt, 1897).

⁵⁶ MUAAI, 52.

⁵⁷ Jeffrey Gantz, trans., Early Irish Myths and Sagas (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 32.

⁵⁸ PMA, 325.

much like in the story of Talicsin, where the magician was to kill Gwyon after he was born from her, in the poem a shadow is cast over the bread-pregnancy and maternal love mixes with murderous feelings even if love eventually overcomes the desire to hurt the new-born child: "It seems I comfort her / Even as she slits my face / And stabs my chest." As in the mythological tale where Gwyon takes the form of the magician's baby, after the birth the bread is equated with a perfection that obliterates any homicidal inclination:

So I am glad to go through fire And come out

Shaped like her dream. 59

Eventually, in agreement with gnomic bardic lyrics, the last three lines beginning with "l" inscribes the bread's coming to life within a universal cycle originated from Woman:

I am all that can happen to men. I came to life at her finger-ends. I will go back into her again.

I.2 Satires and Curses

I.2.1 Echoes of Ancient Spells

In magical duel such as the one which engaged Ceridwen and Gwyon, druids had recourse to satire and magic spell, verbal instruments which poets could also use. In the end of the play *Poetaster*, ⁶⁰ the poet character boasts that he possesses the magic power of cursing:

... or I could do worse, Armed with Archilochus' fury, write iambics, Should make the desperate lashers hang themselves: Rhyme 'em to death, as they do Irish rats In drumming tunes.⁶¹

⁵⁹ FS, 434.

⁶⁰ Ben Jonson, Ben Jonson: The Devil is an Ass and Other Plays (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2000), 1-

⁶¹ Ben Jonson, The Devil is an Ass and Other Plays, 99.

Archilochus was a Greek sooth-sayer and a poet, famous in Antiquity for his cursing talent and also known as the creator of iambic verse. About this invention Robert C. Elliott writes: "The derivation of the words *iambi* is obscure. Archilochus used it of his own poetry," and John Maxwell Edmonds: "It is certain that when the word came to be used to describe a form of literature, it came to connote ridicule and invective, and the idea of ridicule seems to have joined in it with that sort of improvisation." 63

The first written Irish satires are dated from the 9th century. However, not many satires were committed to paper as they were thought to have little literary value. *Cairpre MacEdaine's Satire upon Bres MacEladain*⁶⁴ is a tale relating how Bres, king of the Fomorians was satirised by Cairpre for his lack of hospitality and his stinginess. The text includes fragments of what is thought to be the first written satire:

Without food speedily on a platter Without cow's milk whereon a calf thrives, Without a man's habitation after the staying of darkness, Be that the luck of Bres MacEladain.⁶⁵

Much like in the use of iambic rhythm by Archilochus, the form bears a great importance to the efficiency of the spell.⁶⁶ The incantation relies on the rhyming of the opening and of the closing line, complicated metrical devices, strong sound effects in alliterations and assonances. When highly stylised, satire relies on formal elements for the effectiveness of its power.

In Ireland saints were also mighty cursers, a practice inherited by both priests and Christian copyist monks, who often included in their manuscripts curses that fell on those who attempted to destroy their writings. St Fechin of Fore cursed children who

⁶² Robert Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), 7. ⁶³ John Maxwell Edmonds, *Lyra Graeca*, vol. 3, ed. and trans. J.M. Edmonds (London, 1927), 604, in Elliott, *The Power of Satire*, 7.

⁶⁴ Trans. Vernam Hull, Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie 18 (1930), 63-69, in Elliott, The Power of Satire, 7.

⁶⁵ Elliott, The Power of Satire, 38.

⁶⁶ Vivian Mercier, The Irish Comic Tradition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 114.

subsequently drowned themselves in a lake called Loch Macraide and the legend says that their souls ascended directly to Heaven.⁶⁷ Similarly St Patrick also used cursing. In the case of Becan's story, as related in *Sylva Gadelica*,⁶⁸ despite his wealth, Becan denied meat to clerics. St Patrick's cursing song runs as follow: "Becan here Becan there: be his fastings not many in number; so long as the sun shall travel right-hand-wise, let Becan not make mirth for them (his people)." Another example of often quoted satire is that of Nede's satire prompted by Caier's wife against Caier, Nede's uncle, also his surrogate father, and whose kingdom he coveted.

Evil, death, short life to Caier! Let spears of battle wound him, Caier! Caier...! Caier under earth, Under ramparts, under stones be Caier! 70

When comparing examples of religious curses and some magic satires, one is bound to acknowledge the difficulty of discriminating on the basis of form. The similarity in the use of words corresponds to the similarity in the composition by satirists and cursers: religious and magic composers are both related to the realm of the divine. What prompted religious curses and magic satires, their mode of application and their consequences were nonetheless the same.

As already suggested about praise and blessing, the tradition states that a blessing is the unique possible antidote against a satire to counter-act its harmful power, and that praise offers a protection against a satire. This is why in his struggle against the magician Morrigan, using "stone" as a metaphor for curse, Cúchulainn says: "Then I'll hurl a stone at you,' ... 'and shatter your leg, and you'll carry that mark forever unless I lift it from you

⁶⁷ Elliott, The Power of Satire, 190.

⁶⁸ Standish H. O'Grady trans., Silva Gadelica I-XXXI, A Collection of Tales in Irish, with Extracts Illustrating Persons and Place (London: Williams and Norgate, 1892).

⁶⁹ Silva Gadelica I-XXXI, 113.

⁷⁰ Fred Norris Robinson, "Satirists and Enchanters in Early Irish Literature," in *The Bardic Source Book*, 1998, 134-158, 142.

with a blessing." An observation of ancient Irish curses and satires calls attention to a number of formal aspects. Magic verse heavily relies on repetition and on the optative mood expressed in phrases such as "let him," "may he ..." As shown by the examples quoted, foremost significance lies in the repetition of the victim's name because the name was equated with the man himself. Such identification was also wide-spread in ancient Greece as testified by the numerous *defixiones* (curse-tablets) that have been unearthed. One striking ancient Greek tablet states: "I nail his name that is himself."

However, instead of using the victim's name in its plain form the satirist could also have recourse to a nickname and sometimes change the victim's name in mixing the letters that composed it. An example of such a device appears in *Cormac's Glossary* under the opening "rer," "blackbird":

Hard to thee the little stripling, Son of the little blackbird! Have thou every good thing ready before him, O little head (that is, O head of a little goose)!⁷³

Robinson identifies⁷⁴ the little blackbird as referring to the poet, Flann MacLonain and his victim might have been Finnguine, King of Cashel currently called by his nickname "head of a little goose." This satire possesses a naive and childish quality, not remote from nursery rhymes and among other things word-play determines its effect.

⁷¹ Thomas Kinsella, The Táin (Dublin: Dolmen Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 133.

⁷² Richard Cavendish, *The Black Art* (London et al.: Penguin, 1968), 42.

⁷³ Robinson, The Bardic Source Book, 142.

⁷⁴ Ihid

I.2.2 Brendan Kennelly's Heritage

The tradition of curses has been common practice in Kerry from ancient times until recently and has been part and parcel of Kennelly's background. Gerry McMahon remembers the fear inspired by verse in North Kerry:

Poets were rewarded for their verses and their singing. Songs of venom and of praise too, came forth from their lips and their pens, causing them to be feared by their enemies as well as respected by their friends and patrons. I recall my late father, Bryan MacMahon, telling me of a person carrying a coffin who had been mentioned in a ballad tightening at the sight of the author of the song and suddenly blurting out: "Wouldn't you forget that old ballad wouldn't you."⁷⁵

The Crooked Cross refers to a cursing practice which goes back to the time of bardic satirists that is, the cursing of a land or of a given place. Elliot explains such custom: "In addition to their command over the skins, the lives and the honour of men, some of the great Celtic satirists were able to blight the land itself – a curious reversal here of the function of satire in the ritual of Greece, where it promoted fertility." Another reference to cursing appears in "The most evil man" that describes a magic technique:

The most evil man I know

Plays Mozart

Backwards,

In Disciples, Paddy Kennelly, Brendan Kennelly's brother also alludes to cursing:

Or
Within a week you'll find
A dozen eggs
Nestling snugly in the hay
- A certain sign that, before the month is out,
Your hens will refuse to lay

⁷⁵ Gary, McMahon, "The Ballad Tradition," in *The World of Bryan MacMahon*, ed. Gabriel Fitzmaurice (Cork: Mercier Press, 2005), 79.

⁷⁶ Elliott, The Power of Satire, 33.

⁷⁷ PMA, 229.

Or, you may find instead A cow's afterbirth upon the grass. That is the foulest plague. It signifies that within the year All calves will be born dead.

Ask Hawley Melrose Who thought himself above it all. Now he knows Pride comes before a fall.⁷⁸

Although the extract clearly describes the signs that can identify occult practice, only somebody already acquainted with the nature of such signs would grasp what is here involved. One would mark that in these lines as anywhere in the book, the common name of the practice, piseog, 79 has been left out in an omission that reflects the general silent understanding surrounding curses in Kerry villages.

In Cromwell several poems directly draw on the Irish cursing tradition. Each of these references occurs in relation to Buffún, the poet interlocutor of Cromwell and the source of the malediction. The poem "The Curse" depicts a new type of spell, defined by contrast to traditional cursing methods and described in the first two octets as follow:

> ... It didn't assume a pig-shape or dog-shape Nor was it tarred and feathered like a crow It wasn't an old soldier talking his wounds Nor a priest going fifteen rounds with the Devil It wasn't the smell of blood in killing hands I'd hardly call it foul."80

The poem, "You Would Have Blessed Me"81 offers another interesting reference to magic, and to the power of words within the tradition here studied.

⁷⁸ Paddy Kennelly, Disciples (Cork: Marino Books, 2005), 140.

⁷⁹ Irish for "charm" or "spell," but the word has also become dismissive in the sense of "superstition."

⁸⁰ C, 26. ⁸¹ C, 27.

I dreamed the curse into that hot white bread I am your womb, I said, and bread is your name. I tasted the bread. Every crumb was sweet.

The passage seems a direct comment on the poetic composition of "Bread": "I dreamed the curse into that hot white bread." The image of bread-pregnancy developed in the "Bread": "The form that I shall bear / Grows round and white. / It seems I comfort her," is continued in "You would have blessed me" as Kennelly writes: "I am your womb, I said, and bread is your name."

Between Kennelly's Cromwell and Buffún, hunger and the provision of food are issues frequently at stake. Similarly magical satires and curses were often prompted by the failure of a host to present a poet with a satisfying amount of food or riches, or to satisfy his lust. In other words the curse was a revenge to compensate for a poet's sense of deprivation. He considered that his due had not been delivered to him. In "You Would Have Blessed Me," it is indeed a sense of deprivation that causes the curse to emerge in starving Buffun. The poet tries to quiet his hunger in walking but hunger remains attached to his feet: "I devoured streets, mountains, acres of bog," and as in Thomas de Quincey's Confessions of an English Opium Eater delirious dreams induced by hunger end up in eating bread: "I tasted the bread. Every crumb was sweet." The process of identification already evoked about ancient bards and their use of magic is here at work again and the double equation between saying and being takes the form of a near epiphora in the first two lines of the tercet: "... I said / ... I am," immediately followed by the anaphora "I dreamed ... / I am." As previously seen only a blessing could cancel a curse. In this particular case where the curse is so closely related to hunger, cancelling the curse is an equivalent for feeding the poet. The solution to the pain of the first line: "The curse was once so virulent in me" is consequently brought forward in the last line: "You would have blessed me had you seen me eat."

The violent power of curses not only had a thematic influence on Brendan Kennelly's poetry but also a formal one. "Oliver's Hymn to Hammering" seems directly inspired by the cursing tradition and the use of defixiones. This practice was inherited from the Greeks and passed on to the Romans as explained by Joann Shelton in As the Roman Did:

[Roman] people frequently put curses on their enemies and consecrated them to the spirits of the underworld. The procedure was to write the name of the intended victim on a tablet (usually a lead tablet), to make the consecration, and then stick a long nail through the name on the tablet. Sometimes a rough sketch of the hated person was also included on the tablet and was pierced by many long nails ... These tablets were usually placed in tombs so that they might be close to the underworld spirits. 83

"Oliver's Hymn to Hammering" demonstrates a will to destruction reinforced by the optative mood and the haunting repetition of a phrase that sounds like a magic formula:

Hammer hammer hammer them down
Hammer the shrimps among men
Hammer the vermin born to lose
The cripples who know how to run.

Who would be victors? Who would be kings
Lord of the land and the sea?
Hammer hammer hammer them down
And then sing a hymn with me⁸⁵

The rhetorical questions contribute here to assert in a boastful way the power of the creator: "Who would be victors? Who would be kings? / Lord of the land and the sea?" Rhetorical questions of that type seem directly inspired from pre-Christian Ireland when

⁸² C, 145.

⁸³ Joann Shelton, As the Romans Did: A Source Book in Roman Social History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 426.

⁸⁴ "The Swan's Curse," (B, 88), offers another instance of a poem in which the influence of magic spells can be felt.

⁸⁵ C, 145.

similar questions often appeared in ancient bardic lines, and in particular in the Welsh "Taliesin's Lore":

Who will measure Annwn?
Who can tell the thickness of its veil?
Who can tell the size of its maw?
Who can tell the value of its stones?⁸⁶

1.2.3 Bardic or Latin Satire?

Whereas ancient bardic satire almost always bears magic overtones, Latin satire possesses a much wider definition. Latin satire corresponds to a free literary work in which genres, forms and meters are varied and which censors public mores. It is essentially defined according to thematic criteria – ranging from personal, social, religious to poetic realms, a formal and topical variety that follows the etymology of the word *satura* which means "mixture." Satire was a warlike and aggressive piece and satirists were feared among the Romans but not so much because of their magic power as because of the violence of their attacks and the shame that ensued.

Gaelic satire does not systematically use ridicule, Roman satire always does. ⁸⁷ The distinction between Gaelic satire using ridicule, and Roman satire in verse would then mainly rely on its themes, on the fact that Roman satire targets a wider range of subjects but it would especially be based on the belief in the power of the words that sets the foundation of magic. If we give credence to several storics about Irish satirists, shame resulting from mockery seems to have been a particularly acute torment. Bardic satire was classified into different categories formally defined according to their names. Vivian Mercier lists its different forms and following *The Book of Ballymote*, a treatise including the various types of satires, he classified the principal satires as: "aer, aisnes, ail and

87 Elliott, The Power of Satire, 115.

⁸⁶ John Matthews, "The Story of the Bards," The Bardic Source Book, 17.

aircetal.**88 which Professor Meroney translates respectively as "declaration, insult, incantation." "Aer" is "narration in reproach without rhyme," "ail" is "the insult of a nickname which clings to anyone, or verbal injury, whether rhymed or not." Mercier explains: "Aircetal aire mean[s] 'incantation of satire,' a merely 'versified satire' is subdivided into ten types, arranged roughly in ascending order or publicity." Due to their shortness and their fragmentary presentation, many early Irish satires were called epigrams. Since The Book of Ballymote that was compiled in early 15th century does not provide any instance of satire directed at any physical or moral flaw abstracted from individuals, Vivian Mercier notes that "Early Irish satire is usually aimed at an individual or a clearly specified group of individuals." Satire was a virtuoso piece making a crafted use of assonance, alliteration and metrical patterns. Some are terribly abusive and bitter, consisting of a savage lampoon composed of a list of deprecating names and adjectives. The victim can be named, but not always, and that name is smeared by the salve of the satire.

Kennelly's satiric shafts generally do not possess the fierceness of bardic lines as he favours a merry playful banter. However he can occasionally choose one particular target as was the case with William Pratt. On several occasions the latter, an American critic, proved insulting and used defamatory words against Brendan Kennelly. Each of his articles is remarkable for its anger and virulence. Just as the satirists changed their victims into rats, Kennelly turned Pratt into a Mickey Mouse, the hero of "Squeak." In this poem, Kennelly plays both with the image of Walt Disney's famous character and with the term "mickey," that designates an insignificant thing. In the end, Kennelly literally and metaphorically "takes the mickey" out of Pratt:

⁸⁸ Vivian Mercier, The Irish Comic Tradition, 109.

⁸⁹ Ihid.

⁹⁰ The Book of Ballymote, ed. Robert Atkinson (Dublin: Royal Irish Acadamy, 1887).

⁹¹ Vivian Mercier, The Irish Comic Tradition 113.

⁹² PMA, 277.

... Then someone had the happy thought (I do believe it was a chap called Pratt) of making Mickey Mouse the first obvious Rodent President of America After all the crooked, futile years Mickey came to power. Why?

His ears! His ears! His ears are two indelible black circles, two ebony halo at the head, indestructible, growing more and more

Soulful. 93

In Irish literature, there is a great difference between on the one hand ancient bardic satires in the form of spells and on the other hand satires as were mostly inherited from the Romans. One can then wonder why a common term, "satire," was applied to both. ⁹⁴ This single term used in order to designate two different genres does not however seem totally random since the Irish language itself uses indifferently the same words (aer, dinnsencha... ⁹⁵) for a satire in the form of a spell and a satire with a broader scope as was used in later times. The following satire in 122 lines against women was composed in the first half of the 9th century and was included in *The Instructions of King Cormac MacAir*. It exemplifies bardic satire with a broad rather than a specific scope:

"O grandson of Conn, O Cormac," said Carbre, "how do you distinguish women?"
"Not hard to tell," said Cormac, "I distinguish them, but I make no difference among them.
They are crabbed as constant companions, haughty when visited, lewd when neglected ... not to be trusted with a secret ... lustful in bed ... better to whip them than to humour them, better to scourge them than to gladden them. "96"

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Elliott, The Power of Satire, 25-30.

⁹⁵ Robinson, The Bardic Source Book, 138.

⁹⁶ Trans. Kuno Meyer, Todd Lecture Series, vol. 15, 1909, 29-35, in Elliott, The Power of Satire, 40-41.

Elliott argues that the thematic widening of the targets taken by satires, in Middle Irish (10th to 12th century) for instance, was due to the influence of clerics who had access to Roman satires. Nonetheless both Roman satire - satire as we know it today -- and Gaelic satire used ridicule as a weapon. "Irish ... also exhibits very clearly the close connection between the poetry of magic malediction and the poetry of mockery and abuse, and shows the importance of satire, of whatever sort, as an element in the life of simple people."97 Old and Middle Irish drew no distinction between magic satire and the mocking verse of a poet attempting to ridicule his victim. Public outlook was most important and destroying one's reputation with satire equated hurting the victim personally. It is thus striking that in early satire the victims died of shame and bashfulness as was the case with Luaine 98 but also with Caier. 99 The type of nouns and adjectives found in magic satire and in "broad satire" are similar and the Irish names designating these satires that seem distinct nowadays are identical. Magical verse and ridiculing verse were part of the poet's instruments. Besides, whether Irish satire or Latin satire is considered, it should be underlined that the vices castigated by satiric verse are the same and that the use of ridicule is also a quality proper to satire anywhere, at any time.

Even when satire reached a stage more developed than early Christian and pre-Christian Irish satire, becoming more elaborate and more literary, and departing from the form of the magic quatrain, the magic link between words and their effect was never dissolved. This leads Robinson to write about Irish literature in the modern period:

Suffice it to say of this later development that although real satire, as opposed to incantational verse, increases as time goes on, the old conception of the destructive satirist, the poet with superior power, whom it is dangerous to displease, has never disappeared among the Gael of either Ireland or Scotland. 100

⁹⁷ Robinson, The Bardic Source Book, 137.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 142-143.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 150.

Consequently curses are often included in the works of Irish poets, and can be found among the poems of Samuel Ferguson, W.B. Yeats, Synge, Joyce, Swift etc. Curses and satire were fully part of Brendan Kennelly's background. In "Poetry and Violence," the poet expresses his admiration for "A Cry for Art O'Leary" by Eibhlin Dubh Ní Chonaill who composed the poem after her husband was assassinated by High Sheriff of Cork, Abraham Morris to whom he refused to sell his horse thus not complying with the 18th century Penal Laws. As often in satire, magic satire in particular, and as noted by Brendan Kennelly, who translated it, the poem is remarkable for the intensity of the feelings expressed:

the woman's passion is fiercely real; this fierce, passionate, violent reality creates the poem's momentum, its primal, driving, driven rhythms. It intrigues me most of all for the way the woman's violent feelings are somehow changed even as they are expressed in this unrelenting rhythmical momentum. 102

The long poem includes a curse on the murderer:

God's curse on you, Morris
God's curse on your treachery
You swept my man from me
The man of my children
Two children play in the house
A third lives in me.

John B. Keane who was from Listowel, a village near Kennelly's village, Ballylongford, regularly included curses and satiric passages in his plays. *Sive* offers one of the most remarkable uses of a curse in contemporary Irish literature:

May his hens lay clods and stones
May the east wind blight his bones
May warts and welts waylay him by the score.
Now I swear upon this verse

¹⁰¹ JIJ. 23-46.

¹⁰² JIJ, 23.

He'll be travelling soon by hearse And we'll never see Scan Dota any more. 103

Brendan Kennelly's fascination for the power of words also appears in Blood Wedding

whose tragic nature owes much to their ominous force. After a quick exchange between the

mother and the bridegroom, Kennelly's version of Lorca's play opens with three curses in

the mother's mouth: "The knife, the knife...The curse of God on all the knives and the

devil's knacker that invented them." ¹⁰⁴ the scope of this initial curse is then widened: "And

the curse of God on guns, machine guns, rifles, pistols... and knives, even the smallest

knife ... and scythes and pitchforks,"105 before her last response reaches a universal scale:

"the curse of God on any thing that can cut and hack and rip the body of a man ..." 106

Brendan Kennelly has mainly recourse to ridicule, but traces of magic satire are

occasionally perceptible in his poetry as in "The beggar curses his mocker":

May your arse fester Mortify and blister shut up

and never again open. 107

This piece seems to be inspired by a well-known curse in Kerry: "That your arse may close

up." A widow's (such as Eibhlin Dubh Ni Chonaill who wrote "A Cry for Art O'Leary"),

an orphan's and a beggar's curse possess a particular power and the title "The beggar

curses his mocker," suggests that the mocker will suffer punishment for his lack of

compassion. Charity and hospitality were indeed among the most ancient laws of Ireland

and if not respected offered ground for satire.

¹⁰³ John B. Kcane, Three Plays by John B. Keane, ed. Ben Barnes (Cork: Mercier Press, 1990), 86.

¹⁰⁴ BW, 11.

105 Ihid.

106 Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ G, 142.

40

The satiric weapon could be aimed at general vice but could also targets individuals. Because it is a short form and because it most often names and ridicules its victims the Latin epigram is the form that is closest to the early Irish satire. As an heir to the latter's tradition, Kennelly naturally turned to Martial's epigrams and wrote his own version of them. In *Martial Art* Kennelly intersperses epigrams of his own with Martial's. The stylistic resemblance between Martial and Kennelly's creations makes it extremely difficult for the reader to distinguish between the two. Although names are changed, one suspects that the victims of Brendan Kennelly's satiric shafts would recognize themselves in his lines. Thus William Pratt, who has already been mentioned in relation to "Squeak," also becomes one of the book's protagonists in *Martial Art* where he bears the name of "Prattus." The epigrams show both Martial and bardic wit:

Prattus tries to write. People say words laugh at him and run away. Most words hate to be led astray though, if you're willing they'll help you play. Prattus tries to write. Olé! Olé! Olé!

3) The Muse's Imperative

1.3.1 The Significance of Vision

Magic verse and curses were motivated by the belief shared by the poet and his victim in the equation between the poetic word and its performative effect. Through some unknown occult power the word uttered became a word enacted. The mystery of this reality just like poetic inspiration had its source in the supernatural world. In her study, *Poets and Prophecy*, Nora Chadwick points out the similarities existing between the art of poetry and divination: "Invariably we find that the poet and seer attributes his inspiration to contact

¹⁰⁸ MA, 38.

with supernatural powers, and his mood during prophetic utterance is exalted and remote from that of his normal existence." She underlines acute insight, sensitivity and "highly strung" personality as characteristic traits of these activities. In ancient Ireland poets were also "seers, visionaries and shamans, who kn[e]w the true power of words and how to make bridges between the world with them, who [could] open magic doors with a poem ..." The importance of dreams, mystic visions and subconscious states such as those achieved under the spell of drugs or in states of trance participates in that opening of perception to another level of reality. As Nora Chadwick thoroughly specifies, this is no claim to assert the poetic talent of any person suffering from mental illness or drug addiction, but simply to highlight common features running among our greatest poets and in particular those who influenced Brendan Kennelly. Thus Patrick Kavanagh claimed: "The poet is not concerned with the effect he is making, he forgets himself." One would also here recall William Blake's visionary approach to creation and it is to that particular state at the limit of consciousness that Brendan Kennelly refers to when he mentions "voices." This personal approach to poetic creation demands closer attention and will be developed in a subsequent chapter. The poet's addiction to alcohol was connected to his addiction to writing, an association also made by Baudelaire:

Le vin sait revêtir le plus sordide bouge
D'un luxe miraculeux
Et fait sortir plus d'un portique fabuleux
Dans l'or de sa vapeur rouge
Comme un soleil couchant dans un ciel ténébreux.
112

109 Nora Chadwick, Poetry and Prophecy., 14

In a miraculous luxury

And makes fabulous porticos surge up

Like a sunset in a hazy sky.

¹¹⁰ Matthews, The Bardic Source Book, 12.

¹¹¹ Patrick Kayanagh, Collected Pruse (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1967), 28.

¹¹² Charles Baudelaire, Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1968), 70.

Wine knows how to clothe the most sordid slum dwelling

Trans. Phil Baker, The Book of the Absinthe (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 64.

Although Brendan Kennelly was influenced by his contact with the works of these poets, it is interesting to note that in his poetry a more remote legacy can be felt, going back to Early Ireland when poets shared the prophetic mood with druids.

Brendan Kennelly was brought up in a society where faith in the power of words was a belief commonly shared and where witchcraft was a secret practice that everybody knew about but that was rarely discussed. As the heir to the belief of a traditional community Kennelly reproduces certain behaviours that were part of the ancient poets' way of writing. His mode of creation testifies to a quest for subconscious states comparable to that of dreams or nightmares from which he draws the stuff of some of his writing. The first sentence of the preface to *Cromwell* provides an illustration: "This poem tries to present the nature and implications of various forms of dreams and nightmares, including the nightmare of Irish history." Very much like de Quincey in his *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, in an interview Kennelly said: "I love eating raw food like they do in Japan." Both poets are thus using inspirational techniques that were also that of the early Irish bards. In the translation of Cormac's glossary by Whitley Stoke, the following passage describes the usage and habits of poets and ecclesiastics:

Thus it is done. The poet chews a piece of (the) flesh of a read pig, or of a dog or cat, and puts it afterwards on the flag behind the door, and pronounces an incantation on it, and offers it to idol-gods, and afterwards calls his idols to him and then finds them not on the morrow, and pronounces incantations on his two palms, and calls again onto him his idol-gods that his sleep may not be disturbed; and he lays his two palms on his two cheeks and (in this manner) he falls asleep; and he is watched in order that no one may interrupt (?) nor disturb him till everything about which he is engaged is revealed to him, (which may be) a minute or two or three, or as long as he was supposed to be at the offering.

113 C, 6

¹¹⁴ Mary Rose Doorly, "The Poet as image gourmet, Night Off," Sunday Press 14 December 1986, 16.

¹¹⁵ Cormac's Glossary, trans. J. O'Donovan, ed. Whitley Stokes (Calcutta: O.T. Cutter for the Irish Archaeological and Celtic Society, 1868), 94-94, in Ettlinger, Celtic Seers' Source Book, 31.

Using ingestion to reach poetic knowledge and inspiration goes back to the remotest times. For instance, the mythological Irish hero and poet Fionn, like the Welsh Talicsin, found inspiration through eating a sacred substance that in the story took the form of the Salmon of Knowledge. The practice to chew raw flesh in order to receive the poetic sight, meets an echo in the often repeated phrase of the Finnagecht: "Finn put his thumb into his mouth; when he took it out again, his imbas enlightened him."116 Similar practice took place in the tarbh feis (bull-feast), a form of divinatory sleep. A preferably white bull was slaughtered, cooked and the person looking for an answer from the divine ate of the flesh and broth and went to sleep while druids chanted a magic formula over him.

In the quest for inspiration the absorption of a magic or revelatory substance was essential. The latter might be raw meat, 117 a draught from a cauldron but also air as suggested by the unpublished text of Bretha Nemed. 118 In his article "Indo-European Metrics and Archaic Irish Verse," Calvert Watkins explains that the anamain is an archaic metre that includes both the idea of inspiration and of breath. The link between breathing and inspiration is also present in the awen, the Welsh equivalent to the Irish imbas forosnai. The metric pattern combined with alliterations that provided a frame to counterbalance the sometimes seemingly incoherent outpour of the vision. The line offered a container that could help memorization since this poetic art was oral and materially unrecorded.119

In his work Brendan Kennelly anchors his representation of bardic 120 inspiration within the banality of everyday life and common language. Hints to the ancient world of visionary Irish practices are recurrent but most often positioned in a subtle way; this

¹¹⁶ Kuno Meyer, Revue Celtique, vol. 25, 1904, 349, in Robert D. Scott, "The Thumb of Knowledge," in The Celtic Seers' Source Book, 70.

Nora Chadwick, "Imbas Forosnai," in Celtic Seers' Source Book, 46-67, 55.
 Calvert Watkins, "Indo-European Metrics and Archaic Irish Verse," Celtica, vol. 6, 1963, in Ettlinger, Celtic Seers' Source Book, 24.

¹¹⁹ John Matthews, "Vision and Seership: The Druids and the Bards," Celtic Seers' Source Book, 19-26, 24.

¹²⁰ Like ancient bards.

discretion somehow corresponds to divinatory methods themselves, in that they were only imparted to the initiated. Thus, while at times Brendan Kennelly presents the reader with poems whose first contact may conjure a sense of oddity or even ridicule, these apparently flimsy pieces often contain a link to the more serious realm of vision and mystic inspiration. Much like James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, *Poetry My Arse* is essentially connected with Dublin's Liffey. The poet hero, Ace, seems to draw inspiration and comfort from its polluted and foul smelling water. River-bank incubation was a frequent practice of Celtic heroes, "the poet[s] thought that the place where poetry was revealed always was on the brink of water." Before his fight with Cúchulainn, Ferdiad goes to sleep at the ford of combat while his gillic watches over his sleep. Similarly the banks of the Grand Canal are the place where Patrick Kavanagh had his "hegira" and they are also one of Kennelly's favourite walks. In "Miracles" Brendan Kennelly indirectly alludes to the belief that miracles can be expected on the side of a river:

Miracles are common enough in Dublin, the greatest, a day without hurt. No miracle, though, if you walk on the Liffey That beauty is solid with dirt. 123

The first two lines dismantle the common sense of the word "miracle" so that the meaning of the third line can both be read literally with the sense that miracle has in the first line, and ironically, according to a sense of "miracle" that sticks to Latin etymology: miror meaning "to wonder at something, to look at in awe." Indeed if no "miracle," in the common sense, happens on the Liffey in *Poetry My Arse*, the spirit of the place still demonstrates its power in inspiring Ace. Despite the mundane explanation ("That beauty is solid with dirt"), "walking on the Liffey" is still a miracle in the sense that "miracle" takes

¹²¹ "Immacuallun in da Thuarad" quoted in P.K. Ford, *The Poetry of Llwyarch Hen* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974), in *Celtic Seers' Source Book*, 24.

Patrick Kavanagh, Collected Pruse, 1967, 229.

¹²³ PMA, 102.

in the first line. The flawed logic of the first two lines contaminates the last two. Another feature that relates Brendan Kennelly's poetry to inspired creation resides in the attention he pays to doors. The latter, like any passage way in general, possesses strong symbolic value. However when doors are mentioned in a poem where other elements belong to the realm of Irish mythology, the reference to bardic visionary practices becomes undeniable. Numerous descriptions of visionary practices mention the presence of a door. In the passage quoted earlier, Cormac wrote: "the poet chews a piece of the read flesh of a pig, or a dog, or a cat, and puts it then on a flagstone *behind the door valve*, ¹²⁴ and chants an incantation over it." Similarly in several saga stories such as "The Death of Cúldub," Fionn, the poet hero, squeezed his thumb in a door, put his thumb in his mouth and had a vision. These mythological elements provide a much deeper reading to a poem such as "knock":

When did I last see my vagina?" she wondered, standing naked on the bedroom floor.

Her body tensed like the salmon of knowledge at the knock on the door. 127

The "salmon of knowledge" refers to the flesh that Fionn cats and that provides him with visionary insight. Like ancient poets preparing for incubation, the female character of the poem is in a bedroom, possibly getting ready for visionary sleep. "The knock on the door" in the last line is loaded with a multiplicity of interpretations. At a first immediately available level, it reads as the disruption of a private and intimate moment, at a second level, the door symbolizing the connection with the supernatural, the knock can be read as otherworldly manifestation triggered by "the salmon of knowledge." However if one recalls that poets' visionary sleep was protected from any disruption for fear that their

124 Emphasis mine.

¹²⁷ PMA, 102.

¹²⁵ Cormac's Glossary, in Osborn Bergin, "Irish Bardic Poetry," The Bardic Source Book, 171-187, 177.

Robert D. Scott, "The Thumb of Knowledge," Celtic Seers' Source Book, 68-88, 70.

souls would not return to their body, the knock on the door might be interpreted as a dramatic event breaking a process and in any case striking the end of the poem.

I.3.2 Inspiration as a Dangerous Thing

Bardic incubation in pre-Christian Ireland was perceived as a dangerous and violent experience. It was believed that the person undergoing visionary sleep might lose their soul that would not find its way back to the body 128 and they would die if their sleep was disturbed. Chadwick explains 129 that the Sidhe's food was not cooked and was forbidden to human beings. Eating the food of the Sidhe resulted in the eater to be permanently held prisoner in the fairy world. Thus in consuming raw tlesh, poets and druids put themselves at risk of not being able to return to their own world but they also entered in immediate contact with heathen spirits. Several occurrences in ancient texts show a dreamer being watched over by four druids who formed a magic circle to protect them. Before launching into visionary sleep purification was required, often through fasting. Brendan Kennelly uses similar methods. He thus recalls 130 fasting for three days, drinking nothing but water before setting up to write Mary, 131 his translation from the Irish. Ancient dreamers also had to be pure of lies, for they would die if they uttered any untrue statement: "Classical passages illuminate the meaning of the phrase [anamain]: the sleeper's lips would perish if he uttered a falsehood. The supernatural forces which disclosed truth to the dreamer also punished liars."132

The question of the poet's integrity is crucial to Brendan Kennelly and similarly was to Patrick Kavanagh whose statement Kennelly quotes regularly: "Poetry is a dangerous thing." "Pausanias (VII; 25, 13) and Tibullus (II, V, 63) leave no doubt that

¹²⁸ Ettlinger, Celtic Seers' Source Book, 31.

¹²⁹ *lbid.*, 55.

¹³⁰ In communication with Brendan Kennelly, December 2004.

¹³¹ Brendan Kennelly, Mary: From the Irish (Dublin: Aisling, 1987).

¹³² Ettlinger, "Precognitive Dreams in Celtic Legend," in Celtic Seers' Source Book, 27-42, 31.

prophets were subject to an ordeal by partaking of sacred food, which was believed either to inspire the truth-speaking prophet or to poison the deceitful one."¹³³ During such dreams, the soul came in contact with "demons." In the story of St Brendan, the travel of the Saint's soul is related to that ordeal:

Il alla retirer de l'enfer l'âme de sa mère. Son âme (de Brendan) eut à se battre continuellement avec les démons, jusqu'à ce qu'il retira sa mère des mains des démons. Pendant ce temps, l'évêque Mainenn gardait son corps. L'esprit de Brendan revint dans son corps tout affligé; et il poussa un soupir. L'évêque Mainenn l'interrogea alors. 134

These lines evoke the widely shared conception that dreamers undertaking the travel of the soul in the supernatural world, had to go through sufferings. Descriptions of druidic trances evoke the sleeper's screams and restlessness. The vision is almost necessarily associated with some form of violence. In the story "Finn and the Phantoms" the poet is flagellated. E. Ettlinger takes this as a sign that Fionn's adventures were happening in a dreamworld. Indeed, since antiquity voluntary flagellation had been a means to reach eestasy. Similarly, in "The Sickbed of Cuchulain," while Cúchulainn lies asleep, two women beat him badly. 138

Beyond the spiritual pain endured by mantic dreamers, physical danger was also a reality associated with these visionary incubations. Arthur Rimbaud who turned himself into a "voyant" (seer) might be one of those who inspired Brendan Kennelly's approach to

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ J. Vendryes, "Trois historiettes irlandaises," *Revue Celtique*, 31, 1910, 310, in Ettlinger, *Celtic Seers'* Source Book, 35.

[&]quot;He went to take his mother's soul out of hell. His soul (Brendan's) had to struggle relentlessly against demons until he took her away from the demons' hands. Meanwhile, Bishop Mainenn looked after his body. Brendan's spirit came back to his upset body; and he heaved a sigh. Bishop Mainenn questioned him then." Translation mine.

¹³⁵ Jean Markale, The Epics of Celtic Ireland: Ancient Tales of Mystery and Magic (Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2000),136.

¹³⁶ Ettlinger, Celtic Seers' Source Book, 33.

Ancient Irish Tales, eds. Tom Peete Cross and Clark Harris Slover (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1936) (reprinted by Barnes & Noble, 1996) in Ettlinger, Celtic Seers' Source Book, 35.

¹³⁸ Ettlinger, Celtic Seers' Source Book, 350.

creation. ¹³⁹ In a letter to his professor Georges Izambard, Rimbaud wrote: "Je veux être poète, et je travaille à me rendre Voyant ... Il s'agit d'arriver à l'inconnu par le dérèglement de tous les sens. Les souffrances sont énormes, mais il faut être fort, être né poète, et je me suis reconnu poète." ¹⁴⁰ However, a study of poetic writings in Ireland reveals that Rimbaud's creative programme had been put in practice from the earliest time in the Celtic world. In pre-Christian Ireland the belief was that sacred food had the power of poisoning dishonest seers. This suggests that some of them must have found death through incubations. Ancient bards and druids also consumed certain potions to enhance the vision. Although the ingredients of the drink remain unknown to this day, one might postulate that some must have been sufficiently toxic to induce hallucinations. Ettlinger evokes ¹⁴¹ the story of Druil, the Druid of Ossory to whom two jars full of wine and food from Gaul was brought and who, through prophetic inspiration betrayed his own tribe which was consequently defeated at Inreoin. The food of Gaul was reputed to be composed of salty ingredients that led eaters to the consumptions of a great quantity of wine. Good amounts of beer were also brought to druids during divinatory practices.

The violence and intensity of the visionary experience is demonstrated in the violence that had to be applied to the dreamer to drag him out of his trance. Numerous evocations of the shaking applied to mantic seers describe how the seer was brought back to his normal state. An account of the awakening from the Welsh awenydhyon is given in Description of Wales:

[people inspired] are then raised from their ecstasy, as from a deep sleep, and, as it were, by violence compelled to return to their proper senses. After

¹³⁹ Brendan Kennelly studied French poetry at secondary level under the supervision of Jane Agnes McKenna and later on in Trinity College of Prof. Jean-Paul Pittion.

¹⁴⁰ Oeuvres complètes [d'] Arthur Rimbaud, ed. Antoine Adam (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 249.

[&]quot;I want to be a poet and I am working on becoming a Secr. [...] The process consists in reaching the Unknown by disturbing all the senses. Implied sufferings are enormous, but one has to be strong, one has to be born a poet, and I have recognized myself as a poet." Translation mine.

¹⁴¹ Ettlinger, Celtic Seers' Source Book, 36.

having answered the questions, they do not recover till violently shaken by other people. 142

Referring to that awakening, Nora Chadwick points out¹⁴³ that in *Finn and the Phantoms* the shaking and beating of Fionn might have been performed by Fionn's own followers to bring him out of his trance. This interpretation seems to her all the more plausible as the original text does not specify that the beating is performed "by the phantoms."

The image of the nuts of *imbas* confirms the feeling that inspired creation was necessarily a violent and painful process. Many debates have taken place¹⁴⁴ about the meaning of the *tenm laida*, one of the divinatory processes within the *dichetal do chennaib* and the *imbas forosnai*. John Matthews notes¹⁴⁵ that the meaning of "tenm" is "to crack open, or husk (a nut)," which, where the eating of nuts takes place in the context of the saga stories, suggests that the nut in question is one of the Nine Hazels of Wisdom, referred to in a number of texts. *The Dinsenchas*, a collection of lore explains:

[Connla's Well], which is under the sea ... That is a well at which are the hazels and inspirations of wisdom that is the hazels of science and poetry, and in the same hour their fruits, and their blossoms and their foliage break forth, and these fall on the well in the same shower, which raises on the water a royal surge of purple. Then the salmon chew the fruit, and the juice of the nuts is in their bellies. And seven streams spring forth and turn again. ¹⁴⁶

These nuts are usually associated with the Spring of the Shannon and the Boync. Brendan Kennelly, whose birthplace, Ballylongford, is on the brinks of the Shannon, was perfectly acquainted with these stories and tales and used them as a mythological background to his verse. In the light of mythology, one is bound to reinterpret Ace's "nutbook" not only as

¹⁴² Description of Wales, trans. Thomas Wright (London: H.G. Bohn, 1863), 501-502, in Ettlinger, Celtic Seer's Book, 35.

¹⁴³ Nora Chadwick, Celtic Seers' Source Boook, 56.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 60.

¹⁴⁵ John Matthews, "Seeing the Truth, Speaking the Truth," Celtic Seers' Source Boook, 11, 12.

¹⁴⁶ E. Gwynn, The Metrical Dindsenchas (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis and Co., 1903), 35, in John Matthews,

[&]quot;Vision and Seership; The Druids and the Bards," Celtic Seers' Source Book, 23.

the place of deliriously mad inspiration but also as a place where poetic wisdom becomes shaped into words.

The image drawn from that figuring the nut of wisdom, of a hard container split and cracked open through a violent process that results in poetic creation or in a cathartic release is a recurring one in Kennelly's work. In "Brown Shoes" the first stanza depicts a photograph on which "mused Ace" till a state of self-hypnosis comparable to that of early visionary bards is reached. One line breaks the body of the poem and signals the passage in the realm of vision: "His head split open." The following stanza corresponds to "a moment of beautiful delirium visionary fever" in which elements of the first stanza: the poet's "brothers" and "sisters," "the brown shoes," "the photograph," "table" are picked up and reframed on a universal and timeless scale. The pain of the creative process is often evoked while also made fun of in Kennelly's work such s in "Obsession":

Ace spent years writing a poem obsessing him since childhood, now a stretch of peace, now a storm aching to be born of his blood.

For Brendan Kennelly, this pain was long closely related to his addiction to alcohol. "Blood" is one of the rare poems where alcoholism is openly evoked. The poem recalls various drinking places on the Liffey quays where its author used to go binge-drinking. Very much like bards, the poet used to drink a phenomenal quantity of alcohol and he remembers drinking up to three bottles of vodka in the course of one evening. The refrain "I drink the blood of God and I feel good" illustrates how the drink had become the rhythmic obsession of his days and nights and how it was for him a medium to escape the presence of a broken family, "My loves involves remembering Magee," and try to reach a

¹⁴⁷ PMA, 93.

¹⁴⁸ FS, 266

¹⁴⁹ In communication with Brendan Kennelly, May 2005.

mystical realm through "the blood of God." Intoxication was also a device in the service of poetic creation. "Drink what you will, what matters is the work, / Responsible intensity of that illusion." The poem also suggests that the self-inflicted pain of alcohol was partly used to attain redemption. The endless and ceaselessly repeated communion provided a way to compensate for guilty feelings.

In "The moaning sea" through Ace, Kennelly reveals one of his creative methods and the importance of dreams for his work: "Ace de Horner, who keeps copious notes / on all dreams he has and hear about." Dreams appear as a major source of inspiration. When looked upon in the light of bardic visionary tradition, the poem "Conference" is particularly interesting. More than half of the piece is written in the gnomic form one finds in Amergin's and Taliesin's poetry: "I am a bell no one can stop ringing / I am the photograph hidden in Beethoven's wallet." Because it combines the recurrence and stability of the anaphora "I am" associated with a wide range of various elements, such form is particularly apt to tell the travels of the soul while the body lies asleep. From the beginning the poem is placed under the sign of a vision and the opening lines suggest that the poet uses a form of hypnotic meditation as a source for his verse:

It takes a while but then
Yes, I believe my eye.
Half-way up the quiet laneway
Where drinkers and stray dogs make their beds.
I stumble on a conference of dreams.

This technique is highly reminiscent of the process that the early *fili* (etymologically the word means "seer") went through to reach a vision. Sometimes they would go in a dark

¹⁵⁰ PMA, 172.

¹⁵¹ FS, 28.

room and stare in the dark for hours¹⁵² until they eventually "saw something" and returned with a poem.

1.3.3 Blindness and Vision

In early Ireland but also in the Middle Ages, blindness affected numerous *fili* and blind poets were often the best known and appreciated. Being deprived of physical sight seems to have developed their visionary sight and their sense of music. In the early period,

the bardic pupil was taken to a cave [a name Kennelly gives to his composing room] and left inside to contemplate a sign carved in stone. The initiate then took a drink of initiation ... [which] had an effect like the drugs taken by shamanic practitioners ... it put them into a trance in which they saw things with inner visionary sight. 153

A description of an appropriate setting for a poet to be inspired is given in the following lines by Flatha O Gnimh:

Myself now, when I make a poem,
I prefer, guarding me from error,
A screen against the sun; to be under a roof,
A dark bed to protect me.
If I did not close my eyelids,
Against the brilliant rays,
Like a veil between me and my lays,
I would loose all my skill.

In the 18th century, *The Memoirs of the Marquis of Clanricarde* (1722) describe the study room of Scottish poets as follows – Osborn Bergin estimates that the description is trustworthy and provides us with precious information as to the circumstances of their Irish peers: "The structure was a snug, low Hut, and beds in it at convenient Distances, each within a small Appartment ... No Windows to let in the Day, nor any Light at all us'd but

¹⁵² Osborn Bergin, The Bardic Source Book, 176.

¹⁵³ John, Matthews, The Bardic Source Book, 18.

¹⁵⁴ Osborn Bergin, The Bardic Source Book, 173-175.

that of Candles, and these brought in at a proper season only." Trainees were given a subject to work on overnight. They meditated on their beds, spent the entire next day in the dark until light was brought to them during the night. Then they sat down to write their poems. Reading in the dark permitted students to avoid the distraction of physical visions and concentrate on their inner voice to let their minds open to receive spiritual visions.

Bardic schools continued to exist in Scotland in the 18th century. In *Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* Martin Martin also gives an account of the trainees' conditions of study. The text insists on the absence of light in the room:

I must not omit to relate their way of Study, which is very singular. They shut their Doors and Windows for a Days [sic] time, and lie on their backs with a Stone upon their Belly an Plads about their Heads, and their Eyes being cover'd they pump their Brains for Rhetorical Encomium or Panegyrick ... 156

The act of shutting one's eyes, of going blind to see truth, bears a particular importance to Brendan Kennelly. He thus used to have some of his classes in Trinity College Dublin spent in the dark after closing the curtains and turning the electric light off to have students concentrate on the sound of spoken words. ¹⁵⁷ In *Poetry My Arse*, two lines illustrate the poet's views on inspired poems: "beyond their touch but not beyond their sight, / visible in darkness, lost in light." The repetition of "beyond" combined with the length of the line suggests that poetry is perceived as a quest, a travel *beyond* the common reach of senses. "Sight" here, as explained in the second line does not refer to physical but to visionary sight that, in agreement with the rhyme does not associate with physical but with spiritual light, in the form of illumination.

¹⁵⁵ Pádraig A. Breatnach, The Chief's Poet, 54.

¹⁵⁶ Osborn Bergin, The Bardic Source Book, 176.

¹⁵⁷ Personal notes from class with Brendan Kennelly, 2003.

¹⁵⁸ PMA, 89.

In "Dirt" 159 Ace de Horner seems to practice a way of initiating sight that directly recalls bardic exercises:

... he sees, dimly at first, then clearly, a grieving, handsome face.

He stares into the dirt, more privileged now than he's ever been. The face appears, fades, appears again ...

The meaning of both *imbas: forosnai* and *tenm laida*, is related to the presence of light and fire. John Matthews explains: "Both the words *forosnai* and *tenm* contains an element of burning, heat, brightness." Thus the *imbas forosnai* can be described as "wisdom that illumines." The illumination happens in every sense: metaphorically some supernatural light is brought to the poet and literally the light blinds the eyes of the person who sees it. This conforms to the traditional belief that whoever drank water from Nechtan's Well would earn poetic sight while they would lose their visual ability and go blind. Similarly "Taliesin" means "bright-shining brow" and his name was given to him as a baby, when followers of Elphin found him in a dark leather bag. 162

In line with this belief Brendan Kennelly has several of his characters suffering from blindness. Buffun is a blind poet, Ace is progressively going blind through his progress in the book and his dog, Kanoocc loses one eye in a fight which, as a symbol of inspiration, turns him into a sort of cyclope: "... as if he saw / more with that one eye than most humans / do with two. Like a bleedin' prophet, as the man said." In "What they saw" Kennelly directly assesses the issue of poetic sight. Inspired from the Gaelic

¹⁵⁹ PMA, 118.

John Matthews, "Vision and Seership: The Druids and the Bards," Celtic Seers' Source Book, 19-26, 24.

¹⁶² David Annwn, Hear the Voice of the Bard!, 12-13.

¹⁶³ PMA, 232.

¹⁶⁴ PMA, 76.

naming pattern in which the epithet "blind," "dall" was inserted in the poet's name such as in "Liam Dall Ua Laoghaire." Brendan Kennelly lists the names of the Dumb Cat poets:

blind Willy, blind Paddy, blind Mickey blind Thady blind Biddy blind Matt

blind Raftery blind Scattery blind Carolan

The list mixes authentic blind Gaelic poets – Raftery, and Carolan were reputed for their music – with imaginary names. However the poem demands close attention:

blind Baldy blind Scourge blind Cripes blind Limerick blind Kerry blind Monaghan blind Balor blind Angel blind Tripe.

The Dumb Cat poets are represented as if the fact that they are poets merely relied on their literary title "blind." "We've nothing to say" declares their leader, which also suggests that the Dumb Cat poets are a dumb category and all they can achieve is something "like a dream of inspired voices." The phrase is ambiguous. Are their songs a pale reflection of "inspired voices" or a musical inspired climax?

The second encounter of Ace with the Dumb Cat poets corresponds with his election as a "Holy Seer," ¹⁶⁶ a poem in which Ace like Kennelly in his youth appears at a literary gathering in an advanced state of drunkenness. By this stage, in the end of the book ¹⁶⁷ Ace is almost totally blind and Kanooce, who stands for inspired poetry has become part of himself. He has become a true *file* in the authentic sense of the word that signifies "seer." However in this poem, the gap becomes apparent between Ace and those for whom "blindness" and "seership" are nothing but titles. This gap between the Dumb

¹⁶⁵ Corkery, The Hidden Ireland, 28.

¹⁶⁶ PMA, 296.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 295.

Cat's poets and Ace is noticeable in the difference of tone between them and Ace. It is also materialised in the blank space that separates the lines which describe them:

'Hell is in Bluebell,' said Ace and scratched himself.

The poets giggled.

They cannot perceive the seriousness of Ace's statement who is there giving expression to the pain and suffering demanded by true illumination. His humorous attitude: "he scratched himself" is the mark of his determination to remain comical while dealing with serious matters. As will be later examined, Kennelly often writes under the aegis of the Comic Muse.

As he insists on the contradiction between "dall" in these poets' name and their lack of visionary insight, Kennelly denounces a self-celebrating art that attributes itself titles voided from any significance. While poets are expected to load words with a meaning that common language often weakens, here on the contrary verbal thinning finds its source among literary circles. This satiric representation of the Irish literary world cannot but remind the reader of Kavanagh's "Spring Day" that mocks Dublin's "tragic" poets:

O Come all ye tragic poets and sing a stave with me – ... And our verbal constipation will be totally forgotten. ... Forget about the books you've read and the inbred verses there Forget about the Kinsey Report and take a mouthful of air ...

57

¹⁶⁸ Patrick Kavanagh, Selected Poems, 90.

II Refusing the Fili Way of Writing

1) Poetry as a Lonely Business

II.1.1 Fili and Schools of Bardism

From the earliest time to the Middle Ages, bards¹⁶⁹ were known for their pride and arrogance that relied on the fear inspired by their magic powers. Concerning the bards of Gaul, in the first century BC, Diodorus who also acknowledges the vivacity of their wits, calls them "boasters and threateners." File Aithirne's shrewdness and arrogance contributed to fuelling the myth that grew to surround him. The legend goes that he started satirizing even before he was born so as to provide his pregnant mother with ale. His arrogance and boastfulness owed him the nickname "Aithirne the Importunate." ¹⁷¹

In pre-Christian and early Christian Ireland, the *fili* formed an extremely well organised order, parallel in honour and magnificence to the aristocrats whose privilege was also hereditary. Thus Aithirne's two sons and daughters were regularly involved with the exactions of their notorious father. The *fili* order was comparable to a University¹⁷² except that this intellectual aristocracy relied on birth and the practice of their art. At a time when no social organisation was settled in Ireland, they formed the only steady institution. The Chiefs were to comply with their duty to the *fili* as reminded by O'Hosey, the poet of the Maguires, who on his being appointed *ollamh* reminded his patron in his laureate ode that the *ollamh* ranked in all ways as an equal with a king and a bishop: "To him his due of warmth, of loving-kindness, the primes of all largesse, the initiative in counsel, the seat closest to the prince and a share of his bed, with payment, whether 'in wood' or 'in

¹⁶⁹ In the broad sense of "poets."

¹⁷⁰ Diodoro Siculo, *Diodorus of Sicily*, trans. C.H. Oldfather (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1933), 177, in Elliott, *The Power of Satire*, 21.

¹⁷¹ Robinson, The Bardic Source Book, 144.

¹⁷² Daniel Corkery, "The Bardic Schools," The Bardic Source Book, 26-42, 28.

sanctuary."¹⁷³ Their training was long and elaborate. It took seven years to complete the full course of a *fili*. Their organisation followed a strict hierarchy composed of seven levels. The *ollamh* (director of a bardic school), also called "Chief's poet," had an attendant train of thirty followers, at the head of which the *anruth* had himself a train of fifteen etc... They worked in groups and travelled the country in gangs.

Often they went in bands, attended as fully as they could afford and carried with them a large pot, or caldron, called "The Pot of Avarice." ... when they approached the house the leader of one of these parties, at one end of the line of minstrels, would begin with a verse. The second verse could be recited by the poet at the other end, and the third by the one next to the other.¹⁷⁴

Despite their duty of allegiance to fairness, and despite the fierce rivalry between them, solidarity among the members of the order prevailed above any moral consideration. As explained by Elliott, 175 questions of morality, justice and responsibility were put aside when poets voiced their common outrage. In pre-Christian Ireland, supporting King Conchobar in his revenge, Ulstermen destroyed Aithirne's household in setting it on fire and the poets thus responded: "Great grief, great pity, the destruction of Aithirne the greatly famous ... Woe (to him) that wrought the man's destruction, woe to him, that caused his slaughter ... He had a spear which would slay a king ..." 176

The *fili*'s mode of thinking and mode of composition became extremely conservative from the 13th century and for the 400 hundred following years:

Over a period of some four hundred years the best poets produced material of a sustained standard and of similar nature. In many instances,

¹⁷³ Eleanor Hull, A Textbook of Irish Literature (London: Nutt, 1906), n.p. in Daniel Corkery, "The Bardic Schools," The Bardic Source Book, 32.

¹⁷⁴ Charles de Kay, "The Old Poetic Guild in Ireland," The Bardic Source Book, 333-342, 336.

¹⁷⁵ Elliott, The Power of Satire, 31.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. Trans. R. Williamson., 31.

compositions are hardly datable by language owing to the faithfulness to the standardized language of formal composition. 177

They were the keepers of common memory and defenders of an ancient tradition. They also acted as genealogists, lawyers, spokesmen etc... The *fill* were

highly trained in the use of a polished literary medium, belonging to a hereditary caste in an aristocratic society, holding an official position therein by virtue of [their] training, [their] learning, [their] knowledge of the history and tradition of [their] learning and their clan. 178

In their mode of composition priority was given to craft and skill. Whereas *filli* in early Ireland were inspired poets, later on, inspiration became optional and their quasi exclusive concern focused on rhetorical rules that guaranteed the crafted nature of their poems. Although they continued to be called "*fili*." they were no longer seers. In poetic schools, their standards in writing were particularly artificial. Before accepting any "new" form within their verse they checked whether such form had been employed by their predecessors. Any other poetic form was thoroughly excluded. The result was that most of the time their own verse was much more formal and more crafted than these earlier poets. "It was their dearest study: their metres became more and more intricate, and their verse, what between this intricacy and the special dialect they used, more and more a study rather for the schools themselves than an outlet for a people's emotion." The schools were characterised by the cult of secrecy, pride in their form of elitism, the rivalry between them and their confidence in their own power that was rooted in people's fear of their satiric verse. Such characteristics made them a butt for ridicule. Indeed "Imtheacht na Tromdháimhe," ("The Proceedings of the Burdensome Bardic Company") by Guaire the

¹⁷⁷ Michelle O'Riordan, Irish Bardic Poetry and Rhetorical Reality (Cork: Cork University Press, 2007), vvii

¹⁷⁸ Osborn Bergin, The Bardic Source Book, 172.

¹⁷⁹ Daniel Corkery, The Bardic Source Book, 35.

Generous, satirises the bardic schools 180 and in some respect reads like Poetry My Arse, a modern satire of the Irish literary world. In both works pedantry, human cupidity, and the politics of success among the literati are exposed.

This sense of belonging to a group of poets played an essential part in the contemporary emergence of the Northern poets in the seventies. The sense of a community appears for instance in The Poet's Chair¹⁸¹ but also in "Flight of the Earls Now Leaving" 182 by James Simmons. In this poem, the poet questions his colleagues' decision to leave the troubled stage of Northern Ireland to reach a safer ground where "the troubles" may become "more poetic" because less directly real. The sense of a group can also be noted in Michael Longley's The Echo Gate: poems 1975-1979¹⁸³ that opens with a series of letters called "Home Ground," 184 addressed among others to Derek Mahon, Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon.

As opposed to this sense of community among Northern poets, Irish poets from the Republic do not show any such wish to be identifiable through references to other poets or through dealing with a common theme. Brendan Kennelly exemplifies the lonely and individual progress which can lead a poet to voice a personal style of verse that has all to do with his own creative quest and little to do with the influence of colleague poets. It is also striking that a long time before there was any question of Aosdána. 185 as early as the Seventics, Brendan Kennelly like Yeats and Patrick Kavanagh before him, professed his strong belief in the necessary loneliness of the poet and remained faithful to this principle for the rest of his career. He approved the financial support granted to artists and poets but

Vivian Mercier, The Irish Comic Tradition, 140. Cf. also "The Proceedings of the Great Bardic Institution," trans. Owen Connelan, in The Bardic Source Book, 257-283.

¹⁸¹ Seamus Heancy, Paul Durcan, John Montaguc, Nuala Ni Dhomhaill, The Poet's Chair, the First Nine Years of the Ireland Chair of Poetry (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2008), preface by Seamus Heancy and Foreword by Donnell Deeny

182 James Simmons, "Flight of the Earls Now Leaving." Irish Times, 04 June 1974, 10.

¹⁸³ Michael Longley, The Echo Gate: Poems 1975-1979 (London: Secker and Warburg, 1979).

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. next subsection "Poetry and Patronage."

rejected any compromise with a group: "people who write verse letters to one another presumably feel some sort of poetic brotherhood. There is a smack of trade unionism about it which I find repulsive." 186

The progress of Kennelly's views with regard to poetry groups is most interesting. He started writing and publishing with his student friend from Trinity College, Rudi Holzapfel. They published in common Cast a Cold Eve (1959), The Rain, the Moon (1961), The Dark about Our Loves (1962) and Green Townlands (1963). In their first volume, poems by Kennelly and those by Holzapfel were not distinguished. Austin Clarke notes: "with unusual modesty Mr Brendan Kennelly and Rudi Holzapfel refrained from signing their poems and so provide us with an opportunity for literary detection." The decision of not asserting ownership over one's literary work is typical of the oral tradition and will be subsequently examined in this study. At the time, Brendan Kennelly was scriously involved with the group of young poets writing for the college poetry magazine Icarus. Among these were Michael Longley, Eavan Boland, and Derek Mahon. The circle offered a fertile dynamic from which several major poets emerged. However, while some of them seem to have felt the need to remain within a group - even in a different group such as the Belfast group - Brendan Kennelly shortly affirmed his independence. This in no way cancelled friendly relationships as shown by Kennelly's life-long friendship with Michael Longley, but these strong bounds and mutual admiration remained outside the sphere of poetic creation and promotion.

¹⁸⁶ Anonymous, "On Language and Invention," The Literary Review, Winter 1979, 199.

¹⁸⁷ Austin Clarke, "The Amorous Gael," The Irish Times, 23 January 1960,8.

II 1.2 Poetry and Patronage

Because poetry by the *fili* was essentially court poetry, in a comparison between a contemporary poet such as Brendan Kennelly and Irish bards since pre-Christian Ireland the issue of patronage has to be taken into account. After considering the question, one soon comes to realise that although it has now taken a more muted form, the issue of patronage remains relevant to this present day. Through his treatment of *Aosdána*, but also through different aspects of his poetry, Brendan Kennelly asserts the independence of his own writing.

In his work, poets find a caricatural representative in the figure of Acc de Horner, a name almost homonymous with Aosdána, a contemporary group of poets who, like the Irish *fili*, enjoy tax remission. The distinction between the *baird* and the *fili* was roughly drawn in 574 AD at the Drumceat's synode¹⁸⁸ during which a law decided that poets would no longer be travellers but would become sedentary, working in the service of a prince or a big house. Subsequently, the *fili* who belonged to the higher poetic order were attached to a place while the *baird* who did not benefit from the same training as the upper order of the *fili* remained itinerant. In the poems "What they saw" and "Holy Seer" referred to earlier, "Drumceat" becomes "Dum Cat" and Acc distinguishes himself from the "Dum Cat poets." Kennelly is here playing with early Irish history and mythology which he became familiar with during his doctoral studies. In his PhD thesis he quotes the following lines:

See in despite the Clerics' hate, where Kellach's care awards Rough though it be, a sanctuary to Erin's banished Bards.

A life-time now is well-nigh spent since first our wandering feet Compelled by that unjust decree enacted at Drumkeat,
Left home and presidential scat by plentcous board and fire
To rate the rage of impious Aed, ungrateful Domnal's sire.
Twelve hundred men, with one consent, from Erin's utmost ends,

¹⁸⁸ Robinson, The Bardic Source Book, 149.

¹⁸⁹ PMA, 296.

We sought the hills where ruled the Bard's hereditary friends, Thy sheltering, song-preserving hills, Ultonia. 190

Just like the Aosdána poets enjoy tax remission by virtue of their office, the *fili*'s land was free of taxation. Tadhg O'Dalaigh states: "Our family got Muinter Bhaire of the sheltered shores from our ancestor, if it is taxed after him, our ancestor held it free." In *Poetry My Arse*, the hero goes to war against a caste of poets, the Dum Cat poets, whose works, like the *fili*'s, conform to the tastes and expectations of the day. The battle is also an inner battle raging between the part of Ace tempted by this official poetry and his dark double, Kanooce, his pitbull who champions inspired poetry. Of the two characters, Kanooce seems the most brutally straightforward, yet his name is bound to make him symbolically complex since it also sounds like *cnuas* about which the Arts Council explains:

Members of Aosdána may avail under certain conditions of the Cnuas, a stipend which is designed to enable them to devote their energies fully to their work. The Arts Council reassesses eligibility of the Cnuas every five years. ¹⁹²

Similarly, the ceremony in which Ace is made a "holy seer" is a parody of the attribution of the Saoi (pronounced like "see") title among Aosdána poets:

Members of Aosdána may receive the honour of Saoi. This is for singular and sustained distinction in the arts. The members of Aosdána elect a Saoi. The President of Ireland confers the symbol of the office of Saoi, the gold Torc. Not more than seven members of Aosdána may hold this honour at any one time.

¹⁹⁰ Brendan Kennelly, *Modern Irish Poets and the Irish Epic*, Unpublished thesis submitted to Trinity College, Dublin, as partial fulfilment for the degree of PhD, 1966, 175.

¹⁹¹Pádraig A. Breatnach, The Chief's Poet, 63.

http://aosdana.artscouncil.ic/, 20 May 2008.

¹⁹³ PMA, 296.

Kanooce can be read as a raw and brutally honest satirical voice mocking the potentially corrupting power of this *Cnuas* to aspiring *Saoi* poets. Most interestingly Robinson calls attention to the mistaken but long prevailing etymology of *cainte*, meaning satirist:

The etymology, like that proposed for *cainte*, satirist – "i.e., *canis*, a dog for the satirist has dog's head in barking, and alike is the profession they follow" – has no value in the eyes of modern science, but such comments are of some incidental interest. ¹⁹⁴

Thus in "Pique of the Weak" Kanooce's response lashes at the appeal of poetry purely based on craft as opposed to inspired poetry:

Fuck off, you subsided bastard!
Pathetic little rhyming fucker!
You think your art is divine, mine is diviner.
I only bark what's true. 195

The quatrain underlines the gap between the two significations of "divine." The first adjective refers to craft poetry, as practiced by the *fili* in the Middle Ages (from the 13th to the 17th centuries) but also to some extent by a number of poets contemporary of Brendan Kennelly. The position of the second occurrence at the end of a line, clearly stepping out of the quatrain's body, suggests a form of art that stretches out beyond mere humanity towards the divine. In other words, Brendan Kennelly defends poetry as it was practiced by the Irish poet in early ages when the link with the divine, through the poet's words, had not yet been superseded by self-promoting and social interests. In using the term "aosdána" as the homonymous name of his character – far from being integrated in a group, "Ace de Horner," is an "ace" and a loner – Brendan Kennelly underlines the paradox of using a word "aosdána" that refers to early Irish poetry to designate a group of contemporary poets

195 PMA, 245.

¹⁹⁴ Robinson, The Bardic Source Book, 141.

who greatly departed from the original functions of their early bardic peers. Kennelly explains his distance from Aosdána in these terms:

I never applied to become a member of Aosdána. Somebody did suggest it to me, but I didn't go for it. I've always felt that I'm on my own as a writer, and I've always steered clear of groups. I think it's a good idea that writers get support, but there is a danger of politicking and getting in because of the people they know. On an unconscious or subconscious level, I might feel compromised. 196

The *fili*'s approach to poetic composition and the sense of a community created around their art mark the limit of the comparison between Brendan Kennelly and Irish poets in the Middle Ages. The *fili*'s poetry, especially in the Middle Ages was essentially court poetry. Following the Drumceat assembly, in 574, the *fili* became sedentary and their service was attached to big houses. Their verse was a commodity, a business arrangement to be exchanged with a patron against the riches and honours due to the *fili* order. This was both true of composition and of performance. As far as Kennelly is concerned, if poetic composition has to remain detached from any social or financial interest, poetry performing might be treated in a less straightforward way and this matter will be investigated in a subsequent chapter.

In the Middle Ages, when a patron did not fulfil his duty to his *file*, the latter was entitled to use satire against him. The "contract" between the poet and his patron was strictly founded on the basis of an exchange as explained by Watkins¹⁹⁸

Poet and patron exist on a reciprocal gift-giving basis; the poet's gift is his poem. It is thus that we must understand the specialization of the word dán "gift, talent, poetic faculty; craft, profession" as one of the words for "poem." It is derived not through the sense of "poetic talent," but directly from the primary inherited meaning "gift," "something bestowed," Lat. donum.

¹⁹⁶ Belinda McKeon, "Is It Worth Joining Aosdana?" Irish Times, 21 December 2001, 12.

¹⁹⁷ Michelle O'Riordan, Irish Bardic Poetry and Rhetorical Reality, 146.

¹⁹⁸ Calvert Watkins, "The etymology of Irish duan," Celtica xi (270-7), 272-3 in Breatnach The Chief's Poet, 53.

Thus, in accounts that list the names of families who were in charge of services and worked for an important aristocratic house, the names of *ollamhs* (chief's poets) were cited along with wardens and butlers. The terms of application of the *ollamhs*'s duty were clearly laid down. They were to record the patron family's marriages, births, deaths, acquisitions, heroic feats and remarkable events marking the family's life. The poet's composition should not however be restricted to these occasions and he was to praise his patron regularly. For instance Tuathal O'hUiginn wrote to his patron MacDiarmada: "The friendship we have joined with one another is a firm pact, and I cannot breach it – envy is all but getting the better of mc." While at earlier stages praise had a religious connotation, in that its role was to dispose spiritual forces in favour of the patron, in the Middle Ages, the poem's function was to grant imperishable fame to the poet's protector.

The relationship between poet and patron provided occasions for abundant literature. If praise was among the poet's duties, so was satire which the poet put in his lord's service as a punishment against the latter's enemies or those who had failed him in respect. Breatnach mentions a document from 1580 stating the terms of an agreement between a Lord and the Abbot of a Franciscan monastery. The document specifics that if the monks were to cause any disturbance, poets would be sent to "reprove infame and reprehend the disturbers in their taunting poems." The poets also played the role of counsellors and diplomats, a function in which their rhetoric was used. Eulogies of patrons were often interspersed with political advice. However, the poet's attachment to his patron was purely interested and abstracted from religious, nationalist or moral concerns. Michelle O'Riordan explains²⁰¹ that in the late Middle Ages a poet would accept protection and patronage whenever he found it. She calls attention to the mistaken idea that bardic²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ Trans. Pádraig A. Breatnach, The Chief's Poet, 51.

²⁰⁰ Ibid. 58

²⁰¹ Michelle O'Riordan, The Gaelic Mind and the Collapse of the Gaelic World, 90-92.

²⁰² The fili and the baird.

poets were driven by any nationalist feeling: the fill cannot be identified as nationalist heroes and no awareness as to the political and cultural consequence of the foreigners' arrival in Ireland can be attributed to the poets. She buttresses her view by quoting O'Dalaigh's verse about his taking de Burgo's protection: "I put myself under thy safeguard and under the safeguard of the Foreigners, and of everyone who carries steel; o champion, graceful, bright and fierce, take upon thee my quarrel (?)"203

It seems that the lack of sincerity of the fili's verse was well acknowledged and generally accepted. For example Geoffrey Finn O' Daly in 1387 tries to be forgiven for having praised his patron's enemy and addressed Maurice Fitzgerald, first Earl of Desmond, and Anglo-Norman lord with the rono-words:

> ... In our poems we promise the Gaoidhil (Gaels) a kingdom they never get. You should not pay attention to it, 'tis our custom! ...

In poems to the Goill we promise the driving of the Gaoidhil from Eire; in those to the Gaoidhl we promise the driving of the Goill east overseas!²⁰⁴

However if the practice was common, some poets revolted against such hypocrisy. Pearsun Riabhach satirises court poets for dishonouring their function with their lack of sincerity:

> O ye who fashion lies in verse, when the judgement day comes ye shall repent it, if His anger arises, the Creator of the elements will take vengeance for the false witness that ye bear against Him. Ye put lovely graceful locks upon a bald forehead - for shame! - if a man's eyes are twitching and squinting, ye make them slow moving and clear as crystal.

> For one whose complexion is sallow and tawny you feign - though it is a pitiable saying - that the scion of lovely face has skin like the swan and a bosom like lime.

> From every man from whom you win a reward, you have deserted hatred and anger; because of your praise, alas! His last end will be hell.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Trans. and ed. Lambert McKenna, "Historical Poems of Gofraidh Fionn O'Dalaigh," Irish Monthly, vol. 47 (1919), 513, in Vivian Mercier, The Irish Comic Tradition, 141.

This poem reminds its addressee of the original truthfulness that was a poet's duty in pre-Christian Ireland. In referring to God, he reasserted the bond between poetry and the divine that court poets had neglected in their verse.

In contemporary Ireland patronage necessarily takes a different form. Through the stance he adopts towards Aosdána, Brendan Kennelly denounces a form of patronage that exerts power on writing and on poets who accept to be led by protectors and are directed by motifs external to the artistic realm. This is not to say that he refuses the idea of patronage *per se*. For instance Kennelly has often commended a type of patronage that grants financial protection to artists and writers without interfering with their creation. This was the case in particular with regard to Charles Haughey, a difficult question that will be further examined in the final chapter of the present study. Another form of patronage other than Aosdána, lies in the role of the Northern Arts Council that promoted Northern poets in the late 1960s. In *Northern Voices* Terence Brown explains the decisive impact of such promotion:

The middle and late 1960s in the North of Ireland saw the emergence of a group of poets associated with a magazine edited by the English poet Harry Chambers. It was aptly named *Phoenix*, for since that time a remarkable succession of young poets has appeared in the province. The group ... received encouragement through the Queen's University Festival Committee, under the enthusiastic directorship of Michael Emmerson ... This patronage clearly was important, allowing the youthful exploratory efforts of apprentice poets to receive some local consideration ... Another Englishman, Philip Hobsbaum, ... acted as a catalyst. Hobsbaum had been a member of the London-based Group, whose members had instituted a practice of weekly seminar meetings to read and discuss one another's poems. He established a local branch of the Group when he settled in Belfast, busily hunting out promising talent. 207

²⁰⁵ Osborn Bergin, The Bardic Source Book, 181.

²⁰⁶ The Late Late Show, RTE Television, 30 May 2005.

²⁰⁷ Terence Brown, Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975) 17.

While approving of the support to young poets, Brendan Kennelly calls attention to the consequences that such protective bonds might have on writing, hence his wariness of compromising in joining a poets group. His cherished independence strikes a vivid contrast with Seamus Heaney's involvement in the Belfast Group. In response to Heaney's "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing," Brendan Kennelly writes "Whatever you say, say something" and asserts his view that poetry should be absolutely free of bondage. Yet Blake Morrison explains how in the early Seventies the public expectations, as well as critics and journalists called for war poetry, and show how the storming success of *North* that sold six thousand copies during its first month in 1975 was largely due to such demands. The influence of political context over the world of poetry is also suggested by Medbh McGuckian in an interview, when she says:

Before [the end of the Troubles] if you used the word "Irish" in your poem, it was very dangerous. It was not allowed. But now, they, [the politicians] are encouraging its use more and more, for whatever purpose, for their own purpose. I think really it is in order to maintain their power.²¹¹

This link between political patronage and poetic spheres also appears in the relationship between the Northern Council and Poetry Ireland, the organisation promoting poetry in the Irish Republic. The sudden withdrawal of the sponsorship from the Northern Council was felt as a betrayal by Poetry Ireland, who considered they had filled their part in promoting Northern poets:

The recent decision by the Northern Ireland Arts Council not to award us a cent under their Multi-Annual Funding Scheme comes as a huge blow to the organisation. We've been in receipt of funding from the NIAC for over two decades, and last year received 17,000, a crucial figure in supporting our

Seamus Heancy, North (London: Faber and Faber), 1975, 60.

²⁰⁹ PMA, 337.

Desmond Fennell, Whatever You Say Say Nothing: why Seamus Heaney is no 1 (Dublin: ELO Publication, 1901) 55

²¹¹ Borbala Farago, "Medbh McGuckian: The Angel in Two Parts," *The European English Messenger* vol. 13.2, Autumn 2004, 40.

programming ... This is hugely disappointing, and I hardly need point out how much Poetry Ireland has done for Northern poetry and events over the years.²¹²

In *Cromwell*, through the relationship between Buffún and Cromwell, Kennelly peers into the link between poetics and politics. With regards to the question of patronage and poetry, Buffún can be interpreted as a parody of a *file* with Cromwell for "Lord Protector." Brendan Kennelly rewrote a traditional elegy, yet removed hypocrisy and the glamour of artificial lines. Buffún's language, unlike the far-fetched elaborate lines of the *fili*, is the vernacular of the everyday Irishman, alive with its load of exclamations. In "A Relationship" Kennelly parodies court poetry. A "hate poem" is thus substituted for the love poems that the *fili* used to write for their patrons: "I can never hate you enough. That is my shame. / Everyday I pray that I may hate you more." The boastful and vain *file* here becomes the self-deprecating Buffún, much nearer a common Irishman in the 1980s than a *file*: "A fucked-up Paddy is what I am. Right?" And eventually while the alliance of the *file* and his protector is usually promising of a glorious future, here the conclusion is dark: "Our destinies are mingled, late and soon / But the prospects are not good, I fear."

2) When the Muse is a Whore

II.2.1 The Poets' Abuse

The power of patronage on *fili* and on certain contemporary poets led to a number of poets losing an independence in writing that other writers such as Brendan Kennelly cherish first and foremost. The prestigious status enjoyed by poets from the earliest times in Ireland and perpetuated at a lesser level today provided them with a power that very often in the Middle Ages led them to drift to abusive behaviour.

²¹² Joe Woods, *Poetry Ireland News*, May-June 2005, 1.

²¹³ C. 117.

Many stories testify to the bardic²¹⁴ poets' abuse of their satiric power. They had recourse to satire as a threat and made profit over the fear it surrounded them with. Such offensive attitude resulted in several attempts at banishing the poets from Ireland. In 574 AD, King Aedh called back St Columcille to the Island and they held the Assembly of Drumceat in which Aedh proposed to banish the poets:

> I do not wish to continue to maintain the Filedha, so extreme is their insolence, and so great are their numbers; for the ollave has an attendant train of thirty followers, and the annuith has a train of fifteen; so of the other members of that order downwards, each person has his special number of attendants allotted to him according to his rank, so that now almost one third of the men of Ireland are members of the order.²¹⁵

As an example of the fear aroused by satirists, when threatened by the poet Forgoll, a poet of Aithirne's sort, King Mongán promised all that belonged to him including his wife.²¹⁶ Another extreme illustration from pre-Christian Ireland lies in King Eochaid of Connaught's encounter with Aithirne. To appease the poet the king offered him all his people's jewels and riches. Yet Aithime asked for more: "There is foresooth ... the single eye there in thy head, to be given to me into my fist' ... 'There shall be no refusal,' said Eochaid. ... So then the king put his finger under his eye, and tore it out of his head, and gave it into Aithirne's fist."217 The Proceedings of the Great Bardic Institution,218 a satire of the bardic²¹⁹ order demonstrated the many sorts of excess the poets indulged in. As they used the fear inspired by their satiric power, their demands often overwhelmed the realm of the possible. In The Proceedings of the Great Bardic Institution, the wishes expressed by the bards²²⁰ are of a most extravagant and ludicrous nature. In this fiction, on the first night

²¹⁴ In the broad sense without distinguishing the baird and the fili.

²¹⁵ Charles de Kay, Bardic Sourcebook, 333.

²¹⁶ Elliott, The Power of Satire, 34.

²¹⁷ The Siege of Howth, trans. Whitley Stoke (1887), 49, in Elliott, The Power of Satire, 30.

Owen Connelan, trans. Imtheacht Na Tromdhaimhe, or, the Proceedings of the Great Bardic Institution (London: John O'Daly for the Ossianic Society, 1860).

219 In the broad sense without distinguishing bards and fili.

²²⁰ Id.

at Guairc, the king of Connaght's castle, who was well-known for his generosity, the wife of the *file* Dallan Forgail complained and declared that she should die unless she could have

a bowl of the ale of sweet milk, with the marrow of the ankle-bone of a wild hog; a pet cuckoo on an ivy tree between the two Christmases; her full load on her back, with a girdle of yellow lard of exceeding white boar about her, and to be mounted on a steed with a brown mane, and its four legs exceedingly white, a garment of the spider's web around her, and she humming a tune as she proceeded to Durlus. ²²¹

Due to the sacredness of the poet's person, the general belief was that no request should be refused to a poet. Despite the feeling that it was fair for the poet to be rewarded for his verse, such belief was mainly grounded in the fear that a refusal would result in satire against those not complying. Aithirne was among the satirists who, like Archilochus, raised the greatest fear in Ireland. No one had a rank as high as to prove immune against his threat. In Leinster he demanded that the king would let him sleep with his wife and the king was bound to accept while sadly trying to preserve his honour he declared: "Thou shalt have the woman for my honour's sake. Nevertheless there is not in Ulster a man who could take her unless I gave her to thee for my honour's sake." A similar episode happened in Munster and Aithirne's wish had to be fulfilled as the woman was giving birth. 224 Even saints were liable to succumb to the fear of satirists. St Columba, also known as Columcille, once met poets but having nothing to offer them, he invited them to his house, where he would be able to generously fulfil their demand. However, they refused and threatened him with satire. "When Columcille would hear the poets threatening to satirize him ... he was seized with great shame, and so grievous was that shame that those

²²¹ Robinson, The Bardic Source Book, 149.

²²² The Siege of Howth, trans. Whitley Stoke (1887), 49, in Elliott, The Power of Satire, 29.

²²³ Elliott, The Power of Satire, 30.

²²⁴ Ibid.

present saw smoke arise from his head."225 His forehead covered with sweat under the pressure of fear and, as he wiped it with his hand, the sweat was turned into gold that he presented to the poets. The tale concludes in saying that with this miracle, God saved Columcille from shame. 226 Due to the poets' various excesses regulation had to be implemented regarding their satirizing power because the injurious effect of their satiric verse constituted a serious social problem. The law forbade the unjustified and unfair use of satire and included punishment and restitution for the damage caused by the poet's anger.²²⁷ Elliott notes that "satire is sometimes linked with such purely physical crimes as bodily assault, sexual attack on a man's wife, or theft of his cattle."228 According to the Brehon laws, satire was seen as any other form of crime or injury whatever the social rank of the victim, although damages awarded varied, depending on his social position. Unjustified use of satire was classified among a category entitled "crime of the tongue."²²⁹ Robinson points in particular to the law of distress - according to which three days in prison shall be allowed in cases of ordinary satire, slander, betrayal, or false witness; "but five days stay is the prescribed period for other offences, among which are the blemishes of a nickname, satirizing a man after his death, a satire of exceptional power."230 Eliott thus mentions a case of a woman in early Ireland who was satirized "until laughed at." Despite the satirist's efforts, his verse had no magical effect on her. She was entitled by law to full restitution although she could not claim the maximum damage because no magical blemish had appeared on her face.²³¹ Such regulations prove that centuries after the reign of King Acdh, who in the 6th century had tried to banish the pocts and reduce their power by making them sedentary, poets were still a source of important social disturbances.

²²⁵ Manus O'Donnell, Life of Columb Cille, trans. Richard Henebry, Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie, vol.

^{4, 1903, 297-99,} in Elliott, *The Power of Satire*, 29. ²²⁶ Elliott, *The Power of Satire*, 29.

²²⁷ Ibid., 24.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

²²⁹ Robinson, The Bardic Source Book, 134.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

²³¹ Elliott, The Power of Satire, 40

The equation of the "crime of the tongue" with any other misdemeanour had for correlate that poets were often seen as belonging to the ranks of lewd people, buffoons (hence Brendan Kennelly's character Buffún), jesters, outlaws, harlots and other miscreants. So unsavoury was their reputation, especially in the Middle Ages that Charles de Kay traces the etymology of the French noun "filou" as a derivative of "fili." In exploiting people's fear, and with their extravagant exactions, the poets debased their order and the dark side of their function that was blaming, superseded praising in people's minds,

Poetry became for them a mere commodity designed to fulfil their wishes and desires. Given this position, it is most interesting to observe the shifts in the representations of the Muse, who was sometimes identified with the poet's patron but who was also occasionally seen as a whore. Poets transferred to the Muse a sense of themselves as having corrupted their art. Besides these perceptions, money and financial interest appear to be the stable element in the representation of the Muse. Breatnach points²³³ to the surprising conceit of the marriage between poet and patron. The image is all the more interesting as Carney posits²³⁴ the view that the word "spouse" could be applied by one poet to several patrons simultaneously. He comments upon the poetry of Eochaidh O hEodhasa and writes²³⁵

His full assumption of a feminine role which affects almost all his verse is the strangest feature of his work. Yet since he is working in terms of an established conceit we must be wary of drawing hasty conclusions as to his psychology. It is important to note that he adopts this attitude not merely towards Hugh Maguire, but to Hugh's brother Cu Chonnacht, to Sir Sean O'Doherty and to others.

²³² Charles de Kay, The Bardic Source Book, 335.

²³³ Pádraig A. Breatnach, The Chief's Poet, 41.

²³⁴ James Carney, The Irish Bardic Poet: A Study in the Relationship of Poet and Patron (Portlaoise: Dolmen, 1985), 13.

²³⁵ Carney, Studies, vol. 62, 1973, 246, in Pádraig A. Breatnach, The Chief's Poet, 41.

Such an image presents a parallel with the allegory of the land of Ireland at the time as a woman wedded to the King of Ireland. O'Rahilly wrote: "As the king of Ireland was wedded to Eire, so the local kings were wedded to their territories."²³⁶ The wedding bond between patron and poet might then be compared with the link uniting a king to his territory, However, as pointed out by Breathnach, Eire was later on depicted as the "harlot queen," "a fickle and faithless woman, no better than a meirdreach (whore), who gives her love to every foreign adventurer."²³⁷ The name Meirdreach was also used to denote a member of the bardic order, who was not working for one permanent patron but who moved from household to household in search of a lasting position. Japanese poets are also sometimes called "whores," and Brendan Kennelly, who spent time in Japan, draws on both the Irish and Japanese traditions in which poetry becomes a prostituting activity. Brendan Kennelly worked for Ruhana Women's Project, a voluntary group that helps women who have become involved in prostitution. When he was asked for his support to the group, the poet said that he'd be glad to contribute as "a failed male prostitute" 238 himself. He playfully referred here both to his position as a poet and to his reputation as a charmer.

Kennelly's poem, "Whore," draws upon and plays with the old tradition in which the poet called his muse a prostitute:

An honest man vainlabours days and nights to strike a line that may endure but the Muse is a whore and sleeps with shites.

Janey Mary read this in bed. "So do I, she said." ²³⁹

²³⁶ Thomas Francis O'Rahilly, "On the origin of the names *Erainn* and *Eriu*," *Eriu* vol. 14 (7-28), 18.

²³⁸ In communication with Carrie Crawley, after "A Tribute to Brendan Kennelly," an event held in the National Concert Hall, Dublin, 14 January 2004.
²³⁹ PMA, 223.

The quatrain, most possibly the voice of idealist Ace, expresses the "honest" view of poetical writing, patient and hardworking. The term "vainlabours" presents verse writing as a non-profitable activity that is yet related to the poet's vanity and supersized ego. If "endure" suggests both the idea of pain and patience, and confirms "vainlabours," its rhyming with "whore" contrasts it with the [limsiness sometimes found at the source of poetry writing. The final couplet illustrates a view whose radical difference is also shown in the space gap separating it from the quatrain. In Poetry My Arse, Janey Mary is both Ace's lover and his Muse. The quatrain works on a metaphorical level. It uses the ancient hackneyed image: "the Muse is a whore," which is revived by the word "shites," a spoken word here referring to bad poets. However, Janey Mary's response cancels the trope and "reads" the image literally. The wit of her words lies in the fact that they invite a logical rereading of the previous quatrain from its end to its beginning, a second reading that results in drawing conclusions about Ace as a lover and Ace as a poet. The sudden and abrupt passage, from a metaphorical, mock-inspired and spiritual level to a purely material one, corresponds to the gap between poets, as readers often wish to see them, and poets, as they actually are. The latter's actual motivations, as was the case for the fili, are indeed often far remote from pure idealism.

II.2.2 Poetry and Self-Promotion

Contributing to the modern reader's sense that in bardic times, especially in the Middle Ages, poetry was a mere commodity and justifying the image of the Muse as a whore, is the factor of the poet's egotism. Self-interest constituted the poet's main drive, hence the *fill*'s legendary arrogance that had become a norm in ancient Irish society. Breatnach states that "arrogance [was] regularly represented as being essential to the poetic ethos; Chiefs

are urged to come to terms with it and to show forbcarance towards poets."²⁴⁰ This arrogance was associated with an acute sense of self-promotion. Their concern was mainly to fulfil their office as *fili*, which consisted in perpetuating old forms and old themes and left no space for creative innovation. However, excessive devotion to formal precedent and their worship of an elaborate technique led, as Robinson noted,²⁴¹ to a want of freshness and variety in their verse both in theme and manner. "The voice of insincerity and formalism" weighed heavily on their art. As often with court poetry, the common practice of excessive praise of those in high position and the habit of addressing them in the superlative, turned into a convention, and the lines wore dull and petrified. Hackneyed literary metaphors joined with a traditional metric, produced an impression of a stultified poetic world craving for novelty and formal audacity.

Because their verse showed so little originality, self-promotion also had to take place via devices other than verse. Socializing, reputation and a good relationship with their patrons were crucial for the poets because being appointed *ollamh* by a Chief was no guaranty of a lasting comfortable position. Similarly today, appointment to Aosdána depends on one's getting on well with poet colleagues. For a *file*, to be in the Chief's good graces was indispensable. In the Middle Ages any shadow cast over the relationship between patron and poet, could prove disastrous especially if it resulted in the poet's dismissal. He would then have to find another patron which might prove a difficult task. Numerous examples show the fear and regret experienced by poets because of their reproachable conduct to their chiefs. Thus in the 14th century Sean O'Clumhain sought reconciliation with his chief, Aodh O'Conchobhain, after hitting him with his fist:

Let us not be any longer, O fair one, without lying together on one couch; nor let us be without drinking wine from a single cup, O branch of Suca.

²⁴⁰ Pádraig A. Breatnach, The Chief's Poet, 39.

²⁴¹ Osborn Bergin, The Bardic Sourcebook, 181.

Your right shoulder was mine until I did myself a disserve by it: remove not from me your shoulder, nor the wine of your golden beaker. 242

Given the flattery at work in verse and given the rhetorical gifts of the *fili*, little doubt remains as to the poets using their skills at speaking to promote themselves to the rank of favourite poet. Observation of Brendan Kennelly's public role could lead to similar remarks being made, a point that will be later developed in this study. In some respects the *fili* are comparable to politicians and diplomats or any profession in which the use of speech is crucial. Indeed chiefs also had recourse to the *fili* for diplomacy and political negotiation to act as "pledgers of peace." Although not many texts testify to that function, Breatnach quotes a quatrain from Maoldomhnaigh O'Muirgheasain from the 17th century. The lines are an elegy to the poet Cú Chonnacht mac Maoileachlainn O'Dálaigh:

Following your departure from them (a deed that is the separation of hound from her litter) the race of Gerald receives not knowledge after you; poets dare not to mention it. After you no member of the O'Dálaighs is likely to be put in pledge for peace.²⁴³

A similar diplomatic involvement of the poets was observed in the agreement of June 1539 about the custody of Sligo Castle. Because poets were dependent on their patron's generosity with regard to their income, the position of Chief's poet was highly coveted and because the narrow scope of the *fili*'s verse was restricted to traditional practice, not the quality of the verse but socializing aptitudes were often decisive in securing a poet's position, a feature still at work in the world of contemporary poetry and alluded to by Brendan Kennelly and others.

Appointment was meant to rely on the quality of verse. However a number of poets point out that poetical merit was not always the decisive criterion leading to nomination.

O'Fialáin declares: "Since it is by dint of poetry that I wish to win the favour of the king of

²⁴² Pádraig A. Breatnach, The Chief's Poet, 47.

²⁴³ Ibid., 58.

Raoiliu, before doing so I must reveal a portion of its honour."²⁴⁴ The traditional rule of appointment to the status of Chief's poet stated that to achieve the position a poet had to finish his training course as a *file*. However, a recurring pun underlined by Breatnach and that played on the homonyms "ollamh" meaning "poet" and "hollamh" meaning "finished" "ready" hints that in the 16th century the rule was not always applied as in O'Fialáin's case: "ní hollamh is breath bhunaidh, / neach nach ollamh d'ealadhain." "It is a proper judgement: no one is an ollave who is not perfected in art." These lines imply that "the principle involved seems often times to have been honoured merely in the breach." Eochaidh O hEódhasa offers such an example of a poet who was still an apprentice in the poetical trade but who was working in an *ollamh*'s capacity for the household of the Maguires.

The fact that neither poetical merit nor a poct's completed academic apprenticeship constituted sufficient qualities in the race to the position of official poet, resulted in competition running high among poets to achieve that rank. Rivalry among them had been rife since pre-Christian Ireland, and was most possibly a given characteristic of the poetic order. For instance in pagan Ireland, poets used to have competitions in which rhetoric and the power of versified speech were used as weapons, and in which the victory was carried out by the wittiest, and the crafticst of poets. Jealousy and envy were intense among poets. These sentiments were enforced by feelings of insecurity due to the fact that the office of ollamh was not necessarily a life-long position. In the 16th century Niall Ruanadha wrote: "The poets of Ireland envy me the son of the son of Sean, a man who has imparted his secret to me; and I am jealous of no man." Similar jealousy showed itself in modern Ireland when after being celebrated in the Sixties as the most promising Irish poet,

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 70.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

Brendan Kennelly suddenly got fierce and biting reviews after he was given the coveted responsibility of editing *The Penguin Book of Irish Verse* in 1969. The battle that followed in journals and magazines on the merit of this anthology (which over three decades after its publication still remains a major source of reference), is a telling illustration of the high level of rivalry and pettiness still in existence among poets.

Self-promotion always was a decisive trait of a poct's career and the fierce rivalry among poets in the Middle Ages was inflated by the increasing flexibility of the rules regulating the appointment of *ollamhs*. As a consequence several famous disputes occured such as that concerning the title of *ollamh* attributed to Sir George Carew in the 15th century. However in such disputes weapons were not restricted to words: "Irish poets sometimes fought with weapons more deadly than satires" Breatnacht then give the examples of Tadhg ua hEachnaidhein who was killed in 1394 by the family of Conchonnacht Uí Dhálaigh because O'Neill was appointed *ollamh*. This was not an isolated case. The *ollamh*'s office, the honours and monetary privileges it implies were eagerly coveted as the *ollamh* formed a small elite. Because the number of positions was limited, the battle to achieve this rank was ruthless.

In comparing the situation of poets in the Middle Ages and that of modern Irish poets, many similarities appear with regard to the importance of self-promotion. These common characteristics between rivalry in the ancient and modern world of poetry led Brendan Kennelly to draw on that distant period to depict the society of contemporary Ireland. In bardic times in the Middle Ages self-promotion depended essentially on the poet's relationship with a patron and in contemporary Ireland it relies on a poet's skills at socializing with his peers. In Aosdána, any new member is elected by poets and writers

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

already belonging to the group. This subordination of art to powerful and influential connections was underlined by the novelist Peter Cunningham as he explains:

I left it too late to submit my application but came away with the feeling that this was a closed shop, self-serving. I didn't get much help, it was difficult to get information. Those that were in were keeping it very closely guarded. Now John Banville's move has made me think I made the right decision.²⁴⁹

Niall Williams goes even further and declares:

I understand that the method of getting in requires you to be nominated to have contacts. And, for me, writing life is something you do alone, so it doesn't bring me into contact with people. Aosdána is split between two ideas: the money and the kudos. And the two things have nothing in common.²⁵⁰

It is to such ability to networking in the literary world that Brendan Kennelly alludes in the previously mentioned poem, "What they saw."²⁵¹ In the middle of the poem, as if there was a core of success, Kennelly splits a quatrain in two couplets. The first couplet refers to the mode of promotion: "and countless blind others prodded their way / through themselves, each other, the disco" and the second refers to poetry reciting or reading as was the custom in bardic times and still is nowadays: "Sing up' shouted Raftery, 'We've nothing to say, / nothing to offer but bloody blind gusto." In another instance, a poem, "Clean language" comes immediately after a long one, "Dirty words," praising the liveliness, the creativity and authenticity of spoken street words. "Clean language," whose title could also apply to the polished verse of the *file* takes for hero "Grapevine Smiley," whose name suggests a generous use of "smiles" to make his way through the

²⁴⁹ Belinda McKeon, "Is It Worth Joining Aosdana?"

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ PMA, 76.

²⁵² PMA, 207.

²⁵³ Ibid., 205.

²⁵⁴ PMA, 207.

poetry world. Kennelly's ironic portrait of a poet writing conventional poetry could both correspond to a file in the Middle Ages and to a contemporary poet: "Ace finds it hard to understand / why Grapevine Smiley's language is so clean ..." The fili were known for the hypocrisy of their verse. In "Clean language" Brendan Kennelly lays the emphasis on the contrast between the "cleanliness," or verbally polished verse, and the immoral procedures used by the poet to promote himself: "because Grapevine has been licking arses ... and there's never a dirty word in what he writes." The poem is composed of rhyming lines so that these two lines which do not follow the rhyme scheme call for the reader's attention. This irregularity in the rhymes corresponds to what Brendan Kennelly sees as the forced and unnatural association of "what [onc] writes" and "licking arses" that is self-promotion to achieve a publicly recognised status as a poet. This mismatch is echoed by the hero's puzzlement: "Ace finds it hard to understand." In the poem, Ace's logic relies indeed on the image of contamination by dirt from "licking arses." Much like a file competing tooth and nail to be chosen as a Chief's poet, Grapevine is competing to obtain some privilege, most possibly a literary prize: "because Grapevine has been licking arses / since the challenge began." The character's name, "Grapevine," betrays his device to achieve public celebration. On the one hand "Grapevine" calls forth a vegetal image, but it also suggests the use of one's personal expedients, connections and networking to hit one's target. Kennelly focuses here on the hypocrisy of certain poets towards their work, pointing out their lack of integrity and relating this with an imagery that associates corrupt motives to physical symptoms. In so doing Brendan Kennelly follows and defends the early bardic approach to poetic creation, in which oral integrity (anamain) metaphorically involves purity of the lips: "It is notable that, of the fourteen streams that "flaw through" a master poet, three concern oracular (the three illuminations) and four oral integrity (anamain,

judgement, song and purity of lips)." ²⁵⁵ The implied correlation that makes the poem a witty piece lies in that from so much "licking arses" the poet would get brown-tongued and, poetry being an art of the tongue, if some words are dirty, they should appear in Grapevine's verse. Yet they do not, and the gap between the work and the man, social appearance and reality is syncretised in the irony of the final line: "Grapevine is a good man."

3) A Refusal of Art for Art's Sake

II.3.1 Brendan Kennelly's Progress

The fact that in the Irish past and to some extent in the Irish present, poets have allowed certain preoccupations of a material, honorific and social nature to play a decisive role in their career calls forth the question of how this has had an impact on their creativity. Brendan Kennelly has denounced other poets for yielding to these "un-poetic" sirens and appears to see the latter reflected in poetry that relies quasi exclusively on form. In other words material aspirations would be reflected in material verse, according to a perspective in which Art is celebrated for art's sake. In order to better understand Kennelly's position with regard to artistic shape and its relation to inspired poetry, one must consider how his perception of poetic creativity has evolved since the time when he first started composing verse. Brendan Kennelly's first books of poetry were mainly concerned with country themes. The poet, who had moved to Dublin in 1957 and first worked as a clerk in ESB (Electricity Supply Board) before attending Trinity College, was in many respects in a position comparable to that of Patrick Kavanagh who left his native County Monaghan to make a career as a writer in Dublin. The physical voices of both poets were branded with their country origins – a thick Monaghan accent in Kavanagh's case and a Kerry brogue in

²⁵⁵ John Matthews, "Seeing the Truth, Speaking the Truth: the Vatic Tradition among the Celts," Celtic Seers' Source Book, 13.

Kennelly's. Kavanagh celebrates country life in the first part of his work. His poems, rooted in his native place, are hymns to the beauty of the landscape: "My black hills have never seen the sun rising / Eternally they look north towards Armagh." Great attention is paid to country activity from ploughing to harvesting, from harrowing to "Spraying the Potatoes." His characters and stories are directly drawn from life in his native Inniskeen, hence the "parochial" colour of the depictions. Names of places mingle with local figures: "John Maguire in Donaghmayne," Billy Brennan's barn," Kerr's Ass," Ass," "Art McCoocy" and others ... in occasional accumulations:

Down the laneway of the poplar banshees By Paddy Bradley's; mud to the ankles; A hare is grazing in Matt Rooney's meadow; Maggie Byrne is prowling for dead branches. ²⁶²

Similarly Kennelly's early poems plunge the reader into the landscape of the poet's childhood. However, unlike Patrick Kavanagh's poetry, Brendan Kennelly's rarely connects this poetic picture with any Greek mythology. Mythological references are essentially made to Celtic mythology. With their local particulars, his characters have little to envy those of Kavanagh's: Sean McCarthy, Miss Carmody. Ella Cantillon, Connects this poetic picture with any Greek mythology. Mythological references are essentially made to Celtic mythology. With their local particulars, his characters have little to envy those of Kavanagh's: Sean McCarthy, Miss Carmody. Ella Cantillon, Connects this population as the poetro of colourful portraits immortalising a style of life threatened by economic gloominess and the necessity of emigration. Between 1880 and 1926, Munster lost one third of its population. The region

²⁵⁶ Patrick Kavanagh Selected Poems, 8.

²⁵⁷ Patrick Kavanagh, Collected Pruse, 282.

²⁵⁸ Patrick Kavanagh, Selected Poems, 7.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 6.

^{2e0} Ibid., 95.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁶² *Ihid.*, 17.

²⁶³ FS, 45.

²⁶⁴ lbid., 26.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 75.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 344.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 291.

had the highest emigration rate in Ireland. 268 Terence Brown writes of the 1940s and 1950s that "It is the emigrant, so poignantly evoked in Brendan Kennelly's poem "Westland Row" (the name, then, of a Dublin railway station for the boat to Britain), who seems finally the most truly representative figure in what for many were very dismal times indeed." As in Kavanagh's verse, country scenes are treated with thorough attention. However, possibly resulting from his upbringing in the family pub, Kennelly's writing is not so much interested in farming as in human relationships in the life of his village. This environment involved its load of prejudice, story mongering, the influence of the priest and the school teacher etc., all sources of interest directly related to the poet's experience.

The young poet clearly possessed technical skills that were largely celebrated in the press: "The range of technique is equal to the range of experience. 'The words, as the man nearly said, obey the call." His great ease and talent when dealing with conventional forms won him the A.E. Memorial Prize for Poetry in 1967 for his collection *Good Souls to Survive*, which at the time was in competition with Scamus Heaney's *Death of a Naturalist*. As far as form is concerned Brendan Kennelly's early poems show little innovation or originality. In that respect "The Thatcher" and "The Gift" are interesting as they offer two aesthetic approaches which are opposing each other in their vision of art. On the one hand, "The Gift" portrays the poet as a person elected by the Muse: "It was a gift that took me unaware, / And I accepted it" and suggests inspired poetry. On the other hand with "The Thatcher," the poem designates itself as an artefact, with a rather unsurprising form. For the poet, writing becomes a space of confrontation

²⁶⁸ Richard White, Remembering Ahanagran: A History of Stories (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 69.

²⁷⁰ Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-2002* (London: Harper Perrenial, 2004), 225-226

²⁷¹ Scán Lucy, "A Changing Focus in Poetry, from Ircland to Russia," *Irish Independent*, 07 January 1967,

²⁷² Brendan Kennelly, Selected Poems (New York: E.P. Dutton), 1972, 51.

²⁷³ Brendan Kennelly and Rudi Holzapfel, *The Rain, the Moon* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1961), 40.

with verbal material, its visual and sonorous aspects, and the poet's care aims at constructing an agreeable object to be enjoyed by the reader, much like the fili conceived of their verse. There is certainly some sort of antagonism between the demand of form and the urgency of inspiration, but the antagonism should not be oversimplified. The mimetic (imitative) stage, when form is granted priority was later perceived by Brendan Kennelly as an initial and necessary step that is part of the poet's training.²⁷⁵ The formal discipline offers an initial frame to the inspired spark that Kennelly calls "the gift." Once craft has been acquired, then the frame can be adapted to a more adventurous and experimental poetic writing. Initially, Brendan Kennelly, along with Seamus Heaney, approached poetic composition as an artisan his work. Remembering his beginnings as a poet with Brendan Kennelly, Rudi Holzapfel underlines his friend's "obsession with form." As he analyses Kennelly's early works Ake Persson notes that "The Thatcher" on a formal level adheres to many conventions of a sonnet.²⁷⁷ Certainly in this poem, the reader encounters the traditional space separating the two quatrains (abab cded) and the two tercets (cfg fcg) according to a relatively conventional rhythmic pattern and a use of alliteration and assonance that shows little innovation.

Brendan Kennelly's earliest books are composed of pocms generally written in iambic meters. The Rain. The Moon (1961), Let Fall No Burning Leaf (1963), My Dark Fathers (1964) essentially use rhymod iambic pentameters. Progressively, while still resorting to iambic meters, the young poet no longer systematically chooses the pentameter and more flexibility is introduced as rhymes become less systematic and more approximate than in previous collections. "The Celtic Twilight" initially published in Good Souls to

²⁷⁶ Interview with John McDonagh, audio tape.

²⁷⁵ During his performance in St Patrick's College on the 2d of April 2008, Brendan Kennelly quoted Yeats: "Irish poets, learn your trade."

²⁷⁷ Ake Persson, Betraying the Age: Social and Artistic Protest in Brendan Kennelly's Work (Götcborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 2000), 120. ²⁷⁸ FS, 149.

Survive (1967) offers a vision of the Canal banks that deeply contrasts with Kavanagh's vision of the same place. Whereas for instance Kavanagh "Canal Bank Walk" evokes green rebirth:

The bright stick trapped, the breeze adding a third Party to the couple kissing on an old seat, And a bird gathering materials for the nest for the word Eloquently new and abandoned to its delirious beat. ²⁷⁹

Kennelly's "The Celtic Twilight" depicts the darkness and gloominess of the spot when light has vanished:

New in the Celtic twighlight, decrepit whores Prawl warily along the Grand Canal In whose rank waters bloated corpses float, A dog and a cat that came to a bad end.²⁸⁰

In his earliest collections Brendan Kennelly remains faithful to the spelling of written language and uses verbs in their full forms as shown in "Man Making Fire":

And it dies, the fire is a dozen small fires; The man shudders quickly, the branches are ash, And gloom shuffles in as the evening expires²⁸¹

By contrast "The Celtic Twighlight" shows the poet's first steps towards a form of poetry that tries to give account of the spoken word as he transcribes a prostitute's threat: "Misther! If you come back again, / You'll get a shaggin' steel comb through the chest." "Man Making Fire" is obviously drawing a parallel between the man making fire and the Promethean attempt of the poet to write:

²⁷⁹ Patrick Kavanagh, Selected Poem, 126.

²⁸⁰ FS, 149.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 248.

²⁸² *Ibid*.

And now in the heat that bullies the sun, The afternoon glories to see how the flame And the branch-bearing man are made violently one.

As in "The Thatcher" the artist is here competing with the gods, striving with the raw material of his craft to make a beautiful and divinely enjoyable piece. The lines are not inspired, they are not written with the spiritual breath but constitute a challenge to the gods of beauty vying with divine creation in the way for instance Arachne competed with Athena in weaving a beautiful tapestry.

Brendan Kennelly's mature poetry takes liberties with poetic technique and turns towards a more spontaneous form of verse. The poet uses the dynamics of the opposition between poetry seen as craft, and poetry seen as inspired art. Despite his mastery and ease with traditional form, Brendan Kennelly progressively departed from a type of poetry in which form matters first, and finally altogether rejected this approach in the 1980s. The hero of *Poetry My Arse* occasionally proves an inspired poet and through his dog, Kanooce, Brendan Kennelly plays upon the figurative meaning of the adjective "inspired" as he switches to the literal meaning of inspiration – the idea of creative inspiration (from the Latin *inspiro*) is here represented by "sniff":

But devil the rest will Kanooce give Ace Until sniffed to Bedlam, de Horner begins to sing Like the happymad poets of hectic Greece.²⁸³

However, in the beginning of the book Ace de Horner conforms with the view of poetry in which form matters above anything else. Ace is initially presented as a rhymer, a man who makes rhymes as any craftsman might make anything else. It is only from his association with Kanooce, subsequently followed by a total union when Kanooce becomes part of the poet's body, that authentic poetry is achieved. Dialogue and confrontation between Ace

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²⁸³ Ibid., 176.

and Kanooce are in some ways comparable to that of Romeo and Juliet. In the beginning of the relationship, Ace like Romeo is caught in the ponderous frame of traditional poetic form. Ace needs Kanooce's energy as Romeo needs Juliet's passion and spontancity to free language and find a mode of expression of his own whose form reflects the intensity of the feelings experienced. A poem such as "Ultimate Peace" celebrates the language of Kanooce, its freedom and authentic energy originating in a superior realm, but it also mocks Ace's over-lyrical and whining language:

"O dear Kanooce," sighed Ace
"Where would I be without your music?
How could I face this callous world
devoid of sensitivity and grace?

The poem is in Ace's voice. Brendan Kennelly has chosen to take the iambic tetrameter as the basis of these rhymed quatrains. However, the first quatrain, in which Ace is "Looking into Kanooce's eyes," has no rhyme and is made of trochees. These formal irregularities might illustrate Ace's emotional state, while he is "looking into Kanooce's eyes." The poem then returns to regularity. The last three quatrains leading to "the ultimate peace of poetry," (they rhyme and the iamb remain their basis) seem to lose track of any regular meter, and thus suggest that poetic harmony can be achieved without forcing language into a fixed frame.

Whereas Brendan Kennelly began his career by following a mode of composition which, somehow in the fashion of the *fili*, granted the foremost attention to form, the poet progressively abandons this approach to eventually refuse Art for Art's sake. He consequently loosened his verse and chose inspirational versus imitative poetry.

²⁸⁴ PMA, 60-61.

Il.3.2 The Freedom of the Bard

In the Middle Ages, the baird, who as opposed to the fili were incompletely trained poets, were considered as inferiors to the fili who were more learned and whose verse followed a sophisticated metrical set of rules. Like the fili the baird were divided in a number of grades. 285 Some of them were the equivalent of strolling minstrels in continental Europe but others were monks working in monasteries as explained by Kuno Meyer. 286 Unlike the fili they were not able to demand fixed payment for their poems²⁸⁷ hence their frequent poverty. Very few compositions by the baird have come down to us from the 10th and 11th centuries because the works of the fili survived in manuscripts in a quasi exclusive way, but from the beginning of the 13th down to mid-17th century, there is a more or less uninterrupted stream of bardic verse among MMS.²⁸⁸ Although they were socially considered as inferior, the baird were the depositaries of as much ancestral stories as the fili. They had a primeval role regarding the development of the Sagas and the Ossianic cycle. In particular E. Quiggin specifies: "to them we certainly owe many, if not all, of the heroic ballads dealing with Finn and his warriors."289 However, it seems that their thematic range was much wider than that of the fili. This is indeed shown in Ancient Irish Poetry where poems like "The Monk and his pet cat" have been translated by Kuno Meyer. It is to the baird more than to the fili that names such as "crossan" (buffoon) or "drúth" (satirist) were applied. At times, rivalry arose between the fili and the baird. As the latter were not subject to the honours and dignity due to the function of chief's poets, they felt freer in form, themes of writing but also in their style of delivery, performance, and more generally in the way they amused the household they visited. The playfulness of their

²⁸⁵ E.C. Quiggin, *Prolegomena to the Study of the Later Irish Bards 1200-1500* (London: Oxford University Press, 1911). 3.

²⁸⁶ Kuno Meyer, Ancien Irish Poetry (London: Constable, 1994), x.

²⁸⁷ Cf. "Who Will Buy a Poem," trans. Brendan Kennelly, Love of Ireland: Poems from the Irish (Cork: Mercier 1989), 76.

²⁸⁸ E.C. Quiggin, 3.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁹⁰ Kuno Meyer, trans., Ancient Irish Poetry, (London: Constable, 1994), 15.

creations is noted by Michelle O'Riordan: "Churchmen exchanged poetry and literary materials and indulged in literary games with known troubadours."291 This freedom sometimes provided them with a more certain guaranty to meet success over the official representatives of poetry in the house but this became mainly true towards the 17th century because "there was no audience or readership for what modern sensibilities would understand as 'original' or eccentrically personal presentations of materials."²⁹² This does not mean that the baird necessarily excluded from their repertoire flattery and "arse licking" which they sometimes had in common with the fili. Unlike the baird for whom poetry was also fun and amusement, the fili considered their art in an almost puritanical way, and whereas baird might have enjoyed taking liberties with Gaelic metric, fill passionately and austerely defended the rigid form of their verse and the stability of their tradition. The baird's greater freedom also meant that they remained closer to the early notion of the poets in pre-Christian Ireland, and that their works were more "inspired" than the fili. This difference between the two types of Irish poets leads Quiggin to refer to the baird as "gifted son[s] of the muses who had not qualified for the highest degree." 293 He writes:

[I]t is mere chance if the verse of a gisted son of the muses who had not qualified for the highest degree [that of the fili] in the poetic order have come down. During the last few years we have become familiar with the delightful little poems by young clerics and others which Kuno Mayer has rescued from oblivion, and among the despised bards in olden times there must have been many endowed with the gift of song who are unrepresented in the meager body of spontaneous verse which has been preserved.²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ Michelle O Riordan, Irish Bardic Poetry and Rhetorical Reality, 144.

²⁹² Ibid., 144.

²⁹³ E.C. Quiggin, 4.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

Consequently the increasing success and popularity of certain *baird* (especially in the late 16th century when the decline of the *fili* could be felt) in genteel houses, caused some bitter feelings among the *fili*, as shown by Cathal Mac Muireadhaigh who wrote:

Being in the company of an earl is an omen of high honour to you, till you put one bite on top of another, while your tongue is grinding out words.

Alas that I have never attempted to acquire your style, incorrect and formless in its import – not to speak of elementary scholarship. Let me forsake the stare of straight verse, as we have found it in tradition, and enter your order now in the new fashion – it will last longer than the track I have followed! ²⁹⁵

The *bard* here satirised, performed in banquets and assemblies, and seems to have been a reciter who enjoyed provocation, upsetting the rules of good society and rambling drunken talks in a manner that might have been comparable with that of Brendan Behan, Patrick Kavanagh and Brendan Kennelly in the mid 1980s.²⁹⁶ Bergin's remarks on the author of the critical passage just quoted would fittingly apply as a response to a number of critics who reviewed some of Brendan Kennelly's poems:

The manners of this improvisator, he tells us, are as bad as his verse. He snatches up the food at table without waiting for grace. But, of course, however disorderly he may be, talking rambling nonsense in his cups ... he must never be deprived of the honourable title of scholar. For with all his buffoonery he manages to curry favour with the great!²⁹⁷

This image of the bard, not as a conservative but as a frame breaker, goes back to time immemorial. David Annwn in *Ilear the Voice of the Bard* explains how cult figure and celtic champion, Taliesin's chief role was to liberate and set free:

I Taliesin chief bard by means of brilliant druid's wisdom

²⁹⁵ "Sona do cheird, a Chalbhaigh," in *Celtic Studies in Memory of Angus Matheson*, vol. 9, 51-55 in Osborn Bergin, *The Bardic Source Book*, 180.

²⁹⁶ Djinn Galagher, "Did You Hear the One About the Kerry man With the Funny Face and Fabulous Smile?" *Tribune Magazine*, 21 April 1996, 2.

²⁹⁷ Osborn Bergin, The Bardic Source Book, 180.

will release fair Elffin from the prison of proud Tyrant ...²⁹⁸

Taliesin was beyond time, beyond the barrier of languages and space and his power was

universal:

I was instructor

To the whole Universe.

I shall be until the judgement

On the face of the earth. 299

Taliesin pictured himself as a chain-and-fetter breaker. It is that image of the bard, as a

figure of power, a defender of the oppressed that Blake identified with and that was

adopted by the Romantics. Poetry deprived of divine connection, focusing on formal

achievement but devoid of poetic inspiration is thus deplored by Blake in "To the Muses"

as empty materialistic pleasure:

How you left the ancient love

That bards of old enjoy'd in you!

The languid strings do scarcely move!

The sound is forc'd, the notes are few! 300

Blake sees his writing as an appeal born out of mystic mood to impart a liberating energy

to those who suffer from any form of slavery. The poem's purpose is not to attract the

reader's admiration at its formal accomplishment and at its technical perfection, nor is it to

be contemplated as an item of verbal skill and clever craft, but the poem uses its aesthetic

power to reach out to the reader's emotion so that the feelings experienced, when the poem

is read or heard, might impact on the listener / reader's position in the world. In his

introduction to "Song of Experience," Blake like Taliesin wants to lead the world towards

²⁹⁸ David Annwn, Hear the Voice of the Bard!, 13.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 14.

300 William Blake, Blake, Complete Writings, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London :Oxford University Press, 1969),

210.

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freedom and light: "I was instructor / To the whole Universe" meets an echo in Blake's: "Hear the voice of the Bard! ... That might control / The starry pole ... / And the morn / Rises from the slumberous mass." The poet is a medium, an intermediary whose knowledge and wisdom comes from the divine:

Hear the voice of the Bard! Who Present, Past, and Future, sees; Whose ears have heard The Holy Ward That walk'd among the ancient tree,³⁰¹

His role is to liberate and enlighten "the slumberous mass." The three determining functions of the bard as an intermediary are represented in the first three lines of the stanza: hearing, speaking and seeing. The strength of the call: "Hear" in the first line is reinforced by echoes in "ears" and "heard." While the bard posits himself as a chain-breaker, the form of the poem also steps away from most conventional rhythmic pattern. It is not composed of quatrains but of a series of stanzas made of five lines. Not the most common iambic pentameter but a mixure of anapests, jambs and trochees, that is no uniform meter is used.

The response of the Earth in the "Earth's Answer" confirms the role of the poet as a liberator: "Break this heavy chain / That does freeze my bones around." Commenting on the strength of Blake's introduction to "Song of Experience," David Annwn highlights the energy emanating from the opening line: "Hear the voice of the Bard!" "Hear" immediately places the collection within the realm of the spoken and the heard. The direct address of the imperative to the Earth and to the reader enriches the poem with an inescapable vitality. The phrasing holds strong biblical echoes for instance of Elisha in King 2: "Hear ye the word of the Lord" while in Genesis 3, King James version reads: "And they heard the voice of the Lord God / Walking in the garden in the cool of the day."

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Ibid.

Influenced by Blake and pre-Christian Irish bardism, Brendan Kennelly follows the Gaelic visionary power placed under the sign of fire, and blinding light with the imbas forosnai which does not mean that formal training is neglected. In Poetry My Arse, the hero, Ace is like a bard of Modern Ireland who, like any file who attended a bardic school spends time learning the complex Gaelic metric. Yet, because Ace is no mere craft poet, that is, in a bardic context he is not only a file (in the sense the word takes in the Middle Ages), the fire of inspiration melts in "A winter fire rising from his study / of the strict rules of Gaelic prosody." ³⁰⁴ Here the first line locates the scene and the setting: a study and a fireplace, but the run-on-line adds on a second meaning of "study": the activity of studying. It reverberates on the sense of "fire," which in the context of Gaelic poetry evokes the imbas, the seeing capacity of the ancient bard. However, while the first stanza depicts a peaceful scene, the poem ends on the blazing image of a gigantic fire. The middle part of the poem evokes Ace and Kanooce's walking along the Liffey, a locus that seems to fuel the imbas: "The rules danced demandingly in Ace's head" and as a result "The flameshapes stirred, grew, leaped, spread like / pain or laughter." The poem eventually closes on the struggle between rules and inspiration. As often, in Kennelly's verse the vocabulary of crime is used to depict purification: "... shadows acting assassin between floor and ceiling. / What rules will bring the killing shadows to heel?"

Recalling Blake's "Hear the voice of the bard," inspiration in Kennelly's work takes on a cosmic dimension with the inflation of the fire's reflection: "between floor and ceiling." Yet Brendan Kennelly plays on the idea that anything breaking the social rules is criminal, and he shifts words belonging to the field of crime to that of liberation. Thus "Rules," with the homonymy of "heel" and "heal," beyond the conflict of power between the "killing shadows" "acting assassin" and upsetting the rules, also have a soothing effect

³⁰⁴ PMA, 171.

because there is something comfortable about them: "What rules will bring the killing shadows to heel / [heal]." As in Taliesin's and Blake's poems, a similar range of images that convey a sense of a universal power serving the liberation of the oppressed appears in "That garment." The quatrain is placed at the centre of a long poem in one piece. Much like the "killing shadows" the "IRA trenchcoat" becomes a source of universal freedom:

When Ace wore his trenchcoat he led revolutions all over the globe; translated fiery songs of rebellion and planted seeds of hope.³⁰⁵

II.3.3 Dark Speech

Because the *baird* as opposed to the *fili* were of an inferior rank, the attention they granted to form was of a lesser kind and their concerns were closer to that of common people. Being more like troubadours who lived in precarious conditions without secure patronage, and being poetically "incompletely" trained, they could not afford the haughtiness that their counterparts showed by using Dark Speech. Dark Speech or the oghamic language, was invented so that it could enable the initiated poets to converse with each other, sometimes right in view of people who could not understand their language: "The Ogham Tract" composed of eight pages included in *The Book of Ballymote* constitutes the main source of written knowledge about "the poets' secret language." Poems written in Dark Speech or Ogham in Medieval Ireland can be interpreted as extreme examples in which preoccupation for form is carried to the point where, for the non-initiated the content remains inaccessible and the poem means nothing but a form to be venerated because it has been composed by druids or poets. This admiration for the form of writing offered by Dark Speech or Ogham led to the writing of sham Oghams. In Ireland, proto-Oghams were

³⁰⁵ PMA, 175.

John Matthews, "The Dark Speech: Ogham and the Bards," Celtic Seers' Source Book, 151.

written on the graves of people whose friends or relative could not afford to pay a literary specialist to write an authentic oghamic inscription. Díak explains the reason for such fakes as follow: "the survivors of a deceased person, wishing to have an ogham inscription over his friend, were too poor or too greedy to pay the "literary specialist" to write one, they cut something on the stone which looked like one, but was only casual scratches." 307

The design of such language clearly was the exclusion of those who did not belong to the poets order: "the cause of its invention [is] a proof of [its inventor's] ingenuity, and that his speech should belong to the learned part, to the exclusion of rustic and herdmen."308 The learning of the oghamic language was extremely ponderous since it implied that the poet-druid-seer also became familiar with a system of correspondence between letters, and the numerous secret meanings behind it, whose interpretations depended on the adjacent letters. This extremely difficult speech was the exclusive property of the fully trained poetic order and the ostentatious use they made of it in public places, even in the presence of chieftains, contributed to maintain their superiority in the public's eyes but was also felt as an expression of their arrogance. However, for those who understood the language, such devices also charged words with a literary quality that can be compared to James Joyce's use of language in the early 20th century. In a less obscure use of Dark Speech, the second meaning of a text - its dark side - can totally contradict the widely available significance of the first layer. John Matthews analyses the instance of a praise poem by a poet called Dallow, inserted in the anthology "The Proceeding of the Great Bardic Institution." The piece was a eulogy for a king called Acdh the Dark:

A hero of fortune art thou O Hugh

³⁰⁷ F.C. Díak, "The Origin of the Ogham Alphabet," Celtic Seers' Source Book, 223.

³⁰⁸ George Calder, Auraicept na n-éces, The Scholars' Primer: Being the Texts of the Ogham Tract from the Book of Ballymote and the Yellow Book of Lecan, and the Text of the Trefhocul from the Book of Leinster (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1917), 7, in John Matthews, "The Dark Speech: Ogham and the Bards," Celtic Seers' Source Book 150.

Thou daring, determined foe,
Thy goodness as the great ocean;
Thou canst not be subdued,
Thou canst not be impeded,
O Hugh, son of Druach the Dark.
Good and great is his substance,
Without censure and without reproach
Thou sun after leaving its stars
Which is aweful to me
Thou white chess-board
We will return, O hero. 309

Following the demonstration of John Minahane's – as a scholar of druidry – John Matthews³¹⁰ explains how according to the secret language of poets, a totally different meaning of the poem was available to the initiate. In *The Christian Druids*, Minahane, by slightly re-arranging syllables in the Irish comes out with a version at odds with the first one:

Aedh mic Duach duibh,
you career no one celebrates,
you house of tiny winecups,
you giver of a soon eaten lunch,
you frightened pale sheep
that ploughmen will dine with,
you famine, grey as grease
from a cracked-legged brass candlestick,
you hoste of cold feasts
provider of crumbs,
you entertainer of the black beetle,
you disgrace, you yeaaeh!
311

However R.A.S. Macalister shows how from excluding common people the secret language became excluded itself and how its death was born out of its very seclusion from living language, that is the language of the people. In early Christian Ireland the latter

³⁰⁹ John Matthews, "The Story of the Bards," trans. John Matthews, *The Bardic Source Book*, 11.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 11-12.

³¹¹ Ibid., 12. trans. J. Minahane.

had no share in druidic learning, such as it was. But they had a very considerable share in the shaping of the then colloquial dialect of the Irish language, and in making complete the already wide breach between the spoken tongue and the traditional "ogham" literary language. 312

As the monasteries opened their doors to the illiterate to teach them, some way of writing the colloquial language had to be found and so the vernacular progressively made its way into the literary field: "step by step, a new Christian Irish Literature came into being, and the older language, the heritage of the druids fell into oblivion." Though rarefied the Ogham tradition still survived untill the 14th century when Macalister traces the last references to the language.

With Dark Speech poctry was to be honoured and respected by the laymen for the sake of a form that made the content of verse inaccessible. Druids and poets clearly drew pride in the complexity and exclusivity of that art that yet resulted in books which became unreadable as suggested by the story of Longarad's books. 314 According to the legend Columcille came on a visit to the house of Longarad, a scholar learned in the Ogham Language but possibly for fear of seeing the pagan books destroyed by the saint or because of the secrecy surrounding the language, Longarad hid his books. The angered saint consequently pronounced an imprecation that though extant the books would become of no use to anyone because no one would be able to read them. The curse was fulfilled for no one after Longaran's death showed ability to decipher the secret books.

However, if Dark Speech became unintelligible, fascination for the occult, the sense of word secrecy and the consequent obscurity of verse secluding poets from common people lived on in Ireland up to our time. W.B. Yeats and George Russell's fascination for the occult and its connection with poetry can be read as the heritage of the bards and the numerous attempts at deciphering certain symbols, such as the famous rose in Yeats's

³¹² Robert Alexander Stewart Macalister, "Ogham," Celtic Seers' Source Book, 217.

³¹³ Ibid., 218.

³¹⁴ *Ibid*.

poetry, resemble Minahane's and others' efforts at decoding the bards' language. In contemporary Irish poetry, it seems that the trend of making verse purposely learned and obscure can prove extremely dynamic. References to classic mythology may have been significant for Irish readers of the beginning of the 20th century as Greek and Latin were widely taught in secondary schools, nowadays only a small minority learn classical language in school and these language are suffering from a great decline even at third level. Consequently poems whose significations hinge on classical references becomes somewhat obscure for most Irish readers, while the same cannot be asserted to a similar extent of Irish mythology which is part of a common Irish background. Obscurity can also arise from ostentatious references to foreign philosophers, Latin, French etc. that are made the corner stone of a poem and without which the piece does not make sense. As footnotes would be most useful but are generally absent the common reader is placed in a position similar to the readers and listeners of bardic verse in Dark Speech.

In this type of poetry, rather than making verse a device using language in a special way that aims at clarifying experiences and feelings, poetry becomes a field of complexity where the association of nouns and adjectives achieves a melody whose meaning is more than uncertain. For instance during a reading³¹⁵ on *The Book of the Angel* Maedbh McGuckian introduced several of her poems and addressed her audience saying: "You'll never guess what it is about." As is the case for many Irish writers of contemporary poetry, writing seems for her a ludic form of verbal convolution based on simple experience. This results in a poem whose merits purely lie in a form whose connection with reality is a code possessed by the writer only. In a similar way, during an interview in which John Montague³¹⁶ commented upon *Rough Fields*, the poet regretted that a number of evocations in his poetry had not been grasped by readers. It seems that the system of

316 John Montague, interviewed on RTE Radio One, 31 March, 2005.

³¹⁵ Personal note from Maedbh McGuckian's reading to the Literary Society, Trinity College Dublin, 2004.

correspondence between the Irish contemporary poet's experience and his writing involves a degree of arbitrariness equivalent to that of Rimbaud when in his sonnet, "Voyelles," he assigns a colour to each letter:

A noir, E blanc, I roug, U vert, O bleu: voyelles Je dirai quelque jour vos naissances latentes: A noir corset velu des mouches éclatantes Qui bombinent autour des puanteurs cruelles ...³¹⁷

In « Alchimie du verbe », he explains : « J'inventai la couleur des voyelles ! – A noir, E blanc, I rouge, O bleu, U vert · Je réglai la forme et le mouvement de chaque consonne...» ³¹⁸ and adds with irony : « Je réglai la forme et le mouvement ...» and eventually concludes with mischief: « Je réservai la traduction. » ³¹⁹ For Dark Speech like for many contemporary Irish poems this "missing translation," the secret code exclusively belonging to the writer, and yet bom out of the arbitrary, leads to a flourish of critical speculation as happened about the significance of the association between vowels and colours. Rimbaud was acutely aware of the risk and as a comment about his own poem "Voyelles," he wrote to Paul Démeny: "Des faibles se mettraient à *penser* sur la première lettre de l'alphabet, qui pourraient vite ruer dans la folie!" ³²⁰

While also using classic and literary references and puns on ctymology Brendan Kennelly refuses Art for Art's sake and is always careful not to put these learned allusions in the foreground so that they do not obscure the poem. The reading remains accessible

^{317 &}quot;A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: vowels,

One day I will tell your latent birth:

A, black hairy corset of shining flies

Which buzz around cruel stench,"

Rimbaud, Complete Works, Selected Letters, A Bilingual Edition, trans. Wallace Fowlie (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 141.

^{318 &}quot;I invented the colour of vowels! – A black, E white, I red, O blue, U green – I set up the form and the movement of every consonant ..." Translation mine.

^{319 &}quot;I kept the translation to myself." Translation mine.

Arthur Rimbaud, ed. Olivier Bernard, Rimbaud: Selected Verse with Plain Prose Translations of Each Poem (London: Penguin Books, 1962), 13.

[&]quot;Weak-minded men would start analysing the first letter of the alphabet and might soon cross the line into insanity!" Translation mine.

even to uneducated readers. When speaking about verse and clarity he says: "we owe it to the reader."³²¹ Nonetheless elaborate references are there, available for readers learned enough to perceive and grasp them. A short piece written for the centenary of Patrick Kavanagh provides an example of how a pun on Latin etymology can provide a totally different reading to a poem:

Ridiculed when living Revered in the grave Dear Patrick in eternity Are you learning to behave?³²²

This short apparently simple poem becomes a sharp and witty salve when one takes into account the pun on "revered" on which the rhythm stumbles. The word can mean "worshipped" but its closeness to the Latin reversus (turned over) offers a second reading that alludes to the fact that Patrick Kavanagh's grave was violated and to the dispute that followed the funeral of Kavanagh's wife opposing Peter Kavanagh and Katherine Kavanagh's trustees. The poet's body was indeed literally "revered [or reversed] in the grave." Traditionally the violation of a grave allegedly resulted in the deceased's incapacity to find peace "in eternity." Similarly witches and vampires were not buried flat on their back but lying on their side (that is "slightly turned") so that they could wake up later. In that context the last line of the poem "Are you learning to behave?" becomes a threat to those involved in the profanation of Kavanagh's grave.

As opposed to Dark Speech, for Brendan Kennelly, it is the poet's task to go through chaos and return with light and convey it in verse. The true poet has to be an enlightened man who translates his spark into words for light cannot be expressed through obscure verse. In *Poetry My Arse*, Kennelly plays on the contrast between times when Ace

³²¹ In communication with Brendan Kennelly October 2005.

³²² Sandrine Brisset, "The Laughing Muse," Trinity Records, February 2005, 33.

feels inspired and others when only unclear words respond. In "Sly bastard," 323 the morning light is associated with writing in one line: "and started writing with a watery sun shining" suggests fruitful composition, yet this "watery" light finds no echo in Acc's verse and dark words would not do: "But no, there was no light in the words, no glory." At some other stage in the book, Ace is depicted in a state of bright inspiration but unlike previously, here the correspondence between poetic enlightenment and clear bright words has been achieved:

Ace took pen and recycled paper and started to write. Shuddering changes began to rip the world, the seas were seas of light, rivers were veins of perception, mountains monument of insight. 324

As he introduces "recycled paper" in the line that evokes composition, Brendan Kennelly lowers his hero's activity to the level of comedy. Such device also contributes to increase the inflated effect produced by the contrast of this line with the following one. Entering the world of poetry signifies a shift in scale from the local and commonly individual "recycled paper" to the universal magnitude of "the world," "seas," and "mountains," a geography of clarity, a "monument" of "insight" perceived by the poet and to be enjoyed by the reader too.

III Munster Heritage

1) Poetry and Democracy

III.1.1 In Company of Lower Classes

Contrasting with the *fili*, the *baird* were not limited by exclusive formal concerns and due to their inferior poetic rank were closer to the laymen, which means that when the Gaelic

³²³ PMA, 88.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

order collapsed in 1691 the distinction between the fili and the baird vanished and that poets who followed that period were closer to the baird than to the fili. One major difference is that unlike the baird these poets did not have access to formal training in the way baird had before. It is worth marking that despite significant changes in their position after 1691, pocts were indiscriminately called "bards." These changes were partly due to the fact that with the violation of the Treaty of Limerick by the Penal Laws, persecution against Catholics began and the social and economical degradation of native Irish people followed. In 1691 in the wake of the the Jacobite war, the departure from the Island of the Gaelic aristocracy marked the definite end of the Gaelic order. In the absence of local chiefs, deprived of patrons, poets had to find new ways to make a living. Some would become poor vagrants travelling through the country as the baird (as opposed to the fili) had done before. Mere subsistence was all they could aspire to in a country stricken by poverty. As explained by Blind Raftery their activities often consisted of "performing music to empty pockets"³²⁵ and many became peasants while they continued writing poetry. When they observe the Munster (the region of Ireland where Brendan Kennelly comes from) poets' works, commentators often regret that admirable talents were hindered by everyday concerns for subsistence. Nonetheless, the brutal change in the poets' mode of life also had for consequence a renewal in theme and form of their verse.

While the disintegration of the hierarchical *fili* order signified the end of all the privileges heretofore enjoyed by the poetic class, at an artistic level it also granted them a greater freedom in their creation. Poets were rich in a long and fastidious training and in the great skills associated with their art. Now they could enjoy a formal and thematic freedom that they did not have previously. Consequently, at the breakdown of the Gaelic

³²⁵ An Duanaire, 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed / Curtha i láthair ag Seán Ó Tuama, ed. and trans. Thomas Kinsella (Mountrath: Dolmen, 1985), 253.

order, Munster³²⁶ poets found themselves in an intermediary position since the distinction between the *baird* and the *fili* was invalidated. The knowledge and tradition of the bardic schools was for a while perpetuated in poetry courts where poets gathered to compose and recite their work and in hedge schools as those who had enjoyed the training became teachers.

Interestingly enough, one notes that certain poets such as Art Mac Cubhthaigh from Ulster bemoaned the position of the fili – including the serving state imposed by the bond with a chief - and "lamented the demise of their local chiefs the O'Neill, to whom they had looked, rather than to the exiled Stuarts or the Kings of France and Spain, for the restoration of the old Gaelic order."327 The independence for poets that followed the collapse of the Gaelic order was generally accepted and often appreciated as a relief by Munster poets. Seán na Raithíneach's writes: "Since I am a poet, down through the lack of the nobles, I will run to my garden, take spade in hand, and to the devil with bailiffing."328 Poets then lived among the rest of the community, sharing their labour, (they were farmers, soldiers, teachers, priests...) their joys and their pains. The poets were no longer part of the elite but was now part of the people and had a role to play in their community. From this connection was born the deep feeling that poetry should be democratic. And this tradition that believes in the freedom of writing and in the necessity for it to be democratic largely influenced Brendan Kennelly's poetry. Poets who were also the academics of the time and place were not segregated from the common people but were part of them. They shared their literary activities with them so that most peasants had knowledge in poetry, and were able to recite verse. This common memory of verse that was orally transmitted preserved many pieces that would have otherwise been lost. Echoes of such transmission could still

³²⁶ This study will concentrate on Munster because it is the region where Kennelly was born and reared.

³²⁷ Criostoir O'Flynn, ed. and trans. Irish Comic Poems (Indreabhán: An Chead Chlo, 1995), 80.

³²⁸ Daniel Corkery, The Hidden Ireland, 115.

be heard in the mid-1980's and for instance Kennelly remembers in *Now* a friend who could recite "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard":

Now passing the prison gate, he recalls the young city inmate who knew by heart 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard.' 329

One notable consequence of the democratisation of poetry was that at the time of the Celtic Revival, major actors and literary figures such as Douglas Hyde, Lady Gregory and Yeats had to turn to the peasants to rediscover Gaelic poetry. The Munster poets of the 18th century were in a position to accurately call themselves: "the *literati* of a people" since in addition to their versifying skills they also had mastery of Latin and Greek

This close connection between the academic and the popular spheres was most unusual and little of it has survived to this day. Daniel Corkery's words that underline the oral transmission of Munster verse, have a validity that persists into the present:

Nowadays to know that a piece of art-work is academic is to know that it remains unvisited, unloved of the people. The work of the Irish poets was academic, yet – strange fact! – much of it, almost two hundred years after its creation, has been found alive on the lips of fishermen and ditchers. ³³⁰

Brendan Kennelly has always claimed to write for the people.³³¹ His verse and his public humility has earned him in newspapers the title of "the people's poet."³³² Kennelly talks and listens to anyone he encounters, regardless of their social class including those that society has marginalised: the homeless, drug addicts, prostitutes, prisoners... Yet as was the case with Munster poets, because of this "popularity" commentators and literary critics have had a tendency to disregard the fact that Kennelly is also one of the most

³²⁹ N. 34.

³³⁰ Daniel Corkery, The Hidden Ireland, 150.

³³¹ The Poetry Programme, RTE Radio, 15 March 2008.

³³² Ibid

prestigious academics in Ireland and occupied the Chair of Modern Literature from 1973 to 2005 in Trinity College. He started teaching there in 1963 and still is a Senior Fellow of the College. In making himself so largely available to his audience, despite his academic honours, Kennelly has drawn upon the tradition of his native place to perpetuate the quasi oxymoronic association between literature and common people. Such association goes nonetheless against the current taste of academics and *literati* by whom he was long dismissed as "popular" or "mediatic." This brings up the question of Kennelly's image in the media which will be examined in the last chapter of this study.

The change in the Gaelic poets' way of life was echoed by formal and thematic changes in their verse. The most remarkable modification concerned metrics. As traditional bardic training was no longer available, poets progressively abandoned bardic syllabic verse and instead began to use stressed metres. These were previously despised by the fili because they were the rhythmic mode of wandering ballad-singers and not fully trained poets. In other words the stressed meters, that had been previously rejected by trained poet as vulgar, were now adopted. Nonetheless, even if stressed form was more popular, the use Munster poets made of it was extremely elaborate - it has a sophisticated internal assonantic rhyme scheme - and any attempt to try and reproduce this assonantic system faithfully in English would lead to ridiculous artificiality. 333 It seems that Kennelly's poetry was largely inspired by this melodic mode that did not favour the rhyme at the end of each line but aimed at a more general melodic harmony. Very often he has recourse to internal vocalic and consonantal echoes and regularly uses imperfect rather than full rlivmes. Since it is impossible to write a poem in English and use the Irish sound scheme of Munster poetry, the poet converts the danger of awkwardness and the ridicule effect threatening such enterprise into a comic instrument. This approach to poetic sound and

³³³ Criostoir O'Flynn, ed. and trans. The Maigue Poets (Dublin: Obelisk Books, 1995), 4.

rhythm was also influenced by local rhymers of whom there were many in the area: "Ballygologue, a small place near Listowel, boasted nine poets and every one of them wrote a poem about Ballygologue." Such characters had a decisive influence on Kennelly as shown by *The Crooked Cross* but also *Poetry My Arse*. Several of Ace's poems convey an impression of exaggerated and unnatural sound effects that call attention to poetic craft. Through such pieces, which mock their own artificial devices, as shown earlier in this study, Kennelly targets a form of poetry that places the emphasis on poetic formal skills at the expense of any spiritual inspirational poetic quest:

no matter how much he pretended to be at home there. Home is where pretence is the real thing. Therefore sing. ³³⁵

The scholars of the Celtic Revival turned to the peasantry to try and revive Gaelic poetry, whether in Irish or in English, but they paradoxically overlooked an essential feature of Munster poetry: its popular quality. Munster poetry was indeed both literary and popular. The result is that their works often consisted in imitating a mood and a style that belonged to another time, and the peasantry was romanticized. Because the revival was fundamentally a matter of interest for intellectuals who observed lower classes without truly mixing with them or sharing their concerns and existence, their poetry was only enjoyed by the educated classes. Refusing the segregated sphere in which literati often live because he sees poetry as a field of connections between what life and society has separated – writer and reader, the well-off and the poor, the successful and those who fail ... – in an artistic approach which resembles that of Georges Perros, Kennelly rejects any

³³⁵ PMA, 295.

³³⁴ John B. Keane, Self-Portrait (Cork and Dublin: Mercier Press, 1964), 103.

"terminologie de luxe." Following his predecessors from the 18th century, he chooses a language that anyone in present day Ireland is in a position to access, which means that they can take possession of the poem.

Against the picture offered by the Celtic Revival movement that romanticised poverty and the living conditions of the lower classes, Kennelly opposed the darkly realistic vision of his poem "The Celtic Twilight,"337 a title that cannot be divorced from carly Yeats. Much like Munster poets when in their verse they dealt with everyday life, the scene is described without sparing any gloomy and macabre detail such as "The dark infested waters where / Inflated carcasses / Go floating by into the night," that in the end of the poem develop and confirm the ghostly morbidity stated in the third line: "In whose rank water bloated corpses float." Still as in Munster poetry, one notes the use of words that do not belong to the literary so much as to the common people's range of spoken words: "Misther! If you come back again, / You'll get a shaggin' steel comb through the chest." While it strikes a brutal tonal contrast in the poem, such idiom also pays homage to the creativity, both visual and auditory, of the living language spoken by unlettered people. Indeed the "shaggin' steel comb" almost sounds like the title of a surrealist painting. Later on in his work, Kennelly will develop the share of street language included in his verse. This position was also James Joyce's when he wrote in Finnegans Wake: "My consumers, are they not my producers?" 338 Similarly if one examines a poignant poem such as "A Cry for Art O'Leary" written in the 18th century by Eibhlin Dubh Ni Chonaill and translated by Frank O'Connor and Brendan Kennelly, one is struck by the emotion rising from the intensity, the passionate violence of the voice and the simplicity of a common woman's words:

³³⁶ Jean-Claude Corger, Jean-Pierre Martin, *Lire Perros* (Lyon: Presse Universitaire de Lyon, 1995), 30.

³³⁸ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: the Making of Typographic Man* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), 278.

[You] Threw a kiss at me Saying "Eileen, woman, try To get this house in order, Do your best for us I must be going now I'll not be home again." I thought that you were joking You my laughing man.

III.1.2 An Art of the Locals

With the democratisation of bardic poetry, one observes a change in thematic focus that goes along with the change in the poets' way of life. Whereas before the collapse of the Gaelic order, the fili generally chose high and elevated themes that match their elaborate metrics such as the praise of their Lord or religious poetry, now the humblest was celebrated as the highest in a place where poetry was a common enjoyment. Poets wrote about what belonged to their daily life and the most scemingly insignificant and unworthy things were celebrated in their poems and songs. Any subject, even the most commonplace was an acceptable matter for poetry, and any word was available as a potential instrument. Poems of that time focus on items such as food and drink, as in "The Brandy" by Diarmuid O'Suilleabhain, or tobacco, moral qualities and flaws, worldly and mundane behaviour, as in the anonymous poem entitled "To a Snorer." Poetry would often deal with country life and would mention milk, cows, horses, ploughs... This poetic attitude was also adopted by Patrick Kavanagh who was himself the heir to a local rhymer, "the Bard of Callenberg."³⁴¹ However, as the *baird* and the *fili* previously used their verse to express complaints against insufficiently generous patrons, now Munster poets continued to use poems to express grief but this time, it was to describe in a humorous way everyday realities: like marriage difficulties as in "The Midnight Court" by Brian Merriman, to settle

³³⁹ Criostoir O'Flynn, Irish Comic Poems. 75.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 63.

³⁴¹ Patrick Kavanagh, Collected Pruse, 65.

an account with a neighbour in "The Spinning Wheel," or to celebrate or blame a friend or a publican, as in Sean O'Tuama's "Merry Publican." Bards who used to write for the court of a Lord now wrote for the local population in their village. Consequently, poets drew inspiration from village stories, anecdotes, local events, characters, places. The local particulars opened for them the door to the poetic universal because it dealt with human fundamentals, reaching the reader or listener beyond times and places. In other words their verse belonged to what Kavanagh called "The Parish of the Universe." ³⁴⁴

"Lament for a Bailiff", 345 by Riocard Bairéad from County Mayo in Connaught provides a good example of an occasional piece written for a small community and anchored in a specific locality. Although loaded with comic irony, the poem is not a satire. The use of irony rather than forthright satiric shaft departs from the merciless tone of many satires composed on the occasion of a landlord's or a bailiff's death. More often than from the fierce satiric vein, Brendan Kennelly draws from the comic irony of poems such as Riocard Bairéad's. Several features of "Lament for a Bailiff" are common with many of Kennelly's poems such as the way the poet names specific places and villages:

Isn't it this painful news we've been hearing,
That causes us heart break and woe,
It spreads outwards from Greggan-a-Leena
All the way till it reaches Faulmore ...
Hear Anthony Gavin lamenting!
And John Boyle will soon be at death's door
Since they heard their good friend has departed 346

. . .

Portraits of local characters, whether to mock or praise them, were also a common type of poetry practiced by Munster poets "Cock-eyed Mary", by Art Mac Cubhtaigh, "The

³⁴² Criostoir O'Flynn, Irish Comic Poems, 174.

³⁴³ *lhid.*, 101.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 282-283.

³⁴⁵ *lbid.*, 150.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

Merry Publican"³⁴⁸ and "I am Raftery"³⁴⁹ provide interesting examples of poetic portraits. Whereas in the preceding period, the *fili* essentially portrayed their patrons in panegyrics, now the range of subjects for portraits in verse widened from the poorest to the wealthiest and included priests, craftsmen, peasants, women and publicans Kennelly widely drew on this tradition and his poems count among them numerous portraits of characters from his native place such as "Ella Cantillon,"³⁵⁰ "The Visitor,"³⁵¹ and "The Story."³⁵²

When they were under the patronage of Lords, the *filli* had among their charges the duty of recording important events. They are often compared to chroniclers or journalists. This dimension of their art did not vanish with the downfall of the aristocracy but the link between verse and authentic facts loosened and the type of story recorded in the poetry of Munster no longer focused on the elite of the place. What constituted the importance of an event shifted from the social top to the common lot and poets were equally fond of strange and unusual events that would also provide the material for local gossip. In other words, they drew from reality the substance that with time would potentially develop into stories and myths. In anecdotes but also in seemingly trivial events, they played on a universal chord present in any story transcending time. The apparent insignificance of small events was for them the stepping stone to the universal.

2) A Subversive Art?

III.2.1 Coarseness

When reading anthologies of Munster poetry (17th and 18th centuries), one feels that a wide range of the Munster verses has been left on the shelf for reasons of moral suitability

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁴⁹ An Duanaire, 252-253.

³⁵⁰ FS, 75.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 55.

³⁵² Ibid., 291.

because they were judged too licentious or too offending, even if when it was composed this poetry was generally appreciated, especially in taverns where it was also occasionally created: "The common uneducated people as well as the educated classes could understand and enjoy it [their poetry]. It was sung everywhere."353 However, after Victorian values infiltrated Irish society, this kind of verse, although surviving in remote parts of the country such as Kerry, became obscene in the literary world and its publication would have been held as subversive and scandalous because it was at odds with the moral values of the time. In particular the Maigue poets (e.g. Mac Donnell, Scan O'Tuama, Mac Craith...), a group of jovial poets based in Croom on the banks of the river Maigue, a tributary of the Shannon, were noted for their wit, their humour, and their love of songs. Croom, a village that had earned the title, "The Merry," was the cultural centre where the group met and Sean O'Tuama's tayern was one of the favourite places for their gatherings. Andreas Mac Craith was the wildest of the group and has often been compared with Dylan Thomas and Brendan Behan. 354 The poet, nicknamed "the Merry Pedlar," was denounced by the Parish Priest as a danger to women's virtue and he retaliated by pretending to become a Protestant, an episode that led him to compose the poem, "Neither Protestant nor Papist." Despite this incident, Mac Craith and the Maigue pocts were on friendly terms with the local clergy. The licentiousness of their poems was no obstacle to sympathetic relationships and even complicity. Patrick Stephen Dinneen draws attention to the fact that this humorous poem was written by Mac Craith at the expense of Father William Lee and developed into a series of replies and counter-replies. However, if the clergy of the time showed good humour on such occasions, Dinneen's prudence attests to a tightening of mores as he wrote: "Some humorous poems of his [Mac Craith] ... are not given in this

³⁵³ An Duanaire, xii.

³⁵⁴ Criostoir O'Flynn, Irish Comic Poems, 95.

collection as being unsuitable for general reading."³⁵⁵ Similarly, in 1924, when he comments on some of Egan O'Rahilly's verse, Daniel Corkery explains "some stanzas are not quotable."³⁵⁶ Although he celebrates Mac Craith as the most melodious Gaelic poet of his days, when he describes the life and work of Andreas Mac Craith, James Clarence Mangan acknowledges the necessity of censorship: "Habitual indulgence in intoxicating drinks – that foe to all aspiring thoughts of noble impulses – was his peculiar besetting sin; and, as a consequence, a great number of his songs are so replete with licentious ideas and images as to be totally unfit for publication."³⁵⁷ Patrick Stephen celebrates his poetic genius in 1906, but he also regrets "a depraved taste in choice of subject,"³⁵⁸ a remark that was similarly made in reviews of Brendan Kennelly's early works.³⁵⁹

The coarseness of the Maigue poets' work and on a wider scale that of the Munster poets was reflected in both the form and theme of their poetry. Comic and satirical verse in particular is characterised by exaggeration verging on the grotesque. Yet, if this form of verbal excess is in many ways comparable to the primary influence of Rabelais' writing, it owes little to it since as Corkery remarked, these poems were written by people who, although familiar with the grotesque in Latin satire, were unlikely to have heard of Rabelais. Although in the 20th and 21st century, Irish writers who stepped in the wake of the 17th and 18th century Munster poets (such as Michael Hartnett, John B. Keane, Gabriel Fitzmaurice, Bryan McMahon etc.) enjoy a larger literary scope that includes Rabelais, it is certainly more accurate to attribute excess, exaggeration and the grotesque to the influence of their native background rather than to the French Renaissance. Brendan Kennelly,

³⁵⁵ Patrick Stephen Dinneen, Filide na Máige (Baile Atha Cliath: M. H. Gill, 1906), xxxviii.

³⁵⁶ Daniel Corkery, The Hidden Ireland, 170.

³⁵⁷ James Clarence Mangan, ed. and trans., *Poets and Poetry of Munster: 1885* (New York; London: Woodstock Books, 1997), 22.

³⁵⁸ Dinneen, xl.

³⁵⁹ William Pratt, World Literature Today, vol. 68.1, Winter 1994, 132.

brought up in Ballylongford where his parents kept a pub, was heir to the legacy of the Munster poets whose traces were part and parcel of every day life in the village. About this legacy, John B. Keane writes:

It isn't hard to create when you're reared on stuff like this. Every townland and parish is vibrant with the ballads of our departed poets. They're there waiting to be adapted and woven into the fabric of a living theatre, a theatre which is forcing its way upward and outward. 360

A number of books and theses³⁶¹ mistakenly attribute excess and hyperbolic features in Kennelly's work to Rabelais' influence and thus overlook the essential role the Munster tradition played as a literary background. One of the forms that excess takes in Kennelly's work is the habit, noted by many commentators, of piling up names, adjectives and long lists of names in compound formations.³⁶² In 17th and 18th century Munster poems, this could result in tedious lists (in poems of praise, love poems and satires) but very often these contributed to the humour of the lines, as for instance in "One pair of shoes presented to him" by Egan O'Rahilly:

A pair of shoes, neat, decorated, well trimmed;

A pair of shoes, durable, in stamping on great hills;

A pair of well-finished shoes, beautifully trimmed;

A pair of shoes that are a protection from the roughness of the meaths;

A pair of noble shoes, of light gear;

A pair of shoes, steady, in encounters with a foe;

A pair of shoes, slender, without a fold, or wrinkle;

A pair of shoes, nimble, without seam, or gap ... 363

This poem of 22 stanzas thus proceeds with an extremely long list that enumerates the merits and qualities of the shoes. As a possible influence of his Munster background,

³⁶⁰ John B. Keane, Self-Portrait, 104.

³⁶¹ For instance Gerold Sedlmayr, Brendan Kennelly's Literary Works: The Developing Art of an Irish Writer, 1959-2000 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), 178-180.

³⁶² This practice is also reminiscent of the *Dinnseanchas*.

³⁶³ Dinneen, 101.

Brendan Kennelly shows a particular fondness of lists and long compound formations as in the following triplet from "The Song of Ace de Horner":

> I am river canal sea street scandal pisstaker starving cat graffiti Liffey rat white plastic bag in wild flight over Dublin, 364

Similarly, in his prose Kennelly very often uses long lists that force the reader to gasp; thus in his preface to The Book of Judas, he questions whether Judas could be: "A spirit not confined to the man who bore the name Judas but one more alive and consequential now at the famined, bloated, trivialised, analytical, bomb-menaced, progressive, moneymad, reasonable and of the twentieth century than ever before?"

Munster poetry is characterised by its music, its melody and its rhythm rather than its metaphoric power. This poetry is aimed at an audience, which means it is remarkable for its dramatic quality. This feature that also characterises Brendan Kennelly's poetry will be examined in the next chapter of this study. Munster verse should above all be listened to. It is poetry for the ear more than for the eye, and indeed numerous poems in this tradition were sang and accompanied by music. In his preface to An Duanaire, Sean O'Tuama explains:

> In reading the work of the typical accentual poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth century (as also the work of the anonymous syllabic poets and folk poets) it would be a mistake to judge its imaginative quality primarily by criteria of imagery or metaphor. It is the dramatic or story-telling voice that is most frequently and effectively heard: a situation or story is postulated, imaginatively developed and resolved in the presence of a listening audience. 365

³⁶⁴ PMA, 22.

³⁶⁵ An Duanaire, xxxiii.

The emphasis laid on the auditory more than the visual does not exclude occasional images. However, when used in a context where the narrative is all powerful, they often feel incongruous as in this sudden reference to the Styx in "The Brandy" by Diarmuid O'Suilleabhain from Cork, who in this piece condemns the drink:

Bad friend to every soul, 'tis an enemy of God,
The strongest bodies it can bring to lie beneath the sod;
From Styx's hellish waters that brandy was begot,
A venomous snake that left me oft a senseless clot. 366

Although such unexpected references to classic mythology might feel out of place in a poem that otherwise sounds conversational might wrongly be interpreted as an attempt on the poet's part to make his poems more visual, metaphors are indeed often understood as an indispensable component of poetry. However, although such classical references might seem learned nowadays, at the time they might have been part of the education commonly received. Poets and clergy men were indeed the conveyors of classical culture to the country population. Another interesting example of common usage of classical allusions is the way in Kennelly's village people would say of a woman who was a hard-worker: "She's a Trojan." The expression inspired the title of the poet's play *The Trojan Women*. Consequently, despite the impression made by these classical references on readers of our time, they must be viewed as part and parcel of the conversational quality of the poem.

More than metaphors, Munster poets would rather use comparisons, sometimes of the most colourful, incongruous and grotesque type in their poetry. Although these images owed to the creativity of the poets, they were also characteristic of the way language was spoken in Munster not only by poets but also by common people. John B. Keane, through the prose of his plays depicting country life in County Kerry in the 1960s, provides a good illustration of linguistic creativity among country people. Because of Keane's particular

³⁶⁶ Criostoir O'Flynn, Irish Comic Poems, 77.

use of English, that renders a language as it is spoken by North Kerry people, when *Sive* was first staged in England, it was commented upon as a play in which the language was Elizabethan.³⁶⁷

The closeness between Munster poetry and that of Kennelly is immediately discernible when one observes the grotesque and the comic nature of certain comparisons in Kennelly's work. Yet some of the images that might at first glance be considered as metaphors are actually taken from the North Kerry vernacular and they demand explanation for full understanding. For instance in "Beethoven Hope," the reader comes across the words, "a pig in the interval" and because the phrase is used in a comparison, it seems to provide clarification of the compared object. However, "a pig in the interval" is certain to remain obscure unless the reader is familiar with Kerry English, or if the reader trusts the etymology of "interval" (the Latin prefix *inter*, followed by the imperative of *eo*, "to go") which is the space in between two points. For a pig this interval is the time between birth and slaughter, in other words, the time when the pig is being fattened and becomes round and plump, hence the use of the phrase as a comparison with the moon.

In Keane's *Self-Portrait*, the reader comes across expressions such as "I'll be sittin' back here then with long red plucks on me like a roster and huge white belly like a harvest frog." One notes how this type of game is reminiscent of the verbal jousting among early bards. Similarly in *Poetry My Arse* one reads: "Kanooce stood in the street and chewed the buttock / like a gravid reader of post-modern prose." Most interestingly, the reader notes in the work of John B. Keane and of Brendan Kennelly similarities in some of these comic images. Thus in Act 2, scene 2 of *Moll*, the eponymous character is on the phone

³⁶⁷ Cf. also Katie Hannon, "We'll be important yet, boy! – The Bull McCabe," in John, B. Keane: Playwright of the People, a Collection of Tributes (Listowel: North Kerry Literary Trust, 2004), 78-80, 79.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 42.

³⁶⁹ Playwright of the People, 103.

³⁷⁰ PMA, 170.

addressing a lady who was unfortunately made pregnant: "You had a right to think of that dear girl before you let him put the honey in your coffee. (Listens) A what? He gave you a green cough drop and told you 'twas the pill. You must be a right eeiit ..." 371 Similarly. references to honey in Brendan Kennelly's poetry are very often of a bawdy nature as in "Encouragement": "There's a bee in your milk, Janey Mary.' Travel on. You may find the honey."372

Besides the realm of the grotesque, poetry of abuse was most popular among Munster poets in the 17th and 18th centuries. Unfortunately, although these poems were no less artistic in their form than ballads and elegies, because of the matter they dealt with they were for the most part uncollected, left aside among manuscripts or in the best cases left untranslated. Hence, the present comments had to be made from a necessarily limited corpus of poems. Satiric verse often provided the poet with the opportunity to give free flow to passions and the excessive literary result often echoed the excessive feelings at the root of the composition. However, there was also a great sense of fun and enjoyment involved in the making of satire. Dinneen explains about the Munster poets from the 17th and 18th century: "They were constantly assailing each other with the weapons of poetical satire."373 Similarly in his introduction to the work of Egan O'Rahilly, Tadgh O'Donoghue explains: "A very tempest of passion swept through the poet's soul. His paroxysms are fierce, vehement, and fitful. In such gusts he is often taken so far beyond himself that when the storm is over he seems to forget the links that bound his thoughts together."374 Satire and verse of abuse can be very coarse as shown by the following sample by Egan O'Rahilly from "A Shrewish, Barren, Bony, Nosey servant":

 $^{^{371}}$ John B.Keane, Sive (Dublin Ireland: Progress House, 1986), 39. 372 PMA, 192.

³⁷³ Dinneen, xxxv.

³⁷⁴ An Duanaire, xxxiii.

She's a club-footed slut and not a woman at all, With the barrenest face you would meet on the open road, and certain to be a fool to the end of the world. May she drop her dung down stupidly into the porridge!³⁷⁵

As illustrated by the satiric exchange between Domhnall na Tuile and Egan O'Rahilly, satire mostly consisting of a derogatory portrait, fuelled by bitterness or anger is expressed in the piling up of abusive names and adjectives:

> ... I shall file down his entrails, his complexion, his cheek, And his heart for the idiotic morose boor. A wretch, cowardly, bereft of wisdom, Most disposed to the waking of sleepiness; A low sluggard, a hungry fop, Is the awkward blundering untidy fellow ... 376

To which O'Rahilly replied with no less spirit in his depiction of his fellow poet:

A fellow full of vermin, of running eyes, a dirty gaunt wad, A fugitive vagabond is the liar, A slender hunchback, a greasy swallower, Who swallows every rubish into his greedy maw ...

Apart from the malevolent mind that urged a poet to write a satiric piece that draws a grotesque and deformed portrait of his victim, one can feel in the excess of names and adjectives the delight of a writer who enjoys playing with words. "The most tragic row in the history of Irish literature"377 took place between two close friends, the poets, Sean O'Tuama and Aindreas Mac Craith. Offended by a jibe at customers who did not pay

375 Ibid., 117.

³⁷⁶ Eoghan Ruadh Ó Súilleabháin, Na hAislingí, notes and trans. Pat Muldowney (Aubane: Aubane Historical Society, 2002), 239.

³⁷⁷ Criostoir O'Flynn, Irish Comic Poems, 102.

regularly made by O'Tuama in his poem, "The Merry Publican," Mac Craith who took the hint personally replied in his "Response of an angry customer" O'Tuama writes:

I'm a person who daily sells drinks And my company sets to high jinks, But I say, by the way, if some one fails to pay It's my loss when the account sinks ... 380

Mac Craith replies:

You're a man who sells drink by the splash, Your brandy and ale are a mash, All who drink your bad booze their memory lose And their brains are confused in a hash ...³⁸¹

Criostoir O'Flynn describes the piece as "impeccably constructed and embellished with alliterations and the other ornaments of the poetic craft!" Despite the tone and deprecatory language that deterred many anthologists, the Munster poems possess artistic and poetic value that were born out of ebullient feelings translated into energetic and passionate lines.

In keeping with the Munster tradition, the reader can occasionally recognise in Kennelly's verse people of whom he draws a satirical portrait. This is the case with Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill whom in a newspaper Brendan Kennelly referred to in the following terms:

If Mother Earth herself ever takes to writing poetry in verbal form, she will probably write like Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill. A distinguished regiment on the standing army of Irish poets has been assembled to translate a number of Ni Dhomhaill's Irish poems into English.³⁸³

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 101.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 105

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 102.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 106.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Brendan Kennelly, "Light on Confusion, Brendan Kennelly's Poetry Choice," *Sunday Independent*, 24 February 1991, 26.

In *Poetry My Arse*, she becomes Mother Girth who is also surrounded by poets. She features in "Mother Girth is Bleeding" and reappears in "Licked," a poem where the character is still suffering from menstruation pain:

Mother Girth felt sick
When she saw Kanooce she said
'I hate you
But if you lick me back to life,
I won't poemcurse you."385

Mother Girth is a near anagram of "Mother Earth," and "dirt." Kennelly keeps the phonetic initial of "Dhomhnaill," "G" as the initial of his character. In the satirical world of *Poetry My Arse*, if one chooses to see in Kanooce a warped self-portrait of Kennelly as will be examined in this study later, the following passage becomes both obscene and profoundly hilarious:

Under the bushy rock, Kanooce licked her as she'd never been licked before.

A warmth invaded her out of the icy light and hided her body from head to foot, her spells returned with singing vigour, gunwoman now, quick on the trigger, she'd a bag of myths no longer sick, her legends laughed, her rhythms ticked over

Very often, because in the Munster as in the Latin tradition it is conceived as an address to its victim, satiric or abusive verse is loaded with a dramatic value, increased by the belief in the magic power of satire that has come down from early Ireland. Born out of an overflow of passion, these lines carry at their core an energy that leads to inflated and hyperbolic feelings. In the case of Seán O'Tuama and Andreas Mac Craith, that kind of poetry encouraged the growth of animosity and bitterness between the two close friends

³⁸⁴ PMA, 265.

³⁸⁵ PMA, 266.

and eventually resulted in the end of their long term friendship since after the satiric exchange they never spoke to each other again.

The dramatic quality in poetry of abuse was magnificently exploited by John B. Keane in *Sive*. The ritual that accompanies the ceremony of satire is enhanced as it is repeated several times throughout the play and each time the same gestures and the same words are heard:

Pats: Cartalawn!

(Carthalawn turns towards his father, a wild look in his eyes)

Pats: Your best! Your mighty best!

Violently Pats begins to tap the bodhran with clenched knuckles. For a moment there is a loud timing of stickbeat and bodhran. Then the sound dwindles and Carthalawn takes up the beat to his usual air while the stick is pointed at Thomasheen.³⁸⁶

As the tragic momentum increases with the approach of the wedding day, the fierceness of the satire also reaches a crescendo:

Carthalawn (singing):
May he screech with awful thirst
May his brain and eyeball burst
That melted amadaun, that big bostoon,
May the fleas consume his bed
And the mange eat up his head
That black man from the mountain, Seaneen Rua.³⁸⁷

The use of stressed pattern from the 17th century was an important step towards spoken language and the rhythm of ballads that corresponded to the reduction of the poet's status to the level of the common man at this time. Satire was not only verbal excess, it was the reflection of fiery and passionate country tempers, hence the sense of hubris derived from satiric pieces. The essence of satire seems to intrinsically link the comic and the tragic. And it is because satire is so deeply rooted in Ireland that so many Irish literary works

387 lbid., 46.

³⁸⁶ Sive, 22.

associate both spheres: comic and tragic. This Irish hubris seems to have been powerfully manifest in Kerry. *The Field* by John B. Keane represents how excess and lack of moderation among Kerry people can work at so many levels: drink, love, power, possession... The violence of the play directly draws upon its Kerry background and comprehends the murder of Maurice whose assassin was never arrested. Three scenes are particularly memorable – the scene at the dance where the speed in dancing nearly results in Tadhg's killing his partner, the Bull McCabe losing control and murdering the young American and afterwards dancing with the corpse; eventually the final scene in which the Bull McCabe drives his cattle to the cliff and the animals trample Tadhg to death.

A similar sense of excess is often encountered throughout Kennelly's work. In *Poetry My Arse* in particular, although Kanooce's fierce responses to verbal assaults from critics, politicians, and businessmen are decidedly comic, passages in which such scenes are related are not exempt from a degree of seriousness.

Kanooce, too, bloodromped among the flowers, bits of the novelist's buttock dripping like bad grammar from his jaws and, alarming to report, eager for more. 388

These scenes convey a sense of excess close to the type of hubris found in *The Field*, which was first called "The Field By The River," and which, following Brendan Kennelly's suggestion, John B. Keane shortened to the actual title: *The Field*. 389

III.2.2 Tackling the Forbidden

Coarseness and many shapes of excess were enjoyed among the audiences of the Munster poets in the 17th and 18th centuries, but when later on some of their works had been

³⁸⁹ In communication with Brendan Kennelly, 2005.

³⁸⁸ PMA, 169.

preserved in the form of manuscripts, readers felt otherwise and rejected the coarseness of this poetry. As public tastes changed, their poetry often became inappropriate. With Frank O'Connor's translation of "The Midnight Court" in 1922, those who worked on the revival of the Irish language were bound to realise that Gaelic poetry did not correspond to the purified image of Ireland which they were trying to promote. O'Connor's translation was consequently banned. One should yet note that Victorian prudishness was not introduced in Munster until the last quarter of the 19th century and that sexual issues were commonly mentioned and evoked in songs, poems and jokes. It is only retrospectively in the light of different expectations that these proved at odds with the system of moral values in place and thus became problematic. J.M. Synge's depiction of the Irish countryside was also deemed offensive because it did not match the pastoral myth of Ireland. Moral appreciation of literature does not only vary according to time but also to geography and more generally it varies from the city to the country. Thus, while acclaimed by some critics, some of Kennelly's early pieces, especially those that evoke the violence of every day country life in Kerry, aroused hostility among other critics. Similar reactions led the Abbey Theatre to ignore John B. Keane's plays for a very long time. His work, which describes in the words of the locals life among Kerry people, was possibly too "coarse" for the prestigious institution. His manuscripts were returned without having been read by the Abbey editors. As underlined by Anthony Cronin in John B. - Playwright of the people, Keane owes his success to "the people first," a chronological order of interest that also applies to Brendan Kennelly:

John B. Keane was almost unique among Irish playwrights in one very important respect. It was the public who discovered him and forced the critics to take notice. Usually the process works the other way round. It is the critics who put a particular playwright on the agenda and often even impose their enthusiasm on at first reluctant public. ³⁹⁰

390 Playwright of the People, 5.

When comparing the work of Brendan Kennelly, of John B. Keane and of other fellow Munster contemporary poets, similarities appear in themes, images and in the passionate tone inherited from the 17th and 18th century Munster poets.

While censorship was formally abolished in 1967, a puritanical atmosphere remained, whose consequences are still felt at present, in particular in the field of Gaelic studies. Professor Alan Titley explains:

As for bawdy poems in 17th and 18th centuries Munster poets, they are certainly there in Irish. Lots of them, and many unpublished, but hidden away in manuscripts. Many editors in the early twentieth century simply excised them, or ignored them. There was also, of course a metaphorical language which people obviously understood.³⁹¹

The most recent anthologies of Irish verse in translation do not include the bawdy pieces that are most of the time only alluded to by editors. And even a book like *Irish Comic Poems* by Criostoir O'Flynn shows a rather Victorian and puritanical taste in its selection. Comparably Vivian Mercier only vaguely referred to the Irish bawdy vein from the 17th and 18th centuries and thus greatly truncated the comic tradition. Even after official censorship had come to an end, the atmosphere about the world of publication remained rigid for a long time. With *Up and at It* (1965) Brendan Kennelly directly draws upon Kerry folk tradition. Several poems in the book are written in the line of bawdy Gaelic verse. With this collection the poet calls attention to a part of the Gaelic tradition that was left in the shade. Although *Moloney up and at It* that followed *Up and at It*, was published long after Vivian Mercier's *The Irish Comic Tradition*, few reviewers marked how this type of poetry, despite its apparently provocative themes, was just as traditional in mood as pastoral Irish poems, elegies, vision poems etc. Terence Brown with Eavan Boland were

³⁹¹ In communication with Prof. Alan Titley, 7 July 2005.

 ³⁹² Vivian Mercier only concentrates on the "Midnight Court" and approaches it from a social angle.
 393 The richness of the bawdy tradition in Kerry is referred to by John B. Keane in his Self-Portrait, 12.

among the rare critics to write and defend the vivid energy at work in the Moloney poems.³⁹⁴ By writing in the line of local bawdy verse, Brendan Kennelly was actually proving most original in the scope of Irish contemporary poetry.

Later on, when Moloney up and at It was republished in 1984, reviews were generally mitigated if not hostile to the book. However, it is interesting to mark that none of the critics expressing their views on Moloney commented about the illustrations by John Verling which accompanied the text in the first edition by the Mercier Press. Given the nature of these drawings (men and women having sex, bare breasts, little devils with oversized penises...), one suspects that reviewers were unfavourably influenced by the illustrations. Bernadetta Quinn writes about the 1984 edition: "a coarseness appears which merits the adjective disgusting despite the comic intent."395

These somehow recall Aubrey Beardsley's drawings illustrating Oscar Wilde's Salomé and thus highlight a link between Brendan Kennelly and his Irish predecessor. Nonetheless Verling's illustrations lack the refinement of Aubrey Beardsley's prints and their overtly erotic nature situates them at the perimeters of pornography. Given that pornographic images were forbidden in Ireland until the end of the Sixties one might think that these drawings were part of a strategy to shock the reader. To include them in Moloney up and at It was yet none of Brendan Kennelly's initiative but that of his publisher. 396 The illustrations are faithful to the pagan note of the poems but they add a gruesome tinge of violence that most certainly had a detrimental effect on a first reading because they did not match the boisterous and merry tone of the book.

³⁹⁴ Terence Brown, "Selected Poems," Icarus 58, Michaelmas Term, 1969, 33.

Cf. also Eavan Boland, "Kerry Monologues," Irish Times 26 February 1966, 8. Bernadetta Quinn, "Brendan Kennelly, Instrument of Peace," The Antigonish Review, vol. 83, 1990, 131-143, in Gerold Sedlmayr, Brendan Kennelly's Literary Works, 341.

³⁹⁶ In communication with Brendan Kennelly, September 2006.

One of the most celebrated outraged reactions from an Irish audience to a literary work is the riot caused by Synge's play, *The Playboy of the Western World*.³⁹⁷ The public outbreak was caused in part by the plot and the perceived degradation of Woman in the play but part of it was also due to the curses and the nature of the language – however authentic – used by characters on stage. It seems that the strong reactions in the audience can be interpreted as an attempt at smothering any remaining traces of paganism in favour of Victorian and puritanical Catholic values. W.B. Yeats writes:

They wished to silence what they considered a slander upon Ireland's womanhood ... nor could one recognise the country men and women of Davis and Kickham in these poetical, violent grotesque persons, who used the name of God so freely and spoke of all things that hit their fancy.³⁹⁸

Christy Mahon in *The Playboy Of The Western World* uses the following words to describe a female character: "A walking terror from beyond the hills, and she two scores and five years, and two hundredweights and five pounds in the weighing scales, with a limping leg on her, and a blinded eye, and she a woman of noted misbehaviour with the old and the young." Even if the passage is in prose as opposed to verse, it clearly shows the connection between bardic satire, Irish country language and Irish literature. The words are especially interesting when compared with O'Rahilly's satire "A Shrewish, Barren, Bony, Nosey servant" quoted earlier. However, while in the 17th and 18th centuries such comments on ladies were socially acceptable – although offensive — once Catholic puritanism had been imposed on public mores and the cult of the Virgin Mary steadily established, any offensive comment on Irish women was almost felt as blasphemous, hence

³⁹⁷ John Millington Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World and Riders to the Sea* (New York: Routledge, 1979).

³⁹⁸ W.B. Ycats, "J.M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time," in *Twentieth century interpretations of 'The Playboy of the Western World': A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Thomas R. Whitaker (Englewood Cliffs (N.I.): Hensel Hempstead: Prentice-Hall 1969) 21

⁽NJ); Hemel Hempstead: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 21.

399 John Millington Synge, The Playboy of the Western World and Riders to the Sea (New York et al: Routledge, 1979), 40.

⁴⁰⁰ An Duanaire, 117.

the hyperbolic reactions about *The Playboy*. Such language nonetheless continued to prosper in Kerry among other country regions down to the time of Kennelly's childhood and youth.

Although Sive was a great success, John B. Keane also recorded attitudes comparable with that against The Playboy of the Western World when Sive was initially staged:

Some others resented *Sive*, said it was blasphemous and ungodly, and sanctimonious – even waited till the show was over and tackled us as we got a nasty cut in the neck. One outspoken cleric refused to give permission to lease the hall, and even went so far as to tell his flock to shun us.⁴⁰¹

One feature that raised hostility in certain viewers was that *Sive*, the heroine, was an illegitimate child, born out of wedlock. John B. Keane's theatre deals with everyday life matters and treats them with the language of his fellow villagers. Yet he often targets subjects usually spoken of in a metaphorical way because they belong to the realm of what is forbidden or what Brendan Kennelly calls "the no-go areas." The title of his play *The Change in Mame Fadden* illustrates the linguistic taboo surrounding certain areas of life, in this case Mame Fadden's going through menopause and the incapacity of her relative to relate to her beyond social conventions.

With Frank O'Connor's translation of Merriman, the authorities in 1922 realised that the writer in the Irish language was treating of a subject that had now lapsed into the realm of what is forbidden: the sexual inadequacy in marriages between young women and old men, and the social imbalance caused by old women marrying younger men:

If your jealousy even was based on fact In some hardy young whelp that could keep her packed;

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⁴⁰¹ John B. Keane, Self-Portrait, 92.

⁴⁰² Preface of PMA.

Covetous, quarrelsome, keen on scorring,
Or some hairy old villain hardened with whoring;
A vigorous pusher, a rank outsider,
A jokey of note or a gentleman rider –
But a man disposed in the wrong direction
With a poor mouth shown on a sham erection!⁴⁰³

As heirs of the Munster poets, John B. Keane and Brendan Kennelly tackled themes that had become taboos from the second half of the 19th century. The sense of transgression in their work provoked resentment in part of the audience while others delighted in it. Just as John B. Keane received numerous anonymous letters of abuse, Brendan Kennelly, who also received such letters had to cope with abusive articles from critics, but also verbal and physical abuse from readers, radio listeners and television viewers dissatisfied with his books.

Licentiousness is the quality inherited from the Munster background that might have most hurt the sensitivity of certain readers. Yet a major consequence of censorship that endured up to our time is that most traces of bawdiness in translations from Gaelic poetry have been pruned. Consequently, the current perception of the Gaelic tradition seems greatly impaired and deformed. The quasi-exclusive emphasis placed on elegies, songs, aislings and pastoral pieces has led to a warped and inaccurate picture of Gaelic poetry. One possible consequence of this is the current valorisation of poetry with a scrious tone as opposed to humorous verse that – like "The Midnight Court" – can nonetheless have a deeply scrious core. As explained by Professor Alan Titley the tendency to overlook the playful dimension of Gaelic poetry might be the reason for the current "continentalisation" of Irish poetry, in particular with Irish poetry from the North.

⁴⁰³ Frank O'Connor, "The Midnight Court," *The Penguin Book of Irish Verse*, intro. and ed. Brendan Kennelly (London: Penguin, 1988), 111.

When one refers to Gaelic bawdy poetry, "The Midnight Court" is the title that almost automatically comes to mind. Yet Merriman was far from being the only poet of his time to deal with matters of this nature. Numerous poems and ballads proved as licentious as The Midnight Court. One might consequently wonder about the reason why such emphasis was placed on this particular piece. Professor Alan Titley gives several reasons for the success of Merriman's poem. He points out that unlike the great majority of poems written in the 17th and 18th centuries, "The Midnight Court" is one of the few poems of a sustained length as opposed to short poems or songs with a more limited number of stanzas. In order to understand the work of Brendan Kennelly, one needs to consider that this long humorous piece is possibly closer to the form of saga stories than to poems more commonly composed of a couple of stanzas. In other words, "The Midnight Court" like many of Kennelly's poems is a poem that can be seen as a hybrid between verse and story. In terms of form, "The Midnight Court" does not stand out from other poems composed at the same period and its formal quality was not a criterion to distinguish it from a vast body of light and humorous poems. Its success among scholars was also due to the flexibility it offered to interpretation. A more recent factor that played a decisive role in the popularisation of "The Midnight Court" was the opening of a Merriman Summer school in County Clare which would act as a match to the Yeats Summer School in Sligo.

Although a great part of bawdy Gaelic poetry has been left untranslated, "The Horserider's Reproach" provides an instance of the picturesque language generally used to evoke ribaldry:

A score of death-squeezes tonight and my curse on your buttocks for ever! May ravens pluck both of your eyes, Diabolical whore with the haunch.

May your hoof catch a nail in the quick! May the band cut the string of your tail! Many of the bawdy metaphorical allusions made in the 17th and 18th centuries Gaelic poems were part of a conventional code. The range of images used about sexual matters was however so commonly used and directly fully understood by people that it would probably be more accurate to speak of "dead metaphors." Yet for somebody not initiated to this metaphorical language, bawdy references can be totally misunderstood and taken at their face value for pastoral poetry. Thus images such as "ploughing" "watering the garden," to make "stampy" etc. very often referred to sexual intercourse. Bawdiness in Munster and in Kerry in particular was reflected in poems but also in popular proverbs and sayings or short curses, brief forms at which Gaelic poets also excel. To quote but two striking examples, people from Kerry would be familiar with sayings such as: "He would eat a farmer's arse through a hedge," a phrase most possibly inherited from the time of the famine. A short bawdy curse might take the following form: "May his hand never come clean from his arse." While Munster poetry does not generally lay the emphasis on the visual, it should be stressed that the realm of bawdiness certainly offers a very creative field where metaphors and images that are most extravagant and unexpected abound.

The introduction of Victorian values and puritanical Catholicism in the late 19th century drew the line of what is forbidden so that poems like "The Midnight Court" were no longer acceptable. However, these new values did not lead to the vanishing of pagan bawdiness but instead resulted in the paradoxical concomitance of on the one side radical Catholicism and on the other side wild paganism. At a literary level, this incoherence in moral values provided writers and story-tellers with a generous source of rich and highly

⁴⁰⁴ An Duanaire, 137.

colourful expressions where the Sacred most often flirts with the Pagan in a manner that might be felt as blasphemous in the eyes of certain audiences. Kerry people would explain their oxymoronic values by appealing to a legend, saying that St Patrick never went as far as Kerry. All is from this background where people would still exclaim: He's so hungry he would eat a hind leg of the lamb of God" that *The Book of Judas* was born. Unlike in Dublin, Munster did not leave much room to political correctness.

When Kerry and Munster people went to Dublin, like all those coming from outside the capital, they were called "Culchies" on account of their accents, speech and manners. Part of their rich pagan language and of what belonged to their background was considered improper, inadequate and violent in Dublin. Yet if the Munster form of grotesque and coarse humour was part of the locality in Kerry, it upset the standards of the urban Dublin literary world. Hence the fierce reviews Brendan Kennelly got for those of his poems that were the most influenced by this part of his background. The difference between city and country was also highlighted by John B. Keane. 406 In this literary confrontation between urban and rural Ireland, several contemporary Munster poets remained nonetheless faithful to the language of their 17th and 18th century predecessors, both in tones and in subject matters.

Michael Hartnett from County Limerick exemplified the dichotomy between Dublin and the Irish countryside when after many years spent in Dublin he returned to his native place in Limerick. In "A Farewell to English" dedicated to Brendan Kennelly, he voiced his Dublin experience in a tone that cannot but recall the 17th and 18th century Munster poets and that also resembles Brendan Kennelly's tone:

I saw our governments, the other night —
I think the scene was Leopardtown —
horribly deformed dwarfs rode the racetrack

406 John B. Kcane, Self-Portrait, 99.

⁴⁰⁵ Paddy Kennelly, *Disciples* (Cork: Marino Books, 2005), 148.

each mounted on a horribly deformed dwarf: greenfaced, screaming, yellow toothed, prodding each other with electric prods, thrashing each other's skinny arses, dribbing snot and smeared with their own dung, they galloped towards the prize, a glass and concrete anus.

A piece like this one, but also poems such as Harnett's "Pigkilling" or Brendan Kennelly's "The Pig Killer" can be read as celebrations of country life, even as they include things that might seem gross and aggressive to urban citizens, either from Belfast or Dublin. There might also be in these poems a certain amount of provocation from poets who were bound to be branded "culchies" even after years spent in Dublin. It is this type of poem celebrating gestures primary and elementary for life and survival, gestures that are almost taken for granted in the country, yet looked upon as shocking for an urban reared person, that in the eyes of Belfast-born and bred Ciaran Carson, suffers from "folksy brutality." Nonetheless poems like "Pigkilling" and "The Pig Killer" render most faithfully the merry ritual of the pig's execution and the awesome ceremony of his passing from life to food:

before he sinks, his smiling head sees a delicate girl up to her elbows in a tub of blood while the avalanche of his offal steams among the snapping dogs and mud and porksteaks coil in basins like bright snakes ...⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁷ Hartnett, Michael, Collected Poems (Oldcastle: Gallery press, 2001), 125.

¹⁰⁸ FS, 242.

⁴⁰⁹ Ciaran Carson, "Blamey Stones," Hibernia, 20 August 1976, 20.

⁴¹⁰ Michael Hartnett, Collected Poems, 125.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

In a not so different way, *Moloney up and at It* can be perceived as some form of provocation on the part of Brendan Kennelly to shake politically correct attitudes and well-thinking citizens. The book is a series of comic bawdy poems in the North Kerry language. From beginning to end, every episode of Moloney's adventures is a new transgression giving free vent to Kerry paganism and exploring the field of the Irish Forbidden. Many of these stories inspired by real-life events intermingle death and sexuality. Despite the humorous language, seriousness is often there looming behind frequent *double-entendre* Mena Glavin's remark in *Sive* applies most fittingly to Moloney: "Is it how you're so twisted inside you that you must have the double meaning the whole time?" **412*:

Have you ever stood Back from yourself, Immaculate, an'seen The way you're wastin' the cream O'your womanhood on the holy men⁴¹³

The humour of these poems feels all the more transgressive as every story in *Moloney up* and at It illustrates the dark side of the Irish psyche: incest, drunkenness, the lack of chastity among Church people, erotic games at wakes... In short the reader is here confronted with the merry mix of the Sacred and the Profane. The first poem "Moloney up and at It" shows the main character having sex on his mother's grave:

She fell down on the soft clay
Of a fresh grave, and before I could say
A word, I was on the ground as well,
Goin' like the hammers o'hell!
'Twas only then I saw where I was.
On my mother's grave! ...⁴¹⁴

The rhyming of "the soft clay" and "I could say / A word" directly recalls the first line of Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger*, "Clay is the word and clay is the flesh," and the

⁴¹² Sive, 20.

⁴¹³ MUAAI, 20.

⁴¹⁴ lbid., 10

incestuous power of the mother over Patrick Maguire. Beyond incest, the scene plays with the popular belief that a child conceived on a freshly buried person's grave would offer a new body to this person's soul. It is such belief that led Maud Gonne to conceive a second child on the grave of her first dead baby. While the reference to clay backed-up by "the hammers o'hell" conjures up a sense of transgression of Catholic rules, the lightness of the tone weighs the balance in favour of a merry celebration in which pagan rituals continue a cycle of fertility. Although for Irish city dwellers similar associations might feel as a transgression, this blending of paganism with Catholicism expressed with a comic light-hearted voice renders most faithfully the bawdy spirit of Kerry and on a wider scale of the Munster Gaelic World.

3) A Type of Poet

III.3.1 A Way of Life

Part of the Munster heritage for Brendan Kennelly took the form of an archetypal figure of a poet that was projected on him and with which he later played in his work. The interaction between the public image of the poet and this part of Kennelly's creation will be explored in subsequent pages. When one compares what is known about the way of life of several Munster poets and what Irish readers know about Brendan Kennelly, the resemblance becomes striking. One remarkable feature is the fact that even when he travels, a poet remains a representative of his locality and carries with him the background of his native place. His accent, his language and his countenance binds him to his native village. The example of Owen Roe O'Sullivan, one of the most famous Kerry poets in Irish is telling:

⁴¹⁵ Patrick Kavanagh, Selected Poems, 18.

The characteristic vehemence of the Irish Celt – his enthusiasm, his warmth of nature, his tenderness of heart – have in his songs found their highest expression ... Guts of fierce passion, terrible as Atlantic hurricanes, sweep over his lyre without disturbing its deep-set harmony. He is bold and vehement, but withal soft and tender; terrible in his denunciation, but generous and forgiving. 416

After the death of Owen Roe, nicknamed "Sweet-Tongued Owen," his hugely popular songs brought him legendary status. In The Playboy of the Western World, Pegcen says about him: "I'm thinking of Owen Roe O'Sullivan or the poets of the Dingle Bay, and I've heard all times it's the poets are your like, fine fiery fellows with great rages when their temper's roused."417 Down to the Sixties his songs were widely known in Kerry and the poet was something of an "arch-poet" in the area. In an unpublished Moloncy poem, Kennelly wrote a version of a story based on the legendary status enjoyed by Owen Roe O'Sullivan. The word goes that as he lay dying, a young girl slipped into his bed with the hope of conceiving a child. His aisling songs contributed to the education of peasants and to perpetuate the ancestral memory of Irish history and the legends of Irish heroes. In particular, the allegory of Ireland – a common poetic image at the time – as a beautiful virgin Queen, wife of the banished Stuarts, who is tormented and tortured by foreigners, acted as a reminder of the lost sovereignty of the Gaelic aristocracy and of the unnatural state of oppression in which the peasantry lived. As the nationalist spirit was long lived in Kerry, in particular at the time of Independence and later on during the civil war, Owen Roe O'Sullivan's songs remained relevant and all through the twentieth century, including the time of Brendan Kennelly's youth, these songs still occupied an important place in public repertoires. Although traditional bardic schools had disappeared, poets in the 17th and 18th centuries continued playing an essential role in the transmission of Irish history, myths and sagas, not only through their poems and songs, but also through their

⁴¹⁶ Eoghan Ruadh Ó Súilleabháin, 3.

⁴¹⁷ Synge, 109.

professional activity as teachers. Owen Roc O'Sullivan, who was a school master, and Brian Merriman who opened a school in Limerick, were among the most illustrious teachers of their time. Most interestingly and unlike other contemporary poets, Brendan Kennelly spent forty years as a professor in the English department of Trinity College Dublin. As if perpetuating the activities of his bardic Munster predecessors, he taught a course entitled, "Myth and Mythology," that consisted of a study of Irish ancestral myths and sagas, and of their reshaping in the work of major Irish writers composing in English such as W.B. Yeats, J. M. Synge, Patrick Kavanagh etc. If in the 17th and 18th centuries these myths were part and parcel of everyday life, as poets and travelling singers occupied a major position in their roles as entertainers, nowadays with the difficult survival of the Irish language, students are no longer as familiar with the mythological stories and legends. It is then striking to note that the task of transmitting Irish mythology and demonstrating its relevance to students was imparted to the poet that Ireland acknowledges as its bard. Yet, beyond the role of transmission of myth and love for poetry, Brendan Kennelly – like poets directing schools in 17th and 18th century Munster – also played a decisive role in encouraging and guiding young poets and writers. The success of the Oscar Wilde Centre for Irish Writing was largely due to the decisive impetus provided by Brendan Kennelly to his Masters' students in creative writing. Among his former students, Brendan Kennelly counts numerous poets and writers: Paula Meehan, Katie Donovan, John Boyne, Claire Keegan etc. In This Fellow With The Fabulous Smile, Katie Donovan, who was one of his students in the 1980s, describes her lecturer, Brendan Kennelly, at the time when he was doing research in preparation for Cromwell, and depicts him as a challenging and stimulating teacher. In his class, mythology was not taught as a remote story but he tried to make it a personal experience so that the ancestral myths would be assimilated and reshaped according to every personality. Students were not only there to

receive knowledge but also to create and experience the myths, because this was the most certain way to internalise these and allow them a space in the long term memory. Brendan Kennelly would for instance have students write about their own personal myths and stage excerpts from *Ulysses*, *The Only Jealousy of Emer* etc. "As a teacher, he challenged students to confront their fears from day one." With Kennelly, as in a new Court of poetry, the classroom became a place of exchange and communication, a place where stories and poems continued their travel in time and memory. Thus, in an interview entitled "The Rogues of Academe," the poet says: "I don't see myself as a teacher but as a co-explorer with those who are interested." 419

Although biographical data about 17th and 18th century Munster poets are extremely limited, the desire to explore life, within oneself and with others seems to have been at the core of the best remembered Munster poets. They were men who enjoyed amusement, fun and poetry and had somehow left the realm of seriousness to join a pleasure-loving company: "Poetry now became only an amusement for which no reward was to be expected, but the satisfaction the poet felt in unbosoming his soul in verse." Their travels provided poets with a constant renewal of people around them. For Kennelly, new encounters happened in the streets of Dublin and although his forty years spent in Trinity College Dublin might give a sense of stasis, at odds with his earlier peers, while the place itself hardly changed, the population has been constantly renewed since new students arrived every year and others left usually after four years spent in college. For Brendan Kennelly as for many Munster poets alcohol played a major role in his turbulent exploration of life, which sometimes took him to dangerous ends. Adjectives often applied

⁴²⁰ Dinneen, xii.

⁴¹⁸ This Fellow with the Fabulous Smile: A Tribute to Brendan Kennelly, ed. Ake Persson (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1996), 24.

Madeleine Keane, "The Rogues of Academe," Sunday Independent, 08 October 1989, 15.

to Owen Roc O'Sullivan seem most fitting to Brendan Kennelly: "reckless and wild," "a wastrel with a loud laugh ..." Daniel Corkery describes Owen Roc as "a Mercutio, albeit a rustic one, with the same turn for fanciful and even dainty wit joined to the same fatal recklessness of spirit." After he started a school at Gnecveguilla at the age of 18, the poet became a wandering farm labourer, sometimes working in farms, sometimes teaching. As his living conditions declined, he joined the British army to escape a pursuer and sailed for the West Indies among the rough company of seamen. Several years later he came back to his native place and died from his wounds after he was stabbed in a tavern. When comparing Padraig Ua Duinnin's comments on Owen Roc O'Sullivan's temper with remarks made about Kennelly in newspapers, one can sense that in both cases commentators have the feeling that they are dealing with poets that approach the archetype of the Irish poet. Moreover the eloquence and the sense of revelry that were so fully accomplished in Owen Roe were no less developed in many a Munster poet. Scan O'Tuama and Aindreas Mac Craith were also remembered for their jovial personality.

Brendan Kennelly moved from Ballylongford to Dublin and John B. Keane remained in Listowel but their friendship was comparable with that between Andreas Mac Craith and Sean O'Tuama. Just like the latter, John B. Keane ran a pub in a village and was a leading figure there. Perhaps not as wild as Brendan Kennelly, John B. Keane was described by his friends as a cheerful and garrulous character. He mainly wrote for the theatre but a poet's soul was perceptible in his plays as in his conversation:

John B. was a natural entertainer and must have given a laugh to millions of people in his time ... John B. was a great speaker at the after-match [Ireland v. Denmark Soccer International in Dublin], where most of the Corporate-sponsored tables occupied by urbanites – far removed from the characters that were his subjects. Afterwards, many of them said that it had been a

⁴²¹ Daniel Corkery, The Hidden Ireland, 184.

⁴²² lbid., 190.

great and memorable day, not because of the match, but because of the enjoyment from John B's speech. 423

Similar remarks could be made of Brendan Kennelly, who "speaking about his drinking days ... recalls putting on a great show for many pub audiences, hopping up on tables to regale his public with yarns." His orator and entertainer's talent naturally owed him countless invitations to book-launches, exhibition openings, TV and radio shows, and dinners, an aspect of his public character that will be later examined.

Going back to Munster poets, Daniel Corkery highlights the wild fierceness that rises from O'Tuama and Mac Craith's bantering verse, one called the other an old incompetent bard and the other replied with vivacity in what Corkery deems a "tour de force of word craft and energy." Such a mock dual in verse involved complicity and the intense pleasure of playing with words. Mac Craith, also a schoolmaster, was considered the wildest of the bards in his time, a reputation that would have greatly suited Kennelly up to the late Eighties. Mangan calls him "the gay, the eccentric, the jovial, but withal, the witty, learned and intellectual Andreas Mac Craith." His drinking songs remained in the common memory for their sound and energy:

A good thing 'tis for one
To spend his crown, his sixpence;
Considering how vast a crowd
That the world wheedled to its way
Now rot within the clay;
Their wines with new men play
And they within the church, a tombstone under!
426

When one bears in mind that Andreas Mac Craith was also a school teacher, one suspects that the comparison with Kennelly might go quite far. Katie Donovan remembers:

⁴²³ Mick O'Connell, "A Very Nice Fellow," in *Playwright of the People*, 89-90.

⁴²⁴ Marese McDonagh, "The Bard With Dancing Dimples and a Mischievous Smile," Kerryman, 07 February 1992. 4

⁴²⁵ James Clarence Mangan, 21.

⁴²⁶ Daniel Corkery, The Hidden Ireland, 260.

Those were Brendan's drinking years, and he could give the most lucid and stimulating lectures while claiming he was far from sober ... He was different from our other lecturers in that he was able to quote large chunks of poems by heart, frequently and beautifully. He even did this outside class. It was quite awe-inspiring. Yet at the same time he could tell rude jokes and invite you for a pint in O'Neill's. 427

Anecdotes about Brendan Kennelly's misbehaviour and mischievousness are numerous: fist fighting in the Common room in Trinity College, candid – if embarrassing – remarks at literary events, shattering a solemn and stiff atmosphere with a joke, infectious laughter... His joviality earned him a great number of sympathies but also resentments that were often poured out in begrudging reviews that ignored the text and focused on the person of the poet. Djinn Galagher remembers her first encounter with Brendan Kennelly as follows:

One late afternoon in the early 1980s. I was stunned by the barrage of four-letter words rattling from a drunk man at the bar in O'Neill's of Suffolk Street. "F&@ing, c*\$ting f*&@," he continued cheerfully, abusing the barman. "I can't f*&@ing believe you're such a f*&@ing c*"t..." The other occupants of the bar giggled nervously. My friend turned to me and said: "You know who that is? That's the Professor of Modern Literature in Trinity College." 429

Although in the Ace-Kanooce couple, energy and excess have been transferred to ebullient Kanooce, and Ace is depicted as a mellowed aging poet, traces of the drinking habit appear regularly:

I was drunk when I did that, he said be drunk more often, she replied 430

428 Lifelines, RTE Television, 1996.

⁴²⁷ This Fellow, 24.

⁴²⁹ Djinn Galagher, "Did You Hear the One About the Kerry Man With the Funny Face and Fabulous Smile?" *Tribune Magazine*, 21 April 1996, 2.

430 PMA, 329.

This associations becomes most interesting as Brendan Kennelly turns "Kanooce" into a verb leading to the centre of creation, the place of writing, the "Bluebell Pad": "Ace puts on his clothes, takes a glass of whiskey / and Kanooces the Bluebell Way." When retrospectively explaining the worst time of his addiction, Brendan Kennelly explains: "I rarely lost control, but I was on a high most of the time. In the last couple of years I didn't sober up and I didn't get pissed. I just got drunk in a nicely way. And I managed ... I was able to give the lectures and though I had some disasters, I survived them." The way Brendan Kennelly used his public image in poetry performances and in his written work will be focused on in the final chapter.

A last essential feature which must be considered in order to depict the archetypal bard of the 17th and 18th centuries lies in Kennelly's relationship to women. Many Munster adventurous poets were described as womanizers, a trait generally supported by the licence and bawdy humour of their verse. Owen Roe O'Sullivan is not only remembered for the beauty of his verse, his wit, but also for his good looks and the success he encountered with ladies: "Eoghan Rua is still spoken of and quoted in Irish-speaking districts in Munster as one of the great wits and playboys of the past" explains Thomas Kinsella. 433 He was known to have several children out of wedlock and as a contribution to a poetry competition in his homeland, he once wrote a poem about having to look after one of his children while the mother was out. Similar observations can be made about Mac Craith and women. O'Curry who knew him said: "He was the most sarcastic and ready-witted among all the Munster bards of his day, but he led a licentious and dissolute life." 434

⁴³¹ Ibid., 237.

⁴³² Melanic Boast, "The World According to Brendan Kennelly," Woman's Way, 25 February 1982, 11.

⁴³³ An Duanaire, 183.

⁴³⁴ HS Catalogue, Royal Irish Academy, 47, in Dinneen, xxxi.

Andrew Mac Craith's life was such that his parish priest denounced him as a danger to ladies' virtue. In response, the poet pretended to convert to Protestantism. Yet some times after the event, the poet who had been based in Coshma for long had to leave the parish after a dispute with the priest regarding one of his love affairs. Although in Kennelly's case this sort of allegation did not reach these extremes, the poet's reputation certainly followed the archetype of the Munster bard. It is to this reputation that Katie Donovan alludes when she says: "He could also, by reputation, be something of a lad. But the only time I ever saw him put his arm around a student was after she had fainted and fallen off her seat in the middle of one of his lectures." As for his fellow Munster poets, the "playboy" reputation is enhanced by echoes of bawdiness and licentiousness in his verse. Female characters are numerous in his poetry and the great majority of his plays are devoted to women: *Medea*, *The Trojan Women*, *Antigone...* Newspapers had an essential role in establishing the poet as a great seducer, they rarely missed an occasion to quote the poet on women, even though comments were more often general than personal.

III.3.2 Brendan Kennelly and Robert Burns

From childhood Brendan Kennelly has been familiar with the poetry of Robert Burns that he heard recited around him. In Kennelly's family background Burns' poetry was not so much read as recited and sung. His works were often heard and the Scottish poet's lines were learnt and assimilated by Brendan Kennelly as a child, even before he was able to fully grasp the meaning of certain pieces such as the following composed by Burns for his sister who died a virgin:

May God forgive you Mary Burns What you denied to men

⁴³⁵ This Fellow, 24.

You gave to worms. 436

Underlining the bawdiness of Burns's verse in his introductory note to a 1965 edition of *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*, James Barke who was brought up in Scotland explains how bawdry was part of the background, that licentious ballads were sung with no real awareness of the lyrics and that bawdy songs on the lips of children were nothing unusual:

But outside the house, in school and with friends of my own age [before thirteen] and upwards to senility, bawdry was general and commonplace: no one gave it much conscious thought. In the school playground, long before puberty, the boys and sometimes the girls, chanted such bawdy songs as "Mary Ann" (to the tune of "The Girl I left Behind Me")

O Mary Ann had a leg like a man And a great big hole in her stockin';

A chest like a drum

And a hole to shove your cock in!

In particular, Robert Leslie Boland, Brendan Kennelly's uncle, was a great admirer of Robert Burns. The legend says of the latter that he received very little education and was a self-taught man fascinated by songs and poetry. In North Kerry, Robert Leslie Boland was often compared to Burns, and indeed, his book of verse *Thistle and Docks* can be described as "Burnsian" for its use of dialect, its liveliness, pastoral lyricism and frequent bawdiness. Yet the spirit of Burns' poetry that is so close to that of the Munster bards was not restrictively felt in Brendan Kennelly's family, its influence was widely spread in Kerry and especially in the company of drinkers in a village's pub. John B. Keane also wrote in this vein as shown by a poem such as "Women and dogs": "There are good men who need you much more / And children who think you are witches." Burns' poems and songs

ln Communication with Brendan Kennelly, 2006. Brendan Kennelly said that this stanza was recited by his uncle Leslie Boland who was a great admirer of Robert Burns. I have not been able to find the corresponding quotation in Robert Burns' work and it could well be that this is an example of the way Brendan Kennelly and oral poets can freely dispose of somebody else's text, as will be later examined.

437 Robert Burns, *The Merry Muses Of Caledonia*, eds. James Barke and Sydney Goodsir Smith (London: Panther, 1970), 27.

⁴³⁸ John B. Kcanc, *The Street: and Other Poems* (Dublin: Progress House, 1961), 39.

were in the English language that was the closest to the Gaelic poetry enjoyed in Kerry. Consequently, when the people came to learn English Burns naturally became a favourite. The introduction of English in Kerry happened quite early and poets like Owen Roe O'Sullivan and Aindreas Mac Craith already mastered it well enough to write certain pieces – though apparently of a lesser quality – in the English language. Given Kennelly's background it comes as no surprise that the Moloney poems were the most influenced by his native place yet they were also those which are the most reminiscent of Robert Burns' poetic world. Like some of Burns poems (e.g. "The Fornicator," 439 "The Plenipotentiary,",440 and "Una's Lock",441), every section of Moloney up and at It is conceived as a story, and conjugates the art of the story-teller with that of bawdy poets. Within the first two lines, Kennelly systematically introduces the narrative mode and his narrator, Moloney, with the phrase "Moloney said" or the variant "he said." Moloney is generally presented as the teller in the first line. The only times when he is relegated to the second line is when something seems to overcome him and diminish his power. The opening of "Moloney up and at It" 442 is as follows: "My soul from hell, the night the ould wan died, / Moloney said, I cried an'cried." In this instance Kennelly chose to have Moloney's moral conscience and his mother occupy the first line so as to show their overwhelming power on the narrative voice. After the introductory lines the rest of the poem is devoted to picture the resurrection of pagan forces in Moloney. Similarly "Moloney Cures the Curse" opens on a threat that is followed by its overtaking and the return to forces of life:

> A short dickey is a terrible curse Moloney said I doubt if there's worse Can torment a man ... 443

439 Robert Burns, The Merry Muses, 67.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁴⁴¹ lhid., 204.

⁴⁴² MUAA1, 9.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 39.

In "Moloncy Cures the Curse," Brendan Kennelly deals with a theme commonly developed in bawdry. When reading Robert Burns, one notes that the size of a penis is often subject to exaggeration and caricature and that the poet plays with the male tendency to take pride in the size and shape of their privates. "Moloney Cures the Curse" and "Nine Inch will please a Lady" by Burns begin and end with a similar situation: a man in doubt and anxiety about his virility goes to consult a widow about the size of his genitals and the story proceeds with crotic games:

"Come rede me, dame, come tell me, dame,"

"My dame come tell me truly,"

"What length o'graith, when weel ca'd hame,"

"Will sair a woman duly?"

The carlin clew her wanton tail,

Her wanton tail sae ready —

I learn'd a sang in Annandale,

Nine inch will please a lady.—

444

In Kennelly's poem the situation is comparable:

She said she'd do her best to grow
A weapon he'd always be proud to show
To the world, and then and there she
Rubbed his charley tenderly
As a loving mother caresses a child
Who looks like he might grow up to be wild.
445

In both stories the woman proves witty and clever as she finally turns male prejudices to her own advantage. Burns's "carlin" says:

But weary fa' the laithron doup,
And may it ne'er be thrivin!

It'no the length that maks me loup,
But it's the double drivin'. —

Come nidge me, Tam, come nudge me, Tam,
Come nidge me o'er the nyvel!

⁴⁴⁵ MUAAI, 40.

⁴⁴⁴ Robert Burns, The Merry Muses, 10.

Kennelly writes:

Whatever she did the next I heard Was that the farmer and the widda were Walkin' together up to the altar To be joined together in holy wedlock.⁴⁴⁶

Both Burns and Kennelly's childhood were spent at a time when their society was full of ambiguity and contradictions with regard to sexuality. Brendan Kennelly grew up in De Valera's Free State where the Catholic Church and superstition excrted the most powerful mental influence over the country. More than the love of Christ, the Church cultivated the fear of damnation as depicted in James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, and Redemptorists were sent⁴⁴⁷ to save souls from hell. Sexual repression was fierce and priests preached how to fight "bad thoughts" in the most severe ways. Men were for instance told not to polish their shoe caps in case they would reflect ladies' underskirts, nor to sit on the first floor of a bus in case they would glimpse a lady's cleavage... 448 Yet side by side with puritan and repressive Catholicism, pagan traditions and pagan behaviours coexisted. Thus as explained earlier piseogs were still not unusual practices and celebrations such as puck's fair and wren-boys⁴⁴⁹ were still occasions for wild rejoicing. Despite the priest's efforts, sexual appetites were repressed without being tamed and "Love Cry,"450 metaphorically evokes how coexistent they were with Sunday mass, through the voice of a woman allowing herself fulfilment, sexual hunger is echoed throughout the landscape. In parallel with puritanism, bawdy folk culture lived on in songs and in stories but also in the visual experience of the sexual mating of animals that could be witnessed by anyone regardless of age or sex.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁴⁷ The Poetry Programme, RTE Radio, 15 March 2008.

⁴⁴⁸ In communication with Brendan Kennelly, July 2006.

⁴⁴⁹ Cf. subsequent section.

⁴⁵⁰ FS, 94.

Animal mating actually offered a derivative to frustrated sexual desire. Describing Scottish country society in the 18th century, James Barke explains:

I have been assured on impeachable testimony, the effect on certain otherwise staid and respectable women (married and spinsters) of witnessing the mating of marc and stallion was to induce an almost instantaneous fainting away (orgasm) and an inability to resist the sexual advances of any male who might be on the spot regardless of age or social condition. 451

Kennelly would have been aware of the excitement that animal mating would have engendered among the onlookers and so in Sonnet 33 in *Love Cry*, he depicted the coupling of a swine and a sow with eroticised vocabulary so as to have the reader share the impression created by the scene on a Kerry witness. The reading becomes most disturbing as the reader realises that the encounter, described purely from the male perspective, is narrated as an aggression: "shock by shock," the swine "smelled, grunted, upped with weapon getting hard / Rammed it blindly into his paramour." However, for the poetic voice witnessing the scene, erotic pleasure is derived from sexual violence.

Although the word "bard" has been indiscriminately applied to Brendan Kennelly, examining the work and function of the "bards" from pre-Christian Ireland to the 18th century shows that the term covers a multitude of aspects that should be discerned in how they relate to his poetry. In particular the inspirational mode of creation based on mystical experiences and subconscious states of mind that comes from pre-Christian Ireland is essential to Kennelly. This creative mode that includes composition of verse that echoes early magic verse and later form of satire owes its authenticity to the performative effect attributed to the poems and to the genuine feelings motivating their creation. As opposed to

⁴⁵¹ Robert Burns, The Merry Muses, 28.

this type of bardism that characterized the earliest bards and that is to some extent found in Middle Ages bards and that one encounters again among the Munster poets, the poetic attitude of the Middle Ages fili offers a contrasting model. Their poetry was indeed essentially motivated by materialistic reward and social gratification, which are characteristics Kennelly satirizes in his own work. Poles apart with this latter form of bardism, Kennelly praises the role of the bard as an independent frame-breaker, that corresponds more to a Romantic vision of a Blakean standard than to any bardic figure of Medieval Ireland, but that is enacted and developed in the archetype of the Munster poet of which Robert Burns appears as an echoing reflection. These were a lasting presence in North Kerry and more than the text of these poets from the past, collective memory preserved an archetypal image that was circulated on through anecdotes but also through poetry performances. Long after the time of the 17th and 18th centuries Munster poets, the Munster population – of North Kerry in particular – continued to enjoy songs and poetry performances in pubs, family gatherings, and other local celebrations. As for saga stories preserved by the baird and rambling troubadours, their literary legacy was essentially transmitted through the living word, both spoken and performed. These are qualities which readers and listeners will recognize in the work of Brendan Kennelly, qualities that the next chapter of this thesis will investigate.

Brendan Kennelly and Orality

Brendan Kennelly's status as a modern day bard has much to do with orality. The difficulty of studying orality in the work of a contemporary poet essentially resides in the absence of any strict and satisfactory definition of the term. This difficulty has been convincingly examined by Ruth Finnegan in Oral Poetry, a book which provides an interesting basis for a reflection on the subject. She distinguishes three parameters around which the notion of orality can be articulated: composition, transmission, performance. 452 Unlike Walter J. Ong this thesis will not equate orality and illiteracy (primary orality) not only because in contemporary Western society illiteracy has next to disappeared but also because a study of Brendan Kennelly's poetry within the scope of bardic heritage has to take into account the fact that from the time literacy was introduced the bards - whatever their training were literate and rather than constantly specifying "secondary orality" this study will simply talk about "orality," in a context sufficiently detailed for the reader to understand what type of orality is being refered to. In this section, observations and comments made by observers of illiterate societies will be used because they allow the reader to distinguish well defined characteristics of this type of human group and in particular what Havelock calls "the oral mind." The latter could also be called "the illiterate mind." It precedes the rational stage of development and is a prevailing mode of thinking in an illiterate society. Traces of such specificities will naturally be found in societies (such as Ballylongford at the time of Kennelly's childhood⁴⁵³) among which orality is no longer primary, but remains nonetheless important. This is what Ong calls "secondary orality."

Indeed, when examining the literary work of a poet and academic eminence like Brendan Kennelly there would be little sense in speaking of primary orality. What we have

⁴⁵² Ruth Finnegan, Oral Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 17.

⁴⁵³ Gabriel Fitzmaurice, Beat the Goatskin till the Goat Cries: Notes from a Kerry Village (Cork: Mercier Press, 2006), 80.

instead is a mixed type of orality where the spoken and the written word combine in an original way. Through his written work and in his performances, Kennelly has certainly become one of the most oral of contemporary Irish poets. His poetry presents an intermediary state between oral and written literature. He grew up in a society where little written literature was available. In a radio interview, 454 Brendan Kennelly explains how his teacher Jane Agnes MacKenna played a decisive role in the community by opening her own library to her students who could freely borrow her books. Written production was quasi non-existent but a lot of oral literature was being produced and circulated: ballads, poems, stories etc. Some of this work can be called "oral" because it has been transmitted over long periods of time but there were also many oral literary productions happening in the locality. These could take the form of impromptus, improvised verse-competition, poems and ballads composed on the spot. Consequently rather than trying to force a definition of orality on his work, the present study will try to examine certain aspects of Kennelly's creation and how these relate to a wider tradition of orality from a time when primary orality had not yet become extinct.

I Brendan Kennelly and Ballads

1) The Narrative of Ballad

Numerous allusions in the work of Brendan Kennelly refer to the ballad tradition.⁴⁵⁵ In "Strangers Are Strangers,"⁴⁵⁶ the allusion is heard in the last line: "Bad lad, bad lad, bad lad," and the poem, "Heigh-Ho,"⁴⁵⁷ with its repetitive pattern and its obvious rhythm could easily be set to music:

⁴⁵⁴ My Education, RTE Radio, 1993.

Anonymous, "On Language and Invention," The Literary Review, XXII: 2, Winter 1979, 201.

⁴⁵⁶ BOJ, 140.

⁴⁵⁷ BOJ, 240.

Judas Iscariot is buried and dead

Heigh-Ho buried and dead

And the heart-breaking worms work to nibble his head

Heigh-Ho nibble his head⁴⁵⁸

Such references invite the reader to examine the extent to which Kennelly's writing has

been influenced by Irish ballads. In the environment in which Kennelly was brought up

ballads were commonly heard and this is the form which he naturally started writing in:

[W]hen I wanted to say something, I wanted to say something about a football match or about some event, some awkward event, I tended to write

a ballad because the ballads were what I heard all around me (it's a country

place) and the place was full of ballads ... 459

I.1.1 A Structure Comparable to Stories and Short-Stories: Frank O'Connor's Influence

A typical Kennelly poem could be described as a short-story in verse. The greatest part of

the poet's works shares in common with ballads and short-stories a tight narrative structure

composed of four progressive steps: initial situation, complication, development,

resolution. In "Interview," the first line sets up the context of the story: "I thought Jesus'

questions were rather prickly;" the situation is developed in the body of the poem and the

last two lines bring a conclusion to the story: "At the end, Jesus nodded. He looked me in

the eyes. / 'Congrats, Judas' he said, 'The job is yours.'"

When teaching on his creative writing course, in Stanford University in 1961,

Frank O'Connor would develop his theory that the essence of a short-story had little to do

with the number of pages of the piece but all to do with its inner structure. As he

remembers Frank O'Connor's classes at Standford, Wallace Stagner explains:

458 Ibid., 140.

459 Writer in Profile, RTE Television, 17 October 1976.

460 Ibid., 129.

154

they smiled again when he assured them that the length of the piece of writing had nothing to do with whether it should be called a short story or a novel: he insisted that many unlikely things, from Turgenev's *Old Portraits* to Joyce's *Ulysses*, were short-stories ... he told them ... that any good story ought to be reducible to three or four lines.⁴⁶¹

Brendan Kennelly attended Frank O'Connor's lectures in Trinity College Dublin that began in 1963 and he belonged to O'Connor's circle of close friends. In the wake of these classes Kennelly applied Frank O'Connor's definition of a short-story to his own poetry writing. In the early stages of his career, in his narrative poems Brendan Kennelly used the rules fairly strictly for example in "Leaving," The Fall, Gatechism, Catechism, After School. However, as his style became more personal, Kennelly loosened the structure, and more frequently skipped one of the four steps. This change often leads to increasing the dynamic of the piece, especially when the poem starts in *media res* or when resolution is expected in vain and the ending is left suspended in mid-air. On the one hand, such a conclusion compels the reader to wonder, while on the other hand it creates something of a disappointment, a feeling that the piece is somehow unperfected. If one takes the example of Eily Killbride, the poem starts like a typical story with a narrator strolling along by a river. The phrase, "On the banks of my own lovely Lee," is taken directly from a well known Cork ballad:

On the North side of Cork city Where I sported and played On the banks of my own lovely Lee

⁴⁶¹ Michael / Frank: Studies on Frank O'Connor with a Bibliography of his Writings, ed. Maurice Sheehy (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1969), 97-99.

⁴⁶² BS, 51.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 82.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁶⁶ BOJ, 31.

Michael / Frank, 97-99.

⁴⁶⁶ BS, 51.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 82.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 87.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 88.

This initial situation is also complicated in a typical way, which is a surprising encounter: "I met a child, Eily Kilbride / who'd never heard of marmalade, / whose experience of breakfast / was coldly limited." The exceptional quality of this encounter is subsequently explained as the character's particulars are further described. The description expands over half of the poem and forms the development of the story: tension builds up along the lines. The poem focuses on food, and progressively unveils the child's hunger. The third stanza "Whose entire school day / was a bag of crisps" suggests that the child's "experience of breakfast" alluded to in the second stanza, is more like a continued fast than an actual "break-fast." The tension eventually climaxes with a striking association that — much like in ballads — indirectly gives the key to the child's suffering:

Who went, once, into the countryside, Saw a horse with a feeding bag over its head And thought it was sniffing glue.⁴⁶⁷

The drug addiction of the child or of her carers is here indirectly disclosed through the manysided metaphor of the horse feeding bag.

In his study of Irish songs, Hugh Shields points to the indirect approach as a typical feature of Irish songs:

[Songs] certainly do not usually articulate a succession of events so clearly organised that we might call it a story. Yet events are inherent in them as if waiting to be elicited, or, perhaps better, discovered. Their narrative potential is less easy to define than the narrative sequences which are explicit in lays, old ballads and come-all-yes. Many lyric songs in Irish in this way conceal some objective reality, referring to it by allusion, without coherence, in a suggestive manner which is effectively summed up in the first half of a line of one of them:

"Dá n-inseoinn brí mo scéil duit (is baolach ná ndéanfá, dhom rún ...)"
"If I told you the meaning of my story (you might not keep it secret ...)"
This girl's particular "story" is that she is pregnant: a "meaning" that may be reserved for comment. 468

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

I.1.2 Repetition and the Structure of the Ballad

Brendan Kennelly often uses within one poem many verbal repetitions and a system of direct or indirect echoes that has led certain critics to call his verse "easy" or "naïve," but all these traits have a lot in common with the text of well known ballads. As a genre of song, the ballad was imported to Ireland from Scotland and England. Although Irish ballads did not strictly maintain the formal structure of English ballads, where a very systematic use of echoes (from stanza to stanza, in the appearance of characters, concepts, refrains) applies, certain features of the structure remained. The English / Scottish model was indeed altered under the influence of heroic poetry. Whether due to the influence of ballads or because this feature also characterises most kinds of oral poetry, many poems by Brendan Kennelly use the "framing" technique described by Buchan as follows:

> Framing – the annular device or ring composition, as it is known to the Homerists – is one of the hallmarks of oral poetry, because it is a habit of construction that grows organically out of the restrictive conditions of oral creation... Like the balancing and triadic rhythms, framing operates on both the minor level of scene construction and the major level of ballad construction, and may be simply conceptual or, more pronouncedly, conceptual and verbal. In its simplest forms a frame consists of a balancing pair of stanzas or a balance or a triad.469

The frame can be chiastic as is the case in "Eily Killbride," 470 where the first line sets up the initial scene: "On the North side of Cork city" and where the first line of the last stanza says: "who went, once, into the countryside." Framing patterns are for instance most obvious in "She's There." As often the case with Kennelly, the poem is an "odd" sonnet. Like a story and unlike a typical ballad, the narration takes place in the present that actualizes the scene and voices, hence the title "She's There." The poem, following the

⁴⁶⁸ Hugh Shields, Narrative singing in Ireland: Lays, Ballads, Come-all-yes and Other Songs (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1993), 7.

469 David Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1972), 94-95.

⁴⁷⁰ BOJ, 31.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 29.

ballad / story-telling tradition, opens with the narrator's voice announcing an exceptional encounter. This voice, framing that of the heroine's direct speech is heard in the first and in the last stanza and is signalled by the repetition "My soul is," which verbally backs up the frame at a major level:

My soul is her lower lip but only for A moment, then it's the story she becomes Before my eyes in the coughing street where I am trying to remember her name.

The second line, "A moment, then it's the story she becomes," sounds like an echo of the traditional remark announcing a come-all-ye such as:

I shall recite the triumph of the Big Man Airthreosad caithréim an Fhir Mhóir... 'Laoi an Deirg',472

Another instance would be: "Come all you fine young men that court a becoming maid..." Most interestingly, when reading / hearing "She's There," one notices a poetic "contamination" of the narrator's comments as he tries to recall the character's speech. While the first stanza is generally prosaic and close to speech rhythm, a couple of metaphors have it depart from prose: "My soul is her lower lip," "The story she becomes," "the coughing street." Despite the abbreviations in the character's lines, "An' I takes what I can for me sisters an' brothers," poetry arises through verbal and sound repetition: "Ginnie, Ginnie Green, sir. I take this blanket, yes," "you gave me bread, gave me white bread," but also through a singing rhythm, which, though it does not use any fixed meter, sounds regular feet familiar to poetry listeners: iambs, trochees and anapaests.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁷² Hugh Shields, 16.

The poetic contamination of the narrator's speech is unambiguously confirmed in the last stanza. Given that the poem began like a sonnet, this stanza was expected to be a tercet. It is however a quatrain that reveals the tension between the narrator's own comment and Ginnie's voice in the repetition of "My soul is." This quatrain also emphasises the tension between the two voices as Ginnie's words are repeated: "Ginnie, Ginnie Green," and in the double occurrence "white bread," that figures twice, is eventually echoed by "Who'll give the bread you'll beg for the grave?" This repetition of "bread" forms a chiastic frame with the character's words mentioning bread. One also notes the numerous instances of alliteration and assonance in the stanza. They are completed by coupled rhymes, which somehow perfect the imperfect rhymes of Ginnie's lines. In the interaction commentary-song / ballad, prose-verse, Hugh Shield perceives what he calls "the Gaelic nation's method of transformation":

The commentary, long or short, gives meaning to the song, explains its reference, and shows its authenticity. A commentary usually means something composed after the text it comments on; yet commentary material of songs in Irish can well have been pre-existent, as the traditional belief in their factuality, and the term "tidar," imply. Old ballads, and many come-all-yes, on the other hand, had themselves previous life as independent song forms before a prose support for them was thought of and some, perhaps many, of their verses were lost by memory failure and deliberate omission. 474

What we called "contamination" between commentary and song in one piece can work both ways, that is, towards prosification or towards versification. It can lead the song to "decline into prose" as in the case of "Lord Thomas and Fair Ellen" or the "Holland Handkerchief," or it can, on the contrary, lead to the versification of the commentary as is the case in Brendan Kennelly's "She's there."

474 Hugh Shields, 63.

¹⁷⁶ F.J. Child. 272.

⁴⁷⁵ F.J. Child, ed., *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin; Cambridge Mass.: Riverside Press, 1932), 73.

I.1.3 A Journalistic Dimension: Extrapolation of Reality

In Ireland, the news is not merely called the news but the "stories." Similarly a common Irish greeting is: "What's the news?" or "What's the story?" Reality is taken as the foundation layer of a narrative that retelling again and again will transform, inflate and shape into something that will eventually have little to do with the original facts. Through his literary work Brendan Kennelly plays with these layers at different levels. He intermingles History and stories so that his poems, like poems belonging to an oral⁴⁷⁷ tradition, read like palimpsests whose first original layer can be felt without always being identified. Although not systematically ascertainable some real events often seem to have provided Kennelly with a source for his poems. It should here be noted that this journalistic dimension was part of the bards' function. This is a characteristic also typical of later ballads as explained by Hugh Shields: "Some of the later ballads, which include the comeall-yes were journalistic interpretations of real events." The habit of using ballads to evoke current events was also common in Ballylongford. Gabriel Fitzmaurice explains: "Everything was celebrated in balladry in Kennelly's youth - love, lost and found, martyrdom (the martyrs of the War of Independence and Civil War). The ballad binds the tribe together. This is where Kennelly comes from - he is a ballad-maker, first and last."480

In the case of *Cromwell*, Brendan Kennelly openly used historical documents as the basis of his collection. In other cases, History appears later and the first layer of the poem, which starts like a story, develops through time and subsequently enters the realm of History. *The Book of Judas* was published in 1991 after Charles Haughey's position as the head of the state had become uncertain. At a time when Irish people cruelly suffered from extreme poverty, Haughey enjoyed a monarch's standard of life and his charisma aroused

⁴⁷⁷ Orally transmitted.

⁴⁷⁸ Both fili and baird.

Hugh Shields, 1.

⁴⁸⁰ Gabriel Fitzmaurice, Beat the Goatskin, 182.

fascination and envy. Subsequently, his name was associated with several scandals and many rumours, some of which claimed that the Taoiseach resorted to the services of callgirls. Following his passing, two clearly divided sides were voiced, those depicting the man as a devil and those picturing him as a near saint and a genius. In that context it is difficult not to think of Charles Haughey behind Brendan Kennelly's Herod in "Herod's Hiring." The very word "genius," chosen by the poet, contributes to confirm this impression:

What do we want of a man? His genius but not his kinky Needs? Take him kinks an' all, say I, or leave him alone. I voted for Herod. Isn't he one of us?⁴⁸²

The final tercet quoted here might at first sound like a defence of Herod. Yet in a context of betrayal where the voice of treacherous Judas is ubiquitous, the final question "Isn't he one of us?" can be heard as the narrator's accusation against a "Senior Member of the Party," that Herod's flaws are shared by other party members. It can further mean that this apparent defence is actually treacherous and false. And if the logic is carried to the extreme, the line would suggest that defense is not defense, that praise is not praise and that the praiser – including the poet – might also be a denunciator.

The link between reality and creative writing was of primeval importance to Frank O'Connor who played the role of a master to Brendan Kennelly. Philip Edwards (former Head of English Department in Trinity College Dublin) thus remembers about Frank O'Connor:

He would never *invent* an incident, he said. Any scrap of conversation which came his way might serve as the germ of a story – if it was enigmatic

⁴⁸¹ On a number of occasions Brendan Kennelly himself talked about the former Taoiseach's "genius." *G.* Justine McCarthy, "One big happy party," *Irish Independent* 30 November 1991, 14.

482 BOJ, 326.

enough he couldn't rest until he had found circumstances and people which might lead to that scrap of conversation. The core of a story must be for him something that had happened. 483

This approach followed that of the bards⁴⁸⁴ but the fact that O'Connor was openly and clearly articulating it had an impact on Kennelly who had already been using real events as a basis for his poems. "I suggest Joan Flood" offers another interesting instance of the use of current affairs made by Kennelly as a source of inspiration for a poem. This piece was based on the Kerry babies stories that split Ireland in two and that in the mid Eighties both in the media and in the streets, raised an intense passion that lasted for years. In his poem, Brendan Kennelly chose to remain close to the first name of the main protagonist of the affair, Joanne Hayes, whom he designates as "Joan Flood." For lack of tangible proof and in the absence of any suspect, the police had decided to rely on testimony and confession to accuse Joanne Hayes of murdering her two babies. There had been two murders, so a murderer had to be found. At a time when the Church was still very powerful and its values – especially regarding sexual mores – were widely defended in public, Joanne Hayes represented the freedom so many people strived to repress in themselves and in others:

She's well known As the best little ride in her own parish Ready to open her legs for any man.

She raised extreme feelings in the public opinion. "Such level of public passion was unprecedented." She became near to a national scapegoat. Later on it was proved that the police had influenced testimonies so as to "solve the affair." "Over this period [the

⁴⁸³ Michael / Frank, 135.

⁴⁸⁴Both that of the baird and of the fili.

⁴⁸⁵ BOJ, 219.

⁴⁸⁵ Barry O'Halloran, Lost Innocence: the Inside Story of the Kerry Babies Mystery (Dublin: Confidential Report Printing, 1985), 12.

Eighties] the gardai began to rely more and more on signed testimonies taken in Garda stations as the sole basis for getting convictions." Kennelly chose to have "I suggest Joan Flood" told in the voice of a police officer:

The main thing is to find someone to blame
If we do that we'll put people at their case.
I suggest Joan Flood, make her the focus of shame.

John Courtney, Superintendent at the head of the police, "felt that Joanne Hayes was a woman of 'loose morals." At his first conference he therefore advised the guards to find out if she had any boyfriend other than Jeremiah Locke. He also advised them to approach her with care. "Women's minds are very peculiar at that stage, before or after giving birth,' in his opinion."

The poet might have changed her family name "Hayes" into "Flood" because of all the pain endured and the tears shed by Joanne Hayes during the Tribunal: "She broke down repeatedly. Her tears and sobs and laboured breathing were a daily feature, an hourly feature and then a minute-by-minute occurence as the interminable questions come at her in relays..." In such enquiry "the truth" was a human construction based on oral reports, comparable to the way a ballad is transmitted and transformed through time. In this respect, another poem, "The Original Is Lost" works most interestingly at many levels. In the poem, the narrator, Lazarus, ponders over his own death. Brendan Kennelly plays with the fact that, the Bible being originally an orally transmitted text composed of several versions of the same original events, the "Truth," that is the "Original [is necessarily] Lost." Lazarus becomes a sort of Theologian, or an historian or researcher in

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁸⁸ Nell, McCafferty, A Woman to Blame: the Kerry Babies Case (Dublin: Attic Press, 1985), 26.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 26.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., 94.

⁴⁹¹ Orally composed.

⁴⁹² BOJ, 115.

⁴⁹³ Before it took a written form in the New Testament.

quest of what really happened to Lazarus: "I realised I'd lost the death I'd been brooding over / And working towards for decades..." However, rather than keeping his private quest to himself, Lazarus turns to the public realm in order to find his true object, which is most interesting since public voices in Kennelly's work often get entangled with betrayal. One notes the pun on "keenly" referring to the oral tradition of "keening" the loss of a dear one:

... I felt this loss most keenly So keenly indeed that I placed an advertisement In the Lost and Found section of the Squirish Mimes

Despite the "unearthing" work of the historian, detective etc. his construction is bound to be a degraded, a "cheap" copy of the original:

I received a single reply signed *Bargain Basement* It said, "I can sell you a second-hand death for 30p. The original is lost. At a push, this second-hand will suffice."

The original story no longer exists, like oral⁴⁹⁴ work it seems bound to transience and this is indeed why so few works from the *baird* survived. All you are left with, despite the diligence at digging out, is "second-hand" material from the "Basement.",495

I.1.4 Language of Act and Event versus Description and Contemplation

The energy emanating from Brendan Kennelly's verse rises out of the emphasis granted to action in his writing. In common with the Munster poets' works, his is a language of act, events and speech rather than a language of contemplation. This results in the reader / listener taking pleasure in the succession of episodes, in dialogue, in surprising puns etc. more than in the visual quality of his verse. His characters are in perpetual movement. When movement stops or slows down a new story is about to begin. "Circulating Bags" is

⁴⁹⁵ David C. Rubin, Memory in Oral Traditions: the Cognitive Psychology of Counting-out Rhymes, Ballads, and Epic (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 7.

⁴⁹⁴ Orally peformed, (and transmitted), (and composed).

typical in that respect. The poem opens with a quatrain in a way that recalls the come-allyes: "Whenever I go to Mass ..." After the first line that catches the reader's attention, the three lines that follow are something of an anticlimax as action seems to slow down:

> I am impressed by the sound of money Dropping in circulating bags Handled by the most faithful of the faithful.

At this stage the dynamic that had paused in the poem is rekindled with the following quatrain. A new story begins full of action:

And I think of that angry afternoon When the dreamer, having released the doves from their cages Fell into one of his rare, scattering rages And booted the moneymen⁴⁹⁶

The third "beginning" of the poem takes place in the middle of the final octet: "I once cashed a cheque in the Bank of the Holy Spirit," which again reaches for the reader's attention, and acts as a signal that further action is about to happen. However, this line actually brings forth the conclusion of the poem which in its final line rounds up the piece. It should be noted that the framing technique previously highlighted is used here again and "circulating bags suggest money is the heart of it" echoes "circulating bags" described earlier: This characteristic of Brendan Kennelly's writing that consists in using the language of action and event as opposed to the language of description and contemplation is delineated by Buchan as one particular feature of the ballad:

The ballad emphasis is on people in action, people doing, not, as with much written poetry, on people being. Just as Homeric Greek is innocent of any connection with the verb "to be," the ballad language abjures the flat statement of being for the active description of doing... This preference for doing rather than being and for the concrete rather than the abstract is of

^{4%} BOJ, 178.

course what generates much of the ballad's particular power, and what distinguishes oral from most literate poetry." 497

2) Between Lays and Ballads: A Flexible Genre

If the reader recognizes in Kennelly's poems qualities typical of the ballad's narrative, his treatment of time, however, departs from what can usually be expected from a ballad, and would seem more in keeping with the form of a lay. While ballads are somehow atemporal, lays have a historical background. As he inherited from both traditions (the lays came from the Irish bardic tradition whereas the ballads had appeared with the introduction of English in Kerry in the 17th and 18th century), Brendan Kennelly situates his poetry at the cross-roads of the two genres, mixing characteristics of the ballad with features particular to the lay.

I.2.1 Historical Background

It seems relevant to examine Brendan Kennelly's work within the frame of a comparison between lays and ballads because in the Irish tradition the distinction principally relies on the relation between the poem (lay or ballad) and history. A second major reason for carrying out such a study is Brendan Kennelly's interest in this type of poetry which can be gauged from the study of Irish lays and sagas which he undertook for his PhD, *Modern Poets and the Irish Epic*. His thesis is principally concerned with lays which like historical ballads, and unlike ballads in general, are rooted in a historical background. In his study of Child's ballads, Hodgart⁴⁹⁸ mentions historical ballads dealing with important national events such as "The Battle of Otterburn" and "The Hunting of the Cheviot" but these constitute a minor group. In any case such ballads have not been involved in the wide spectrum of transmission that was that of the Irish lays. The latter led indeed to

⁴⁰⁷ David Buchan, 82.

M.J.C. Hodgart, *The Ballads* (London: Hutchinson House, 1950), 16.

establishing the great Irish myths that inspired Brendan Kennelly in his consideration of the myth of Cromwell and the myth of Judas.

With his epics, especially Cromwell and The Book of Judas, Kennelly sets his poem against a historical background. In so doing, he follows to some degree the example of the Irish epics that he studied for his doctoral research which he completed in 1966. Unlike Homeric epics and despite passages in verse, Irish sagas were essentially in prose. In this respect the lays of Fionn Mac Cumhaill are an exception. These are the oldest type of narrative song that has survived into our days. The difference between an epic story-telling and a lay is of a formal nature, the first being in prose while the second is in verse. In choosing to anchor his narratives in a historical context and to give them the shape of long poems, Brendan Kennelly seems to have followed W.B. Yeats, James Clarence Mangan and other poets that he studied for his PhD. Kennelly's epic poems, like Irish Medieval lays, concentrate on the adventures of a main hero surrounded by a constellation of other characters who can be his friends or his enemies or mere one-time encounters. The adventures of the Fianna heroes find an echo in the adventures of Kennelly's apostles in The Book of Judas. The historical setting to the narrative is created through the characters' names: Judas, Herod, Jesus, John the Baptist, Pilate, Lazarus, Peter, Mary Magdalen... and through names of places such as Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Rome... Several episodes of the New Testament are part of the action: the kiss by Judas, the resurrection of Lazarus, the nomination of the Apostles, the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, the resurrection etc. Similarly in Cromwell, authentic historical names (Cromwell, Spenser...) are given to the main characters / heroes and action takes place in authentic localities. As in The Book of Judas, a number of historical episodes are narrated such as the burning of Lisloughlin Abbey and particular massacres.

Much in the way Oisín discusses his ancient culture, society and faith with St Patrick, Judas discusses the nature of betrayal, Jesus being one of his main interlocutors. As a child, Kennelly was involved in a play that was performed in his village. With Patsy McGibbon, a boyhood friend, they recited a dialogue between Oisin and St Patrick⁴⁹⁹ at a feis. Similarly, Cromwell is based on a dialogue between Cromwell and Buffún. Two systems of values are similarly opposed and yet also find common ground. Thus in The Book of Judas the nature of Judas' kiss is questioned to such an extent that the infamy usually associated with it becomes less obvious and doubt is cast over any kiss that might appear as a pure or innocent kiss. The Fianna's adventures are narrated by the survivor himself, Oisin, just as the Apostles' adventures are told by surviving Judas who, in several instances talks in a voice from beyond the grave:

I spent last night in the company of the corpse Of myself. I was strolling along my favourite Pathway when I glimpsed my corpse in the twilight Swinging from a tree. Oak, I venture to suggest. 501

I.2.2 Timewarp

Relation to time seems a major difference in distinguishing lays from ballads in Ireland. Lays possess a historical framework whereas ballads create a world of their own, independent of history and historical heroism as can be found in medieval epics. In the lay of Fionn Mac Cumhaill, despite the historical background, a sense of time is expanded through the extraordinary survival of Oisin (3rd century) to St Patrick's age (5th century). Brendan Kennelly radicalises this treatment of human time and expands it to space. In other words, characters of different historical periods and of different geographical

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁰⁰ My Education, RTE Radio, 1993 and Sunday with Norris, Newstalk Radio, November 2006.

⁵⁰¹ BOJ, 270.

locations meet and converse between themselves and contemporary Irish characters in historical Irish places. The Book of Judas thus counts among its characters and places the biblical figures previously mentionned but also Marilyn Monroe, Hitler, Brendan Behan, Patrick Kavanagh and others. The scenes of the poems range from biblical locations to Dublin, Ballybunion, Blackrock, Cahirciveen, Cork and other places. This practice results in disrupting the historical credibility of the poem and merely leaves behind a historical flavour that, in the *The Book of Judas*, takes the form of the living myth⁵⁰² of Judas. This is also true of Oisin, St Patrick and any mythological figure - history intervenes only at the foundation level. Living myth is not historical in its relation to its object. Because Brendan Kennelly was dealing with living myths and not with history, he chose to expand the dismantling of time already established in ancient Irish lays. However, beyond the frame of the major myth that is the living myth of Judas in The Book of Judas, one notes the proliferation of "little / sub myths." Much like the major myths, these can have one or several historical roots but they radiate beyond time and place and hover about Brendan Kennelly's text without always being made explicit. In this respect, the poet's treatment of what could generally be called "The Kerry babies" myth is most interesting. The series of dramatic events that happened in Kerry and in Granard, Co. Longford in the Eighties (The Trial of Joanne Hayes, the death of Anne Lovett, the suicide of her sister...) stirred Ireland and scarred the national memory. In the The Book of Judas the myth of Judas is disconnected from "real history" and historical names work as signals to designate an old connection to history. Although the names, of people and places associated with the Kerry Babies myth do not have the power of such names as Nazareth or Judas, Brendan Kennelly uses them in such a way as to resurrect in the reader's memory the ghost of the stories that keep the myth alive and confer to the poems undertones that would only be perceived by a

⁵⁰² The difference between Myth and Mythology will be examined in a subsequent section.

reader familiar with the Kerry Babies myth. In Brendan Kennelly's poetic world, names

such as Cahirciveen and Abbeydorney become omens of dark stories that have become

factually intangible as they fell into the realm of public sensational imagination. One of

these glimpses appears in "Quicksilver". 503:

For such knowledge, smiling men would kill

Succulent virgin on the pill

From Cahersiveen to Castleblayney.

I.2.3 Free Rhythm

When studying the poetry of Brendan Kennelly in comparison with the tradition of Irish

ballads, one distinction that comes to mind is that the rhythm of Brendan Kennelly's verse

is most often "free" while Irish ballads usually possess rhythmical regularity based on

stress pattern. In that respect, his position has changed from the earliest time of his career

when he wrote ballads and thus commented upon the form: "it's a strong obvious rhythm,

but I must say that I prefer that kind of a rhythm to much of the anemic pallid rhythm that

you'd hear in modern poetry."504

Kennelly's long poems seem to follow a free rhythm (which does not mean an

"anemic pallid rhythm") a lot closer to speech than to ballads. Although it would be

difficult to speak of regularity, when paying close attention to "A Devoted Celibate" one

notes the abundance of 8-syllables syntactic group. A similar construction based on a

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, 196-197.

⁵⁰⁴ Writer in Profile, RTE Radio, 17 October 1976.

⁵⁰⁵ BOJ, 197-198.

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syllabic rhythm appears more clearly in "Three Words" which is essentially written in octosyllables:

Three Words

...and yet, and yet, someone loved me, Incredible, incredible. Further, to deepen incredulity, She was beautiful, beautiful And she told me not by letter, not by phone But face to face In a restaurant in Peter's Lane. Three words, I love you. I quit the place And walked for miles and miles Till I was lost, then hopped a bus, Returned to bedsit, unrefreshed, dumb. I love you. I have my own madness, Don't need another's. Whatever love is It's what I fly from. My heart will never house an unexploded bomb.

The declaration of love, "I love you," brings disruption in the regularity. After a series of lines in which the poem seems to stumble on irregular rhythms, a new regularity appears: "Don't need another's. Whatever love is / It's what I fly from." (5-5 / 5) and eventually the narrator chooses a new even rhythm as the poem ends on an Alexandrine: "My heart will never house an unexploded bomb." Although syllabic verse is used in a way that is far from being systematic, its occurrence in Kennelly's writing deserves attention, especially in his epics. This feature is more in keeping with the lay heritage that comes from the Medieval bards than that of the ballads. Lays were indeed composed in syllabic metrics without yet being too strict over metrics. About the rhythm of lays, Hugh Shields writes: 507

Such text would hardly have survived in popular use if the verse form had proved unduly complex. It is remarkable for another reason that they have survived so long. Since the stress of syllabic verse are not uniformly spaced and the genre has much of the rhythmic quality of speech, its lines may reasonably be expected not to have the measured regularity of modern lyric

^{50e} BOJ, 242.

⁵⁰⁷ Hugh Shields, 19.

song, indeed to be better suited to truly free rhythm than even the relaxed rubato lyric singing of present day Connemara.

One then can see that both in terms of historical background and rhythmical flexibilty Brendan Kennelly's verse follows on from Irish lays while this heritage is completed by features typical of the ballad form. As early as the time of his doctoral studies the poet was aware of the various formal features taken by traditional songs and stories:

There is a third manner of expression which is neither prose nor verse, but has aspects of both; it is a kind of irregular rhymeless verse, without strophic division, and rich in alliteration, internal rhyme, and assonance. This type of expression, with its short, impetuous sentences, rhythmical though unrhymed, designed to express vehement enthusiasm, was known as "Rosc." 508

As Kennelly made the choice of doing away with a regular rhythmic structure in books of poems (*Moloney up and at It, Cromwell, The Book of Judas, Poetry My Arse*) organised around a number of characters, the collections became closer to novels, and thus allowed greater identification for the reader. However, it also makes each poem less memorable and consequently less oral⁵⁰⁹ since potential oral transmission has to be considered when talking about an oral poem. Indeed, among a number of organized rules and constraints at work in oral⁵¹⁰ literature, David C. Rubin identifies rhythm⁵¹¹ as one of the most essential of these structural rules:

Of all the constraints discussed earlier in the book, rhythm is the most effective globally because the specific rhythm being used in the line or stanza being sung is usually the same specific rhythm that is used in all lines or stanzas. The local organisation is the global organization. Because the same rhythm repeats, it does not provide much discriminability by itself. However, rhythm does combine with and accentuate other constraints to increase discriminability, and it does change the organization from one long

⁵⁰⁸ Modern Irish Poets and the Irish Epic, 17.

⁵⁰⁹ Oral performance and transmission are consequently more difficult.

⁵¹⁰ Orally performed and transmitted.

David C. Rubin, Memory in Oral Traditions: the Cognitive Psychology of Counting-out Rhymes, Ballads, and Epic (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 177.

list into a hierarchy of sublists that can benefit more from the discriminability of serial position. Rhythm also provides a framework so that when recall fails locally, it can begin again more easily at another rhythmic location by using the rhythm alone or the rhythm with other cues. 512

One consequently understands that what Kennelly earns in terms of increased identification of the reader, he loses in terms of memorability.

3) The Hero's Share

I.3.1 Naive and Simple Heroes

Not only with regard to structure, narrative and treatment of time did Kennelly inherit from Irish lays (that is from Irish bards) and ballads but also with regard to characterisation. Like the heroes of Irish lays, his have a naivety and a simplicity that make them comic to a modern reader. Flann O'Brien in *At Swim-Two-Birds* did not miss the opportunity to make this type of heroism the butt of his satire: "Finn Mac Cool was a legendary hero of old Ireland. Though not mentally robust, he was a man of superb physique and development." Despite the exaggeration in the description of the heroes' bodies, feats and supernatural powers it is now difficult for us to see them as true heroes. The gap between the bombast and inflation of the narrative and the matter of the story is underlined by Flann O'Brien:

Comparable further description of how a day may be spent, being a day from the life of Finn: it is thus that Finn spends the day: a third of the day watching the boys – three fifties of boys has he at play in his ball-yard, a third of the day drinking sack; and a third of the day in the calm sorcery of chess. 514

⁵¹² Ibid

⁵¹³ Flann O'Brien, At Swim-Two-Birds (Bungay, Suffolk: Granada, 1982), 10.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., 214.

Brendan Kennelly in common with Flann O'Brien chose for heroes characters that he himself calls "caricatures." They are first and foremost striking for their comic nature. However their simplicity is also peculiar to heroes in oral literature. As mentioned earlier Fionn Mac Cumhaill, like Ace de Horner is a wandering poet endowed with visionary powers. When telling of Ace's adventures, Brendan Kennelly, like Flann O'Brien, privileges simple structures that emphasise the event as a non-event and emphasizes the hero's simplicity and lack of glory:

Kanooce ate a sheep under the Five Lamps in the once-bombed North Strand While Ace de Horner looked on, making sounds of approval.⁵¹⁵

In common with O'Brien's hero, Ace is above all a passive idle hero spending his time strolling in Dublin in company of his dog. As in Irish lays one also notes in Brendan Kennelly's epics a tendency to let drift his description towards incongruous details and to lose focus as shown here by the mention "the once-bombed North Strand." Although like O'Brien's Finn or Sweeney, Ace is a poet, Kennelly emphasises what a mediocre poet Ace can be. Thus in "A Furious Inquisition," Brendan Kennelly inserts Ace's verse:

"In this happy land," sang Ace de Horner
"this happy land
of buy and sell,
a generous judge
a generous poet
a generous journalist
a generous dog
will never go to hell
to hell
no sir,
a generous dog will never go to hell!"

⁵¹⁵ PMA, 244.

⁵¹⁶ lbid., 245.

A humorous effect is achieved in a comparable fashion when O'Brien inserts Sweeney's verse:

[Sweeney] heard there the voice of a stag and he thereupon made a lay eulogizing aloud the trees and the stags of Erin, and he did not cease or sleep until he had achieved these staves:

Bleating one, little antlers, O lamenter we like delightful the clamouring from your glen you make.

O alder, O alder-friend, delightful your colour, You don't prickle me or tear in the place you are.

O blackthorn, little thorny-one,

O little dark sloe-tree;

O watercress, O green-crowned,

at the well-brink... 517

Although possibly less pronounced, this simplicity in the heroes of Irish lays is also shared by characters in Irish ballads. Ballad characters are also stock characters devoid of any subtle psyche. This is essentially due to the emphasis on plot at the expense of complex characterization.

1.3. 2 The Speech of Narrator and Hero

Orality⁵¹⁸ is what intrinsically relates ballads, epics and story-telling. Unlike the novel, because they belong to the sphere of orality,⁵¹⁹ these genres leave little space to narratorial intrusion. Brendan Kennelly's poems give the impression that a story is being told but the external narrator never intrudes upon a character's feelings or psychological life. The narrative voice introduces the story and occasionally concludes it but in a self-effacing way

517 Flann O'Brien, 100.

519 Id.

^{518 (}In transmission) or (in transmission an in composition) or (in composition).

that leaves no space for moralizing comments. The narrator's discretion is guaranteed by the growing similarity between his voice and the character's as the story progresses:

Why Ace left the house in the suburbs with the woman standing at the door bidding him farewell, a serious farewell believing he was going nowhere since that's what their attempt to live together proved beyond all doubt to her

will not be stated here, let alone explored (certain forms of agony leave everybody bored). But leave he did, to find the Bluebell Pad walks by the Liffey of death and love and rambling chats with Lucifer and God.

The first stanzas of "The Cries of Times" set up the situation in which the character, Ace, will then be left free to progress. At this stage of the poem, as shown by the very long first sentence that expands over two stanzas and that is complicated by the anteposition: "Why...," the narrator signals the passage of his enunciation into the realm of the story. He ironically indicates awareness that the story demands selection as, after drifting over a full stanza, he claims "that reasons will not be stated here, let alone explored," yet the temptation to keep on drifting is clearly asserted by "(certain forms of agony leave everybody bored)," where the attempt at containing a narrative flood takes the form of brackets. With such an introduction, Brendan Kennelly playfully signifies his awareness that story-telling is a demanding discipline, and that unlike in the novel, no space is allowed to delay the narrative because density and action are required. This trait was also taught by Frank O'Connor: "since a whole-life must be crowded into a few minutes, those minutes must be carefully chosen indeed and lit by an unearthly glow, one that enables us to distinguish present, past and future as though they were all

⁵²⁰ PMA, 95.

contemporaneous." ⁵²¹ One can also read in this passage from "The Cries of Time" a mischievous hint at critics who reproached Brendan Kennelly for writing too much and for not sufficiently containing his literary production.

The second stanza progressively steers the reader towards Ace's voice that, although not directly quoted, is clearly heard in the last three lines of the second stanza, with the inversion "leave he did," and the cheap metaphor "the Liffey of death and love." This progressive shift towards Ace's voice brings uncertainty as to the status of what is contained within brackets: is this the narrator's voice drifting further or is this Ace's voice taking over? The rest of the poem is in Ace's voice and the narrator becomes inaudible. This type of interaction between narrator's and character's voice is typical of Kennelly's narrative technique in his long poems, but is also characteristic of ballad narrative. Hugh Shields indeed explains: "The third-person narrative of the old ballad implies an effaced story-teller who gladly makes way for his character's reported speech."522 However, in the case of a poem such as "The cries of Times," Ace's speech is in free reported speech and there is no written sign to indicate a change in the enunciator's voice, which leaves an oral reader⁵²³ entirely free to change the tone of his voice in the way story-tellers do (and bards most certainly did) to indicate a character's speech. Brendan Kennelly's handling of narrative seems consequently to match G.H. Gerould's definition of a ballad in so far as it "tells a story with stress on the crucial situation, tells it by letting the action unfold itself in event and speech and tells it objectively with little comment or intrusion of personal bias."524

⁵²¹ Frank O'Connor, The Lonely Voice (London: Macmillan, 1965), xiv.

⁵²² Hugh Shields, 5.

⁵²³ Who tries to read aloud, as in this case it would be a most common initial step towards transmission.

⁵²⁴ Gordon Hall Gerould, The Ballad of Tradition (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1932), 11.

I.3.3 Ambiguity: Who Speaks?

Due to the narrator's discretion and the use of free indirect speech in Kennelly's poems, ambiguity often hovers about the enunciator's identity. Ambiguity is not however restricted to the relation between narrator and character but can occasionally also be a feature of characters' speech as one is not always certain what character pronounces such and such a line, stanza, or poem. Despite the intervention of secondary characters such as Mum, the Belly, or Ed, *Cromwell* for instance is essentially a dialogue between Oliver Cromwell and Buffún. It would then be convenient for the reader to distinguish two clearly defined voices, one belonging to Cromwell, the other to Buffún and such a wish most possibly prompted Jennifer Belshaw⁵²⁵ to assert that poems in the voice of Buffún are more familiar and that his English is not as formal as that of Oliver. However, this is not clearly the case and a linguistic comparison of the two voices shows little difference between Cromwell's and Buffún's voices.⁵²⁶

Occasions as in "Honest-to-God Oliver," are not rare when Oliver's English is far from standard: "And women, run-through, are properly fucked." If for certain poems (Oliver's letters for instance) the standard of English can be used as a discriminating factor, in many others, ambiguity has to be acknowledged. When one takes the series "Lettering," Ass," Radio," Radio," The Load," it is uncertain whether they are uttered by Oliver or by Buffún. Neither the language nor the content allows us to decide for sure. A similar ambiguity appears when one examines some of the female voices in *Poetry My Arse*. Janey Mary only makes her appearance on page 120. Yet long before that, voices of

⁵²⁵ Belshaw, Jennifer, Form, The Artistic Nightmare: An Analysis of the Sonnet Form in Brendan Kennelly's Cromwell: Unpublished thesis submitted to Trinity College, Dublin, as partial fulfilment for the degree of M. Phil, 1988: 26.

⁵²⁶ Carl Vogel and Sandrine Brisset, "Hearing Voices in the Poetry of Brendan Kennelly," *Belgian Journal of English Language & Literature* 1-16.

⁵²⁷ C, 106.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁵³⁰ Ibid., 109.

⁵³¹ *Ibid*.

women are heard that have a similar type of wit and dash as Janey Mary's. This is exemplified in "Looking," To no one" and in "Slice": "I know, she said 'when we laugh and fuck / life's a blessed slice of luck." The narrator might well try to present Janey-Mary as Ace's main lover, linguistically she is only part of a lot of female characters who cannot be individuated. In *Poetry My Arse*, women are linguistically interchangeable as they are interchangeable in Ace's bed. A consequence of this is that once Janey Mary, a major character in the book, has been introduced, when the reader encounters one of those witty female voices, if she is not clearly named, uncertainty remains as to whom the lines should be attributed to. This is the case in "Don't blame" 1536:

Don't blame

"Don't blame an old man," he said, "if he tries to acknowledge a girl's beauty" "Don't blame a girl," she replies, "if she drives a knife in an old man's belly."

This impossibility to decide on the identity of the enunciator in certain poems might be felt as disorientating for the reader. The phenomenon results from applying to written poems techniques typical of oral forms and illustrates Kennelly's hybrid position with regard to orality.

However, at the level of the book, this technique enriches meaning since it follows Brendan Kennelly's wish to show the close connections between the voices of his characters, especially in *Cromwell*:

Just as Irish history is inextricably commingled with English history, so is this poem's little hero, M.P.G.M Buffún Esq. helplessly entangled with

⁵³⁶ PMA, 218.

⁵³² PMA, 73.

⁵³³ *lbid.*, 62.

⁵³⁴ Ibid, 96.

⁵³⁵ Carl Vogel and Sandrine Brisset, "Hearing Voices in the Poetry of Brendan Kennelly," Belgian Journal of English Language & Literature 1-16.

Oliver Cromwell as the latter appears and disappears in history, biography, speeches, letters, legend, folklore, fantasy, etc. 537

Because a ballad is considered as a whole unit in itself, alternation between speech and

narration takes place within the frame of the ballad. However, Kennelly considers his long

books of poetry as totalities so that alternation between speech and narration does not only

occur within one poem but also from one poem to the next, as if every poem constituted a

stanza of the larger poem. Consequently, the ambiguity related to this alternation in

traditional ballads remains but is shifted to the larger scale of the book. This corresponds to

what Hugh Shields says about a ballad:

The song becomes a drama with characters speaking in alternation without being introduced or perhaps identified... [The narrator] does not, as a rule assign [directly reported speech] to them individually and we are left to guess who they are. Usually we can deduce this, but uncertainties or even

obscurities remain. 538

Such ambiguity is identified by Hugh Shields as a feature peculiar to Irish songs:

Lyric songs in Irish, which unlike the lays survives and continues to be sung today sometimes presents so many doubts about the identity of the speaker as to make it appear that ambiguity is a basic principle of art. Like the old ballads, songs in Irish do not often attribute discourse to a named speaker.

But what is usually deducible in the ballads may remain obscure in Irish. 539

Very often an impression of irrationality results. Hugh Shields considers this as a technique

to induce enquiry in the listeners. Brendan Kennelly has been familiar with this type of

technique since childhood, and although he uses it in several of his books, it might be in

The Book of Judas that its effect is most disturbingly achieved.

537 C, "Note," 6.

538 Hugh Shields, 3-5.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

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The way Brendan Kennelly sometimes uses a refrain can also contribute to increasing the ambiguity as to whom certain lines should be attributed, especially when the tone of the refrain significantly differs from the stanzas. This result in an effect of dialogue between the refrain and the stanza, as if they were uttered by different voices. During a reading⁵⁴⁰ Kennelly clearly explains how such contrast can be used to create a strange effect in the fashion of ballads. Hodgart⁵⁴¹ identifies this rhetorical device as typical of Irish ballads and he shows how "the apparently irrelevant refrain" participates in building up suspense in the narrative of the ballad. In "A Furious Inquisition" this strange effect is achieved through the repetition of a rhyming couplet: "O Dublin lawyers are a witty lot / And stack their cash in the family pot." ⁵⁴²

II Reactualisation of the Epic Model

1) Epic Violence in Brendan Kennelly's Verse

It has been shown with regards to structure, narrative, time and characterisation how Kennelly's poems combine characteristics of both ballads and lays. However, his poetic writing also displays features that are more generally encountered in the epic that is the oral genre composed and transmitted by the bards in Medieval Ireland. It will now be examined how in a broader scope, no longer restricted to lays, Kennelly draws on the model of the Irish epic and reactualizes certain features, such as violence blended with humour, typically found in oral⁵⁴³ literature and transforms them so that the modern reader could more easily relate to his art.

⁵⁴⁰ Brendan Kennelly, reading in the Bank of Ireland, Bank of Ireland, January 2006.

⁵⁴¹ M.J.C. Hodgart, 31.

⁵⁴² PMA, 244.

⁵⁴³ Orally transmitted over a long period of time.

II.1.1 Extreme Physical Violence

Most of Brendan Kennelly's heroes can be described as violent characters: Cromwell, Kanooce, Judas, etc. In certain secondary characters, violence is inherently attached to their names and occasionally hinted at without being really activated in the poem. This is the case for Kennelly's Hitler in a piece called "Like a Child":

I met Hitler in Grafton Street, he looked grisly.
"Hello" I said "Old cock, old sport, old stock,
Old trick-o'-the-loop, old throw-me-the-thistles,
Old bamboozle-my-brains-with-gas, old rattle-my-bones-with-shock,
Old slash-me-to-death, and how are the balls of your feet?"⁵⁴⁴

In *Poetry My Arse*, Kanooce is described as a savage creature devouring, maining, and shredding people and dogs. Most of the time, Kanooce would attack "arses," but not exclusively:

Reflection on howls

As Kanooce bit the mugger again and again
Ace, hearing the howls of pain,
heard himself say
(in relation to a different matter altogether)
"Repetition is the only way."
545

and later in the book:

Warrior Kanooce despatched his victims With ferocity and skill.
God spoke to men, not pitbulls, saying "Thou shalt not kill."

The violence attached to Cromwell's name is unremittingly described in Kennelly's epic, where the poet details the most gruesome scenes:

545 PMA, 336.

⁵⁴⁴ BOJ, 312.

Work and Play

Killing children is not pleasant, even in the worst of times. Oliver's boys
Approached the task with Herodean vigour
And discipline to put us all to shame

. . .

Even when ordered to pile the small Bodies into hastily-dug pits.
They filled in the pits with fresh clay⁵⁴⁶

In the poetry of Kennelly, these violent scenes are directly inspired by the Irish epics. As the young poet studied them for his PhD thesis, Modern Poets and the Irish Epic, he became aware of the energetic potential such passages were endowed with and he perceived violence as an essential feature of the genre: "This aspect [common to the Táin and to the Iliad is that peculiar savage starkness which has already been noted in connection with part of the mythological cycle and which appears to be the most characteristic feature of this early literature."547 Kennelly admired the barbarity, the unswerving descriptions of battles and brutal episodes in the Irish sagas. He consequently regretted the "politeness" and timid restraint of some of the poet translators (Lady Gregory, James Clarence Mangan) that he studied at the time. While some of them polished the raw episodes into acceptability, others simply cut through the original text and rid their translations of the scenes that the age might have found politically incorrect: "It is somewhat unfortunate that de Vere's love of restraint, the Homeric quality he admired so much, frequently becomes a resolution to avoid treating the more violent, striking passages of the Gaelic original."548 The censorship already mentioned that applied to 17th and 18th century Munster poetry was also imposed on the epic.

⁵⁴⁶ C. 57.

⁵⁴⁷ Modern Irish Poets and the Irish Epic, 31.

⁵⁴⁸ *lbid.*, 56.

"Enthusiastic description of physical violence often marks oral narrative," ⁵⁴⁹ Ong says referring to Book viii and x of the *Iliad* which he compares with "the most sensational television and cinema shows today in outright violence and for surpassing them in exquisitely gory details, which can be less repulsive when described verbally [than when presented visually]."550 Due to the opposition between eye and ear of which James Joyce was very much aware, 551 what is most of the time experienced as horrifying when visually presented is on the contrary a source of great enjoyment when orally transmitted. Thus "Portrayal of gross physical violence, central to much oral⁵⁵³ epic and other oral⁵⁵⁴ genres and residual through much early literature, gradually wanes or becomes peripheral in later literary narrative."555 As a work becomes more written and is no longer composed for oral⁵⁵⁶ performance, the writer tends to shift the focus from description of physical violence towards the interior life of the characters. This change in content also corresponds to a modification in the way literature is consumed. When it is performed oral 557 literature is the occasion for an external and communal event. At odds with oral literature, written literature leads to internal and individual enjoyment. With Brendan Kennelly, poems are conceived to be performed and they enthusiastically describe extreme physical violence but are yet written and also destined to be read. These poems present an intermediary situation with strongly marked oral characteristics. 558

⁵⁴⁹ Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word (London: Methuen, 1982), 44.

Marshall McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy, 83.

⁵⁵² Without the support of writing.

⁵⁵³ (Orally transmitted) or (orally transmitted and composed) or (orally composed).

⁵⁵⁴ ld.

⁵⁵⁵ Ong, Orality and Literacy, 44.

⁵⁵⁶ Without the support of writing.

⁵⁵⁷ Orally performed.

⁵⁵⁸ Typical of literature that is (orally transmitted and composed), or (orally transmitted) or (orally composed).

Il. 1.2 Maiming the Hero

. . .

Both in the Irish cpic and in Kennelly's work, heroes are often strong and violent characters, who are nonetheless not immune to wounds and mutilations. In that respect the hero's body can appear as somehow mutable amd proteiform: it can be tortured, mutilated, recovered and turned into something else even if scars can occasionally remain. Wounded Kennellian heroes are numerous. Kanooce who has been named as a savage character, suffered a wound that turned him into a monstrous creature when he lost one eye and when his damaged flesh healed into scars:

Dare I suggest Kanooce is getting older

(oh yes he still fights and kills with all his pre-pagan ferocity but you'd be hard to count his scars now and his one eye,

moon of murder, reddens and blackens like a light fighting with itself).

When a god's scars are many and deep, something is true. 559

In this passage, Brendan Kennelly underlines the connection between his hero and Irish mythological warriors and he highlights how brutal ferocity belongs to the realm of the epic. Even before he started to write epic poems, the thematic choice for some of his early poems denotes awareness that the Irish epic form of heroism requires enduring physical violence. This is for instance the case in "Mastery" where Dowling's flesh is torn away by the hounds. One must also observe that towards the end of *Poetry My Arse* Ace de Horner's penis is cut-off by Janey-Mary, that in The *The Book of Judas* Jesus is crucified, and Cromwell is metaphorically dismembered by Buffún:

⁵⁵⁹ PMA, 232.

And I understand why I have hated You, your language, your army and your Christ Who suffers your puritan crap When he should bleed your guts into the sun Or rip your heart out or break your neck Or manacle you forever to a rock Or stuff the barrel of a gun Up your arse or assassinate your prick⁵⁶⁰

Referring to the Irish epic, if one takes a hero such as Cúchulainn, despite his incredible strength, one notes that he too can be wounded and there is a stage when he even requires the support of his father: "Then the warrior from the side dropped wholesome healing herbs and grasses into Cúchulainn's aching wounds and several sores." 501

II.1.3 Slaughter, Large Scale, Cold Blood

What increases the impression of extreme violence in Brendan Kennelly's writing is the extensive scale on which massacre happens and the cold-bloodedness in which murder is performed. This is the dimension of the epic that grants a place to Hitler⁵⁶² in *The Book of Judas*:

"Your first job since you had to quit Berlin: You must exterminate all the enemies Of Jesuits throughout the world."

"Do you accept?" I asked.

"Six million enemies" he mused, "Ja, ja, I accept. And thanks. Six million ... May the Jesuits' will be done." ⁵⁶³

Most interestingly the poem is called "Like a Child." To better understand the connection to the Irish epic one must keep in mind that Cúchulainn was only a boy when he began slaughtering soldiers in great numbers. Also one would underline the similarity between

⁵⁶¹ The Táin: from the Irish Epic Táin Bó Cualinge, trans. Thomas Kinsella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 144.

⁵⁶⁰ C, 117.

⁵⁰² This is a reference to Hitler as a mythical villain, not as the historical figure.

⁵⁶³ BOJ, 312.

Kennelly's Hitler and Kanooce as far as their being "super-human" is concerned. It is to be remembered that Hitler bent Nietzsche's philosophy (ctymologically "love of wisdom") to his convenience hence Kennelly's line: "He burns with wisdom and skill." About Hitler one reads "He respects the Commandments, except *Thou Shalt Not Kill*." Just as it is said about Kanooce: "God spoke to men not pitbulls, saying / Thou shalt not kill." In "Party" Cromwell casually concludes the poem: "For starters' Cromwell smiled, 'try twenty thousand dead." Later on one reads: "Having butchered everyone in the church / The soldiers explore the vaults underneath ... Massacre flows for five days in succession." In Kennelly's work massacres and victims are described and numbered in a cold and detached manner with simple words and short sentences that leave no space for emotion: "Put the corpse in a sitting position somewhere / In the main street of the Capital. / Let's have fifty thousand such, to start with." Yet this matter-of-fact type of description recalls the *Tain*:

He went into the middle of them and beyond, and moved down great ramparts of his enemies' corpses, circling completely around the armies three times, attacking them in hatred. They fell sole to sole and neck to headless neck, so dense was that destruction ... Any count or estimate of the number of the rabble who fell there is unknown, and unknowable.⁵⁷⁰

What contributes to create a sense of disproportionate slaughter is the listing of victim's names and the repetitive way in which massacres are depicted. Those two features are characteristics of both Brendan Kennelly's writing and the *Tâin*:

Elizabeth Birch had a white neck They roped it George Butterwick of the strong body

⁵⁶⁴ In Brendan Kennelly's private papers, photocopies of A Reader's guide to Nietzsche, n.ref.

⁵⁶⁵ BOJ, 319.

⁵⁶⁶ PMA, 232.

⁵⁶⁷ C, 28.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid., 112.

⁵⁷⁰ The Táin, ed. Thomas Kinsella, 155.

Looked awkward naked
Sylvanus Bullock liked riding the highway
Died stripped in a ditch
John Dawling a brave swimmer
Drowned thrown off Belturbet bridge
Georges Netter a providing father
Perished with his five starved children
Philip Lockington a big farmer
Was flogged to an idiot beggar
Oliver Pinder offered shelter to people of the road
His house was pulled down over his head. 571

In this poem the list of names recalls a memorial. Every name is granted a couplet. The first line tells of a feature characteristic of the person while the second tells of their style of death. The typographic break between the two lines corresponds to the rupture introduced by Cromwell in Irish history. In the *Tain* lists of the dead similarly gives a sense of a great massacre:

The following are the names of these nobles and chiefs: two called Cruaid, two named Calad, two named Cir, two named Ciar, two named Calad, two named Ecall, three named Crom, three named Caur, three named Combirge, four named Feochar, four named Furechar, four named Cass, four named Fota, five named Feochar, four named Furechar, four named Cass, four named Fota, five named Aurith, five named Cerman, five named Cobthach, six named Saxan, six named Dach, six named Daire, seven named Rochad, eight named Rinnach, eight named Coirpre, eight named Hulach, nine named Daithi, nine more named Daire, nine named Damach, ten named Fiac, ten named Fiacha and ten named Feidlimid. 572

II.1.4 Man, Child and Brute

Because the scope of those killings is boundless, the reader gets an impression of a seismic catastrophe, an event comparable to biblical plagues. The *Táin* like many of Brendan Kennelly's poems, is interested in the raw energy radiating from man when brutal instincts take over humanity. These narratives are an enquiry into what in humanity belongs to the

⁵⁷¹ C, 63.

⁵⁷³ The Táin, ed. Thomas Kinsella, 156.

animal realm and thus somehow cancels the opposed polarities "man" versus "animal." A consequence of this is the way killing is often associated with childhood. In a collection as early as Love Cry (1972), the poet opens "Sonnet 37" with the following statement: "Only the innocent can be total monster." The sonnet proceeds in describing the sadistic pleasure of "Myles Bartishel, bored at seven years old" who occupies himself by torturing flies:

He let it flounder; then got it between his Fingers. Two tugs. On the ground, the fly's body Jerked. Myles held in his hand two silver wings.

Killing is shown as a basic impulse so that murder can be represented as a childish game and the murderer is not unfrequently a child. It has already been mentioned how Cúchulainn's heroic deeds began and continued during childhood:

Twenty-seven marauders came from the islands of Faichi...But when they saw those dark men the boy-troop took to flight, all but Cúchulainn. He attacked them with throwing-stones and his hurling-stick and killed nine of them, though they left him with fifty wounds. Then the remainder made off. What wonder that the man who did these deeds before he was five years old should cut off the heads of those four. ⁵⁷³

Yet Cúchulainn is not the only warrior-boy. As shown in the *Táin*,⁵⁷⁴ he is at the head of a fearsome boy-troop army: "Then the boy-troop came down from Emain Macha in the north carrying their hurling-sticks, three times fifty sons of Ulster kings – a third of their whole troop – led by Follamain, Conchobor's son." Accordingly, Cromwell's murderous activities are often presented as childish.

From the earliest stage of his career, the theme of the child-murderer has been running through Kennelly's verse. "The Stones" 575 exemplifies the brutal instinct to kill that can be found in children:

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid, 144.

⁵⁷³ Ibid., 81.

⁵⁷⁵ FS, 52-53.

One child threw a stone.
Another did likewise.
Soon the little monsters
Were furiously stoning her
Whose name was fear.
When she fell bleeding to the ground,
Whimpering like a beaten pup,
Even then they didn't give up
But pelted her like mad.

Echoes to this poem can be found in many of Kennelly's books. "Walking back from Croke Park after the All-Ircland Football Final" seems nearly like a new version of "The Stones":

The violence of children, he thinks, I haven't seen before.

The children run. The stones are at rest. Curses lie like dead flies in the dust. The city roars ahead as the city must.

Ace lingers, shoulder to the door as if he'd stand calmly there forever close to children, sport, murder,

voices of the future. 576

Most interestingly this scene follows a game of Gaelic Football, that is an ancient Gaelic game, and one could nearly say "an epic game" (in which Brendan Kennelly was once a hero as he played in the National semi-final) where violence should be limited to the pitch. This game is meant to be a "final" and yet one feels there is something ancient, immemorial in what is taking place: "as if he'd stand calmly there forever." This violence in children belongs to a mythological past where boy-troops were armed with hurling sticks, but there is also in this something inseparable from human nature so that their shouts become "voices of the future." It is to this raw violence inherent in the human

⁵⁷⁶ PMA, 27.

condition that Brendan Kennelly refers again in "The Voice-of-Us All." The poem evokes the memory of the autobiographical scene described in "The Stones": "Then the stones cromwelled my head." Despite the poet's attempt at escaping his own memory the image of the children's victim returns to him and in his eyes, the river looks

Like a cripple determined to live.

I started dancing to avoid the stones,
The girl sang, the law frowned, the river straggled below
And the voice-of-us-all guttered "Forgive! Forgive!

2) Grotesque and Comical Violence

II.2.1 Ace-Kanooce and Cúchulain

However extreme violence in the Irish epic and in the work of Brendan Kennelly can be, this brutality is also grotesque and comical, a feature characteristic of the epic but also more generally of oral⁵⁷⁸ literature: "Images in oral traditions are often exaggerated by normal standards. They are of epic proportions... Thus over long periods of life in which most images are not as exaggerated as those of oral traditions, exaggerated images will be remembered better than common images." ⁵⁷⁹

Humour and grotesque belong to the essence of the epic. After quoting a gory and grotesque passage in which Lugh throws a sling-stone at Balor so that his eye is thrown away through his head, Kennelly explains: "The saga is striking for its episodes of savage mockery. A.E.'s evasion of the saga's essential spirit means that he completely ignores such events as the Fomorian's brutal ridicule of the Dagdae. The grotesque humour of this

579 David C. Rubin, 55.

⁵⁷⁷ C, 137.

⁵⁷⁸ Orally (transmitted and composed), (composed).

particular passage is a typical aspect of Gaelic saga."⁵⁸⁰ It is with this savagely humorous spirit that Brendan Kennelly animated his own epic poems. His character Kanooce is conceived as an heir of Cúchulainn. One would in particular draw attention to how Angry Kanooce resembles Cúchulainn when he is seized by fury:

Then his riastarthae [Cúchulainn's special battle fury] came upon him. You would have thought that every hair was being driven into his head. You would have thought that a spark of fire was on every hair. He closed one eye until it was no wider than the eye of a needle; he opened the other until it was as big as a wooden bowl. He bared his teeth from jaw to car, and he opened his mouth until the gullet was visible. The warrior's moon rose from his head. ⁵⁸¹

It should be recalled here that Cúchulainn is also "The Hound of Culann." The similarity between Brendan Kennelly's character and the mythological Irish hero is all the more striking when the passage quoted above is compared with the following lines describing Kanooce. The reference to the moon is particularly compelling:

(oh yes he still fights and kills with all his pre-pagan ferocity but you'd be hard to count his scars now and his one eye,

moon of murder reddens and blackens like a light fighting with itself.)⁵⁸³

In a way that is more indirect and discreet than Flann O'Brien's in At Swim-Two-Birds, Brendan Kennelly also uses – especially in Poetry My Arse – an Irish mythological background to create a dialogue between his time and the time of pre-Christian Ireland. A reader aware of this mythological background would appreciate all the more Kennelly's ravaging sense of humour.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 184.

⁵⁸¹ Early Irish Myths and sagas, trans and ed. Jeffrey Gantz (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 136.

^{582 &}quot;cú," Irish for "hound."

⁵⁸³ PMA, 232.

Still playing with this epic background that echoes the bull-fight at the end of the *Táin*, in some poems in *Poetry My Arse*, Brendan Kennelly has Ace make Kanooce participate in a "pitbull fight":

and set him fighting another pitbullterrier of equal ferocity

the two dogs face each other so savagely alike they might be brothers. 584

Another interesting connection between his hero in *Poetry My Arse* and Cúchulainn is the geis⁵⁸⁵ that forbids Cúchulainn to look at naked breasts, for this would cause his death. Cúchulainn loses all his fighting power when looking at bare-breasted women:

"Naked women to meet him!" shouted Conchubur. The women of Emuin went to meet Cu Culaind gathered around Mugain, Conchubur's wife, and they bared their breasts before him. "These are the warriors who will meet you today!" said Mugain. Cu Culaind hid his face, whereupon the warriors of Ulaid seized him and thrust him into a vat of cold water. This vat burst, but the second vat into which he was thrust boiled up with fist-sized bubbles, and the third vat he merely heated to a moderate warmth. 586

Mercier⁵⁸⁷ also emphasizes the passage when Cúchulainn encounters the bare-breasted women as a humorous episode. For a long time in Ireland, public breast-feeding was frowned-upon and a woman could be asked to leave a pub or a restaurant for publicly breast-feeding her child. Nowadays certain public places such as Stephen's Green shopping center still have special segregated rooms where mothers can breastfeed their babies. In drawing a parallel between ancient mythology and current Irish society, Brendan Kennelly makes light of the former Irish attitude, especially in the Eighties, towards breastfeeding.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid., 45.

A geis is a taboo or a prohibition; it can also be an obligation, or a curse. Breaking a geis leads to misfortune and to death.

⁵⁸⁶ Gantz, 146.

⁵⁸⁷ Vivian Mercier, The Irish Comic Tradition, 13.

In *Poetry My Arse* it seems that there is also a *geis* on Ace forbidding him to cast eyes on naked breasts:

Distraction

Ace, distracted by the gypsy's naked breast feeding her child in the August sun

did not complain when he discovered every penny in his pockets gone. 588

A reader aware of the common *geis* forbidding Cúchulainn and Ace to have any visual or physical contact with breasts understands better the sense of a poem like "Obedience":

"What are you doing darling?" she asked.
"Rhyming," he replied.
"Lay your head on my innocent tit," she commanded.
He did. He nearly died. 589

The last line can be interpreted in a metaphorical bawdy meaning (to die: to have an orgasm) but also literally, according to the mythological *geis*: to perish. In a comparable fashion "Mannerly Cows" expands on the fascinating power exerted by breasts on men: "I look at men looking at breasts, goo-goo fools." The final lines steps aside from the rest of the poem in a most ambiguous way: "A naked, breastless woman once smiled at me."

II.2.2 Fantastic Dimension: Resurrection of the Heroes

Despite the violence at work in Brendan Kennelly's poems the reader never fears for the hero's life because of the fantastic dimension of his adventures. Somehow the Kennellian hero is immortal and whatever the nature of his wounds, he always heals and comes back in force. Resurrections are indeed frequent events in the literary world of the poet, but they

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid., 218.

⁵⁸⁸ PMA, 164.

⁵⁹⁰ BOJ, 206-207.

are also a common motif of oral⁵⁹¹ Irish stories.⁵⁹² Following his mutilation by Janey Mary Ace recovers his "John Thomas" in a most hilarious scene:

Ace was rushed to hospital where they surgeoned his willy back on with the patience and skill it takes to make a poem of the kind that will animate the blood, stretch the mind

. . .

It took a while, several months in fact, but paradise lost renewed itself miraculously...

. . .

with the patience and skill it takes to make a poem of the kind that will animate the blood, stretch the mind while reminding the reader of how it's possible he may be blind, he may be blind⁵⁹³

The close connection between such a surgical act and poetry writing is not without recalling the Steinach operation W.B. Yeats had in London which Brendan Kennelly made the subject of his poem, "Late Yeats." 594

Similarly after hanging himself, Judas comes back and comments on the look of his corpse. Jesus, like Lazarus, is also the subject of resurrection. Most interestingly the resuscitation pattern applies to Patrick Kavanagh who is one of Kennelly's literary models. After an operation involving the amputation of a lung, the poet was thrown down from a bridge into the Grand Canal by men hired by a man whom Kavanagh must have offended

⁵⁹¹ Orally transmitted.

⁵⁹² Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Fionn, Vol. 3, Irish text with translation into English by Eoin MacNeill, introduction, notes, appendices and glossary by Gerard Murphy (Dublin: Educational Company of Ireland, 1953), liii.

⁵⁹³ PMA, 346.

⁵⁹⁴ B, 102.

with his wit. However serious the incident actually was, Kennelly introduces fantastic humour in his story of it, told in the poem "Baptism" 595:

Down in the accommodating waters
Kavanagh called on his won't-take-no-for-an-answer God
Who was pleased to display His might.
He plucked the poet from the murderous cold.

Brendan Kennelly here has recourse to a device commonly used by cpic story-tellers: the intervention of the gods or a fantastic element when the hero encounters a difficulty or an obstacle. Thus Gerard Murphy explains about Fionn's second sight: "The story teller commonly uses it to give Fionn knowledge of his helper's extraordinary power, or to enable Fionn to be of assistance to his helper by discovering how to resuscitate him when he is killed." The irony was that Kennelly himself – who as will be seen also makes occasional appearances as a character in his own books – underwent this process of near resurrection. Indeed *Poetry My Arse* published in 1995, before his heart operation, could have been his last book had his heart-surgery, which involved a quadruple by-pass, not been successful. Should we read in "A change of heart, at what price?" an allusion to the then forthcoming surgery, or is this a case of dramatic irony? *The Man Made of Rain*, which followed the operation, and that narrates a voyage in a visionary world has yet nothing of the epic humour one finds in his previous books. In that respect it is an exception.

Patterns of resurrection and the fantastic healing of heroes frequently take place in the Irish epic such as for instance in the healing of the Morrigan. During a confrontation between Cúchulainn and the Morrigan, the warrior inflicts three wounds on her: he breaks

⁵⁹⁵ BOJ, 348.

⁵⁹⁶ Duanaire Finn, xiv.

⁵⁹⁷ PMA, 122.

her ribs, "burst[s] the eye in [her] head" and "shatter[s her] leg." At that stage, only a blessing from Cúchulainn could heal her:

The Morrigan appeared to him in the shape of a squint-eyed old woman milking a cow with three tits. He asked her for a drink and she gave him milk from the first tit.

"Good health to the giver!" Cúchulain said. "The blessing of God and man on you."

And her head was healed and made whole. She gave him milk from the second tit and her eye was made whole. She gave him milk from the third tit and her legs were made whole. ⁵⁹⁹

II.2.3 Figures of Devoration

Grotesque violence also takes the form of devoration, an image more than familiar in the field of the Irish epic. It caught the attention of Brendan Kennelly since the earliest years of his career as a poet. It is however worth noting that, if devoration in his poems is nearly always associated with the epic, the grotesque principally made its appearance from the time of *Cromwell* (1981). In his early poems, from "Mastery" to "Acteon" the poet, like Medieval bards⁶⁰² and Munster poets records a real local accident and passes from a real local event (Ballylongford) to the mythological realm in his use of two similar incidents. In "Mastery," Brendan Kennelly tells the story of an accident that happened to Dowling, a friend of the poet then aged fifteen, while "Acteon" was composed after Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In both stories a Master of the Hunt is being attacked by his pack of hounds. The epic in "Mastery" is stressed: "A usual scene, / Epic in its way."

Dowling had trained them well.

It seemed that in return they liked their master's flesh

⁵⁹⁸ The Táin, ed. Kinsella, 133.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 136-137.

⁶⁰⁰ BS, 35-36.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid., 36.

⁶⁰² Both baird and fili.

And tore it from his thighs and shoulders.

He cried and screamed and cried. 603

Bran is a very common name in Ireland for a dog, but originally in Irish mythology, Bran was Fionn's favourite hound. Bran was a Sidh woman who had been changed into a dog hound. In his poem Brendan Kennelly criss-crosses the real story and mythology: "Bran broke and ran / Dowling could not tell the reason." In the Fionn stories, Bran is said to have left the Fianna without Fionn knowing why. The reason is explained only later. Both in "Mastery" and in "Acteon" Kennelly lists the names of the hounds so that the climactic moment, when the master is being attacked by his hounds, are nearly

The hounds that he had trained to kill Yelped and bayed while he Tried to lose them but they Howled and hungered still

interchangeable from one poem to the other.

Till Blackfoot, Grabber, Harpy sprang. He screamed "I am your master." They tore him deeper, faster. His wet flesh shredded on their fangs. 606

This listing of the dogs' names owned by a hunter is not solely motivated by aesthetic purposes, it also reflects how a common topic of discussion in a Kerry community was a dog's exploits and how they attracted people's admiration.⁶⁰⁷

As Brendan Kennelly's work developed, images of devoration became more playful and humorous and often verged on the grotesque with characters such as the

605 Ibid.

⁶⁰³ BS, 35-36.

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁶⁰⁷ Duanaire Finn, civ.

Mouth, 608 or the Giant. 609 Giants are traditional comic figures usually associated with the Fionn Cycle. Fionn is often pictured as a giant and Mercier specifies: "Finn becomes, in late tradition, almost as much of a butt for humour as Conan." 610

Combining these hints of the antiquity of giant-motifs and amusing motifs in Fionn tradition with the fact that Fionn was probably originally a god, and therefore liable to humorous treatment, we may conclude that burlesque treatment had been associated with Fionn and his companions from very remote times by unlearned storytellers, and that what is new is merely the transference of those themes, under folk influence, from oral tradition to the literature, the way for the transference having been gradually prepared by the decay of the heroic tradition which hindered it.⁶¹¹

This note helps the reader to understand how Kennelly's Kanoocc can be called "a god" while at the same time he clearly is a grotesque character. It is also this background that allows Brendan Kennelly to transfer this irreverent humour to Christian figures in *The Book of Judas*. Among grotesque motifs peculiar to images of devoration is the giant in *Cromwell*. In the collection he is only a secondary character that contributes to setting up the context of Cromwellian ravages. In Irish mythology giant tales belong to the oral⁶¹² tradition but are rarely included in the literature: "None of [the] scraps of legends from various districts concerning the Fian envisaged as giant is important enough to be treated as a central story of the Fionn cycle." In Kennelly's *Cromwell*, the giant's appetite and hunger act as a foil to the memory of the famine. The scope of this character is however better understood in the light of the Fianna's mythology. This character of *Cromwell* is merely called "the giant" so that one cannot really decide to which group of mythological giants he might belong. In the oral⁶¹⁴ tradition Fionn is pictured as possessing gigantic

⁶⁰⁸ In PMA.

⁶⁰⁹ In C.

⁶¹⁰ Vivian Mercier, The Irish Comic Tradition, 32.

⁶¹¹ Duanaire Finn, xeix.

⁶¹² Orally transmitted.

⁶¹³ Duanaire Finn, xix.

⁶¹⁴ Orally transmitted.

proportions.⁶¹⁵ It is said that Fionn brought modification to the landscape and that several elements bear traces of his passage such as a huge rock on a mountain beside Carlingford Loch, the hole from which Loch Neagh springs, the Giant's Causeway and flag stones on the hill of Bally Carrigeen.

"I'm enjoying myself hugely" the giant said
"For I have found how succulent are trees.
It was like this. I fell asleep in the shade
Deep in a forest, one of those summer days."616

In other words the giant marked Irish history. One giant story widely known among Gaelic speakers is that entitled "Oisin and Patrick's Housekeeper," which represents Oisin as the survivor of an age of giants (common belief was that the size of the human race was on the decrease) and lays the emphasis on his insatiable appetite. Playing with the oral tradition, Brendan Kennelly relocates the devouring giant in an urban context and called his poem "A New Menu":

"I've been fasting for a while now" he said,
"But soon I shall resume my diligent chewing.
The roof of your Parish Hall was succulent
But now I'm into Public Libraries,
Music Lounges, Electrical Supplies,
Tools, Plastics, Fittings, Quality Furniture,
Pet Stores, Plastics, Fireplace Centres, Greeting Card Boutiques,
Economy Wallpapers, the Stock Exchange ..." 618

Yet it must not be forgotten that Fionn was a warrior-poet and that as such he is a peer of Buffún. Because of this common feature, the giant advises and encourages Buffún who --

616 C. 34.

618 Ihid., 91.

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xviii.

^{617 &}quot;Oisin and Patrick's Housekeeper," Dublin University Magazine, a Literary and Political Journal, Vol. Ixxii. July-December 1863, 493.

belonging to a more recent time – is obviously of a smaller size: "Shape up, my little bard!

Rattle your rocks! / Give us a twist to ring the ruined moon!" 619

Most interestingly this final couplet of "Exhortation" can be read at several levels. "My little bard!" is an affectionate phrase, but given Buffún's size in comparison to Fionn's, it can also be read literally. "Rattle your rocks!" can be interpreted as a bawdy remark, "rocks" meaning testicles, but can also refer to a music instrument like castanets. It can also be literally understood and might be an invitation for Buffún to defend himself against Oliver and like the giant to throw rocks, to "shape up" his own landscape. Whether it be the giant, Kanooce or Christian biblical figures, Kennelly's gods are both edifying and grotesque, and in that respect they correspond to the way he perceives ancient Irish gods: "the essential spirit of the saga ... is grotesque and stark, brutal" ⁶²¹ and he further insists on "the accompanying element of divine violence." In the Irish epic the gods are an object of reverence and admiration but also of mockery as are Brendan Kennelly's divine characters. As he multiplies grotesque figures of devoration in his work, he follows the path of the Irish epic and confers on his poems qualities that are commonly encountered in oral literature.

Among the various scenes of devoration happening in the work of Kennelly, Kanooce appears as a major protagonist. His savage acts mainly target mediocre and dishonest writers, crooked politicians and any type of dubious men such as in this passage where "speculators" wear animals' costumes so that the scene of devoration recalls the

⁶¹⁹ Ibid., 34.

⁶²⁰ Ibid.

⁶²¹ Modern Irish Poets and the Irish Epic, 282.

⁶²² Ibid.

⁶²³ Orally transmitted.

type of carnage the reader would encounter in the description of a hunt or that of an epic battle:

When Kanooce saw the rats and ferrets the foxes tigers skunks wolves he cut loose, he started eating them, feasting on buttocks, on calves of legs, on bits of belly too.

The speculators had not bargained for this. Some of them pissed in dread.

Kanooce lapped their piss⁶²⁴

The association of the listed animals with the list of bodily fragments increases the sense of gory explosive massacre worthy of the most violent episodes of the Táin. Yet, devoration like slaughter in Poetry My Arse is endowed with the same comic joy as equivalent scenes in Irish sagas and the reader can feel the poet's wild enjoyment in such passages. What contributes to make devoration scenes humorous in Poetry My Arse is the simplicity and brevity of the sentences used to picture Kanooce's feats. Beyond heads and "arses" of evil doers that come across Ace's way, Kanooce has a systematic tendency to cat poodles. With the repeated attacks by Kanooce, Kennelly creates an automatic response in the reader who, any time Ace has encountered a treacherous man, expects Kanooce's intervention on the model of "Real Balls" where the shortest lines conclude the incident: "He met Kanooce in the loo. / Kanooce ate him, balls an' all."

Yet in the case of evil doers, explanation usually accompanies the episode and somehow delays Kanooce's response. In the case of poodles, no such delay is necessary as Kanooce's attacks are absolutely automatic any time the word "poodle" appears in a poem. As the correlation becomes more and more systematic humour increases proportionately. Kanooce's feeding on poodles is presented as a normal, banal activity definatory of his

⁶²⁴ PMA, 81.

character: "Kanooce ate a poodle. Ace bought fresh carrots." However, because of the systematic and recurring aspect of Kanooce's reaction to poodles, and because of Brendan Kennelly's habit of having more complex things dressed in humour and simplicity, the reader is bound to wonder about the exact nature of poodles. Given the poet's way of playing with words, the recurrent scenes of oral sex, and the proximity of the words, one likely interpretation would be to read "poodle" as "pudenda." In "A tolerant dog" the poet mischievously but openly invites the reader to pursue his interrogation on what those poodles could be, so that these nearly become the matter for a riddle:

how may one explain the change in Kanooce when he sees a poodle pranking down a street?

One leap from Kanooce, the poodle is gone, lost in the swamps of Kanooce's bellyjuice.

Why does the wee harmless thing make him so ferocious?
Nobody claims to know, nobody will speculate publicly on this aspect of Kanooce's psyche. 626

Images of "poodle devoration" not only relate to the epic but also to the world of oral literature. In *Introduction à la poésie orale*, Paul Zumthor underlines the symbolic values of the mouth as an essential place where the vital breath finds expression. In Brendan Kennelly's verse, the semantic fertility of the mouth is explored in all its amplitude. Images of devoration, chewing, biting, and rumination are numerous. The poet even makes the mouth one of his characters: the Mouth, which appears in *Poetry My Arse* in "Cross of screams," After prophecy," Lovers all," and "A modest proposal."

⁶²⁵ PMA, 256.

o26 Ibid.

⁶²⁷ Orally transmitted.

⁶²⁸ Paul Zumthor, 15.

⁶²⁹ PMA, 188.

⁶³⁰ Ibid., 189.

Just as in the Bible the prophetic laugh is heard, but nobody can be seen, here these written poems remind their readers that because this is a written text, this mouth is separated from its voice, it is a dis-em-bodied mouth. The Mouth symbolizes orality⁶³³ but also the polyphonic conflict at work in the poet's head, looming as a schizophrenic threat:

When words hack into me like axes or the Mouth threatens to chew my mind I caress Kanooce... 634

The motif of the swallowing mouth sometimes takes on a cosmic dimension. It is typical of the grotesque violence commonly encountered in oral literature and more specifically in the epic. From Kennelly's perspective it presents the advantage of offering a visual representation to his aesthetic views. Kanooce (a name coined out of a combination of the Latin canis, of the poet's initial and of the Irish cnuas meaning "a heap of something," the cnuas from Aosdána but also "to gnash, chew and crunch.") is another figure of the "cosmic monster" ready to devour the entire world:

Kanooce leaped at the sin of the world and began to chew the blackness but the more he ate it the more it continued to grow, outstripping the future, gulping the long ago. 635

In a similar vein the poem "Eating a star" 636 intermingles an anecdote (the poet's discovering the photo book $Sex^{6,17}$) and Kanooce's devouring force. The world of the star, "Madonna" (Madonna from the Latin: that turns you mad) reinforces this universal dimension which might be seen as the share of the Dionysian embodied by Kanooce. A

⁶³¹ Ibid., 190.

⁶³² Ibid.

⁶³³ Orality in general.

⁶³⁴ *Ibid.*, 342.

⁶³⁵ Ibid., 85.

⁶³⁶ PMA, 177.

⁶³⁷ Madonna, Sex (London: Seeker and Warburg, 1992).

double of Cúchulainn, he is indeed some sort of a god on earth, yet a god who has retained all his powers. Between Kanooce and Madonna, a summit fight is taking place:

Kanooce leaped sank his fangs in the goddess, Tore her to pieces, began licking her Pieces with a vigour to induce vertigo In onlookers. (There were many) Poor dizzy, pop eyed Ace!

Eventually, the smile constitutes a last and fundamental expression of how in Kennelly's work orality is associated with devoration. The smile is also a significant attribute of the Sheela na Gigs. The smiling mouth (from the Latin *oris*: face, mouth, opening) offers an entrance in the underworld of death while at the same time it is loaded with a powerful erotic appeal. The image of the smile, a recurring motif in his verse, is closely related to Brendan Kennelly (as suggested by the title chosen by Nell McCafferty for the book: *That Fellow with a Fabulous Smile*) who as a public man and as a poet associates himself with the traditional figure of the buffoon poet. Here again one should also be reminded of the figure of the Dionysian satyr, smiling and playing the flute.

II.2.4 Crude Language

Epic violence in Brendan Kennelly's writing is all the more grotesque and comical as crude and flowery language is used to evoke brutal episodes. Although the Irish sagas were orally⁶³⁸ transmitted, which implies a contact between the story-teller and his audience that would favour coarse and blatant language, translators into English have often shown timidity in rendering certain passages of Irish epics remarkable for their savagery. In particular Kennelly regrets the way Cúchulainn's extreme transformation was so often ignored by translators intimidated by extreme bodily metamorphoses:

⁶³⁸ Without the support of writing.

The first warp-spasm seized Cúchulainn and made him into a monstrous thing, hideous and shapeless, unheard of. His shanks and his joints, every knuckle and angle and organ from head to foot, shook like a tree in the flood or a reed in the stream. His body made a furious twist inside his skin, so that his feet and shins and knees switched to the rear and his heels and calves switched to the front. The balled sinews of his calves switched to the front of his shins, each big knot the size of a warrior's bunched list...⁶³⁹

Just as previous folklore collectors such as Lady Gregory had shunned the sexuality in Gaelic stories, translators did not know how to deal with this episode where the human body is shown in a most disturbed state, somehow comparable to an epileptic attack. Similarly Murphy points out how the passage from an oral⁶⁴⁰ to a literary state was detrimental to humour in the sagas. In the Fionn Cycle, he thus examines the episode when Conan loses his skin:

> The folktales makes him lose the skin of his buttocks and follow it up with a humorous passage (episode 8) about the resultant growth of wool upon Conán... In the literary tale Conán loses the skin of his heels, the back of his head and shoulders: no humorous passage follows the account of the loss.⁶⁴¹

Poles apart with this literary attitude that deliberately avoided matters that would have been felt as unwelcome among the gentry, Kennelly relishes in those grotesque scenes where his "buttocks-mad Kanooce" can be loosed and have a feast on "arses." Literary prudishness did not only concern grotesque and comical subjects but also the shape such themes might take on the page. When reading Thomas Kinsella's translation, one feels that certain passages would have descrived a more vivid description stepping away from formalities:

> Next day Larene went to meet Cúchulainn, with the girl beside him urging him on. Cúchulainn sprang at him unarmed and took his weapons away roughly. He grasped him in his two hands and ground and rattled him until the dung was forced out of him. The ford grew foul with his droppings. In every direction the air thickened with his dust. Then Cúchulainn flung him

⁶³⁹ The Táin, ed. Kinsella, 150.

⁶⁴⁰ Orally transmitted.

⁶⁴¹ Duanaire Finn, xxx-xxi.

into Lugaid's arms. Ever afterwards, for as long as he lived, Larene couldn't empty his bowels properly. 642

The necessity felt by literary translators to adapt the epic story to the moral sensitivity of their readership resulted in a departure from the original oral⁶⁴³ version. This modification in representing the Irish epic corresponded to a change in the audience from lower to upper class, the Irish saga was no longer lower class, the orality and its grotesque and humorous qualities disappeared. About the 19th century, Gerard Murphy writes: "the rump was not so freely spoken of in the halls of the gentry, where the literary storyteller's tale would have had its first audience, as in the cottage kitchens where those who listen to folktales gather."644 Refusing the dictum that certain words should not be committed to paper and certain things should not be written about, Brendan Kennelly allowed space in his poems to themes and words that in an oral⁶⁴⁵ tradition were a source of delight and merriment but that were bound to encounter resistance in the written literary world. In The Crooked Cross, through the character, Palestine, readers can sample a type of oral 646 poetry that could be heard at the time of the poet's childhood in Ballylongford and that follows in the tradition of 17th and 18th century Munster poetry:

> I put my cock on board a ship And the ship began to rock, I fell into the water And a fish caught a hold of my cock. He's a my cock-a-doodle-do And he has nothin' to do with you, And upon my word, he's a bloody fine bird Is my cock-a-doodle-do.647

642 The Táin, ed. Kinsella, 132.

⁶⁴³ That did not involve writing.

⁶⁴⁴ Duanaire Finn, xxxi.

^{645 (}Orally transmitted) or (orally transmitted and composed) or (orally composed) and where the oral mind prevails.
646 Orally composed.

⁶⁴⁷ CC, 49.

In "Dirty Words", Brendan Kennelly explains this process of reclaiming the original place and energy of oral 649 words in poetry:

... Kanooce gave it a severe licking This dirty word was clean or cleaner than it had been since it was born. When did that word begin its life in the mouths of men who'd made it so vile it had lost all sense of its own original style? 650

It is here striking that only Kanooce, the god of inspiration and ancient Irish epic, succeeds in "cleaning" the Dirty Word, that is in bringing it back to its oral⁶⁵¹ origins when it had not yet fallen and been gotten rid of under the spell of moral judgement.

A similar revival of a word takes place in "Buzzword in the mud." In a literary state, that is written on a page, the "Buzzword" is invisible to Ace: "The more Ace kept peering / the less he saw. He said, "Fuck this for a lark." It is with the Liffey, that carries the rumours of Dublin, that the word is regenerated and from there on, in the poem it is no longer called a "buzzword":

Did the buzzword drown? Not on your nanny! It rose up out of pre-dictionary urge, unmudded, shook itself, looked around for a clear head,

found one, candid woman, lodged itself there. Someday soon, it'll tumble head-over heels in the unregulated air, bee's wing, starlight, curse, firebrand, love-act, knife, gossamer.

⁶⁴⁸ PMA, 206.

⁶⁴⁹ Orally transmitted.

⁶⁵⁰ PMA, 206.

⁶⁵¹ Orally transmitted.

⁶⁵² Ibid., 208.

Thus in his verse Kennelly restitutes to "dirty words" such as "prick," "fuck," "piss" and others the original role they played in the Irish epic and in particular in savage scenes.

II.2.5 The Comic Muse

The crudeness of language in Kennelly's poems contributes to the humorous effect of his writing and often occurs during violent episodes that in a different context would be deemed tragic. As explained by Buchan comedy and tragedy were originally interwoven:

The primitive mind not being given to categorizing, does not separate fun from solemn grandeur... But by the time the Greeks staged their tragedies, the comic element was already segregated from the solemn, being attached as a pendant, a satiric comedy, to three tragic productions. Still later, comedy was felt to be entirely incongruous with tragedy. 653

The comic element in the Irish epic was thus long ignored to the benefit of serious, solemn and tragic elements. Yet as seen with Irish mythology the gods were both worshipped and revered but also mocked and laughed about. A parallel could be here drawn with Greek gods. Traces of paganism – primitive religion – can bear this double take of both tragic and comic aspect and Kerry certainly is one of the regions in Ireland where those traces were still vivid when Kennelly lived there. Kerry was indeed one of the latest parts of the island to be Christianized and pagan rituals endured until recently. This background and his academic research⁶⁵⁴ made Kennelly particularly sensitive to Patrick Kavanagh's poetics of the "Comic Muse." Kavanagh's "The Great Hunger" bad a determining influence on the poetry of Brendan Kennelly. As a student in Trinity College Dublin in the Sixties, he spent time in the library copying Kavanagh's long poem and started learning it off by heart. The immediate follow-up of his fascination for "The Great Hunger" is perceptible in the series of Moloney poems (1965) that deals with serious questions in a light matter-of-fact

⁶⁵³ David Buchan, 245.

⁶⁵⁴ His PhD thesis was entitled Modern Poets and the Irish Epic.

⁶⁵⁵ Patrick Kavanagh, Selected Poems, 18.

manner. In these poems it is the gay and jocular mood that prevails. Unlike Patrick Maguire in "The Great Hunger," Moloney is no tragic hero. In the series, cheerfulness leaves little space for the seriousness of tragedy. Potential tragedy is systematically defused and full comedy wins the day. In this respect the Moloney poems seem to answer Patrick Kavanagh's definition of what good poetry should be: "There is only one muse, the comic Muse. In tragedy there is always something of a lie. Great poetry is always comic in the profound sense. Comedy is abundance of life. All true poets are gay, fantastically humorous."656

According to this definition poetry would be a celebration of fertility as opposed to "unfruitful prayer" of as Kavanagh later called satire. The Moloney poems are indeed a celebration of fertility as they depict several instances of resurrections, victorious sexuality as opposed to death, against the oppression of the Church. Brendan Kennelly turns into his own Kavanagh's assertion that "Tragedy is underdeveloped Comedy." 658 In his article "Patrick Kavanagh's Comic vision," Kennelly attempts at elucidating what Patrick Kavanagh meant. This leads him to write: "Comedy then, meant for Kavanagh something very definite and profound, but sometimes what is perfectly clear to a poet is confused to a critic because the poet lives poetry and his discoveries are inevitable and organic."659 It could however be argued that Kavanagh understood Comedy in its primitive sense, that is a type of comedy that comprehended Tragedy. He defended a new coming of this type of comedy hence the word "underdeveloped" was chosen instead of "maimed" or "truncated." A balance between the comic and the tragic elements would be necessary. Despite Kennelly's fascination with the "Comic Muse," comic (that is also tragic) poetry appears in

⁰⁵⁶ Patrick Kavanagh, Collected Pruse, 25.

⁶⁵⁷ Id. Selected Poetry, 27. 658 Ibid., 2.

⁶⁵⁹ JIJ, 109.

his work with the publication of Up and at It (1965), and subsequently vanished to reappear in Cromwell (1983). Before this, his work was rather serious and dignified (Love Cry, Shellev in Dublin etc.) After Cromwell, Brendan Kennelly's long poems - with the exception of The Man Made of Rain - fulfilled Kavanagh's requirement that poetry should be both comic and tragic.

Although strikingly phrased, Kavanagh's statement was not new. It simply recalled the Greek principal of not separating tragedy and comedy. The two were originally fused in the "Attic comedy [that] grew out of the licentious komos at the feast of Dionysus. Only at a later phase did it become a consciously literary exercise and even then, in the days of Aristophanes, it bears numerous traces of its Dionysian past."660 When tragedy and comedy were made distinct, they remained related as they were fully part of a play cycle. The intrinsic connection between comedy and tragedy was also underlined by Socrates who, in Plato's Symposium⁶⁶¹ says that a true poet must be at once tragic and comic and that life should be experienced as both simultaneously tragic and comic. In that respect he vindicated an attitude typical of primitive oral⁶⁶² societies.

Because comedy and tragedy are so closely interwoven in Kennelly's Up and at It and in some of his later works, traces of grotesque Dionysiac elements naturally abound. Comedy and tragedy were born out of the Dionysiac Bacchae, that is from rude country celebration where singing and dancing melt with drunken ecstasy and erotic games:

> In nearly every case these festivals centered in extravagant sexual licentiousness, whose waves overwhelmed all family life and its venerable traditions: the most savage natural instincts were unleashed, including even

662 Societies in which illiteracy is important and in which the oral mind prevails.

⁶⁶⁰ Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture (London: Maurice Temple Smith Ltd), 1970, 144.
661 Plato, Symposium, 223D.

that horrible mixture of sensuality and cruelty which has always seemed to me to be the genuine "witches brew." 663

These traits also characterized the Pagan side of Kerry as shown by such festivals as the

Puck Fair. In that instance a goat is celebrated and crowned for saving a village from the

Cromwellians. The festivities held in honour of the goat are reminiscent of a pagan totemic

ceremony. Not a Christian God but Nature through an animal god is being worshipped.

One also notes in such celebration the use of irrationality to provide explanation for a

historical fact that is typical of the oral mind. Young Brendan Kennelly recognized similar

features in "The Great Hunger" and was deeply moved. At the time he was a singular

student in Trinity College Dublin, a country boy with a Kerry accent, an Irish Catholic

among Protestants. Out of his native environment, Kavanagh's long poem had a decisive

impact on Brendan Kennelly's career as a writer. Among his numerous poetic

compositions the Moloney poems from 1965 in Up and at It with some passages of The

Crooked Cross are certainly the closest to the Kerry story-telling tradition, but also the

closest in forms, themes and mood to "The Great Hunger." In these poems the Dionysian

qualities blending humour, exuberance, excess and cruelty can be felt as in "Moloney Sees

Through a Blind Eye"665:

(The corpse's left knee

Was very crooked and stiff and we

Had to break her leg with a brick in order

To fit her into the coffin.)

663 Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy (London: Constable, 1995), 6.

⁶⁶⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, Selected Poems, 18.

⁶⁶⁵ FS, 275.

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In later works, Brendan Kennelly still favours the Dionysian mood for the energy it conveys to his verse as in this scene, not uncommon in his poetry where he describes a "Scottish Rugby ecstasy" 666:

in this ghastly, ghostly, murderous, gossipy, old, ecstatic land – love will up and out and live

again in the slaughtering hearts of men heedless of icy music

this blue true-mooned February night of angels guarding the dancers in this ancient city of light.

II.2.6 Grotesque Bodies

The Dionysian seems necessarily in one form or another related to the grotesque, and through the grotesque the poetic word passes from the upper level of the spirit to the lower level of the belly (as is the case in "When arse and mouth are one"667). It could be said that the grotesque allows the birth of the verb, in other words the anchorage of the verb in the flesh and by the flesh. Zumthor calls attention to "l'enracinement libidinal spécifique sur lequel vient s'articuler en second temps l'érogénéité orale de la parole."668 Within the realm of oral literature, the energy of the grotesque opens "the prison of the body" to which speech is granted. With the grotesque, the place of every metamorphosis, the body becomes indeed extremely fertile. If Brendan Kennelly has recourse to the grotesque and to the violence it implies, it is also because speech is essentially for him a bodily event. Outside the realm of the performance, it permits the reader to be reminded of the

667 Ibid., 93.

⁶⁶⁶ PMA, 32.

⁶⁶⁸ Zumthor, 12.

My translation: "the specific libidinal anchorage with which the erogeneity of the oral word is subsequently articulated."

⁶⁶⁹ (Orally transmitted) or (orally transmitted and composed) or (orally composed).

corporeity of speech, which is some way of compensating for losses – in tone (height and power of the voice) and gestures, imposed by the passage of composition from an oral to a written state. Kennelly's poetry then offers a wide variety of images which recall the narrow link that originally unites speech and body.

One of the modalities that break and extend bodily limits in the grotesque is the intermingling of the human, the animal, and occasionally the vegetal. The close connection of the various natural realms that is characteristic of the grotesque, finds – as shown by Vivian Mercier in *The Irish Comic Tradition* – a remarkable illustration in *The Book of Kells*. This combination of the three realms applied to the body constitutes one of the most ancient forms of the grotesque. Kennelly does not ignore this trait and makes his poetic world a place where the proximity between men and animals are one of the major themes present at the beginning of his career (cf. "Blackbirds," "Cock" "Cock" etc.) and it develops later on, especially in *Poetry My Arse*, until the two species almost disappear to give birth to hybrid creatures that belong to the world of the grotesque. In *Poetry My Arse*, one of the most remarkable fusions is that of Acc and Kanooce. The two characters live within a proximity that is eventually elucidated when their corporeal union is disclosed: "Ace de Horner has a tattoo of Kanooce / on the bicep of his right arm." The revelation invites the reader to go through the book another time and reconsider the poems that tell about the relationship between the two heroes:

I know I've earned a spot in his pitbull heart as he is engraved on my skin. I'm part of him, he of me,
Thank God for the beast within. 673

⁶⁷⁰ FS, 461.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid., 242.

⁶⁷² PMA, 342.

⁶⁷³ *Ibid*.

The drawings found in the Italian caves from which the adjective "grotesque" originates counted among them numerous representations of genitalia with exaggerated proportions. They were mostly phallic emblems. It seems that from its early origins the grotesque was associated with sexual symbolism. It is generally the male reproductive organs that are subject to grotesque representations. Traces of that remote time when comedy was not distinguished from tragedy appears in the Dionysian parabasis where the actors were phallic costumes and where the chorus were disguised wearing animal masks. 674 Echoes of such celebrations are heard in "On Dalkey Hill":

[The Speculators] held a Masked Ball on Dalkey Hill.
They wore masks of wolves skunks tigers rats Foxes ferrets. It was beautiful.

It was thrilling, a sophisticated yet primitive way to celebrate their style of making a killing. (It's all

about style, darling.) ...⁶⁷⁵

The party ends up with Kanooce killing everybody. Like in Irish pagan times, Brendan Kennelly also associates the grotesque with triumphant female power. Several of his female characters (Janey Mary, Babe, Samantha Beckett, Mother Girth...) are represented as powerful women. They may be perceived as some sort of modern Sheela-na-gigs. The latter designate wood or stone sculptures representing women with giant vulva grossly exaggerated, often crouching in a posture calling attention to organs of reproduction. This posture is that of Queen Maeve on a *cairn* (small hill) as described in an ancient Irish poem translated by Thomas Kinsella. Katie Donovan, poet and friend of Brendan Kennelly, points out that Kinsella's translation might yet be misleading:

⁶⁷⁴ Huizinga, 144.

⁶⁷⁵ PMA, 80.

Brendan O hEithir said that Thomas Kinsella had deliberately chosen the version that was the most misogynist. And he said this monkish scribe who was writing down the *Táin* was obviously very misogynist and instead of saying, "Medb pissed," he said "Medb passed a foul thing." And it's forever known as "Medbh's foul place." And Kinsella translates it as "Medb got her gush of blood."

Kennelly took up the image and turned his Janey Mary into a new Queen Maeve:

At the top of the stairs she stood, opened legs, pissed on him. This was something most women no longer did, or had forgotten how to do. 677

While the upper part of the body (head and bust) of the Sheela seems to evoke death because of its bony and desiccated aspect, the lower part suggests fertility. Although theories might vary when it comes to explaining the signification of these small statues, Vivian Mercier sees in the Sheela a goddess of creation and destruction. The Sheela-na-gig can be interpreted as a representation of vital forces but also as a double of the god Ogme, the god of war. It is indeed to that double function that Kennelly often associates his female characters. The figure of the Sheela-na-gig is explicitly mentioned in "Digging" where the poet asserts Old Ireland as his source of inspiration: "No man has lived, he thought, who has not prayed in the cunt of the Sheela na Gig."

Kennelly tries to make his own Patrick Kavanagh's statement: "My god is feminine," hence his evocation of feminine characters in Irish mythology (Deirdre, Queen Maeve, Grainne, Etain...) and it should be noted that along with *Ulysses* and Molly Bloom, *Poetry My Arse* has its last pages devoted to Janey Mary's words. In Brendan Kennelly's poetry, the female grotesque is a celebration of women's fertility, both physical and artistic even if traces of a more ambiguous perception occasionally surface. The deformation of the body involved in the grotesque is a way of expanding a body whose

⁶⁷⁶ http://www.tallgirlshorts.net/marymary/katietext.html. 14 December 2007.

⁶⁷⁷ PMA, 288.

⁶⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 183.

limits are constantly extended, until they take cosmic and universal dimensions. Mutilating, mixing and scattering organs, recomposing these fragments is also part of that expansion which sees the vital energies take the form of a close association between death and birth. In a reciprocal process, the body swallows the world and the world swallows the body. In Kennelly's verse the body swells until it outgrows human dimensions as in *The Man Made of Rain* where his father's body becomes the landscape of the poet's wandering, at a time when the thread of life threatened to yield. This voyage followed Brendan Kennelly's quadruple by-pass surgery: "I climb the walls of a cave in his skull / and hear the wild white horses." Yet in this case because the picture combines with a lyrical tonality, the grotesque image is not felt as comic at all.

The grotesque offers a way to make death a happy event. And it is to this kind of merry death that the poet aspired in 1997, when he replied to Kelly Younger's question: "Will you end up with joy as well?" by saying: "I hope so. I pray to God I will!" It is response illustrates his fidelity to a peculiar conception of death that one finds in Celtic country wakes in Irish villages – and Kerry remained faithful to such traditions until recently – that were often an occasion for pagan excess. Very often, rejoicing overwhelmed the funeral, and during the wake obscene games occasionally took place, that was a way to associate rites of fertility and funeral rites. Lady Wilde in *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, and Superstitions in Ireland,* goes as far as to speak of "The Wake Orgies." Such practice lasted up to the Sixties and Brendan Kennelly found inspiration in these celebrations as shown for instance in "Moloney Remembers the Resurrection of Kate Finucane."

⁶⁸¹ MUAΛI, 57.

⁶⁷⁹ Interview with Kelly Younger, "Dionysus in Dublin: Brendan Kennelly's Greek Triology, 29 April 1997" http://www.ucd.ie/irthrm/kyounger.htm, 22 September 2007.

⁶⁸⁰ Lady Francesca Speranza Wilde, Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, and Superstitions in Ireland (London: Ward and Downey), 1887, Vol. 1, 228, in Vivian Mercier, The Irish Comic Tradition, 50.

A grotesque image, very common in the poetry of Brendan Kennelly, is that of the monstrous creature composed of both man and rat. In "What a way to rear seagulls!"682 "Ace de Horner calls it ratacumen," a coinage composed of "rat cum men," a hybrid species closely interweaving man and rat. However, if Ace, central character, proves rather passive in the face of grotesque monsters, he encounters Samantha Beckett, an active epic double not that remote from a female Ulysses, who challenges the power of those monsters. By name, Samantha Beckett belongs, like Acc, to the literary world. She is a female version of Samuel Beckett, that Kennelly familiarly calls "Sam Beckett" but she has to be listed among the figures of epic cleaners pervading Poetry My Arse. Thus Brendan Kennelly entitled "Non Smoking Area" a poem describing Samantha's liberating activities: "If I didn't kill rats, I'd kill men, she replied," but no allusion whatsoever is made regarding smoke or cigarettes. The title first seems enigmatic; yet, when paying close attention, one realizes that Sam, the ratkiller, works in favour of the purification of the city, in order to restore "breathing spaces" there, or in other words some "Non Smoking Area." The task of the rat killer Sam seems immense because man's metamorphosis into rat resembles a vicious circle as suggested by the following lines taken from "So far" that describes the Liffey as a:

grave of rats and drunken culchies out of money, home and work; fed-up with not being fed, so Liffey mud's the answer, mate. 684

The Liffey then appears as both the fertilizer and the grave of rats. Another instance of rebellious dog turning into a monster is found in "The Dog of Darkness." Not without

⁶⁸² PMA, 327.

⁶R3 Ibid., 110.

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid., 109.

⁶⁸⁵ BS, 146.

recalling the blood-thirsty dog in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, in this poem the monstrous animal symbolizing depression invades the girl's breathing space:

The dogs of darkness howl Across the fields. Their smells lacerate my room, Their fangs flash over half-sleep.

Here the dogs are like an army walking "Across the field," the space separating them from the keep that is the room. "Their smells lacerate [her] room," the breathing cell that was the room is torn away by their smell which poisons the girl and pollutes her dreams: "Their fangs flash over half-sleep." Kanooce first seems an odd number in the category of monstrous threatening dogs. Yet his role and his relation to Ace is far from being clearly defined. When peering into his literary ancestors Kanooce is discovered as one of the half-beast half-human creatures that in Kennelly's work triumph over men's domination. Kanooce is most certainly with Salamano's dog in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, the only dog in literature that his master won in a lotto:

Ace de Horner won Kanooce In the only doglotto Ever held in Ireland⁶⁸⁶

In Camus's book, Salamano turns his dog into a substitute for his late wife, for whom his love implied its share of beating. The relationship between Ace and Kanooce is of an utterly different nature. In some respects they can be compared to a fusional couple, they are two in one or one in two, tenderness unites both protagonists and their couple is based on equality if not on the dog's domination. Cats also belong to the number of pets made grotesque in "The Cats and the books," the little feline is changed into a tiger demon, a

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⁶⁸⁶ PMA, 36.

predator for the poet. A whole team of various cats is examined like a battalion of monsters that somehow recalls "Mastery":

If even a scrap of a single page survives the fierce assault of fangs and claws old white cat will see that nothing lives apart from what is favoured by bristling laws. 687

3) A Revolt Against a Sense of Loss

In the work of Brendan Kennelly epic violence takes on different forms that are related to the Irish epic and that connect it to the work of Irish bards but that are refreshed and adapted to a contemporary world. Picturing violence provides Kennelly with a matchless source of poetic energy. Violence becomes enjoyable because it is distanced through the artistic medium. Kennelly proves both traditional and original in the fact that his writing associates the grotesque and the comical to the realm of brutal violence. In this sense his long poems are truly epic. However beyond the raw images of mutilation, slaughter and execution of all types narrated in an unswerving language, his poems convey an angry sense of loss that is also the hallmark of the epic. Ruth Finnegan, Paul Zumthor, Hugh Shields, and Walter Ong identify the sense of loss as a characteristic feature of oral literature.

II.3.1 Paradise Lost

In many respects, Kennelly's long poems celebrate a "post-lapsarian" world. The present state of things results from a fall that led to a degraded form of a perfect past. However, the past remains vague and undescribed which means that loss does not lead to a fully fledged sense of nostalgia but rather to a nostalgic flavour. In that regard Kennelly's poems differ

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid., 38.

from most oral poetry including Irish bardic poetry. Confirming these ideas, the attention Kennelly bears to the prefix "post" invites the reader's reflection. In literary criticism as in most theoretical disciplines, the poet refuses the theoretical suffix. "-ism" (such as postcolonialism, post-modernism, post-postmodernism...) of what he calls "Postism" - the word appears in a list of negative elements: "pricey whores in denim drags, / sincere apostles of the pure-obscene, / post-Postims, cynics with mortgages."688 "Post" is nonetheless used and pondered upon. This contributes to a pervading sense of loss in his poetry. Quite strikingly it is the feeling immediately referred to when the adjective "postcolonial" is mentioned in the preface of *Poetry My Arse*: "What marks a post-colonial city? I feel a bit lost trying to answer that one. In fact, I'd say that this feeling a bit lost in history and language is probably the first mark of post-colonialism. A bit lost."689 Indeed something has been lost and left confusion behind, even if the nature of this "something" is not clearly identified, but what follows has given rise to epic violence and to an angry craving for a new order. Once again, this sense of loss relates Brendan Kennelly's work to old Irish lays and in particular to the lays of Fionn Mac Cumhaill in which Oisin enters into a dialogue with St Patrick⁶⁹⁰: "The fiction gives free play to nostalgic reminiscence of a golden Age, an age which modem folk tradition has continued to evoke by simple mention of the names of the Fianna mingled perhaps with those of historical figures." In the poetry of Brendan Kennelly references to Paradise Lost are too many not to catch the reader's attention. Among other occurrences, Paradise Lost is the name given to Ace's mutilated penis:

> Paradise lost was cold, limp, offcolour, cleaner than it had been for years, since cradled Ace, in fact, rocked to and fro warming to his destiny

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⁶⁸⁸ PMA, 332.

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁹⁰ Hugh Shields, 13.

like a nappy.

That, like the Golden Age, was long ago. 691

It would be tempting to analyse Kennelly's "Paradise Lost" as a longing for lost childhood, an innocent state where guilt had yet no place. Any reference to "Paradise Lost" would indeed often involve childhood as in:

Now, aged ten, he stumbles on *Paradise Lost* in a laneway, and starts to read. Heaven and Hell clash and dance in his head. 692

Paradise Lost was a text commonly part of the Irish school syllabus in the Fortics to the Seventies. Yet it is also remarkable for being one of the most important pieces of written literature in English that is yet oral in the sense that it was entirely dictated by Milton who – like Ace – had become blind. From a literary vantage point, it could be argued that the loss Brendan Kennelly is struggling against is the loss of orality. As a teacher, commenting on his own course, he confirms: "The purpose is to go back to orality." Most interestingly the poem that immediately follows the one quoted above illustrates Kennelly's position and begins with "Now he hears (emphasis mine) the censor speak." What also brings support to this interpretation is how in the preface to Poetry My Arse, after mentioning the impression of feeling "A bit lost," Brendan Kennelly refers to a large variety of oral 695 phenomena (yarns, jokes, gossips, etc.) and quotes a series of oral 696 expressions: "Pure joy, me oul' flower, pure joy..." This sense of a lost paradise is also typical of the epic and Ruth Finnegan 698 analyses it as more generally characteristic of oral

⁶⁹¹ PMA, 346.

⁶⁹² N, 26.

⁶⁹³ http://www.bc.edu/crs/cn/index/web/major.courses.shtml, November 2007.

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid.

^{695 (}Orally transmitted), or (orally transmitted and composed).

⁶⁹⁶ Orally transmitted.

⁶⁹⁷ PMA, 13.

⁶⁹⁸ Ruth Finnegan, 34.

literature, hence the numerous ballads lamenting a lost order such as the loss of the Gaelic aristocracy in Ireland.

II.3.2 Figures of Toxicity

Brendan Kennelly's literary world like the Greek or the Irish epic suggests a fall from an ideal state, a Garden of Eden, or a Golden Age. This fall that is not explained is designated through images tainted with apocalyptic shades. Whereas in 17th and 18th century ballads, with Aislings in particular, the sense of loss was associated with a beautiful woman that abandoned the poet, in Kennelly's poems - this is also true of William Blake's - loss takes the form of environmental corruption concentrated within cities. Both poets prove indeed sensitive to the degradation of an urban environment that modern life leads towards a deterioration overshadowed with apocalyptic tonalities. In Blake's verse, pollution sickens London and Brendan Kennelly's Dublin also becomes its victim. The urban world depicted by Kennelly plunges into an atmosphere heavily loaded with toxic substance that turns away breathing motions into an attempt at surviving. 699 Soiled air is tinged with a vague sense of nostalgia for a prelapsarian world, before modernity reached Dublin. The perception of Ireland as a place with a suffocating atmosphere was already underlined by Flann O'Brien who in The Poor Mouth wrote: "It was stated that they told people in that place that Ireland was a fine country but that the air was too strong there."⁷⁰⁰ The novelist limits the picture of that asphyxia to the indoor of the hero's (Bonapart) place: "Alas! There was never any air in our house"⁷⁰¹ and in O'Brien's work this pollution is essentially metaphorical whereas Kennelly extends the lack of air to the external environment. In "Acid," the magnitude of the poison suggests the destruction of breathing cells:

⁶⁹⁹ Gerold Sedlmayr, Brendan Kennelly's Literary Works, 166-173.

⁷⁰⁰ Flann O'Brien, 22.

⁷⁰¹ *Ibid*

They sprayed the air with acid Breathed it like the first promise of love Heard long ago in the corner of a garden. 702

pollution (inhaled drug for instance) so as to fill the void of a loss? Whatever the nature of

Yet is this a form of pollution that reaches an entire population or is it a self-inflicted

the poisoning, the city and its modern pains are pointed at as the source of this atmospheric

corruption. In this regard it is interesting to compare Blake's vision of London, and that of

Dublin by Kennelly. "Gobblegasp" seems to directly echo Blake's city. Brendan Kennelly

grants speech to the century which comes and makes for Dublin the sad statement that

similarly Blake made for London that environmental corruption is a wide-scale

phenomenon:

"Yes, show me a city where the air is clean

And poison doesn't cancerise the rain

And the light's not bruised with hungry crying

And breath is evidence of more than men half-dying." 703

In both poems the anaphora, "And" combined with "every" underlines the large scope and

the severity of the damage. Men's cries, "hungry crying" and "cry of every Man... cry of

fear" hardly tell the pain caused by a void whose abysmal measure is accentuated by air

poisoning. The music of the stanza is interrupted in the last line: "And breath is evidence

of more than men half-dying," which in an excess of syllables marks the attempt of a

stifling breath which at its best can only result in a form of survival dressed in agony.

Air toxicity is aggravated by water pollution. The Liffey, the river at the heart of

Dublin runs through Poetry My Arse as a black flood artery. In the book, the Liffey is

depicted as an immense liquid dump whose murmur choirs with that of the city, around

⁷⁰² BOJ, 124.

⁷⁰³ Ibid., 125.

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which various monsters crawl. Thus a poem such as "Cargo", gives the reader to contemplate an apocalyptic view of the river, an image that despite its darkness is not deprived of humour:

Bearing bits of paper, bags of condoms the hissing Liffey yahoos tonight seaward with a cargo of our latest scandals.

Listen love, listen! And hold on tight!

Dublin's river is here described as a fantastic Styx, with devilish colours, "hissing" like a "yahoo," a creature of dubious humanity. The Liffey, vital center of Dublin, forms the core around which is built *Poetry My Arse*. In the epic poem, both a source of inspiration and of toxicity, the river floods Kennelly's imaginary world with all-embracing darkness. Pollution in water is not however restricted to the Liffey. Dublin, costal and estuary town, sees its main artery, the Liffey, meet the sea. "This Legendary Coastline" evokes the West coast, the poet's native place in a vision once again apocalyptic, and in which the shore is being spread with an oily smear following the shipwreck of an Italian carrier:

This legendary coastline is vulnerable. Force 9 gale, forty-foot high waves, *Regina Coeli* has a crack in her hull, The drowned are turning in their graves, The Italian skipper admits He has 90,000 gallons of my crude on board. Good Lord! 705

As he introduces ruptures in the tone of the poem, Kennelly takes the technique to an extreme point. In "Cargo," this chasm takes place in the last line, while "Listen love! Listen" recalls Wordsworth in "The Solitary Reaper": "Ho listen! For the vale profound / Is overflowing with the sound." The poet's voice suddenly takes us down to the zero level, that of the sea, with the warning: "And hold on tight!" Similarly in "This legendary

⁷⁰⁵ BOJ, 123.

⁷⁶⁴ PMA, 94.

Coastline," Brendan Kennelly mixes the detached tone of the radio weather forecast: "Force nine gales, forty foot high waves" and religious echoes as the carrier's name "Regina Coeli" is repeated at the beginning of some lines and biblical overtones are heard with "Even the Son of Man / Might hesitate to walk on the water tonight." The Regina Coeli is also a well known hostel in Dublin founded in 1930 by the Legion of Mary to provide shelter for women who were homeless for various reasons including being unmarried mothers. The range of tones in the poem includes a bawdy reading due to the name of the boat that evokes virginity and the polysemy of "rocks," meaning both "massive stones" and "testicles" so that the "Legendary Coastline" can also be read as a "bikini line." The episode is treated with the biting humour of Dublin wit. Immediately preceding the biblical evocation, a voice exclaims: "Good Lord!" while suspense rises and the final catastrophe becomes imminent: "Regina Coeli is drifting towards the rocks."

The degradation of elements in Kennelly's imaginary world lays down the basis for a potential destruction of that universe. Like a warning to men, the signs of pestilential breath are first written in the animal world. The imagery used by Kennelly is indeed pervaded with nightmarish visions where the order of fauna has been shattered. Images of slaughter on a large scale, echoing that of epic human battles, the growth of parasitic creatures, animal insanity are like so many visions recalling Blake and St John's revelations. As often in the epic, the lost world of peace and harmony has been replaced by threat, destruction and apocalyptic chaos. Similarly in the *Odyssey* Odysseus' travels lead him to encounter and fight all sorts of strange monsters. In Kennelly's poetry, the destruction of the animal realm looks like a dark epic massacre. Confronted with environmental destruction, the poet expresses his concern in the form of recurring images in which the animals die by numbers, subjected to atrocious suffering but also in the form

of long poems dedicated to this theme. Thus "Milk" exposes the disastrous consequences of the pollution of a river by three men who pour in it a whitish chemical substance. "Milk" is also the title of another poem in *The Book of Judas* and the adjective "milky" appears in several other titles. The poem's strength here relies on the corruption of the nourishing substance into a mortiferous liquid flowing into the river's bed and destroying any spark of possible life:

Everything died in the milky river. Brown trouts, eels, fluke, young salmon Perished every one.

The extreme character of the plague is expressed in the first tercet in the second section of the poem. The first and the second line form a chiastic frame encompassing the enumeration in the second line, a frame that opens on "everything" and closes on "every one," with in its middle an evocation of death: "died in the milky river" and "perished" that extends to the beginning of the following line. The general impression that emerges from the poem is that of a profound upheaval. The source of life, natural elements here brings death and desolation. The shift from Paradise to a hellish world has taken place. The light and whiteness that brightens the poem at first sight becomes fatal. Similar images appear often in Kennelly's poems. They show for instance a damaged sun: "Poison entered the sun," which the reader also encounters in *The Man Made Of Rain*: "The wound reaches the sun," of a possible reminiscence on Nerval's "black sun of melancholy." The general convulsion also alters survival instinct:

They saw countless trout Try to leap from the water As if wanting to be alone, Preferring to die

⁷⁰⁶ BS, 46-47.

⁷⁰⁷ MMOR, 88.

⁷⁰⁸ My translation.

In an alien element
Than in their poisoned own.

Confronted with such a waste the reader senses a profound evil that the poem yet forbids to accept and on the contrary invites to struggle against, in a refusal of static passivity.

As in St John's vision, the plague of pollution destroys the creatures that used to live in the former environment; the new atmospheric conditions are yet not altogether sterile and give birth to a crowd of monsters that Kennelly describes as a new generation of parasites. Thus in *Poetry My Arse*, Dublin is depicted as a city in which rats crawl – Liffey rats – and where birds feed on air pollution. For them cohabitation with human beings includes its load of difficulty and takes place in the mode of struggle and invasion:

pigeon fluffs the space between Ace and the sun magpie slices the sky into good and bad

crows of nightmare go on croaking in his head. 709

In "Bird of Morning"⁷¹⁰ the absence of punctuation underlines the progressive absorption of the human by the animal. Beyond the pestilential and mortiferous breath that can blow on Kennelly's poetic universe, one should not ignore the disruption of human and animal hierarchies. This marks the end of an old order and the beginning of a new one synonymous with struggle. This sense of transition is typical of oral poetry. The Leviticus says: "When we are gathered together within our cities, I will send the pestilence among you."⁷¹¹ If this applies to the cityscape in Brendan Kennelly's poetry, this does not yet mean an absolute end but also the beginning of a new – maybe chaotic – order. Here humans and animals live together in a struggling mode and as humans lose their overwhelming power, angels and demons all the same join the party, becoming a little less

⁷⁰⁹ PMA, 195.

⁷¹⁰ *Ibid*.

⁷¹¹ Leviticus, 26:25.

divine and a lot more human, sometimes prosaically human. On the Dublin scene of *Poetry My Arse*, Kennelly grants a place to both angels and demons, yet none of them possess any particular initiative. Tokens of an original fall, an indeterminate loss, they happily mix with the human population. In "Demons," hint of a threat as a possible remnant of a lost power, is suggested: "The maddest fuckin' head in Dublin, demons / tryin' to break the cage. He smiled / But ya love the demons, don't ya?" The threat is soon evinced by the voice of the streets that welcomes men as well as demons. "Rescue" cqually opens and closes on an evocation of demons: "Demons pester me like bills I cannot pay," but the body of the poem is in no respect mystical and the torments evoked are just as prosaic as the bills unpaid. This is the reason why demons are ruthlessly sent back to hell in the last words of the poem where "fox" provides an alternative to "fuck": "fox the demons."

It should also be noted that in *Poetry My Arse*, at the heart of Dublin, Trinity College in front of the Bank of Ireland is placed under the tutelary watch of three angels. In the Apocalypse of St John, the angels come to punish men with cataclysms, and plagues; one of the angels is described as follows:

He was dressed with a cloud A glory clouded his brow His face was the sun, And his feet were like columns of fire. He held a small open book in his hand.⁷¹⁴

The vision is very near that depicted in "Enough!"

Three angels stand guard Over the Bank of Ireland, Each one a distant lover.⁷¹⁵

⁷¹³ BOJ, 265.

⁷¹² PMA, 165.

⁷¹⁴ Revelation, 10:2.

⁷¹⁵ PMA, 32.

These angels stand on the columns of the neoclassic building and are generally invisible—"always there, not always scen"—to pedestrians who rarely look up to the clouds in the Irish sky. These angels are not the vengeful angels of the Apocalypse but guardian angels, "under a cool moon," watching over the Dionysian excessive festivities of men "dancing to the icy music, / dancing under the angels." Humans, angels and demons now live in the same world. Figures of pollution, asphyxia and environmental deterioration reinforce the sense that some "paradise" has been lost and that a fall has taken place. Like many oral poets Kennelly creates a "post-paradise" world and much like in Blake's poetry, his verse is pervaded with apocalyptic shades. If nostalgia is not fully excluded it is not yet expressed in any clear manner and in that regard Kennelly's work differs from much bardic poetry that celebrates an ancient order. Kennelly's version of the past is not idealised, the present is evoked as a degradation of this past and a transitional chaotic state on the mode of epic struggle results. Nonetheless the new world remains branded by the loss of the old one and even if Kennelly's poetry does not openly communicate nostalgia, loss is so often told that it is hard not to infer some hidden regret for the past.

The nature of the loss is never explained and what made the past better than the present is not described in the poems. This loss could be accounted for by many reasons: historical, cultural, personal... But from a creative point of view, what has been lost in Ireland is the oral mind and the accompanying orally performed literature. In that respect Kennelly's sense of loss reflects his attitude towards the loss of oral⁷¹⁶ poetry in Ireland. "My Dark Fathers" sheds a very interesting light on the question:

Since I am come of Kerry clay and rock, I celebrate the darkness and the shame That could compel a man to turn his face

^{716 (}Orally transmitted), or (orally transmitted and composed) or (orally composed).

Against the wall, withdrawn from light so strong And undeceiving, spancelled in a place Of unapplauding hands and broken song.⁷¹⁷

The poem evokes the famine, another apocalyptic episode in the history of Ireland. As previously shown through "Dirty Word," poetic beauty was born out of an apparently sterile environment: "clay and rock." With the famine, the capacity to freely dance and sing had been lost, and it left behind "unapplauding hands and broken song," so that now the singer feels ashamed to sing. However, Kennelly does not choose to offer his readers and listeners the prelapsarian state of things but instead: "[He] celebrates the darkness and the shame" that is what follows the loss and also what, despite the difficulty and struggle, implies a rich and beautiful potential. In this respect Brendan Kennelly departs from a romantic attitude towards a lost order and in particular towards the loss of orality⁷¹⁸ in Irish society. There is no longing in Brendan Kennelly's poetry for a "natural" state of humanity in the sense in which Rousseau opposed the natural individual to the individual in society. Similarly, although Art for Art's sake is rejected, in Kennelly's verse "Nature" is not opposed to "Art." M.H. Abrams⁷¹⁹ underlines how the Romantics advocated "spontaneity, sincerety, and integral unity of thought and feeling as the essential criteria of poetry." Emotion had to prevail and the ideal of romantic poetry was a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings."⁷²⁰ Ruth Finnegan explains how Romanticism went along with a dynamic enthusiasm for folklore gathering and the belief in "the artless spontancity of such literature."⁷²¹ The Celtic Twilight movement in Ireland belonged to that trend of thought. An attempt was made at a return towards that idealised state of literature. This took the

⁷¹⁷ FS, 377.

The loss of orally (transmitted, or (orally transmitted and composed)) literature, but also the loss of the oral mind.

oral mind.

719 Meyer Howard Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (New York; London: W.W. Norton, 1958), 102.

N.C. Smith, Wordsworth's Literary Criticism (London: Frowde, 1905), 15.

⁷²¹ Ruth Finnegan, 34.

form of imitations such as *The Poem of Ossian* by James McPherson and many ballads were written. Brendan Kennelly's mode of composition departs from that of the Romantics in the sense that he started composing songs and poems in imitation of pieces he had heard around him, without being aware that he was thus continuing the tradition. When later on awareness surfaced in him that he came from a cultural background where all the values celebrated by the Romantics were at work, he progressively departed from the initial shape of his verse. He only kept certain elements of traditional oral⁷²² poetry (such as for instance the use of the vernacular, bawdiness etc.) and he essentially renewed it while he tried to keep it as oral as possible in a social context where orality⁷²³ was progressively being lost. This means that his poetry would bear the marks of a strong residual orality⁷²⁴ without being purely oral. One of the features maintained is the sense of loss that links Brendan Kennelly's poetry to the epic world and more generally to the world of oral literature.

II.3.3 Blood and Bones

The sense of loss that relates the work of Brendan Kennelly to the world of the Irish epic and of the bards is also expressed through the strikingly recurrent motifs of blood and bones. These are images that do not merely partake in the setting of extreme physical violence, they also link past and present and signify the acuteness of the sense of loss in Kennelly's creative world. Blood and bones are repeated images in his poetry. They are presented as the root of the poet's writing and suggest a total commitment of the poet to his work. In Celtic pre-Christian time and later on in the world of ballads, blood was believed to be a vehicle of the soul. Plood and bones contribute to create an atmosphere of violence but there is more to them than the blood shed by victims and the relic bones of

^{722 (}Orally transmitted) or (orally transmitted and orally composed) or (orally composed).

⁷²³ Id. and the oral mind.

⁷²⁴ Cf. Walter Ong, Orality and Literacy.

⁷²⁵ M.J.C. Hodgart, 124

those who suffered violent death, they are also the blood of creation and the bones that become a singing instrument as is the case with tipplers. 726

Blood is essential in one of the very last remains of pure orality⁷²⁷ in our Western societies: the Christian ritual of the communion. A formula: "And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Drink ye all of this; For this is my blood of the New Testament, which is shed for you and for many for the remission of sins;" is being transmitted through time with very little alteration, memorized and recited during mass without the support of writing. Yet the very matter of blood in communion is both what unites and what separates communities since this was one of the main causes for debates that led Protestants to part from the Catholic Church. Although, unlike the Northern poets, Brendan Kennelly would not dwell in his verse on the Northern political issue, the matter is approached in a subtle, yet not exclusive way, through the pervasive presence of blood in his writing. This hyper-consciousness of what blood carries in its flow was also shared by James Joyce who for this reason, as explained by Brendan Kennelly in an interview, did not drink red wine. ⁷²⁹

In Kennelly's literary world, what is apparently synonymous with loss, chaos and death often reveals itself to bear the seeds of a new beginning. His poem "Begin" is certainly one of his poems that is most representative of this attitude to life. It is nowadays in Ireland one of the most frequently recited (that is orally⁷³⁰ alive) poems for special occasions such as weddings, funerals etc... Brendan Kennelly read "Begin" at the funeral mass of former Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, but the poem travelled far beyond Ireland.⁷³¹ While it is a celebration of a new start and of the capacity to begin again, the poem also

⁷²⁶ In Kerry, tipplers were musicians who used dried bones as instruments.

Next to illiteracy, since the transmission of Catholic prayers and rituals do not necessarily involve writing.

Matthew, 26:26-28.

⁷²⁹ The Verb, BBC Radio 3, 19 June 2004.

⁷³⁰ Orally performed and to some extent orally transmitted.

The poem was quoted by the American actress Meryl Streep in her Commencement speech delivered at the University of New Hampshire, in Durham, on the 24th of May 2003.

Cf. http://www.beliefnet.com/story/127/story 12762.html, June 2003.

bears in itself some very dark images. It seems that loss has to be experienced so that renewal can take place. A consequence of this optimistic view is that in his poetry, markers of destruction also signify reconstruction at a different level. The poet's treatment of blood and bones is significant for this ambivalence. Kennelly's writing proceeds under the banner of blood, the poet's blood mixing with ink, but also the reader's blood targeted and carried out to ebullition, so that the title which the poet gave to his version of Lorca's play, Blood Wedding almost sounds like a definition of his poetry.

Among ancient Greek poets and in Homer's poems in particular air, blood and Kardia (the heart) are closely related and were more rigorously conceptualized in Plato's Thumos (passion). What is at work in these concepts is the idea of a deep vital and violent energy that the reader can perceive in Kennelly's poetry and in particular in his epic poems. In Poetry My Arse, the centre of the poetic creation is the place where Ace de Horner lives, the "Bluebell pad." A pad is an apartment, blotting paper and a notebook. A long list of instruments essential to a poet's life is concentrated in the word. "Bluebell" conjures up the image of a flower or the name of a cow, "blue" suggests a note of melancholy, what is morally forbidden such as "blue movies," but "Bluebell" is also a brand of sanitary towel in Japan where Brendan Kennelly travelled twice, once in 1985 and a second time in 1992. For Ace de Horner, the "Bluebell pad" is the cell where the poct sheds his ink and lets his blood flow. As regularly repeated by Kennelly, Ace is indeed "a bleeding poet."⁷³² Although blood evokes violence and suffering it is also creative. When it comes to poetry the chaotic violence at the source of inspiration finds a fertile outlet in the act of composition. For Kennelly, the birth of a poem involves the entire being of the poet, blood and bones:

^{732 &}quot;Bleeding" also has a derogatory connotation in Dublin vernacular.

I will study Until it merges with my bones, Bonepoem, bombpoem, One-word-poem-tick-tick-way-of-seeing⁷³³

Here the "bonepoem" is an allusion to the idea that the poet writes with his own blood and sacrifices a part of himself to his work. Yet it also alludes to the tippler, a traditional musician in Kerry who used bones as his music instrument. John B. Keane explains: "Then came the tippers [sic] or bones players, their instruments pairs of polished rib bones extracted from the carcasses of bullocks or cows." 734

> Out of the clean bones He tipples a hard music; Cocking his head, He knows himself sole master of his trade. Hence his pride

A goat ran wild Through field and hillside, Was tracked, caught, tethered, tamed, But chared and no man cried. And the Tippler got his bones.

All bones dry in the sun, Harden to browny white, Mere flesh stripped and gone; But bones create a new delight When clacked by the proper man.

Let flesh lie rotten When the Tippler takes his stand, Holds the bones between his fingers; Death has given him command, Permitted him his hunger,

Made his heart articulate, Tender, proud, Clacking at shoulder, chest and head; That man is for a while unbowed Who brings music from the dead. 735

⁷¹⁴ John B. Keane, The Bodhrán Makers (Dingle: Brandon, 1986), quoted in Gerold Sedlmayr, Brendan Kennelly's Literary Works, 139. 715 FS, 247.

This poem clearly expresses how a sacrifice is necessary for music to be played. The third stanza offers an other instance of a hero's body being mutilated and martyred. The fact that Brendan Kennelly here chose a goat and not a bovine to provide the tippler with bones calls forth the Kerry tradition of Puck Fair when a goat is captured, crowned, perched at the top of a high pole and celebrated for the duration of the day. On that occasion the goat becomes a heroic king. He is given thanks and honoured in remembrance of the time when – according to the legend – a goat warned villagers in Killorglin, Co. Kerry, that the Cromwellians were nearing the village and thus saved the life of the villagers.

Because of the heroic status of the goat, his slaughter recalls the savage epic deaths. The manner his corpse is dealt with: "All bones dry in the sun / Harden to browny white, / Here flesh stripped and gone;" conforms with the treatment inflicted upon the lowest of the low in ancient Greece: the corpse is left rotting in the sun offered to pestilence and parasites – as is the case for Polynices, Antigone's brother – as opposed to the glorious funerals reserved to kings and princes. Yet the fertile side of bones is underlined in the same stanza, that is placed at the core of the poem: "But bones create a new delight / when clacked by the proper man."

A comparable transformation of skulls from hellish sight to poetic visions happens in Brendan Kennelly's later poetry. In Celtic tradition, the head was seen as the seat of the soul and the mouthpiece of oracular wisdom. Kennelly like Blake internalises the apocalyptic images of the city and reshapes the urban scene within the space of a skull. For both poets one could speak of a universe contained within a skull. "Golgos," the skull, gave birth in Blake's verse to Gorgonooza, the interior of London. He wrote about the city:

My streets are my ideas of Imagination ... My Houses are Thoughts: my inhabitants, Affections, The children of my Thoughts walking within my blood-vessels.⁷³⁷

737 William Blake, Jerusalem, 28:39.

⁷³⁶ John Matthews, "Introduction," Celtic Scers' Source Book, 15.

The city is incarnated (made flesh) in the figure of the poet, in his flesh, his blood but also in his bones, and most of all in his skull up to the point that one could speak of an "incranation" ("cranium": medieval Latin for "skull") of the city. This series of images also appears in Kennelly's work that abounds in haunted heads, hit or smashed. The poet's art becomes the instrument to stir up movement in the city. This power of literature also finds an illustration in the relation of Joyce's work to Dublin. This is why in a similar way, in The Man Made of Rain, a visionary poem where the poet travels among his father's bones as in the streets of Dublin, the skull is represented as the container of poetic

The skull is the least dead road I've travelled Nothing but surprise Behind where used to be his eyes⁷³⁸

The skull is here far remote from a traditional "memento mori." The first line stumbles on "the least dead" before returning to the fluidity of the iamb. The skull contains a poetic world of infinite love and life. The following tercet indicates indeed that in the ocular cavities, the poet encounters the eyes of the man made of rain, that is the vision at the limit of the word: "Love shines through death, / kisses it with these eyes," in a reversal of the union between Eros and Thanatos where love is stronger than death in the end of a struggle with Baudelairian overtones:

Le globe lumineux et frêle Prend un grand essor, Crêve et crache son âme grêle Comme un songe d'or.⁷³⁹

imagination:

⁷³⁸ MMOR, 57.

⁷³⁹ Charles Baudelaire, « L'Amour et le Crâne » in Les Fleurs du Mal (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1972), 140.

[&]quot;The sphere, fragile and luminous,

Takes flight rapidly,

Bursts and spits out its flimsy soul

Like a golden dream."

Trans. William Aggeler, The Flowers of Evil (Fresno, CA: Academy Library Guild, 1954),

http://fleursdumal.org/poem/188.

A humorous version of that image where the poet encounters the skull, this time his own, appears in "Friend":

"Tis only an old skull," said Ace, 'that once contained ideas, music, song.

Nothing to fear from it...

I looked at the skull: old gasgob, eyehole, greybone.

My own. 740

In this case again, the image is one of a poetic world captured within the bonecell of the head. Yet the vision is double-sided, the clear side of the poetic world is represented by "ideas, music, song" while the dark side corresponds to the second series: "old gasgob, eyehole, greybone" where coinages play upon the polysemy of the terms and tend to present the poet as a monstrous creature. The two opposite poles of blood and bones are maintained in constant proximity so that if they signify violence and loss they also stand for creativity, birth and fertility. This is a paradox in Kennelly's work, loss is told but is not really felt and the violent epic state of chaos that follows is celebrated as a potential source of new life. The sense of loss is typical of oral literature, but orality is also part of what has been lost in Ireland. In that regard Kennelly treats orality like blood and bones, that is, not as a relic that would lead to nostalgic meditation but as a source of literary renewal. In *The Man Made of Rain* the skull that could signify the loss of life appears as the capsule from which, when a poem is born, a breath might emerge, potentially able to stir a city to move. This approach seems particularly interesting when Dublin is the city in question, a place that Joyce used to call "the centre of paralysis."

⁷⁴⁰ PMA, 71.

III Oral versus Analytical Mind

1) The Wiseman's Model as Opposed to the Philosopher's

III.1.1 Proverbs, Riddles and Jokes

Beyond the formal aspects highlighted, if Kennelly's long poems have a lot in common with the Irish epic of the bards, it is because the creative mind behind them is aware that the world of the epic is a lot more than a mere exercise of style. The epic is the product of the oral mind as opposed to the analytical mind that dominates this modern age and which was born from the ability of man to read and write. Brendan Kennelly, in his poetry, his performances, and in his teaching, has defended this oral mind (this is the realm of wisdom), often at the cost of theory and analysis (this is the sphere of philosophy and science) whose prevalent power he ccaselessly condemns. This section of the present study will concentrate on the modes taken by this oral mind in Kennelly's creation. The contrast between wisdom and philosophy corresponds to the contrast between the oral and the literate mind. Analysis and theory were born with writing. In that respect Havelock's Preface to Plato is a remarkable study of the transition from the oral to the literate within a Greek context. His comments on the pre-socratics are all the more interesting as they highlight how this group of thinkers, 741 opposed to the Homeric approach to experience, were yet essentially oral poets. On the one hand they rejected the formulaic technique of presenting the oral⁷⁴² text developed by epic poets but on the other hand they were more concerned by words than by thoughts and in particular abstraction:

We observe in them a constant preoccupation with language, and a continual complaint against its limitations, and a constant appeal for new efforts of cognition... If then it turns out that the earlier pre-Socratics composed either in verse or in poetic aphorism; and that even the later ones could manage a prose of ideas only as they strung together lapidary sentences into paragraphs of meaning, we should not suppose, as is too

⁷⁴² Orally performed and orally transmitted.

⁷⁴¹ Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Blackwell: Harvard University Press, 1963), 288-289.

commonly supposed that they were philosophers by intent and poets by accident. 743

Through shorter forms such as proverbs, aphorisms, riddles etc. an appeal to memory was made in a way that is comparable to Homer's. They - Irish bards at any time also used this form - had to strike their listeners' ears so that their words would be memorised and preserved in time. In that respect, the brevity of the form made up for the absence of the formulaic technique necessary to memorize longer pieces. It will be here argued that a good deal of Kennelly's verse follows this intermediary trend between the oral and the literate where writing is necessarily involved.

When observing the evolution of his career it is very clear that the poet's quest for a powerful and striking idiom has developed through time until he wrote Glimpses (2001) and Now (2006), collections in which poems are reduced to the minimalist and concentrated form of triplets. Much like Yeats and Oscar Wilde, Brendan Kennelly excels in the composition of lines that within or outside the context of a longer piece will brand the reader's / listener's memory so that they will be repeated and will thus integrate an oral corpus that is transmitted independently from the books. It naturally follows that Kennelly has become a necessary reference in any book of Irish sayings.

In earlier collections these striking lines were typically used as the coda of poems. In "Stones and Pebbles and the Language of Heaven,"⁷⁴⁴ from *Cromwell*, the last line takes the form of an aphorism: "Utter yourself, universalise your views." It works like a maxim indicating how through language and accent - English in this instance - the coloniser gets to build an empire and rule over part of the universe. The line is also addressed to a poet, Buffún, and through him possibly to poets in general. It can be understood as

⁷⁴³ *Ibid.*, 289. ⁷⁴⁴ C, 45.

encouragement to poets to read or recite their works, but the line also mocks poets' frequently strong sense of ego: "Utter yourself, *u-ni-vers-alise*⁷⁴⁵ your views." In other words make *your* visions and *your* opinions known internationally through your verse.

A very interesting example of how Kennelly uses maxims and aphorisms appears in "Masters." The aphorism is usually positioned at the very end of the poem, here the poet chooses to play with the content of the line and illustrate it in a way that humorously attenuates its efficiency:

"Trouble is, sonnets are genetic epics.

Something in them wants to grow out of bounds.

I'm up to my bollox in sonnets" Spenser said.

Similarly in "History"⁷⁴⁷ Brendan Kennelly ends the poem with an aphorism that sticks in the reader's memory and has thus caught the attention of many critics: "History is when I decide to act." This particular line contains that which opposes the orality of the epic to the literary world. The line is felt as paradoxical because of the opposition between being and acting, that is between two conceptions of the past. Above all Brendan Kennelly seems to have launched into a quest for a poetic form that will target memory, a form that would allow for the expression of an impetus, an energy hitting against the fixity of a formal frame anchored in literary and historical tradition. The energetic blow that leads to a formal rupture can only take place if some sort of agreement exists with the reader, that is, if the reader possesses certain expectations. The "knock" takes the form of either a final explosion or on the contrary of a deflation. This structure, composed of a time of preparation followed by a climax (or a "pique" to which the poet often refers), is that of stories belonging to the oral tradition but also sonnets, riddles, epigrams and haikus – so

⁷⁴⁵ Emphasis mine.

⁷⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁷⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

many forms that Brendan Kennelly - explores in his verse. Thus in "A Relationship,"⁷⁴⁸ the urgency of the pressure on Buffún to confess his feelings for Cromwell is expressed by multiple run-on-lines which contribute to intensifying the expectation of a solution:

"Cromwell" I said, "If our relationship Is to develop, there's something I must tell You, something from which I can't escape."

Yet the final lines have the effect of "a cold shower." To the reader's surprise and disappointment, due to Cromwell's calm and his detachment, all the energy raised by Buffún's anger eventually flops in the most lamentable way:

Then we shall sit together
Outside a pub on a June afternoon
Sipping infinite pints of cool beer.
I have been brooding on this, mulling it over,
Our destinies are mingled, late and soon.
But the prospects are not good, I fear.⁷⁴⁹

In short poetic forms, the moment when the punch is being prepared is necessarily shortened, and the reduced space on the page indicates to the reader that the piece is most possibly an epigram or a haiku. An epigram is a short poem either rhymed or not, characterised by its witty vivacity. The form was particularly popular in Latin literature. In a few words, the epigram posits a situation and the last line strikes a breach, a surprising reversal. Brendan Kennelly devoted himself to this form in *Martial Art*, a translation of Martial's epigrams to which the poet added – the difference is hardly perceptible – epigrams of his own. Nonetheless in that case again, Kennelly plays upon the prospect of a punchline and he amuses himself by disappointing the reader's expectations such as in "Ouest." "Ouest." where the epigram is cut short and turned into a riddle:

⁷⁴⁸ C, 117.

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁰ MA, 74.

"My days and nights are a quest for brevity. Why?"

The haiku, from Japan, is one of these short (seventeen syllables in a 5-7-5 pattern) forms.

It evokes an impression through the juxtaposition of a natural sonorous or visual element

and a phrase suggesting a season or an emotion. Surprise is the purpose and surprise is

experienced as a relief contrasting with the fixity and brevity of this demanding form. In

this regard Sean Lucy in 1984 already wrote about Kennelly: "He has disciplined and

directed the explosive material by use of the short poem frame... The rhythms are

powerful, the language varied, strong and immediate modes as that of the best of

Kerrymen."⁷⁵¹ Yet here again Brendan Kennelly makes fun both with the form and with

his reader's expectations as he writes good along with poor haikus such as "Underworld":

under Dublin streets tonight parched rats sip freezing water by sewelight⁷⁵

Brendan Kennelly here mocks Ace, his poet character, with the inescapable anticlimax of

mediocre haikus.

The effect of these literary forms typically used in illiterate societies by wisemen, is

comparable to jokes in so far as the reader, very much like the listener, has been warned

and prepared for the punchline that is meant to happen in the end, in the final lines of the

poem. Brendan Kennelly plays upon that similarity and, integrating jokes in his books of

poems, he superimposes its dynamic (the joke is funny and invites the listener's laugh) and

an anticlimactic effect. For the poetry reader the collocation of poems with jokes is often

751 Sean Lucy, "Cromwell's Curse," *The Tablet*, 29 September 1984, 952-953.
 752 PMA, 139.

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felt like a sacrilege because his expectations as to what a book of poetry should be are partly disappointed as is the case with "Garlic":

Mac Annasbie's jokes are memorable as garlic.

Is there anyone alive he hasn't mocked?

"What do a fridge and a woman have in common?"

"I don't know, MacAnnassbie."

"They both leak when they're fucked." 753

Brendan Kennelly here underlines something common to all of these short forms aphorisms, riddles, proverbs and jokes: they are "memorable," which means they are more likely to enter an oral tradition. Indeed, Hunter (1984, 1985) has convincingly argued that there are no documented cases of pieces over 50 words long being recalled verbatim in any oral tradition without a parallel written record available to the singer."⁷⁵⁴ Surprise increases the impact of these short pieces on memory and with surprise they enter the realm of oral literature when they are orally transmitted. Surprise also discloses a new perspective on life combined with wonder that yet partakes of wisdom as opposed to philosophy. Brendan Kennelly's latest collections Martial Art, Glimpses, and Now are exclusively composed of very short poems reduced to the minimum with Now, a collection of three liners. They mark how the poet significantly turns toward oral⁷⁵⁵ wisdom and tries to open his reader's eyes onto aspects of reality often ignored.

His easiness among such forms is underlined by John McAulife: "The form soon sounds like an entirely natural instrument for Kennelly's preoccupations (and enjoyable reminiscence of Michael Hartnett's Inchicore Haiku)."⁷⁵⁶ Some of the triplets from Now

754 David C. Rubin, 6.

⁷⁵³ PMA, 49.

^{755 (}Orally transmitted) or (orally transmitted and composed) or (orally composed) and in which the oral mind prevails.

756 John McAulife, Irish Times 20 January 2007, 114.

directly refer to those oral 757 ancient wisdoms to which Brendan Kennelly seems to aspire. but again they belong to the oral mind more than to philosophy that is proper to the literary mind:

> "Now, what I need most," he says, "is a wise irrefutable Oriental proverb to lie at my side and gentle me to sleep."

The joke, as an oral phenomenon, is turned into the subject of a poem: "The Joke." The piece is extremely patchy and is only contained through the framing technique. This fragmentary quality reflects how jokes are passed on through very different people, through different spaces, time and social classes. Recurrent oral formulae that typically announce a joke in Ireland and that partake of an announcement technique that was also largely used by troubadours and bards in "Come all yes," are integrated in the poem:

> "Did ya hear this one? It's a bloody howl. All about a stupid man."759

The joke is surprise, the joke is laughter but the joke is also memory and certain mechanisms that lead to an automatic reaction, hence:

> And so it came to pass That when he heard the joke He was back in a parody of catechism class.

Question: Who made the world?

Answer: A little pig.

With his tail curled

Question: What is the definition

Of the ultimate Kerryman?

Answer: A Corkman

Who fucks pigs. 760

^{757 (}Orally transmitted) or (orally transmitted and composed) or (orally composed) and in which the oral mind prevails. 758 FS, 420.

⁷⁵⁹ FS, 419.

⁷⁶⁰ Ibid., 420.

In these lines Brendan Kennelly points out the mechanisms of joke (that is paralleled with the way catechism was taught in the Forties in Ireland) but in amalgamating the jokes (and changing their context) he transforms them into riddles with a metaphorical edge. In the poem, he also defuses some widely circulated jokes that are still heard nowadays so as to enable his reader to think about them:

When he made love, he wore two contraceptives To be sure to be sure.

When he listened to sport on the radio
He burned his ear.

If you wanted to touch his mind
You put your hand on his bum⁷⁶¹

The poet is acutely aware of the joke as an oral⁷⁶² phenomenon whose survival depends on oral transmission that involves repetition:

Spill me, spill me, the black rain sang, Tell me, tell me again, I'm good laugh, good laugh, good laugh.⁷⁶³

Writing the jokes and integrating them in books of poetry is a way to call attention to this particular way of playing with words and it makes tangible the shock necessarily involved by the passage from the oral to the written form.

A consequence of Kennelly's skill at creating a striking short and memorable idiom is that many of his lines are being orally circulated in Ireland. For instance: "All songs are living ghosts / And long for a living voice" from "Living Ghosts" is often quoted on RTE Radio, and some of his verse has been turned into slogans such as "The best way to serve the age is to betray it." However, such lines are very often misquoted. One notes

⁷⁶² Orally transmitted.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid.

⁷⁶³ *Ibid.*, 421

⁷⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 463.

⁷⁶⁵ BOJ, 17.

that the original has a paradoxical nature that is satisfying but does not always have a type of rhythm that is sufficiently familiar to listeners / readers to be easily memorable. These instances verify Rubin's claim that the absence of a strong rhythmical structure results in a lack of stability in oral transmission. Other quotations by Kennelly such as "Expression is the enemy of depression," have entered the realm of formulae orally circulated in Ireland. The saying is quoted as a piece of wisdom by Gabriel Fitzmaurice who, in a comment upon Denis O'Driscoll, writes: "Expression, it has been said, is the opposite of depression." Most interestingly, one notes that in this case the saying has become anonymous.

III.1.2 Children's Games and the Metaphysics of Childhood

Surprise is the common element to all the short forms examined in the work of Brendan Kennelly. Yet surprise in his poetry is not final, on the contrary it opens a new perspective of investigation. The sense of wonder is cultivated in order to lead the reader towards questioning his reality: "Poetry is, among other things, an interrogatory art, an art of relentless questioning." And this sense of wonder is what the wise man shares with the philosopher but also the child. We may note in passing that the cosmogonic question as to how the world came about is one of the prime preoccupations of the human mind. "Experimental child-psychology has shown that a large part of the questions put by a sixyear-old are actually of a cosmogonic nature, as for instance: What makes water run? The intensity of children's interrogation is most efficiently conveyed in "Poem

⁷⁶⁶ Deirdre Mulrooney, no title, http://ccst.ie/pa/Fall&Recover(DM).pdf, 25 June 2004.

⁷⁶⁷ Gabriel Fitzmaurice, Beat the Goatskin, 182.

⁷⁶⁸ JIJ, 36.

⁷⁶⁹ Huizinga, 107.

from a Three Year Old."⁷⁷⁰ Except for one very long paratactic sentence in which punctuation progressively disappears, the poem is made of a series of existential questions:

And will the flower die? And will the people die?

And every day do you grow old, do I grow old, no I'm not old, do flowers grow old?

Old things – do you throw them out?

Do you throw old people out? ...

The poem ends up with the ultimate interrogation: "And why?" Patrick Kavanagh once said: "One must beware of being too logical about anything. If we go on in a logical way we come to cage bars. We must not ask the ultimate question. "WHY?" is God."⁷⁷¹ A possible way to comment upon this would be to say "why" is wonder without limit, "why" is the utmost opening towards what we cannot comprehend. Brendan Kennelly is interested in the question, not so much in the answer. This is what distinguishes his poetry from philosophy. Wisdom was concerned with wonder and meditating over the mysteries of nature. It constituted a first and necessary step towards philosophy, that is a stage when concepts are elaborated and logical connections highlighted and examined.

Archaic thought, brooding in rapture on the mysteries of Being, is hovering here and over the border-line between sacred poetry, profoundest wisdom, mysticism and sheer verbal mystification... The poet-priest is continually knocking at the door of the Unknowable, closed to him as to us. All we can say of these venerable texts is that in them we are witnessing the birth of philosophy, not in vain play but in sacred play.⁷⁷²

⁷⁷² Huizinga, 107.

⁷⁷⁰ FS, 59.

Patrick Kavanagh, Collected Pruse, "Signpost," 26.

The word "Why" concludes "Poem from a Three Year Old" but also many other poems by Brendan Kennelly.⁷⁷³ In a different way the fourth section of *A Small Light* intermingles contemplation of nature, personal anxiety and cosmogonic interrogation:

Bits of mud and twigs Showering from the sky In a hail of words, Each word asking why.⁷⁷⁴

The following tercet from Now 775

Now he dreams of mercy. Why? Because a child hiding behind a nameless tree begins to cry.

seems an exception since the question "why?" is followed by a causal phrase "Because ..."

The rhetorical construction however sounds hollow. This causal phrase is loaded with unanswered questions from the "nameless tree" to the actual reason for the child's tears, and the rhyming of "cry" with "why," even if the question is not asked, calls for and ends with the reader's interrogation: "why?"

The capacity for interrogating the world around us is characteristic of the child, of the wise man and it appears in early verse from Celtic bards.⁷⁷⁶ However, poles apart with these, Kennelly also evokes people whose life has been so harsh as to kill the child in them and thus extinguish the sense of wonder and the ability to question things. This state of

⁷⁷³ C, 40.

Ibid., 54.

Ibid., 62.

Ibid., 113.

Ibid., 154.

N. 23.

Ibid., 31.

Ibid., 39.

FS, 383.

⁷⁷⁴ FS, 383.

⁷⁷⁵ N. 31.

⁷⁷⁶ John Matthews, "The Story of the Bards," The Bardic Source Book, 17.

mind is usually twinned with a burdensome sense of fate such as for those who had to leave Ireland because the land was so poor:

Like members of your own family who Couldn't find work at home and had to slave So hard in other countries they forgot to ask why.⁷⁷⁷

Another version of a similar process is evoked in "The Lugworms Know"778:

But about noon, with my sandshovel, I go To the beach and dig some lugworms up. I peer at them for hours and then I laugh And laugh. Why? Can't say. The lugworms know.

Similarly in "She,"⁷⁷⁹ the horror She has been through prevents her from questioning things:

She sees Ruth Lynn hanged by the hair of the head Anne Butler's brains scattered on stones Toole McCann cut in pieces Jane Hazleton die Giles Whitehead burn

She does not ask why.

For Brendan Kennelly poetry must strive at seeing things in a new way that is with the eyes of a child because «Le génic n'est que l'enfance retrouvée à volonté. »⁷⁸⁰ His approach is a struggle against the blind impression that things are known, but poetry is tempted by blindness, and maybe even bound to blindness:

our eyes on the tree we can sec,

⁷⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷⁷⁷ C, 40.

⁷⁷⁹ Ibid., 62.

⁷⁸⁰ Trans. mine: "Genius is nothing but childhood regained at will." Charles Baudelaire, « Le Peintre de la vie moderne » in *Critique d'art*, Gallimard, 1992, 350.

will not see.

Have you ever seen anything so still? Have you ever seen anything so wild? I've tried not to murder the child

but the blindness of poetry I see, tells me I must. Murder the child, yes, I must. I shall lay him out in the dust⁷⁸¹

In order to recall the ability that is the child's, Kennelly often uses heavy repetitive patterns. These are typical of children's oral⁷⁸² games. About these, Ruth Finnegan writes:

It is easy to overlook such oral poetry. This is a special temptation to the scholar and those committed to "high culture" whose preconceptions all tend to direct attention towards written literature as the characteristic locations of poetry. Oral forms are often just not noticed – particularly by those who are near – by a contemporary.⁷⁸³

In calling attention to the poetry at work in children's oral⁷⁸⁴ games Brendan Kennelly turns himself into a fresh listener so it is possible for the reader to listen and see anew with him. This is achieved by borrowing formal characteristics of children's games. Consequently cosmogonic interrogations in his work are often expressed within highly repetitive poems as is the case in "Poem from a Three Year Old." The piece is 45 lines long, most of which would include one of the words "old," "flower," "people," "dirt" and "petal" that are gathered in many combinations throughout the 45 lines. This results throughout the poem in a haunting effect that one also encounters in troubadours' form as the villanelle or the sestina. In the first eight lines "old" is repeated seven times. This is reinforced by auditory repetitions of [51] in "people," "petal" and "old." Another instance of such repetition that is directly inspired by children's chain games is the line "One for

⁷⁸¹ PMA, 340.

⁷⁸² There is no written support in them.

⁷⁸³ Ruth Finnegan, 5.

⁷⁸⁴ Orally (transmitted), (transmitted and composed), (composed).

sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl, four for a boy" that punctuates *Poetry My Arse*. 785 The game is also used in *The Man Made of Rain* but this time in a vertical way that changes the ritual rhyme:

One for bones and flesh Two for school three for a bright lad four for a fool five for glad giving six for peace seven for loving⁷⁸⁶

This game is used as a magical exorcism against the bad luck that a sole magpie is supposed to bring when he is seen without a fellow magpie at his side. Kennelly's title *The House That Jack Did not Build* is also taken from a children's rhyme, "The House That Jack Built." This type of repetition usually heard among children partakes of many oral poems and oral games. Besides, one should also recall that haikus were originally "a game of chain-rhymes begun by one player and continued by the next." **

III.1.3 Myth and Mythology

III.1.3.1 Myth as Useful Lics

Cosmogonic questions are often answered by living myths. In its negative form, a living myth can be understood as a lie but myth is also that which feeds the human need for an explanation when a rational and logical chain of events cannot be provided. "In myth, primitive man seeks to account for the world of phenomena by grounding it in the Divine. In all the wild imaginings of ancient mythology a fanciful spirit is playing on the border-

⁷⁸⁶ MMOR, 32.

⁷⁸⁸ Huizinga, 124.

⁷⁸⁵ PMA, 272, 4.

⁷⁸⁷ Gerold Sedlmayr, Brendan Kennelly's Literary Works, 57.

line between jest and earnest."⁷⁸⁹ This is true of children but this is also true of most oral societies. Thus, in ancient Greece pre-Socratic philosophers, Socrates and Plato himself had recourse to myth to provide explanation. In a living myth, the line between what is believed and what is not has not been clearly drawn. Hence when it comes to history, historians cannot tell where historical truth ends and where mythical truth begins. Similarly with children, when a story is delivered to them, credulity and incredulity often merge. The myth satisfies not only the need for cosmogonic explanation but also the need to wonder. In that respect, Kennelly's approach to myth is close to that of the earliest philosophers: "their solutions came not by reflections and argument but by flashes of insight. It is always the same old cosmogonic teasers, propounded since time immemorial in riddle-form and solved in myth." Paradoxically, living myth can answer wonder by wonder. It is then often abundant with enormities, extravagance and a lack of moderation. The rural community from which Brendan Kennelly came was primitive in many respects, and primitive in particular with regards to the fundamental place myth played in it.

The poct's allusion to Platonic myths are discrete yet undeniable as in "poemprayer." The poem begins with a free quotation from Plato: "he escaped then from the prison of his body." The paradigm of the cave developed in Plato's *Republic* is also a pervasive myth in Kennelly's poetry where the image of the cage or of the cave (as Brendan Kennelly calls the room where he composes) is often combined with the idea of blindness as in "It will be".

It will be a darkness deeper than you've known since the sun lit the wet blade of the plough driven by a man in a field outside a town unpeopled now.

⁷⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁷⁹¹ *Ibid*., 116.

⁷⁹² BOJ, 300.

⁷⁹³ PMA, 219.

Most interestingly in "Screaming streets" Perendan Kennelly uses the myth of love as exposed by Plato through Socrates in *The Symposium*. In this dialogue, Love is described as the child of Penia (deprivation, poverty and loneliness). In his poem Brendan Kennelly combines elements characteristic of myth. The latter finds its origin in serial interrogations, that are "like one hell of a question." The truth of living myth escapes the grasp of time and history: "Seconds were centuries," and myth provides a useful lie:

Ace turned a corner
in a mucky city street,
saw love
begging in the rain,
blue fingers gripping a white bowl
darkness coming on
like one hell of a question.

"I love you," he said.

Seconds were centuries.

"I know," love replied

Old streets were screaming that he lied.

Living myth plays with the thin line between lies and truth, belief and disbelief, the possible and the impossible. Myth is no frivolous lie but a necessity for the construction of humanity. Myth can thus be seen as a useful lie. It is useful for two essential reasons that Brendan Kennelly explores in his work: living myth provides wonder and explanation but it also provides a shelter against a truth that is unbearable. In that sense myth possesses a tragic dimension. Myth is according to Nietzsche "a pragmatic lie." In The Book of Judas, most particularly Kennelly dives into an exploration of living myth and into its extension that are lies. Many of his poems depict situations where tragedy bursts out with

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⁷⁹⁴ PMA, 134.

⁷⁹⁵ Brendan Kennelly's interest in Platonic philosophy is confirmed by the numerous photocopies of Plato's text, expecially related to art, among his private papers.

⁷⁹⁶ Emmanuel Diet, Nietzsche et les métamorphose du divin (Paris: Edition du Cerf, 1972), 43.

truth when living myth (at a personal level) that often involves self-delusion, has been shattered. This is the case in "Honest" where the woman describes how escape into myth is forbidden to her. The last quatrain in iambic pentameters sounds Judas' truth about the necessity for certain lies:

> "Your husband's honest, dear, but sick: An honest man with a dishonest prick. I too shall be as candid as I can: Your tragedy is you chose an honest man."

"Honest" features in every line with such insistence as to oblige the reader to question the notion of honesty. What the quatrain reminds the reader of is that tragedy cannot proceed when myth is maintained. This is the reason why in Greek tragedy the living myths as people commonly believed in have been transformed (e.g. Aeschylus and Sophocles turn Oedipus into a self-blinded man) so that "the hero ceases to be regarded as a model and becomes instead an object of debate." While myths provide answers, tragedy forces us to interrogate human condition and exposes enigmatic questions that do not have any solution. In the present poem, the living myth of the good husband "Urbane, educated, ambitious, honest" has been exploded, put to death and executed by the husband himself, his "executive stress" and his "honesty." But living myth is also the necessary substance on which the poets feed. W.B. Yeats invented his own myths as he turned to magic and made his own the mythological heroes of ancient Ireland and similarly Patrick Kavanagh insisted that his survival as a poet depends on myth. The painful trouble of a poet without a living myth is expressed by Patrick Kavanagh in "Personal Problem." After evoking myths such as the sacredness of the cow in India, the poet tells about the void left in his heart by the absence of a personal myth:

⁷⁹⁸ Jean-Pierre Vernant, Myth and Thought among the Greeks, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books; Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006), 196.

799 Patrick Kavanagh, Selected Poems, 145.

Personal Problem

To take something as a subject, indifferent
To personal affection, I have been considering
Some old saga as an instrument
To play upon without the person suffering
From the tiring years. But I can only
Tell of my problem without solving
Anything. If I could rewrite a famous tale
Or perhaps return to a midnight calving,
This cow sacred on a Hindu scale —

So there it is my friends. What am I to do With the void growing more awful every hour? I lacked a classical discipline. I grew Uncultivated and now the soil turns sour, Heroes enormous who do astounding deeds — Out of this world. Only thus can I attune To despair an illness like winter alone in Leeds.

This poem bears a particular importance for Brendan Kennelly who suggested to Antoinette Quinn to close her *Selected Poems* on this piece⁸⁰⁰ and who very often examined it with his students. For a poet, living myth has to be intimately connected with the self and cannot be "indifferent / To personal affection." A poet without a myth or "a theme" as Brendan Kennelly also calls it,⁸⁰¹ is a poet threatened by loss of inspiration. The search for a myth and the pain of its absence is also Yeats's theme in the "Circus Animal's Desertion":

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain. I sought it daily for six weeks or so.

The poet subsequently enumerates the myths that he made his and that inspired him to write: Oisin, the Countless Cathleen, Cúchulainn... Most strikingly the last line expresses how a myth should be both universal and personal to the poet in order to move him to write:

⁸⁰⁰ In communication with Brendan Kennelly, June 2004.

⁸⁰¹ Personal notes from classes with Brendan Kennelly, 2003.

It was the dream itself enchanted me: Character isolated by a deed To engross the present and dominate memory.

The essential link between the poet, his myth and the necessary delusion that goes with poetry writing is evoked by Kennelly in "Out of the visioncloud."802 The relationship between Kanooce and Ace is humorously paralleled with famous poets (contrasting with Ace who is only a caricature of a poet):

> How do I know what Satan thinks of Milton or Poldy Bloom of Mr Joyce or Crazy Jane of Mr Yeats or Heaven and Hell of Mr Blake or Cuchulain of Anonymous?

Kanooce, a double of Cúchulainn and Ace's mythical creature threatens the poet with tearing out the myth that keeps them united. Confronted with impending tragedy Ace's panic is instantaneous:

> No! No! screamed Ace, not now, not here, I want to see it as I see it, not as you think I ought to, and certainly not as you do. The way I see it is the way that's true for me and therefore everyone I see. 803

Myth fulfils a deep human need, a need to wonder and its rarefication allows Brendan Kennelly to deplore "post-human poetry famined of the primitive-miraculous." 804

⁸⁰² PMA, 163.

⁸⁰³ *Ibid.*, 174. 804 *Ibid.*, 342.

III.1.3.2 Myth versus Mythology

While myth is alive and remains so through the spoken word, mythology could be defined as myth run dead or petrified in the written word. In his *Preface to Plato*, Eric Havelock underlines how to be personal a myth has to be political, that is, it has to echo the society in which the individual listener lives. This explains the need felt by Brendan Kennelly to readjust mythological references to modern society and situations in which his readers and listeners will recognize themselves:

The men who act [in the myth] must be the kind of men whose actions would involve the public law and the family law of the group. They must therefore be "political" men in the most general sense of that term, men whose acts, passions, and thoughts will affect the behaviour and the fate of the society in which they live so that the things they do will send out vibrations into the farthest confines of this society, and the whole apparatus becomes alive and performs motions which are paradigmatic. 805

While myth belongs to the live memory of a community, mythology belongs to the dead but longer term memory of the books. While myth is comic and playful, mythology is often serious and austere:

Living myth knows no distinction between play and seriousness. Only when myth has become mythology, that is, literature, borne along as traditional lore by a culture which has in the meantime more or less outgrown the primitive imagination, only then will the contrast between play and seriousness apply to myth – and to its detriment. 806

Brendan Kennelly's approach to ancient mythology both Greek and Irish attempted to restitute to mythology its connection to life and its humour. In other words, the poet's comprehension of mythology is a challenge to linear time and the seemingly inescapable degradation of living myth into mythology. His purpose both in his teaching and in his poetry is to turn ancient mythology into myth. Living myth belongs both to the collective

806 Huizinga, 129-130.

⁸⁰⁵ Havelock, 167.

and to the personal, but ancient mythology is often experienced as estranged from us, being part of a different time and space, detached from our day and age. Brendan Kennelly worked on restituting to ancient mythology its connection to us. In class he would do it by asking his students to rewrite great mythological stories or to stage some of these. The personal and emotional link that existed between these stories and their audience when they still were living myths was worked upon through titles of essays such as "Imagine you are Juno."807 Similarly in his poetry, mythological traces are integrated within poems that allow the reader to identify with a situation. Ancient mythology is present in a noninvasive way.

Unlike W.B. Yeats or certain contemporary poets making heavy use of ancient mythology. Brendan Kennelly is careful to keep ancient mythology at a secondary level, enriching the poem but not obscuring it since ancient mythology, unlike living myth has lost its close connection with most people nowadays and few would have any acquaintance with mythological stories. Thus the links to ancient mythology are discreet as in "By the ears":

> Janey Mary grabbed him by the ears and said "Sweep the caution out of your heart, stand up and sing, what use to man or God if you're clever and tame-blooded?"808

In doing so, Janey Mary's position is lined up with that of Deirdre of the Sorrows. She becomes a heroine in the wake of great heroines from Irish ancient mythology who entice their lovers to become heroes rather than contemplative men. One notes that the scene is sufficiently explicit for the reader to grasp the contrast between the two characters. Similarly, when Etain is mentioned, her characteristic is specified so that the reference will

 $^{^{807}}$ In communicatin wit Professor Joris Duytschaever, May 2007. 808 PMA, 337.

be understood: "The old grey Liffeyrat got in touch with Etain the shape-changer / and had a go at being humans." 809

In "No Solution," Deirdre and Emer become two middle class women, the new rich type whose sorrows flow in the Sunday papers:

Corner table, Deirdre of the Fashionable Sorrows,
Black-hatted, literate paradigm of
Middle-class prosperity:
 "And how are you?"
"Actually, to be brutally true,
I've just been having a ferocious tête-à-tête
With Emer on the subject of estranged husbands."

This Deirdre is not the usual "literate paradigm" in so far as this woman is extremely mundane and in that respect most readers would recognise in her something of a person they know. Humour makes a new entrance in this mythological reference as the ruthlessness of the epic is maintained yet through expressions casually used in common talk: "to be brutally true" and "a ferocious tête-à-tête," so that the attempted shift from ancient mythology to living myth is extremely comical. The linguistic snobbish habit of dropping French words in a conversation, typical of the Irish middle class and new Irish rich society, is pointed out with the "tête-à-tête." While in the context of epic mythology a "ferocious tête-à-tête" would amount to head-butting at least and most possibly to a good deal of blood being spilt, here despite the exaggeration in the talk, it most certainly refers to a one-to-one confidential chat.

In "Child of the Sword," state in a comparable way the mythological reference is most explicit and even explanatory as the poet narrates the mythological story in order to have the link and relevance to the present clarified. One marks that the typical goriness of epic mythology persists in the present time of the poem. The victim can be viewed as any

⁸⁰⁹ Ibid., 325.

BOJ, 216.

⁸¹¹ BOJ, 163.

young Irish person and "line" can refer to the train but also to poetry, for St Bridget is also the patron saint of artists and poets:

Somebody stabbed somebody up the line, I ran to the victim, his neck was bloody.

There beside him lay Saint Bridget's Peace Cross. It said, "One day, a beggar called to her Asking for alms." Bridget looked in the man's eyes And seeing whatever she saw there

Gave him her father's sword. Today, right here, A child of that sword stabbed a man in the neck, He's quiet in his blood now, tonight he'll be raving, 812

III.1.3.3 Myth and Gossip

When living myths have become extinct and have fallen into the category of ancient mythology, the group has to provide itself with new myths of which gossip can be viewed as a subcategory. Gossip indeed in common with living myth is an oral phenomenon (it is orally transmitted) born out of the need to wonder, to inflate reality but also out of the delight in what is experienced by gossip mongers as harmless viciousness. Gossip creates a loose chain talk in which every link feels safe and anonymous and one can thus revel in his / her own tyrannical momentary power while still comfortably enjoying a degree of innocence. However, even if oral transmission is involved, in comparison with ballads or orally transmitted literature, and chain games, gossip presents very little stability. "The changes that occur in the transmission of rumors in the laboratory are so great that after a message passes through a handful of people it is often difficult to see any relation to the original." In his poetic investigation of living myth, Brendan Kennelly turns to gossip as

⁸¹² Ibid., 164.

⁸¹³ David C. Rubin, 7.

an extension of myth. Gossip was an activity of primary importance in the poet's background. Everybody talked of everybody, and talking was what was done best:

Life in Ballylongford was lived as annotated text. Things happened; they were described, and they were commented on. Ballylongford was a small village and gossip ran like a stream through its streets. In a place so poor, there was often nothing to share but talk. Much of the talk was wonderful... but much of it was cruel and vicious and meant to wound. Talk was the solution in which the horrible things were preserved and kept for inspection. 814

The proximity between living myths and gossip, and between present and past through them, is most strikingly exposed in "Gods and Servants." The poem begins with the pleasure of oral transmission and ends on the power of the teller:

> A summit meeting of yesterdays and tomorrows Shows one last king and his obstreperous fool Trying, failing to unlock me

For I was present when the legends said They'd be my gods and servants if I trapped them in my head. 815

In *Poetry My Arse*, through his character The Mouth, Brendan Kennelly personifies that love for talk and gossip in Dublin. Anything can be said as long as it is entertaining:

"First I spread the yarn that Hopkins was a secret alco screwing a businessman's wife from Dublin 4. Then I added this proxy whore from stoneybatter plus a brothel in Fairview. Next, the drugs

spiced with a deal, half of a million, what a ball!" *816

⁸¹⁴ Richard White, Remembering Ahanagran: Storytelling in a Family's Past (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 93.

⁸¹⁵ BOJ, 272.

⁸¹⁶ PMA, 190.

This section is clearly prosaic and syntactically relies on heavy accumulation marked by the verbs and by the logical connections systematically placed at the beginning of every sentence. Just like a legend, gossip has to be inflated out of any reasonable proportion. Gossip, like myth, is alive in its oral shape and its nature changes as it is written down. Brendan Kennelly, as a poet brought up in the oral tradition, pays special attention to that type of talk that "cannot" be written or if it is written it yet remains somehow in between oral and written. In that respect the status of the gutter press is rather interesting as it is a written continuation of oral gossip and unsurprisingly constitutes a flourishing industry in Ireland. Just like oral gossip written gossip is based on its author's vanity and his or her sense of self-importance. This could be one of the reasons why Kennelly included a piece by gossip columnist and mistress to Taoiseach Charles Haughey, Terry Keane from the Sunday Independent in his anthology Dublines. These various dimensions have been encapsulated in "Reading Lesson" 817:

When the green demons insist "You matter" Ace reads the Dublin gutter and finds what can't be written on paper.

Did Brendan Kennelly choose his demons to be green as the sign of a particular Irish trait? Green is also the colour of jealousy and the colour of a Jameson bottle. The impression that the true nature of gossip can hardly be captured by writing is also insisted on by historian Richard White, in his attempt at writing down for his reader the type of gossip circulated in Ballylongford in his mother's time:

the story, as told in whispers, is about people everyone knew, but in print the story seems at once less malicious and more cruel. The story whispered in Ballylongford is gossip whose principals are well known. There is no malice in placing the story on the page, but that seems all the more cruel. 818

818 Richard White, 94.

⁸¹⁷ PMA, 133.

In "Rumour," ⁸¹⁹ Kennelly lends his voice to the rumour and highlights the dynamic of the transmission, a chain game that is not so far – if a lot less innocent – from children's chain games:

Now you're moving, baby. 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 -

The length of the poem reflects the length of the gossip chain whose origin, most of the time, has been lost. One marks how the sexual nature of the rumour is transferred to the conveyer of the gossip. As "mouth me" is repeated the link with the character, "The Mouth" becomes more obvious. And the creativity of gossip is underlined in this poem just as it is also studied in *Poetry My Arse*. "Gossip has many features in common with poetry. They are both born of hunger; mental and emotional, intellectual, physical hunger of various kinds." Yet, what Kennelly celebrates and underlines, although the word does not appear, is a residual form of orality still powerfully at work in Ireland: "In a culture where the impulse to caricature is so widespread, 'normal' and strong, its influence naturally and inevitably spreads into language, emotions, attitudes to tolerance and justice and what passes for ideas. On the whole, anecdotes and yarns replace ideas." As a poet, Brendan Kennelly feeds on this aspect of Irish society from which he largely draws a form and a material that allows us to call his verse "pre-philosophical."

⁸¹⁹ FS, 450.

⁸²⁰ PMA, preface, 14.

⁸²¹ *Ibid*.

Very much like the magic of early Irish bards, gossip substitutes the reputation of a person for the person herself / himself. Somebody is thus attacked through his good name, that gossip degrades. The resorts of gossip are in that respect identical to that of satire, only satire has a known source while gossip is most of the time anonymous. Critical distance does not exist in the gossip world. The name is the person and the talk is the truth. This absence of any distance between words and what they designate provides Brendan Kennelly with rich material. The ozzie poems in *The Book of Judas* nearly suggest a narrator with an illiterate mind for whom writing is essentially based on aural perception: "Jesus" is then taken no longer as an abstract swear-word, said and not written, but it is taken literally:

but everywun sez jesus dis an jesus dat pay de jesus rent by us a jesus pint till i get de jesus dole

but who de jesus hell was he sez ozzie i dunno sez i yoor jesus iggerant sez he shuv yoor iggerance up yoor bleedin hole⁸²²

In "Let Me Be the Thing I am" the poem is told in the voice of someone whom gossip has cruelly mythified, a voice that could be Brendan Kennelly's own:

Above all, I pray you, do not fabricate me, Don't make me a butt, a scapegoat, a paradigm, Ne plus ultra, sine qua non, epitome Of this or that.

Don't make my lie your truth, my truth your lie.

The first stanza highlights the caricaturing and simplification at work in gossip. The picture drawn by gossip has to be simple, inflated, striking and memorable. The oxymoronic final line indicates the fusion of lies and truth within gossip. In this area of talk, what is said

823 Ibid., 279.

⁸²² BOJ, 42.

becomes the truth independently of anything else. Like living myth, gossip invents what it fails to understand. Interestingly Brendan Kennelly chose to express this reality through an oral or pre-philosophical way, that is the association of antagonistic polarities: "Don't make my lie your truth, my truth your lie."

Gossip being essentially an oral phenomenon, air is the element where it lives. Images of asphyxia in Brendan Kennelly's work are then very often related to a claustrophobic space saturated with rumour and gossip. Among other works, the poet applies the metaphor to his own family house in Ballylongford in "Taking the Air." "Kincaid" is an anagram of "Cain kid" that Brendan Kennelly might apply to himself as a child. Such reference also appears in *Glimpses* in "Wrong Words":

Don't tell me you can't remember the hammer in your hand.
Ten years old, you flung it at his head, missed.
After that, he watched what he said.
Wrong words sin Cain in the blood. 825

In "Taking the Air," "the house of Allo Kincaid" refers to Brendan Kennelly's family pub, that is the center where gossip is exchanged in the village:

The Shadow said, "This village may soon find itself without air, People find life difficult, I fear."

The shadow sneered, vanished through the wall. Allo Kincaid frayed at the door of his house, Said "I fear the gossip of men and women Words are poison in this place."

Though each breath rhymes with death, I'm breathing still Relishing, as it kill me, what has the power to kill. 826

⁸²⁴ BOJ, 268.

⁸²⁵ G, 11.

Similarly in *The Crooked Cross*, the village's pub is a place where gossip is circulated. In "Satire in Flann O'Brien's *The Poor Mouth*," Brendan Kennelly quotes a passage that might have provided him with this image of rarefied atmosphere in an Irish place:

There was another house two hundred yards down the road from us and one day when our smell was extremely bad the folks there cleared out, went to America and never returned.⁸²⁸

Even if in his comment Kennelly does not mention gossip as an instance of language misuse, gossip perfectly corresponds to the characteristics of that smell described by Flann O'Brien. Kennelly too, used the trope of the overpowering stench in the *Crooked Cross*. There were certainly many causes for people leaving the country and Kerry was one of the regions that were the most badly hit by immigration. A major reason was the lack of land and the lack of any prospect of making money, however, another reason for emigration was also to escape local talk. This was particularly true of expecting mothers who had become pregnant outside the bond of marriage. These were many in North Kerry and in Ballylongford as in other villages, at mass they were asked to walk up the aisle on their own while everybody in the parish was watching them. In his book, Richard White narrated the story of his aunt Kitty, who had been made pregnant by a local womanizer and explains: "Kitty had little choice but to leave; if she had stayed, the talk would have been vicious."

In an interview with Siobhán Mc Sweeney, 830 Brendan Kennelly describes the people from his village in these terms:

^{\$26} BOJ, 268.

⁸²⁷ JIJ, 183.

⁸²⁸ Ihid.

⁸²⁹ Richard White, 26.

⁸³⁰ Siobhan Mc Sweeney, transcript of interview with Brendan Kennelly, Dublin 2 February 1981, n.p.

In their more essential moments, in their more characteristic moments, the people were always expressing themselves either in terms of a song or a story or an interest in character. There was a great deal of gossip where I grew up: really intense and highly penetrating gossip about personality.

More than archaeology, Kennelly's interest clearly is for the living word, hence the way he humorously hints at Seamus Heaney's poetic approach to the bog people in "Fascist?":

> Deep in the bog, Kanooce starts to dig. He unbogs four corpses, one headless, in an hour. Ace whips him back to Dublin in a hurry. 831

The last line is however ambiguous. Is the pronoun "him" referring to Kanooce or to the corpse without a head, that is without a mouth? Once again the walk here evoked is a quest for fresh air:

> "Take him, for a stroll through the wildest bog in Offaly," suggested the psyche, "he might love the open spaces, freshest of fresh air

Free him from Dublin's babbling poisons."

Yet a part of the poet feeds on Dublin's gossip so that a corpse without a mouth would not do for Ace who comes home "breathless":

> Back home, Ace, breathless, snarls: "Fuck you, psyche, for advising me and my supportive dog to risk fresh air in that murder-cluttered bog!"

The couplet that concludes the poem confirms the poet's ambivalent attitude towards gossip:

> Psyche cowers, cringes, craves release in unpolluted deep, decapitated peace.

⁸³¹ PMA, 258.

A "decapitated peace," that is a peace from mouths. Bog people are nonetheless too quiet for Ace (and maybe for Brendan Kennelly) whose people really are "gobpeople."

III.1.3.4 Myth in Brendan Kennelly's Background

Living myth always comprehends a certain amount of something fabulous. Living myth is also fabula (story, tale) that is, in an Irish context, myth is a type of story. Brendan Kennelly comes from a village where living myth defines the landscape. Every ruin, road, path, hill, wall, pond, church, nearly every bush is related to the world of myth. In Ballylongford myth is rooted in the supernatural but also in history and violence. In this region of Ireland the myths are orally transmitted through time. Like most oral narrative they get distorted, the teller makes them his own according to his own self but also according to the demand of the present time for living myth only remains alive as it keeps being told and maintains some relevance to the present listeners. Local bards play an essential part in keeping the myths alive. The link to what factually happened does not really matter. What matters is the truth of the teller that is his / her genuine feelings about the myths and the belief and sense of awe and wonder among the listeners:

Kerry wants not just the story but the very facts themselves to meet the times. Kerry wants a past that meets the demands of the present; it wants present events and past events to connect and even to merge. Kerry is inventive: it will alter the cut of the past to fit present fashions. 832

When the myths have been transmitted to him in a powerful way through repetitions and through good telling, the teller is capable of convincing himself that he lived and witnessed things that he never attended including events that took place long before he was born. This conviction leads to sincerity in his / her delivery. The living myth that belongs to

⁸³² Richard White, 49.

collective memory thus becomes personal memory. Richard White encountered the phenomenon in Teresa, a woman from Ballylongford:

"I used to hear the stories," Teresa says, "I used to tell the stories as a child." The stories were so compelling that she actually became part of the stories. She was hiding out on the dike when the Black and Tans came. She was in the fields "on the moonlight night." But Teresa says now, "I wasn't even born." These stories matter. They are powerful tools, and the closer you get to County Kerry, the more powerful they become. 833

These myths involve a good deal of self-delusion yet they were essential in this society. They provided entertainment, wonder but also a sense of heroism. This power of living myth on an everyday basis is often the hallmark of a primitive and oral society that has not yet taken the step to rationality and to the literate mind. This is not to say that in Brendan Kennelly's childhood people in North Kerry could not write. Most were literate or semiliterate but the share occupied by talk, gossip and myth was of such overwhelming importance that despite literacy they would have to be called an oral society. Myth structured time and space. Richard White says: "Little was what it seemed in this landscape. Nothing was reliably only the here and now."834 The fox announced impending death, fairies lived in mounds in fields, there was a holy well at the Holly's, Guyney's Hole inspired fear, a horse had drowned there. "Between Ballylongford and Ballybunion there was an enchanted village that appeared from beneath the waters once every seven years."835 Treasure hunters had been deterred by underground bulls that came out as they dug. Galvin's Gate was haunted and should be avoided at night. These local myths were strongly rooted in the place: "In Dublin these stories are out of place. When they were alive in memory, they were part of the land itself. They were about the land and its features. They were the landscape people moved through." In Dublin Brendan Kennelly

⁸³³ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁸³⁴ Ibid., 56.

³³⁵ Ibid

was a dislocated Kerryman, yet these Kerry myths continued to mark his verse even if discretely so. In "Dream of a Black Fox" and "The Black Fox, Again" the black fox is a source of fear not only in himself, because of the nature of the dream but also because in Kerry the fox announces death:

> The black fox, big as a pony, Circled and circled, Whimsical executioner. Torment dripping like saliva from its jaws. 836

In "The Brown Man,"837 a short story by Gerald Griffin, every night the Brown Man, his dog and the horse go to feed on human flesh in the local graveyard. In Ballylongford it was believed that if you hurt yourself in a graveyard your wound would never heal. Once, in a story located in the Thirties, two hunters let their hounds in the Aghavallen churchyard, and they raised a hare. One of the men had a stick and beat him dead. The hare cried like a human being. After that the hand that had held the stick began to rot. No doctor could heal him. There was something unearthly about the wound and the man died shortly after. 838

In Kennelly's poem "Family Affairs," living myths, History and personal history are tightly interwoven through the reference to the song "Margaret" in the third line, the rebel martyrs and a date, the 6th of April:

> Tidying up the parish graves on April The sixth. With martyrs, dates are precise. With landlords, monuments are understandable.

The word "Understandable" proposes two types of logics. On the one hand the logic of history: landlords have their monuments because of their wealth and power. On the other hand the monuments to rebels are of a different type in Kerry. They belong to the logic of

⁸³⁶ FS, 364.

⁸³⁷ The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories, ed William Trevor (Oxford: Oxford Univ Press, 1991), 75.

⁸³⁸ Richard White, 58.

⁸³⁹ This title most certainly refers to the song "Lady Margaret."

living myths and are often mysterious, vague if not slightly irrational. This was pointed out by Manus O'Riordan as he commented on the plaque to Michael Lehane in his unpublished paper "In Search of Michael Lehane" "840: "In true Kerry Republican tradition, the inscription is as intriguing as it is informative, shedding light on but one aspect of his heroic life and none whatsoever on the context or even date of his death." In Kennelly's poem the figure of the hare appears as a cross between the Easter hare and the mythical hare of Ballylongford's churchyard. Martyrs with a common date, "on April / the sixth," enter the realm of collective memory where historical truth is tied with collective feelings for heroes and heroism, just like ivy clings to the grave so that the speaking voice in the poem is in a position comparable to that of an historian trying to distinguish truth from myth. Every year, on the 6th of April, the parish priest in Ballylongford took the children – young Brendan Kennelly was among them – to clean the graveyard. He believed that this day was the day when Carigafoyle castle had been destroyed by the Cromwellians. 841

Norman Sande had one, all ivy and moss. I know I got involved with the ivy, Ripping it off yet no finding a source, Piling it high amid gravel and stones. 842

III.1.4 Free Borrowing

Beyond the attention the poet pays to living myth and ancient mythology and the use he makes of them in the various spheres of his activities, Kennelly's conception of his own poetic creation, oral (not committed to paper) and written, is certainly more in keeping with the oral than the literary perception of the text. Following the direction of wisdom rather than that of philosophy, Brendan Kennelly views poems as free entities with a life of

⁸⁴⁰ Manus O'Riordan, "In Search of Michael Lehane," unpublished paper.

⁸⁴¹ My Education, RTE Radio, 1993.

⁸⁴² C, 26.

their own. A consequence of this is the great freedom with which he borrows⁸⁴³ and lets his work be borrowed, included in journals and reviews without authorisation.⁸⁴⁴ Brendan Kennelly's position is there located at the crossroads between the oral and the literary tradition, since the fact that the poet writes and reads extensively attaches him to the literary tradition. However, his friend Robbie Cox from Ballylongford, resolutely remained in the oral sphere and refused to write: "he would not commit that story of the Twelfth Night of Christmas to a machine because he said 'if some young fellow, in this parish does not want to remember that story, then that story should be forgotten."845 This refusal of writing was also practiced in pre-Christian bardic school. "Instruction in the schools [was] conveyed in the form of verses, dictated to the pupils and by them committed to memory; for a religious tabu – such is the implication of the word fas – forbid ... both teachers and taught to commit them to writing."846 This means that most of these "oral texts" like Robbie Cox's never achieved the fixed form of a written text. Mechanical recording along with writing stabilises the text in a way that is never achieved when it remains oral in its mode of performance and of transmission. As will be subsequently examined one notes that Cox's suspicion of machines is echoed by Kennelly's "Preference," a poem from Glimpses that was most likely inspired by Robbie Cox:

Such words of wisdom he had, they just poured out, he didn't seem to need to think and when I asked him why he wouldn't write his wisdom down he said he preferred blood to ink. 847

An instance of a borrowing from Brendan Kennelly's work appears in Ciaran Carson's *The Ballad of HMS Belfast* (1999):

843 In relation to Shelley in Dublin, cf. Persson, 113.

⁸⁴⁴ In communication with Brendan Kennelly, April 2006.

⁸⁴⁵ My Education, RTE Radio, 1993.

⁸⁴⁶ R.A.S. Macalister, "Ogham," Celtic Seers' Source Book, 199.

Our crew of Jacks was aromatic with tobacco-twist and Alcoholic Reekings from the night before. Both Catestants and

Protholics.

We were tarry-breeked and pig-Tailed, and sailed beneath the

White Ensign: 848

The pun originally appeared in 1978 in the literary review Poesie NE 24 / 25 in a poem by

Kennelly about the Troubles in Northern Ireland entitled "The Patriot":

Is he a catholic?

Is he a protestant?

Is he a protholic?

Is he a cathestant?

Some of these borrowings appear recurrently in Kennelly's work. Brendan Behan

famously wrote about his grand-mother: "Besides, who lived at the top of the next house,

was a lady of capernosity and function."849 "Capernosity" is the combination of

"capability" and "generosity." One notes however that Kennelly's spelling does not match

Behan's, which most likely shows that Kennelly wrote down the word from auditory rather

than visual memory. Indeed, the word has been orally transmitted while the written source

has largely been forgotten. The utterance that remained "printed" in Dublin's memory

appears in Kennelly's work in several instances. The phrase is either slightly transformed

or used in its full form combined with "function" as in:

Repeating, at the most telling moments,

the one sentence

he lifted from Demosthenes

whom he also claims as a distant cousin

on his mother's side,

a woman of coppernossity and function

and luciferian pride.850

848 Ciaran Carson, The Ballad of HMS Belfast (London: Picador, 1999), 113.

849 Brendan Behan, After The Wake (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1981), 37.

⁸⁵⁰ PMA, 216.

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Interestingly this passage nearly sounds like a comment on Brendan Kennelly's own technique. Similarly James Joyce's phrase: "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" is recontextualized and used in *Cromwell* as an essential pillar to the edifice of the book

III.1.5 Print versus Manuscript Culture

As explained by Ong, 852 the culture of print has encouraged a sense of the written text as finite: "Print encourages a sense of closure, a sense that what is found in a text has been finalized, has reached a state of completion. This sense affects literary creations and it affects analytic philosophical or scientific work." In many ways, Brendan Kennelly has remained a stranger to the absoluteness of print. His work seems in perpetual movement both because of the weight of performances, readings and recitations of his poems and because he gives the impression of being in a constant quest to compose one poem. Indeed, certain themes and images are repeated in different contexts and shapes as if the poet was aspiring to one ideal and maybe archetypal poem.

One consequence of this is that poems that have been most often recited such as "My Dark Fathers" and "Begin" have also been those which were the most drastically modified through time. Another consequence is that many critics find a lot of his work inadequate for print⁸⁵³ and a critique often made against the poet is: "he writes too much." Consequently in a defense of Brendan Kennelly, the argument of Kennelly's detractors is summarized by Basil Payne: "He writes too much; *ergo* he is second-rate." 854

852 Ong, Orality and Literacy, 132-133.

⁸⁵¹ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford Wold Classics, 1998), 34.

⁸⁵³ In "Southern Poet," Fortnight: An Independent Review for Northern Ireland, 01 October 1973, 18-19, James Simmons suggests that too many of Kennelly's poems are being published.

⁸⁵⁴ Basil Payne, "Reviews." Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review of Letters, Philosophy and Science 60. 239 & 240, Autumn-Winter 1971, 426-30.

Kennelly's work frequently makes the impression of being a variation on a certain number of themes that are modulated, researched and varied in a multiplicity of shapes. Aesthetically such an effect can only be achieved through quantity, which proves very demanding on the reader and clearly results in most critics "giving the game away."855 When it comes to shaping his poems in relation to print, both at the poem and at the book level, Brendan Kennelly not infrequently delegates his power to other people. Thus he let his secretary Frances Gwynn⁸⁵⁶ choose the typography for "Poem from a Three year old."857 A major consequence is that the poem recited by Kennelly and its written version greatly vary. Another reason that might account for the discrepancies between the oral and the written form of some of his poems - at least those composed in the 1970s - is the written technique that he had at the time and that is explained by Frances Gwynn: "Kennelly uses prose drafts in composing his poems and takes great care to cut out essential words, being normally watchful of adjectives and linking words such as prepositions and conjunctions."858 As mentioned earlier, one notes that this mode of composition is a lot more in keeping with the craft than with the inspired approach to poctry.

Regarding emails the poet answers any suggestion of him using this modern way of communication by "male and female, that's sufficient for me, no need for e-male!" Later on the pun was integrated in *Now*. A few collections excepted, all of Brendan Kennelly's books were typed by his secretaries Frances Gwynn, Geraldine Mangan, and Louise Kidney. At the level of the collection a great flexibility also applies. In that regard, the role played by Brendan Kennelly's publisher and on some occasions his colleagues and friends

⁸⁵⁵ PMA, 263.

⁸⁵⁶ In communication with Brendan Kennelly, November 2006...

⁸⁵⁷ FS, 59.

⁸⁵⁸ Frances Gwynn, "The Poetry of Brendan Kennelly: Some Aspects." Paper submitted for IASIL Conference, Cork, August 1973. Typescript. 18 Un-numbered pages.

Personal notes from classes with Brendan Kennelly, 2003.

⁸⁶⁰ N, 41.

seem to have been significant as suggested by the acknowledgement note in the preface of The Book of Judas:

I would like to thank Terence Brown for his readings of this poem and suggestions concerning it. Thanks also to Gerald Dawe for his reading and comments. And finally my gratitude to Neil Astley for his many ideas on how to shape and re-shape this work. It was he, chiefly, who gave the poem whatever shape it can claim and have.

The flexible and changing form of his work is also shown in the numerous collections of his books that blend previously published and new poems: Selected Poems (1969), Selected Poems, enlarged edition (1971), The Voices (1973), New and Selected Poems, (1976), A Time for Voices, (1992), Breathing Spaces: Early Poems, (1992), Familiar Strangers (2004). Similarly, the task of editing The Book of Judas into The Little Book of Judas that included 30 additional poems, was handed over to Anthony Roche. These choices indicate that the poet does not feel any need to strictly control the shape of the book that is not really perceived as final. This attitude is a lot more in keeping with the manuscript than with the print culture and in that respect is more characteristic of the oral than the literary – especially contemporary – world: "Manuscript culture felt works of verbal art to be more in touch with the oral plenum, and never very effectively distinguished between poetry and rhetoric."

As to free borrowing and intertextuality, because it was still connected with the oral tradition "manuscript culture had taken intertextuality for granted. Still tied to the common place tradition of the oral world, it deliberately created texts out of other texts, borrowing, adapting, sharing the common, originally oral, formulas and themes, even though it worked them up into fresh literary forms impossible without writing." Because he still belongs

K62 Ibid.

⁸⁶¹ Ong, Orality and Literacy, 133.

to the manuscript culture, Brendan Kennelly does not really have a sense of ownership when it comes to writing. Spoken and written words are treated all the same. Like Joyce, Brendan Kennelly is a spoken word hunter, a careful listener always alert to catch his material from the air of Dublin's talk. John B. Keane, from Listowel, North Kerry too, used a similar technique that prompted one of his fellow villagers to exclaim about "reusing their talk": "John B., you're a cute man. You takes down what we says and then you charges us to read it." 863

Because of his freedom with text's property, in many ways Brendan Kennelly, who so often refers to poetry through violent metaphors, can be called a "plagiarus." The word was used by the Latin poet Martial⁸⁶⁴ to designate a torturer, a plunderer, an oppressor, somebody who makes somebody else's writing his own. Most interestingly, in *Martial Art*, Brendan Kennelly plays with the question of text ownership as he adapted English translations and mixed with them epigrams of his own, using pastiche in such a way that Martial's and Kennelly's pieces become hardly distinguishable if only through anachronism that Kennelly mischievously slipped here and there in the book. Another interesting instance is the way he took Kavanagh's "Raglan Road" and turned it into the much publicized "Raglan Lane."

As rightly noted by Ong print is largely responsible for the sense of personal privacy in books. Yet there is little of this for Brendan Kennelly, hence his claim that "there is no such thing as a public poem." This independence of the poem once it has

863 Fitzmaurice, Beat the Goatskin, 132.

⁸⁶⁴ Ong, Orality and Literacy, 131.

⁸⁶⁵ Patrick Kavanagh, Selected Poems, 83.

⁸⁶⁶ SP 1985, 60.

been composed is humorously depicted in "Real Cool." After it has been written, the poem rebels against its author Ace:

Ace de Horner chopped off his head with his black Thomas Street knife, ⁸⁶⁸ opened the door, kicked his head into the street.

"Cool," the poem said, "real cool. I hope you two never again meet."

Most interestingly, once it is out the poem starts using the language of the street. Once written it becomes totally independent from its creator. This detachment of the author from his own words is characteristic of oral poets who move on once words have been uttered as explained by Wilkinson about Malay poetry.

The horror of literary privacy which characterises European work has no place among primitive peoples. A jester whose jokes are repeated is only flattered by the repetitions... [A native dramatist] would curse as a "plagiarist" any man who crimped his clown or enticed away his poet, he would not stoop to quarrel about mere words, which, once uttered, are to him as stale as the joke of yester-year. ⁸⁶⁹

The freedom in disposing of somebody else's text and letting one's text be freely disposed of matches Brendan Kennelly's belief in the autonomy of poems. This approach that was shared by Irish bards of all times has certainly more to do with wisdom than with philosophy and goes along with a strong suspicion on the poet's part towards linguistics and sciences of languages that he perceives as a form of violence done to words. The result is that poems are depicted as creatures in their own right that come to the poet according to their own wishes, often playing with the poet, teasing him and driving him out of his wit:

868 Thomas Street is the site where Robert Emmet was beheaded.

⁸⁶⁷ PMA, 215.

⁸⁶⁹ Richard James Wilkinson, *Papers on Malay Subjects*, P.L. Burns, Richard James Wilkinson, Richard Olof Winstedt, Cuthbert Woodville Harrison, George Ernest Shaw (Federal Malay States, 1907) 41, in Ruth Finnegan, 202-203.

Poems are cheecky bastards they tickle my heart and head, they break all the rules and live by their own like a night of love, she said.⁸⁷⁰

In keeping with his notion of inspiration, he imagines a sort of divine centre from which

poems originate:

Ace saw all the poems of Ireland drifting down the Liffey

to drop into the Greally Hole.

Down there

in the Greally Hole

the verbal music of the island lay.871

In Poetry My Arse, the Greally Hole is a near anagram of "the Holy Grail" and seems to be

the source where poetry congregates. These characteristics in his conception of the origin

and the status of poems have for their main result that, like in primitive oral society a poem

- any poem - is necessarily a public thing, belonging to all as it does not belong to anyone.

This lax form of ownership is also manifest in Brendan Kennelly's manner of honouring

anonymous writers whose works have remained alive but whose names have long been

forgotten. In such instances the detachment between the author and his piece is absolute.

Thus in "Out of the vision cloud" that includes a list of famous characters and their famous

authors, "Anonymous" is included side by side with Cúchulainn. Yet in Now,

"Anonymous" is reduced to something that looks like an unknown name and thus might be

even more anonymous:

He once asked Eily Kilbride who was her favourite poet.

"Anon," she replied.872

870 PMA, 147.

⁸⁷¹ PMA, 317.

⁸⁷² N, 89.

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2) Refusing the Analytical Mind

III.2.1 Triggering Empathy

For anybody who has attended readings and recitals by Brendan Kennelly it would hardly seem an exaggeration to speak of the next to hypnotic effect of his performances. The audience surrenders to the pleasure of the words and the modulations of the voice. The experience is both personal and communal and at that moment there is no doubt that the poet, through the utterance of his words exerts a personal power over his listeners. The event is sensual and enjoyable but leaves little space to the rational faculty. This pleasure and the sheer sensuality of the quality of oral poetry was largely emphasized by Hesiod who had one of his muses called The Enjoyable and another named Erato, the "Passionate." These muses certainly seem to be at work during recitals and readings by Kennelly. At the time of the performances his whole body is involved. Connection is established through formulae such as "can you hear me," or "You'd know yourself" that work on introducing the listener into the world of the oral performance and involve him at a personal level. The poet is not immobile but often beats the rhythm with his hands or his feet and occasionally a gentle swaying of the body is perceptible. This is the type of performance that was described by Hesiod as associated with sexual feelings and in this context it is hardly surprising that throughout his career the poet -- but as previously emphasised this is also the continuation of an Irish archetype - was long seen as something of a National sex-symbol. In this type of literary event emotions are targeted by the poet who moves his listeners to laughter and sometimes next to tears. In such a situation we find a perfect instance of what led Plato to reject poets and a major reason why Brendan Kennelly was called "the bard." A public reading of Cromwell by Kennelly is described as follows:

⁸⁷³ Havelock, 154.

The majority of the packed audience come from the young men and women, who sit offering up young minds to be fashioned and shaped by the poet... And in that word-wrapt audience there was not as much as a a sneeze as the Poet Kennelly gave his personal kiss of life to the page-print words.⁸⁷⁴

Brendan Kennelly indeed largely resorts to the mechanisms of Platonic *Mimesis* that mesmerizes the majority of his listeners and somehow cancels their critical and rational faculties. Yet this is possible only because identification is involved. As explained by Havelock, identification and nervous excitement is more easily reached through words that evoke action⁸⁷⁵ and in that respect it has already been shown how Brendan Kennelly's long poems shared a lot with traditional epics. Not cognition but emotion is the aim. Only when emotions and passions are presented in active situations can re-enactment take place and identification be stimulated. As opposed to this the cognitive faculty is best appealed to in silence through abstract concepts and thus is better fitted to the written than the oral word.

In *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, Jean-Pierre Vernant explains: "If the tendency of the spoken word is to give pleasure, this is because it affects the listener in the manner of an incantation... oral narration stimulates its public to an affective communion with the dramatic actions recounted in the story." This type of poetry whose powerful qualities are at their best when spoken, was celebrated by the sophist Gorgias. Unlike the *logos* at work in philosophy and rational discourse, these words involve *mimesis* and the sympathy that is the emotional participation of the listener, while his critical faculty is put to rest to the profit of pleasure, emotion and drama. In ancient Greece, beyond the characteristics mentioned in poetry recitals by Brendan Kennelly, the power also relied on metrics and sometimes on instrumental accompaniment and dances. Given that Brendan Kennelly's work has a situation – somehow like Hesiod's *Theogony* – half way between the oral and the written tradition, one would then wonder: what form does the *mimesis* take

⁸⁷⁴ John Healy, "From Drogheda to Dalkey," The Irish Independent, 05 December 1983, 10.

⁸⁷⁵ Havelock, 167.

⁸⁷⁶ Vernant, 189.

in Brendan Kennelly's written poetry? Because sympathy and identification are intended, whether the poem be read or recited, the poet had to lay heavy emphasis on certain devices used by Greek poets but he also had to invent new ones. As the Greck tragedians chose to write in a language that was close to the spectators' in order to facilitate identification with their characters, Kennelly writes in free verse and often uses spoken language in his poems. His major collections (Cromwell, The Book of Judas, Poetry My Arse, The Man Made of Rain) are conceived as "long poems" so that each book reads very much like a novel, that is the genre that nowadays might best allow the reader to identify and sympathize with the voice that remains stable throughout the book. Consequently, at a written level the mimetic power that is traditionally induced by metrics and rhythmic regularity might be here replaced by a type of identification that is often found in the novel.

What is more, Kennelly's main heroes often belong to the realm of myth – they relate both to the public and to the private sphere – so that the personal link that exists when the living myth is orally considered is maintained when the poem that deals with the myth takes a written shape. At the level of the plot, Brendan Kennelly has maintained a very high level of sensationalism that has a lot in common with the epic and which, according to Thucydide's criteria is totally at odds with what a text of history should be:

A historical author should not try to thrill his readers by such exaggerated picture ... but simply record what really happened and what really was said, however commonplace; for the purpose of history is not to thrill and charm the audience for a moment but to instruct and convince serious students for all time, by the truth of the facts and speeches he narrates.⁸⁷⁷

Kennelly does not however restrict the scope of emotions to that of thrilling violence and heroic deeds but extends it to laughter, eroticism, pathos sometimes inflated to bathetic proportions. In this respect he answers the old Irish craving for sensationalism that sprang

⁸⁷⁷ Vernant, 191.

from the oral tradition - while the analytical and philosophical stage was never fully reached in Ireland where as the poet himself noted, there is a blatant lack of a philosophical tradition – and that guarantees success to gossip, tabloids and soaps. In his preface to Poetry Mv Arse, he writes:

> [In Ireland] on the whole, anecdotes, stories and yarn replace ideas. Can anecdotes, stories become adequate substitutes for an inherited or personally achieved philosophy in poetry? ... Most English poets, even when they don't study their philosophers, are nearly always aware of them, directly or indirectly. Irish poets have little or no such available support.

Even if the last part of this passage can be debated, what Kennelly here appropriately emphasizes is the prevalence of the oral over the analytical mind in Ireland. In "Best bit" 878 this thirst for thrill that is applied to absolutely anything including war, politics and religion is pointed out and gently made fun with while at the same time used for the poem's purpose through the dynamic of a series of questions:

> "Did he pull down her panties or push'em aside? Did he rape her? Did she lead him on? Did he half-throttle her? Did she give him that scar? O man dear, it's the best bit o'telly I seen since the Gulf War."

A major difference between Brendan Kennelly's type of sensationalism and that of oral epic pocts – whether from Greece or from Ireland – is the social protest dimension that was emphasised and thoroughly studied by Ake Persson. Although it does not apply to the epic, Ruth Finnegan identifies this feature as a general characteristic of oral poetry and she quotes the example of the IRA protest songs. 879 As he chose to write about what is usually kept silent. Kennelly somehow followed the model of Patrick Kavanagh as in "Lough

⁸⁷⁸ PMA, 131.

⁸⁷⁹ Finnegan, 159.

Derg" where he openly describes an aspect of country servants' life that was usually not talked about even if it was known:

Servant girls bred my servility:
When I stoop
It is my mother's mother['s] mother's mother
Each one in turn being called in to spread —
"Wider with your legs," the master of the house said.
Domestic servants taken back and front. 880

Yet Kennelly generalises this and nothing is spared that could bring the reader to sympathize with victims. Child abuse, prostitution, clergy deviation, domestic violence, poverty, sex, AIDS... anything that he calls the "no-go area" is used as a theme. In that respect the 24th poem of the series "Thirty Pieces of Silver" is striking:

Rachel sparkles in the parking-lot with Daddy Who receives me from Davison Like a rustling eucharist from the Age of Gold. Davison was born to buy Rachel Rachel was born to be sold. 881

The dramatic effect is achieved through the internal focalisation in the coin, the detached tone of the lines, the echo of the girl's voice in "Daddy," biblical overtone and the sense of fate through the repetition of "was born to," and the first line, an iambic pentameter "marred" by "with Daddy." Numerous examples could be given of Kennelly's powerful skill at dramatising his poems and raising the reader's empathy.

While on the one hand there is little else the poet can do but to draw and call for awareness and the pity of the public towards these not so uncommon everyday type of drama and hope that action might follow to see things improve; on the other hand Brendan Kennelly refuses to romanticize victims. He is also very much aware of the fact that his

⁸⁸¹ BOJ, 185.

⁸⁸⁰ Patrick Kavanagh, Selected Poems, 59.

poetry somehow feeds on the tragedies that make the stuff of his verse, hence the following lines that might seem a little out of place in the piece just mentioned:

> A mystical poet who swears he cannot be bought in this or any other city Might lilt her cries are silver Her tears gold, Unpollutable river of pity Flowing through heartless lands. 882

This very long sentence in the middle of the poem contrasts with the very short lines at the beginning and sounds like a romanticized approach to something that morality forbids to make poetical; hence the sharp and extremely sober end of the poem that brings back the reader to the factual transaction at stake: "Daddy and Davison shake on the deal / Rachel changes hands." An equally shocking interaction between an adult and a child is evoked in "When I was three." The 24th poem of the series "Thirty Pieces of Silver," that describes how Rachel is being sold by her father, like many other poems in Kennelly's work, is memorable because it presents a series of actions that are sharply defined, simple and emotionally vivid. No elaborate, theoretical language or difficult metaphor is used: "I'm not interested in visuality at all. I just don't care about how people see things. I care about how they hear them"884 Kennelly says. These characteristics make his poetry easily imageable, and as such strongly participate in the mnemonic process that is essential in oral poetry. 885 In other words, Kennelly's strength as a poet docs not lie in visual tropes but in the poet's ability to provide the reader with elements that contribute to create a sharp vision. Abstractions are rare and concepts are made concrete through characters such as The Mouth or Arse First.

⁸⁸² BOJ, 185.

⁸⁸³ BOJ, 48.

⁸⁸⁴ Siobhán McSweeney, 4.

⁸⁸⁵ David C. Rubin, 11.

The power of the mimesis is also reinforced by the poet's popularity. As he regularly went on the popular TV programme, The Late Late Show and spoke about the personal problems that he had gone through such as alcoholism, depression, his heart operation... he attracted the sympathy of many people who, one way or another identified with him. At the same time when the poet was interviewed he was also asked to recite some of his poems so that the emotions raised in the audience by the "confessions" of the poet found an extension in the poems. Echoes of the difficulties evoked on television would be found in his books, so that the reading of his work, also because the poems are often dramatic and sensational, would possibly be experienced as a continuation of the emotion felt when watching the poet on television or when listening to him on the radio. Thus recitals of poems but also the personality of the poet, who, since the Sixties has remained very much in the public eye, have been used to serve and support written poems. Through his presence in the media, Brendan Kennelly ensured that his name would not be anonymous but on the contrary, because it has become so public, would have certain connotations, including clichés in the mind of the great majority. In that regard, Brendan Kennelly has followed the line of most oral poets, and in particular Irish oral poets (oral in so far as their work was orally recited), as explained by Ruth Finnegan⁸⁸⁶ who demonstrates that against certain received ideas, oral poets are rarely anonymous.

III.2.2 An Agonistic Type of Writing

Dynamic is a key word to the understanding of Kennelly's poetry. This is expressed through the depiction of action, through poems conceived as open, but also through a poetry of violence.

Ruth Finnegan, 202.

The imagination of a man or a woman can be nourished by the same violence and forces which would most likely repel that same man or woman in his or her attempts to live an ordinary, decent life. The light of poetry often finds its origin in the darkness of our nature.⁸⁸⁷

Against the closed space where the air is trapped in a stasis often denounced as sterile if not mortiferous, the poet argues: "You must learn to rage, rage."888 Violence is indeed conceived as a radical way to open the mind towards tolerance, which is conveyed through a series of images expressing some idea of explosion: "This is one of the most valuable abilities of poetry: it extends the reader, sometimes against his or her will." According to Kennelly, poetry in its essence is necessarily cathartic. Poetry in that respect is comparable with Socrates' maieutic as it tends to pull the reader out from the comfort of the cave where he contemplates his own prejudices. Brendan Kennelly conceives of poetry as an art to interrogate life and upset the system of pre-established values lacking a valid basis. The poet encompasses this system with the word "cliché" that covers any sort of preconceptions: "cliché is not only the truth worn dull by repetition, it can also be a form of immoral evasion, even to one's own discomfort or distress."889 Brendan Kennelly's interest is focused on the moment when the spectator of shadows dancing on the wall is pulled out towards blinding light, in other words the moment when stasis is being stirred and makes room for a shake that leads to a fresh move. The poet keeps silent on the new forms that this light should offer to our eyes. He is indeed no philosopher and has no ready answer to offer: "the poetry that deals with violence is more concerned with its own compulsions than with the expectations of others."890 As he explained, poetry is neither moral or immoral, it does not aim at upsetting an established order of values to establish another predefined one. This poetic of violence is contained within the concept of

⁸⁸⁷ JIJ, 36.

⁸⁸⁸ BS, 54.

BB9 JIJ, 184.

⁸⁹⁰ Ibid., 44.

"Blitzophrenia" coined by Kennelly. In his article entitled "Blitzophrenia': Brendan Kennelly's Post-colonial Vision," John McDonagh examines the term and, while he approaches it as the encounter of several voices, he nonetheless restricts the scope of the phrase to a confrontation between past and present. However, more than some mnesiac prospect, the phrase finds its articulation in the idea of a polyphonic conflict conveying some powerful energy to the poem. This blitzophrenic device energizes the poem with an often ruthless passion. The latter acts through tonal variations but also through the use of a language of "bad taste," that is not conforming with the reader's expectations vis-à-vis poetry. Kennelly's poems include a good amount of "vulgar" (in the moral sense) expressions such as: "fuck," "cock," "prick," "arse"... and of images that at first sight seem unpoetic such as scenes in brothels, description of garbage... Blitzophrenia can then be interpreted as liberation from the constraints of respectability within the poetic field.

In attacking fundamental living myths in his society, Brendan Kennelly contributes to create feelings comparable to that provoked by tragedy and thus initiates a cathartic process. He does not merely use living myths that are commonly circulated but he goes straight to the brutality at the crux of any myth and that prompted Vernant to ask:

How can one justify the presence, alongside the most rarefied reason, of this irrational element of myth reminiscent of the pronouncements "of a mind temporarily demented." In short, how is it that in myth one can detect a barbarity lying at the very heart of the culture from which all our science and, to a large extent, our religion proceeds?⁸⁹²

Kennelly turns the violence of living myth inside out and in so doing challenges the very fundamentals of his own culture. "Myth satisfies the general need in society for stability and cohesion and allows people to accept the same norms of behaviour and to respect

⁸⁹² V*ern*ant, 208.

⁸⁹¹ John McDonagh, "Blitzophrenia': Brendan Kennelly's Post-Colonial Vision," *The Irish University Review*, Vol. 33, No.2, Autumn / Winter 2003, 322-337.

social hierarchy." Brendan Kennelly's treatment of myth can then be felt as threatening. Because in his eyes poetry should be a challenge to a static order, Kennelly sees Plato's wish to banish the poets from the Republic as a consequence of that disruptive power: "The light of poetry often finds its origin in the darkness of our natures. It is no wonder at all that Plato banished poets from his ideal republic."894 What Kennelly did not grasp is that the poets Plato lashed against were the defendors of an old petrified order. On the contrary the real threats to this oral (illiterate) society that was still in place in ancient Greece when Socrates appeared⁸⁹⁵ were the advocates of reason such as Socrates and Plato himself. As opposed to this Brendan Kennelly's position is a challenge to anything analytical and an attempt, against the reign of reason and the written type of literature that goes along with it, at maintaining the dying values of Irish orality. 896 In April 2007, Kennelly wrote a summary of the course he gave in Boston College:

> This course will investigate the relationship between oral and written traditions. Students will read poems written by themselves, and then read aloud in their own natural, unique voices. Students would then discuss the ways in which their minds influence their voices, and as the weeks go past, how their voices educate their minds as they read aloud, or speak aloud, their own poems. The purpose is to go back to orality in order to renew and revitalize our contemporary styles of thinking, imagining, and actually experiencing literature to-day. 897

Such a programme through which he casts himself in the role of "a bard of modern Ireland" seems very ambitious and rather naïve. It shows little awareness of the complexities one is bound to encounter when dealing with the question of orality and in particular with the oral mind. Kennelly's wish to "revitalize our contemporary styles of thinking" goes along with his rejection of analysis and a fortiori of reason. Such a program

⁸⁹³ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁸⁹⁵ Havelock, 47.

⁸⁹⁶ Here "oral" refers both to the oral mind and to a society where oral (as opposed to written) literature was

http://www.bc.edu/crs/cn/index/web/major.courses.shtml, November 2007.

presupposes the superiority of the oral mind to the literary mind, a presupposition that is more than dubious.

The poet's purpose to change the current order of things can appear as somewhat "unversed," especially because no proposition is ever made as to what should come after the change. Despite this, Kennelly sees his poetry as an attempt to provoke a crisis in the reader so that at least thought would be stimulated towards action. In order to provoke a catharsis the poem is regarded as a weapon. In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga underlines the importance of play and strife in humanity through what he calls "the agonistic instinct." In Kerry this instinct is particularly developed as shown by the passion for sport, Gaelic football in particular, but also the common discipline of fist-fighting which Brendan Kennelly also practiced. This agonistic instinct also proved its vivacity in the historical violence that took place through history in Kerry and Richard White notes how the landscape bears the marks of these fights: "The Shannon has provided an avenue for invaders it has brought in and around Ahanagran lie burned abbeys and the blasted castle of Carrigafoyle. The land itself testifies to violence and conquest: to the troubled times that stretch back for half a millennium and more." During the civil war the fiercest combats took place in Kerry.

Onc of the most elementary forms of strife opposes man and Nature. From the earliest stages of his career, when his position on violence and poetry had not yet been formulated, Brendan Kennelly showed his interest in this aspect of life through poems such as "The Pig Killer" and "The Grip." Although Frances Gwynn interprets these early poems as the poet's belief in a form of Darwinism that asserts the survival of the fittest,

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⁸⁹⁸ Richard White, 18.

⁸⁹⁹ Fitzmaurice, Beat the Goatskin, 153.

⁹⁰⁰ Frances Gwynn, "The Poetry of Brendan Kennelly: Some Aspects." Paper submitted for IASAIL Conference, Cork, August 1973. Typescript. 18 Un-numbered pages.

this study would argue that these pieces were an early stage of the poet's interest in a form of non-destructive violence that is poetic violence and the agonistic impulse at work in any kind of game. Violence that is so repulsive in real life takes on a different dimension when represented in poetry: "It goes further: violence is a kind of motive-power, a sort of emotional fuel, a key to develop action, a source of creative thinking, a restless, stirring, challenging origin of art and civilisation." Since violence has to be expressed, in one way or another, it can find in an antidote that might defuse enacted violence. Brendan Kennelly consequently chose to dress Ace, his poet hero in *Poetry My Arse*, in an "IRA trenchcoat" like a modern reflection of the bard Amergin who participated in battles. Real life violence becomes sublimated in terrorist poetry. "That garment" is an ode to violence represented in verse. While poets from the North often depict themselves as victims of violence and attract sympathy for themselves and for the suffering population they represent, it certainly took courage on Brendan Kennelly's part to write the following lines that – although they acknowledge some eternal truth of human nature – are yet open to misinterpretation:

Ile knew the thrill of murdering a young man home on Christmas leave, he knew the pleasure of bombing anyone anywhere anytime, phone rang in his blood as he issued warning of disaster, he enjoyed the intellectual certainty of knowing who is the victim, who the master, he knew history as it should be known and must be re-shaped, he was a hungerstriking poet, an object of police brutality...

⁹⁰¹ JIJ, 42.

⁹⁰² PMA, 175.

In this passage Kennelly also mocks the poet's limited scope when it comes to action and somehow suggests that there is very little heroism in writing those lines. Action and acts of valour seem restricted to dreams:

> When Ace wore his trenchcoat he led revolutions all over the globe, translated fiery songs of rebellion and planted seeds of hope. 903

In common with Ace, Kennelly "translated ficry songs of rebellion," one of the most striking being "A Cry for Art O'Leary" from the Irish of Eibhlin Dubh Ni Chonaill. For this woman, her poetic cry is her only weapon against the murderer of her husband, similarly Brendan Kennelly's mode of action takes the form of his verse. If Ace, also called "a poet-assassin," occasionally suffers from caution, his double Kanooce is yet a lot more direct and brutal advocate of violence in verse and articulately phrases Brendan Kennelly's poetics:

> ... be a criminal of rhyme write like I bark, write like I bite, mix my fangjuice with your timid ink.904

If the terrorist motives are recurrent in *Poetry My Arse*, they also intensely pervade *The* Book of Judas. In particular the metaphor of the bomb-poem that is to provoke in the reader, at an individual level, the revolution the poet cannot lead in the real world. The full fantasy of that final and ultimate explosion is revelled in throughout the poem "Boom" where the rhyming or near rhyming words "bomb," "bum," "books," "gloom," "doom" and numerous alliterations catch the urge and the obsession to destroy but also somehow recalls the tick-tick of the bomb that is verbally activated in the final line where syntax is being exploded towards inarticulation:

⁹⁰³ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁴ PMA, 359.

I want that bomb
So the world shakes
And vanished like a man into a woman
Going boom coming boom bloody boom boy boom.

905

Kennelly's terrorist poetics blooms into "semtext" and the reader of *The Book of Judas* is warned: "God is a Bomb." The book with his many voices, his bulk, its intense questioning, its progression and the way it forces the reader's involvement, for instance in the section "You," reaches for the reader's mind so as to unsettle it. Yet the game is nonetheless candid in so far as the process is announced and recalled at regular intervals, the shock is a constant promise. In "Lovers of the Genuine" Brendan Kennelly's poetic plan is openly exposed in the association of verse and explosive:

Semtex is more powerful than disruptive prose
Or detonating verse, so genuine
It must do what it was created to do.
If you're compelled to polite your way through lies
And live the death of average non-man
Semtex is the line for you,
The only line your heart will know is true.

Sensitive to this poetics of violence, in "Singing to me of who and why I am,' Brendan Kennelly's Judascape," Mark Patrick Hederman interprets as follows the explosion he felt in reading *The Book of Judas*:

As we reach the last page of the poem we realise that the poet has been guilty of the ultimate treachery which is that the book itself is a carefully devised "time bomb" that, when discovered will "chutzpah his poem" (359) It is a treachery then because we understand in that final explosion that *The Book of Judas* is in fact about God and not, as we had been given to believe, about his opposite, the dog, Judas. 907

906 Ibid., 121.

⁹⁰⁵ BOJ, 107.

⁹⁹⁷ Mark Patrick Hederman, "Singing to Me of Who and Why I am, Brendan Kennelly's Judascape." Typescript, 11 un-numbered pages, 7.

At another level one finds a good deal of provocation aimed at the reader in a way that is not without recalling how Samuel Beckett teased his spectators in *Waiting for Godot*. During the first performance in Paris, in 1953 the wait and the agonistic play of the characters indirectly addressing the spectators was so provocative and so unbearable to some of them that half of the audience left the room before the end of the play. Especially in his long books of poetry, Kennelly tends to play a similar challenging game. For instance in "Hard to beat a good book" he chose to end up the poem with: "Continue reading. And whatever you do or say / don't give the game away." Another instance is to be found in the end of "Reader's Report" that can be interpreted as a mock review of the *The Book of Judas* and concludes with

... I recommend a large paperback edition. I'll bet it sells.

This afterwards seems all the more comical as *The Book of Judas* topped the list of best sellers in 1991, a rare achievement for a book of poetry by a poet who did not receive many literary distinctions.

Kennelly nags and challenges his reader, corners him to analyse his own system of values, his own range of beliefs. While he is addressing a readership from a Christian background he dangerously plays with Christian living myths. Yet as explained by Johan Huizinga, whether playful strife would be verbal or would actually involve weapons, punches and blood, the sense of danger contributes to the thrill. "There can be no question of poetic licence; the plain fact is that play may be deadly yet still remain play – which is all the more reason for not separating play and contest as concepts." Sennelly chooses to

⁹⁰⁹ BOJ, 363.

⁹⁰⁸ PMA 262

⁴¹⁰ Huizinga, 41

go as far as possible in the challenging game and does not squirm at depicting obscene and blasphemous visions:

... millions of devils
Opened their mouths, black teeth unwashed since God knows when,
Throats howling "Mary, we thirst! Please! Please!"
Mary looks down, takes her breast from Jesus's mouth,
Squirt milk on the devils, they drink like hell,
I like the picture, it's called A Moment of Ease.

According to the Romantic image of the bard as a freedom-fighter, Kennelly sees catharsis as a necessary step towards self improvement and a fortiori to the improvement of society. Yet in surrendering to poetry, the reader puts himself at risk, escapism is tempting so that as a poet Brendan Kennelly resorts to every possible device in order that the self-revelatory shock would be as immediate and powerful as possible:

lbsen called poetry "a court of judgement on the soul." When we read poetry, *really* read it we are putting ourselves on trial. Do some people relegate poetry to the level of mere entertainment, or consolatory escapism, precisely because the close intense study of it can result in brutal state of self-revelation? So we condemn what we are not prepared to confront. 912

This perception of poetry corresponds to what Johan Huizinga sees as a social agonistic game which he opposes – although this is not a necessity since mixed types do exist – to poetry with an aesthetic purport. In this opposition he distinguishes a reflection of the opposition between oral and literary poetry. In particular he notes that the agonistic element is often implicit but yet very much present in impromptu versifying. Not surprisingly, this is a type of poetry, in which Brendan Kennelly would merrily indulge in

⁹¹² Brendan Kennelly, "Poetry and Violence," *History and Violence in Anglo-Irish Literature*, ed. Joris Duytschaever and Geert Lernout (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988), 19.

⁹¹¹ BOJ, 362.

⁹¹⁴ (Orally transmitted and performed), or (orally transmitted and composed) or (orally composed).

public until the 1980s and 1990s, 915 but also more recently as was the case at the book launch of *Now*. 916 Most certainly a left-over from the bardic tradition, such poetic practice was common in Ballylongford. When describing how oral 917 literature was still vivid in North Kerry not long ago, Gabriel Fitzmaurice says about Listowel and surrounding areas: "Along with the high literary tradition of the area, there was a rich vein of oral 918 poetry where local rhymers, some of them illiterate, would praise and excoriate as the occasion demanded. Indeed, this indigenous rhyming tradition continues to this day." 919 In *The Crooked Cross*, this dimension of oral 920 poetry is represented by Paddyo "[who] always spoke in verse of a sort. The poet, as he said, sat at the right hand of God." 921 In Deevna, Paddyo is the local versifier, and the narrator regularly underlines the biting edge of his creation, a quality he has in common with early bards as was shown in the first part of this study: "Paddyo was enjoying his jibe. He was one of those men to whom mockery of others' faults and weaknesses is second nature, and he revelled in piling it on." As noted by Professor Joris Duytschaever, 923 the impromptu seemed to have survived in Ireland like nowhere else in Europe and the tradition was somehow perpetuated in poetry slams.

The violence, the catharsis applied to the reader is seen by Brendan Kennelly as a necessary mode of transcending enacted barbarity, a way of satisfying the human need for violence without suffering the actuality of physical destruction. In that respect "Violence is the begetter of sweetness and gentleness. Murderous *disorder* is often the source of that beautiful, unruffled self-possession and order which are associated with style." Because

⁹¹⁵ In communication with Professor Joris Duytschaever, May 2007.

⁹¹⁶ Sandrine Brisset, personal notes from reading by Brendan Kennelly at the book launch of *Now*, Waterstone's bookshop, Dawson St Dublin, October 2006.

⁹¹⁷ (Orally transmitted), or (orally transmitted and composed) or (orally composed).

⁹¹⁸ *Id.*

^{°19} Fitzmaurice, Beat the Goatskin, 120.

⁹²⁰ Orally composed.

⁹²¹ CC, 14.

⁹²² Ibid., 17.

⁹²³ In communication with Professor Joris Duytschaever, May 2007.

⁹²⁴ JIJ, 32.

he sees poetry as a place of challenge to open the reader's mind and push him / her to question his or her values, according to a position that involves representing crude violence, Kennelly sees his poetry, and poetry in general, as beyond morality: "poetry is amoral, it exists beyond morality. If poetry merely reflected conventional morality, it would exist only in Christmas bards and after-dinner speeches. But poetry creates its own new fierce, vigorous code of morality."925 In that regard Kennelly follows W.B. Yeats whose "Leda and the Swan" exemplifies how violence in poetry can be shocking, disturbing, awe-inspiring and yet beautiful. Just as Yeats had been decisively impressed by his acquaintance with Nietzschean philosophy, regarding the morality of verse, one can feel the influence of the German philosopher on Brendan Kennelly. A similar idea was expressed by Oscar Wilde who in his preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray wrote: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all."926 The influence of Nietszche is especially striking when Kennelly quotes Synge as he claims that "before verse can be human again it must learn to be brutal." Nonetheless, one has to admit that poetry can "do violence" to the reader and engender questions only by opposing the system of values prevalent in the reader's world, so that morality has to be taken into account, maybe not within the poem but certainly at an external level. Indeed, with his poetics of violence, more than a poet of artifice, Kennelly asserts himself as a poet-artificer.

Like any agonistic game, agonistic poetry can prove dangerous. The pattern is not unusual nor is it restricted to poetry and history counts many of those who fell for challenging their society too far. Due to the violence of his maieutic, and the cultural change he precipitated, Socrates was condemned to commit suicide, Jesus was crucified

⁹²⁵ Ibid., 42

⁹²⁶ Oscar Wilde, Oscar Wilde: the Major Works (Oxford: Oxford University Press., 2000), 48.

etc. In a different way Brendan Kennelly had to pay for his agonistic poems. He was physically attacked for his comments on Cromwell, and some of his collections triggered abusive rage in certain critics. The most spectacular was possibly the common rejection by critics and reviewers of *Poetry My Arse*, a book that can certainly be viewed as a masterpiece, but a masterpiece that questions the role and the status of both critics and poets and thus called for their opprobrium.

III.2.3 Play on Polarities

Contributing to reach the reader's / listener's emotion more than his reasoning faculty, a striking and recurrent technique used by Kennelly consists in playing with opposite polarities. He thus creates paradoxical associations, witty, surprising and often pleasing for the mind. The Irish poet shares with the Greek sophists a taste for verbal pyrotechnics, suprising effects born out of oxymoronic constructions and paradoxes. Before the word "sophists" took on a pejorative meaning as "a falsifier of wisdom," the sophists corresponded to pre-philosophers, wisemen in search of wisdom through words.

As explained by Eric Havelock⁹²⁹ they were obsessed with language and continually struggled against its limitations. In them the thinker could not be distinguished from the poet. Their taste for paradox appealed to Kennelly who although discretely refers to them from time to time and widely uses their teaching and their verbal techniques. This literary lineage is evoked in "A cheeky lot".

Repeating, at the most telling moments, the one sentence he lifted from Demosthenes whom he also claims as a distant cousin on his mother's side,

⁹²⁷ Pratt, William, "World Literature in Review: English," World Literature Today Vol. 66 Issue 3, Summer 1992, 518.

⁹²⁸ Huizinga, 152.

⁹²⁹ Havelock, 289.

⁹³⁰ PMA: 216.

One striking method that makes his writing reminiscent of the sophists' fragments, lies in the way he so often mixes antagonisms, thus leading to oxymoronic effects that largely contribute to energize his poetry: such as "wrinkling into youth," "Don't make my lie your truth, my truth your lie."

"Lost" and "found" make a frequently recurring pair of opposite polarities in his work:

he reads the line and begins uneasily to sense how little he has found how much he has lost. 933

These oxymoronic effects are often combined with marked parallelisms:

You see the innocence in some adults, the malice in some children. You bite what you don't like and sometimes you bite what you like. 934

Kennelly's belief in the power of opposite polarities has a lot in common with the sophist Heraclitus who asserts the "harmony deriving from opposites" but also with William Blake whom Kennelly greatly admires. He often quotes Blake on the importance of antagonism: "without contraries is no progression." Following William Blake, in a series of poems that are dialogues between the couple Hell and Heaven, a direct inspiration from Blake, whose *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*⁹³⁷ is taken literally in a series of poems, in which Heaven and Hell becomes two characters unhappily married. Kennelly asserts the alliance of opposites as a source of fertility as he parodies Blake's formula: "Knowing

⁹³¹ Ibid., 300.

⁹³² Ibid., 279.

⁴³³ *lbid*.

⁹³⁴ Ibid., 251.

⁹³⁵ Giannis Stamatellos, Plotinus and the Presocratics: A Philosophical Study of Presocratic Influences on Plotinus' Enneads (New York: SUNY Press, 2007), 52.

⁹³⁶ William Blake, "The Argument," "Marriage of Heaven and Hell," The Complete Poems: Second Edition,

ed. W.H. Stevenson (London and NY Congman, 1989), 105.

937 William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (London: Oxford University Press), 1975.

without contraries is no copulation." As explained by Ong⁹³⁹ oral literature⁹⁴⁰ is highly polarized and for Brendan Kennelly like for Blake, this polarization is a necessity to achieve the greatest perplexing effect in the form of lapidary lines that also lead the reader / listener into reflection. This polarization is not a characteristic limited to the words of a sophist but is more generally typical of oral poets, including Irish bards from the earliest times.

Interestingly enough, high polarization in Kennelly's work is also used to dismantle clichés, that often take the form of myths. In other words cliché is used against cliché. In that respect Brendan Kennelly made his poetics explicit as early as 1977 in "Satire in Flann O'Brien's: "Cliché is not only the truth worn dull by repetition; it can also be a form of immoral evasion, a refusal to exercise the mind at a moment when it should be exercised, even to one's own discomfort or distress." This discomfort and distress clearly corresponds to the sense of tragedy experienced by the reader / listener when they feel their myths crack under the pressure of poetic interrogation.

For Heraclitus, "war is the father of all things" and Kennelly seems to faithfully follow this assertion of the fertility and creative power that sparks out of the struggle between contraries. As shown by the following sentence from "Note," the preface to *Cromwell*: "Because of history, an Irish poet, to realise himself, must turn the full attention of his imagination to the English tradition," "English" prose and "Irish" prose form one of the essential conflicts on which the book is based. These two polarities are parallelled in the opposition between on the one hand the English tradition of the sonnet and on the other hand the Irish tradition of the epic. Just like what came after the English colonisation of

⁰³⁸ BOJ, 292.

⁹³⁹ Ong, Orality and Literacy, 45.

⁹⁴⁶ Primary orality.

⁹⁴¹ JIJ, 184.

⁹⁴² Charles H. Kahn, The Art and Thought of Heraclitus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 137

Ireland could not be English or Irish in the sense the word "Irish" had before the British domination but had to be reinvented. Similarly the confrontation between the sonnet and the Irish epic provided Brendan Kennelly with an opportunity to create something new and dynamic. Consequently, *Cromwell* is formally suspended, constantly tensed and nearly torn between the two traditions, the sonnet and the epic. Post-colonial Ireland had to learn to integrate the British heritage as "Irish history is inextricably commingled with English history." Similarly, Brendan Kennelly's epic integrates – sometimes through disintegrating – the sonnet. This tension, expressed in a poetic form that contributes to the book's energy is evoked as a key towards understanding in the following line uttered in the book by poet Edmund Spenser⁹⁴³: "Trouble is, sonnets are genetic epics."

Through the dichotomy epic-sonnet, Kennelly plays on the tension between a container and a contained flux. He has often chosen the sonnet as the frame of this confrontation, not only because of the English tradition but also for the formal qualities of the sonnet. As explained by M.R.G. Spiller, the sonnet is a form traditionally "compact, shapely, highly finished, and able to contain, in concentrated form, almost all that is human." Its form offers little flexibility: an octet followed by a sestet, separated by a blank, rhymes vary from alternate to couplet rhymes. The English sonnet is made of three quatrains followed by a rhymed couplet. The form demands great technical mastery because of its brevity and of the precision of its rules. These qualities make it an extremely popular form that is yet perceived as a little artificial.

When *Cromwell* was published in 1983, as noted by Michael Hartnett⁹⁴⁵ while series of sonnets were common enough, epics were scarce at the time and the combination of the sonnet and the epic made *Cromwell* a very original piece. The book of sonnets is

943 C. 81.

945 Folio - Kennelly's Cromwell, RTE Television, 07 February 1984.

⁹⁴⁴ Michael R.G. Spiller, The Development of the Sonnet, an Introduction (London: Routledge, 1992), 1.

composed of subsections that work as the units or the chapters of a story. Each sonnet can either follow the line of the series or, on the contrary, can act as an odd element disrupting the harmony of the part to which it belongs. Such variations bring movement and energy in a totality that otherwise might be felt as lengthy. "Warm" is one of these disruptive poems which, in a group of sonnets answering the rhetorical criteria of traditional sonnets marks a halt, both in form and tonality in the series:

In this moaning place
Where dead and dying
Soldiers are lying
In frozen grass
Barefoot children
Creep from hovels
Cross black ditches
Into freezing fields
Assess all bodies
Halt at the side
Of some dying form
Bare feet meeting
Blood yet living
Are a moment warm. 946

The lines have been mutilated, shortened by half in comparison with other sonnets of the series, which confers to the poem a dynamic that contrasts with the section to which it belongs. While the number of lines – fourteen – demanded by the sonnet is maintained, and despite the ghost of a conclusion in the last three lines, the poem eliminates progression and in one single sentence draws the picture of a battlefield covered with agonising bodies. As it causes a rupture both in form and in theme, such a sonnet introduces in the reading process a jerk and a flow of emotion that unsettles the frame of the more traditional sonnets which surround it.

The dismantling of the sonnet is also an operation that takes place in the structural turmoil Kennelly creates with sonnets that begin with a sestet and end with an octet. This is

⁹⁴⁶ C, 133.

nearly the case with "Friends" whose first five lines are separated from the final octet by a blank line. One should also mark variations in the number of lines. The double sonnet, that is a sonnet made of 28 lines, frequently appears in *Cromwell*. This is often the case when the poem represents Cromwell's words, as if the restricted space of the forteen lines according to the rule was not sufficient; among these sonnets are "Oliver to His Brothers" and "Oliver to a Friend." This extension of the poetic form on the page parallels the linguistic conquest of Cromwell's language over Irish and of the invasion of Irish territory by his troops.

Although variants of the sonnet were nothing new when *Cromwell* was published (the sonnet had already been stirred by Eliot, Hopkins, Auden, Dylan Thomas and many others) Brendan Kennelly's originality in *Cromwell* is the strong coherence, between the distortion of his sonnets and his main theme, that is, the violent confrontation of two cultures. The sonnets of 15, 16 and 17 lines – should such poems still be called a sonnet? – constitutes the dominant form of *The Book of Judas*. The extra line takes upon a peculiar importance as in "History" which closes with the aphoristic "History is when I decide to act." The special use of typography should also be underlined as it constitutes an important element in the onslaught against the sonnet. Such feature is illustrated in "The Music Pity Cries For" where the sestet seems to crumble into pieces:

He hardly knows the words

he heard old men

Mutter it once or twice,

he was born

To make the music pity cries for.

He knows the tricks clouds play with water and stone,

He has time for creatures,

his heart won't harden

Wondering what any creature lives and dies for. 950

947 C, 22.

948 Ibid., 118.

949 *Ibid.*, 51.

950 Ibid., 154.

As shown by the way he dismantles the sonnet, Kennelly seems above all to have launched into a quest for a poetic form of rupture, a form that would allow the expression of an impetus, an energy hitting against the fixity of a formal frame anchored in the literary and historical tradition. Such rupture at the level of the poem and tension at the level of the sequence can only take place because the reader and the poet agree on the general definition of the two polarities: the sonnet and the epic. At the level of the poem, fracture either takes the form of a final explosion – that fits with the Petrarchan tercet or the couplet in the English sonnet – or on the contrary with a deflation. In the latter case the reader expects the usual progression concluded in a tercet or in a couplet, yet this expectation is disappointed as the distorted sonnet breaks the "contract" with the reader. The structure of the sonnet, composed of a preparatory time (octave or triple quatrain), followed by a punchline (or "pique" to which Kennelly regularly refers) is also that of stories that belong to the oral tradition, sonnets, jokes, epigrams and haikus – so many forms that the poet explores in his verse.

Kennelly's play on polarities contributes to making his literary work extremely dynamic. The poet's taste for paradox that often takes the form of a combination of contraries is yet hardly compatible with the analytical thought. The analytical or philosophical approach based on reason lays down the principle of non-contradiction as its basis. Breaking with this Brendan Kennelly places himself as the defender of the irrational, occasionally verging on the absurd, and seems to fully assume contradiction inside and outside his verse as he quotes Walt Whitman:

Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)⁹⁵¹

Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass and Other Writings, ed. Michael Moon (NY: Norton and Company, Inc., 2002), 77. Quoted by Kennelly, cf. personal notes of classes, 2003.

III.2.4 Against Systems

Above all Kennelly refuses any kind of systematically organised mode of thinking which leads him to virulent attacks against the Church, analysis, intellectualism and academia. His approach opposes the primitive – often also irrational and chaotic – oral tradition and a philosophical position aimed at rigour and rationality. Following an interview with the poet, as early as February 1981, Siobhan McSweeney notes: "Kennelly dismisses the notion of intellectuality as a kind of an imposition."

Kennelly's attacks against the dogmatic and tyrannical power of the Church, among other systems, mainly took place in the 1980s and 1990s. Thus following Austin Clarke's (and other's) denunciation of the Church's tyrannical power, in a long accusatory paragraph, Kennelly expressed his rejection of this type of oppression and targets "the hypocrisy engendered by the violence of the institution of the Church."953 In particular he concentrates on the excessive power over women within and without the institution. This, combined with a powerful assertion of his Roman Catholic faith, won him the heart of many an Irish nun who tends to see in him a sort of Christ-like figure. However, as the grasp of the Church on the Irish psyche abated, especially when numerous cases of abuse were made public in the late 1990s and early 2000s, one marks that Kennelly - abandoned this target. Instead he focused his criticism on a theme that had long been present in his poetry, that is rationality, which he also broadly calls "the analytical mind." His position consists in rejecting any attitude that attempts at providing answers to wonder and puzzlement by use of a logical and rational chain of arguments. This stance naturally led the poet to strong suspicion if not utter dismissal of any kind of theory or analytical construction. For instance in "Beethoven hopes," the irrational and primitive world of "the harvest moon," is also represented by:

⁹⁵² Siobhán Mc Sweeney, transcript of interview with Brendan Kennelly, Dublin 2 February 1981, 3.

⁹⁵³ History and Violence in Anglo-Irish Literature, 22.

O my dark Rosaleen dear Helen of Troy Eileen Aroon⁹⁵⁴

that corresponds to a form of poetry detached from systematic thought and philosophy. In this poem the moon is

> going through its own kind of deconstruction beyond words beyond analysis

seems to reject the world of systematic rational thoughts so much so that in the middle of the poem, the moon "presented the Derridean cosmos / with a breakthrough fart." The piece ends with a praise of a type of poetry that is oral⁹⁵⁵ poetry, clearly rejecting philosophy in so far as systems are concerned and exposing the artificiality of certain critical methods imposing philosophical systems onto poetry. After his list of heroines born from the oral⁹⁵⁶ tradition, Irish and Greek, Kennelly concludes as if he was referring to his own words in an extremely long and syntactically complex sentence:

new language is born to sing your praises
thanks to the farting moon
that loves the thinkers
who won't use a word
without making it absurd
as a bird
whose song
chokes
on a perfectly argued academic turd.

Of all Kennelly's collections, *Now* is the one that most focuses on academic life and often shows itself very critical of dons. Yet in its background always looms Kennelly's dislike of systems, his love of questions and his suspicion of definite answers:

956 Orally transmitted.

⁹⁵⁴ PMA, 42.

^{955 (}Orally transmitted) or (orally transmitted and composed) or (orally composed).

How much violence hides in educated voices? Some questions find answers like science in the air when the last train passes.⁹⁵⁷

The antagonism between the world of poetry as the poet sees it and the world of numbers

and rationality is most fiercely pictured in:

The economist sneers at the poem.

The poem smiles back at him.

The economist can't begin to analyse the smile. 958

In Now, education as commonly practiced in Ireland is equated with "polished dishonesty."

Kennelly asked a long time earlier: "How many victims of intellectual rape / are there in

Universities?"959 and the rhetoric of argumentation and proof is dismantled line after line,

in a way that seems to illustrate Kennelly's talk with Siobhán McSweeney. This position

drove the poet to ask about literary criticism: "Why do we kill poetry with intellectual

politeness - with fatuous phrases like "It seems to me," when we should be saying 'I

believe.",960

Theses attacks against the rhetoric of academia and any rhetorical discourse goes

along with the rejection of labelling, not only abusive labelling but more generally of any

kind of attempt at specific and accurate definitions of a phenomenon. With such reaction,

the very basis of philosophy is dismantled and thrown to the dogs, since any systematised

approach is felt as an oppressive imposture. This attitude does not however exclude

admiration for science and in particular geniuses such as Einstein. Yet in them is

celebrated curiosity, openness, imagination, their heroic status, and possibly their celebrity,

⁹⁵⁷ N, **5**4.

⁹⁵⁸ N, 57.

960 Duytschaever, 11.

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whereas reason and the rigour of their method in their work is ignored in a manner that Gaston Bachelard would deem "pre-scientific":961

> Cissy wants to interview Einstein but stumbling on him in the nude leads her to write a brilliant non-interview for a famous paper. 962

In concordance, "Proof" celebrates the beauty of the phenomenon as opposed to a rational understanding or even an attempt at understanding. Causes and consequences are swept aside for the contemplative enjoyment of something that to the senses feels undermined by analysis:

> ... How easy It is to maim the moment With expectation, to force it to define Itself. Beyond all that I am, the sun Scatters its light as though by accident.

The second and last stanza of the poem seem rather disconnected (maybe in a way that illustrates the gap Kennelly sees between phenomenon and causal justification for it) from the first as the poet turns to a vision of a dreamlike mood that recalls "Dream of a Black Fox" and concludes with a sharp snappy line: "Proof is what I do not need." This poetics that also corresponds to the oral state of mind, as noted by Plato, but also by Gaston Bachelard, 963 constitutes a major obstacle to the scientific mind, to the ordering of experience according to a sequence in which causes and consequences are distinguished and classified.

⁹⁶¹ Gaston Bachelard, The Philosophy of No: A Philosophy of the New Scientific Mind (New York: Orion Press, 1968), 46.

⁹⁶³ Gaston Bachelard, La Formation de l'esprit scientifique (Paris: Vrin, 1975).

III.2.5 Rejection of a Mechanised World

Philosophy, science and more generally analysis attempt at ordering our perception of nature in a coherent and logical way. Machines and mechanised devices are the material products resulting from such perceptions. However, these can hardly exist in an illiterate society for beyond a certain level of complexity a construction necessitates writing. In a vision that refuses the analytical mind, it comes as an expected consequence that Kennelly would reject the world of elaborate machines.

In concordance with the Romantic approach to oral poetry⁹⁶⁴ Brendan Kennelly's verse shows a marked rejection of the mechanised world in favour of the organic. However, he parts with the Romantics in so far as he does not advocate an artless view of poetry in favour of spontaneity at all cost. A certain type of verbal spontaneity is sought after, and used as raw material subsequently worked upon by the poet. Thus, *Now* is essentially made of overheard scraps of conversations, sayings, etc. As noted by Gerold Sedlmayr Kennelly's earlier work is pervaded by an anti-pastoral streak that recalls Patrick Kavanagh and that does not allow for any idealisation of a natural primitive country life. ⁹⁶⁵

To pin-point but a couple of examples that illustrate Kennelly's position towards certain elements of modern Ireland, attention will be drawn to Brendan Kennelly's position towards traffic, computers and television. Since he places himself in the position of the lonely walking poet in the wake of Arthur Rimbaud, like an Irish version of "I'homme aux semelles de vent" (the man with soles of wind), Brendan Kennelly's rejection of cars would hardly surprise the reader. His denunciation against the traffic in Dublin provides a new perspective of Joyce's calling Dublin "the center of paralysis." At a time (from the late 1990s up to now) when the purchase of a car has become synonymous with the

⁹⁶⁴ Ruth Finnegan, 31.

⁹⁶⁵ Gerold Sedlmayr, Brendan Kennelly's Literary Works, 13.

lbid., 143.

Ibid., 146-148.

Ibid., 171.

increased wealth that accompanied the Celtic Tiger, traffic is experienced by the poet as a dehumanizing factor. The world of drivers resembles a battlefield where any blow is permitted. "Some drivers hit and killed." The man behind the wheel is like a predator. The shell offered by the car provides him with a sense of power that makes him ferocious against anyone but more particularly against pedestrians and leads the poet to utter the aphorism: "Never interfere with a man driving somewhere." In "When light turns red" 968 the contrast in tone between the geniality of the boy and the agressivity of the driver is characteristic of the atmosphere on the roads in Dublin: "No! No! Snaps the motorist." The poet represents cars as authoritarian machines in which men are carried away into an hypnotic race, a forgetfulness of the world and of themselves. "A new fool" gives us to consider a flowing line of cars in which drivers become anonymous and faceless: "... Ten vards away, Ace de Homer / stands and peers at the flashing faces / of the drivers..." The run-on-line insists on the impression made by cars of a chain whose links are all similar and next to interchangeable. The contrast is strong between the anonymous drivers passing like units in a row and the fixed point on the road: the run flat dog. There is something pathetic and deeply funny in the poet's pity for the dead dog whose image systematically returns: "blackandwhite" (words merge like the colours of what is left of the dog) in the beginning or in the end of the second line of every stanza. The poet, pedestrian on a halt at the traffic light, "stand(s) there, peering, peering, one more helpless fool." Brendan Kennelly humorously plays with Ace's tendency to identify with dogs, Kanooce especially, and "peering" suggests an intense gaze but also that Ace contemplates the dog as "a peer," in a pun that reinforces the preceding words in the poem: "it could be me." Echoes of the antagonism between drivers and the pedestrian poet are also heard in Now:

⁹⁶⁶ PMA, 183.

⁹⁶⁷ Ibid., 193.

⁹⁶⁸ Ibid., 54.

⁹⁶⁹ Ibid., 183.

The Volvo misses him by inches. The woman at the wheel smiles as if she'd invited him to dinner.

While traffic dehumanizes people into savage drivers, computers cause another type of human alteration. In that case the machine provides a substitute to human interaction and act as a ghost. The machine asserts itself as an "alter ego" which creates the illusion of an interaction that answers the need to escape loneliness. This relationship between man and the machine shapes a closed space where the individual is chained with a projection of himself, that is a perfectly self-centered space.

About computers and the internet, Brendan Kennelly says "I don't understand machines." The computer machine acts as a third party, an obstacle limiting human interaction. Brendan Kennelly's poetry represents computers as a substitute to humans through an illusory otherness. This leads him to entitle a poem dealing with the interaction between a man and his computer "A Subtle Relathionship." Line after line the computer is personified. It is initially compared to a turtle: "My computer is shaped like a turtle..." then the compared object disappears and the two images fuse: "I consulted my turtle to find the true / Shape and direction of my future." Eventually the computer is granted speech and the narrative voice gives the poem over to the computer in the final tercet: "Betray, by all means..." Up to then the narrative voice in the poem was that of Judas, the central character of the collection, yet close attention to the computer's voice reveals that Judas' pervasive voice has also entered the computer: "Betray by all means... / But please, dear master, please remember, if you find / Yourself in some despair, put no hope in rope:"

The computer's voice sounds like another variation of the Judas voice, who in that piece, blinds himself like so many people do when they grant some form of otherness to their machines. Brendan Kennelly mocks this fusional relationship of the self with the self:

⁹⁷¹ BOJ, 176.

⁹⁷⁰ Personal notes from classes with Brendan Kennelly, 2003.

... We have a subtle

Relationship characterised by courtesy And counsel; an old-fashioned couple⁹⁷²

The accumulation of internal rhymes underlines how ridiculous and artificial the

relationship is, and recalls "turtle;" the alter ego computer that ends up with a voice. This

dissemination of the phoneme [al] that one can also hear in "final," "apostolic," "debacle,"

"consulted," might also suggest that in the mock dialogue between Judas / computer and

the "turtle" is enacted a modern version of the mythological story of Echo.

Interestingly enough, decades later, Brendan Kennelly's position about computers

has remained the same and he still denounces the use of computers as a substitute to human

beings:

Bored with her men

she married her computer

and discovered conversation. 973

For all its ambiguity the television offers a most interesting instance of Brendan Kennelly's

attitude towards machines. Just like with cars, his personal position is here in conflict with

his public role and the contradiction is openly played upon in his verse. He grants a

particular attention to the television in his writing, yet always to denounce its hypnotic

power. The poet underlines the power of the small screen. In his essay "Poetry and

Violence" he said: "Ireland is, in certain respects, as mummified by television violence and

soapoperas as England or any country." Judas is often pictured in a television studio,

occasionally interviewing Jesus, constantly charming spectators:

"You'd betray your own mother

wouldn't you, my son?"

⁹⁷² Ibid.

⁹⁷³ N, 71. ⁹⁷⁴ JIJ, 29.

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'I suppose I would' I mused as I flashed that Winning Judas grin. Viewers adored my honesty.

My tam-ratings soared high as heaven. 975

For Brendan Kennelly, television possesses the capacity to cancel viewers' critical faculty

or their ability to think. They become manipulated entranced puppets. Subdued, they "sit

content and stupefied in a trance."976 Nobody seems imune against the irresistible power of

the small screen which is referred to as the ultimate device of propagation, also because it

circulates gossip:

There'll be a million versions from now on.

You have yours.

I have mine.

But Christ in heaven,

Wait'll it hits the small screen! 977

The only possible shelter against the television's almighty power is a total refusal to let it

enter one's domestic space:

"No television! No television!" roared Ace,

"in my Bluebell pad!"978

Introducing a television in the poet's rooms would allow an invasion that could petrify his

thought. Kennelly then plays with his polysemic title: "The unthinkable." It both applies to

the idea of having a television in one's place, and to the small screen itself. The latter is

"unthinkable" as an object because it swallows thought. The pun on the container and the

contained, the active and the passive is completed when, ironically referring to his many

television appearances. The poet adds: "Suppose one night I were to see myself? / - O

God!"

⁹⁷⁵ BOJ, 103.

⁹⁷⁶ JIJ, 29.

⁹⁷⁷ PMA, 133.

978 Ibid., 271

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Brendan Kennelly refuses to watch himself on television and also refuses to have a television set in his home, but the television has yet been a crucial instrument to spread his poetry and construct him as a public figure and in that regard it acted as a substitute for the travels his earlier bardic peers used to take. Despite his rejection of machines, Kennelly like many oral poets, from Somali poets to Bob Dylan, made ample use of modern telecommunications.⁹⁷⁹ His poetry was largely popularized through radio and television, tapes, videos and nowadays, although he has a limited awareness of this because he does not use computers, through the internet.

The time has passed when oral⁹⁸⁰ poetry and story-telling took place after sun-set by the fire place, when the aural faculty was foremost appealed to. Brendan Kennelly in his bardic poet's role, in order that his poetry would be publicized or "enjoyed by the people" to use his own words accepted that, matching modern society where the visual sense has overcome the auditory, his voice would be attached to his image on television. As shown in the way he represents television in his verse, the compromise yet was not fully accepted and in some of his television appearances the poet's yearning for the old order is palpable when oral poetry used to prevail over visual images and over the written word.

Not surprisingly telecommunication devices that solely appeal to the auditory are favoured by Kennelly both at a personal and at a poetic level. This is true of the phone 981 but also of the radio:

> Kennelly cites the radio, another feature of an oral pre-television era, as having had a real influence on him: "It was a heard thing, because in the stuff I write, I'm not interested in

visuality at all."982

Zumthor, 240.

982 Siobhán McSweeney, n.p.

⁹⁷⁹ Ruth Finnegan, 195.

Ong, Orality and Literacy, 171.

980 (Orally transmitted) or (Orally transmitted and composed) or (orally composed).

⁹⁸¹ Kenny Live, RTE Television, 17 February 1990.

One consequently understands that Brendan Kennelly generally favours the organic over the mechanic and feels suspicious of machines. Among these he yet cherishes technical devices that allow for oral communication such as the radio and the telephone and more particularly the broadcast of literature. His approach to a mechanised world leaves no room whatsoever for analysis or a logical understanding of the device. In his view of machines, he proclaims the importance of spontaneity and he refuses analysis, in particular that of his own image which led to the occasional flop and to many successes.

3) No Linear Time

III.3.1 Past into Present, Present of the Future... Mythical and Historical Time

In concordance with his refusal of analytical thought, that dismisses nearly anything intellectual or material - organised in a systematic way, the poet interrogates and in many respects rejects the linear conception of time. Instead, he turns to a perception based on memory, close to a mythical and consequently more oral (typical of illiterate societies) perception of time.

In an oral (illiterate or semi-literate) society time charters possess a symbolic more than a pragmatic value. 983 It takes literacy to have time represented in terms of space, most often as a line, and for adults in the rural area of North Kerry where Kennelly grew up, the few years spent in school hardly sufficed to switch people's approach to time from oral to literate time. The education they received increased their taste for stories but not the logical and structured approach to life of the analytical mind. 984 Consequently, in such societies the past is transmitted in the form of mythical stories whose value resides in their relevance to the present more than in truth. The past can then be freely distorted and adapted to the needs of the present.

 ⁹⁸³ Ong, Orality and Literacy, 98.
 984 In communication with Brendan Kennelly 18 July 2008.

Persons whose world view has been formed by high literacy need to remind themselves that in functionally oral cultures the past is not felt as an itemized terrain, peppered with verifiable and disputed "facts" or bits of information. It is the domain of the ancestors, a resonant source for renewing awareness of present existence, which itself is not an itemized terrain either. 985

This conception leaves no room for analysis. Frequently, chronological compilations are erroneous and contradictory without anybody questioning this chronology of past events. Witnesses claim and are persuaded to have attended events that took place before they were born and the most powerful narratives are often the most confusing from a historical perspective. In that respect Richard White's enquiry into his mother's past proves most enlightening. As a trained historian from Harvard his analytical approach to his mother's lrish past was bound to encounter surprises when he visited his family in Ballylongford: "My confusion showed that I did not understand the Troubles, I didn't understand how time worked in Ballylongford." This notion of time in which Brendan Kennelly grew up. that is an oral time, 987 does not itemize events as a succession of units on a line but aggregates, superimposes and fuses events that a historical approach would discriminate.

In Ballylongford time was not historical but mythical. This past accounts for and justifies the present. In particular, Richard White calls attention to "the Troubles." 988 In the village, the expression refers to a period that spans about a thousand years from the Vikings invasion to the time of the civil war. What is more specifically referred to here is the violence that the country went through over that period: invasions, conquests, battles, murders and persecutions. "The Troubles" encompass everything at once obscurely and indistinctly. These violent events are not considered each in their own right as individuated moments in history but they are perceived as one same event that is being repeated over

985 Ibid.

oss Ibid.

⁹⁸⁶ Richard White, 34.
987 A perception of the oral mind.

and over again. Explaining one event is synonymous with explaining the whole and contact with one of these events equates contact with the totality of the Troubles.

The time of the Troubles is the frame for one set of extraordinary events. It is the frame in which the people of Kerry combine and recombine these images of the past. The time of the Troubles is less a narrative that seeks to chronicle than a match maker pairing past and present. I ask my uncles and aunts about the ruins of a medieval tower or a plaque where an IRA man fell, and it is all the same: the Time of the Troubles. 989

Eddie Carmody was the local hero who died at the hands of the Black and Tans. He is refered to in

Historicity

Who killed Carmody? Who threw his coat in the Liffcy? What does his name signify in that appalling song?

Don't ask Ace, he wasn't there, and if he were, he'd probably have got it wrong.

He also reappears in The Singing Tree:

I saw the Civil War, I was there The day Eddie Carmody was shot. A quiet man, Eddie. He whispered a prayer ⁹⁹¹

During his stay in Ballylongford, Richard White remarked how anyone who had witnessed or who had been in contact with the hero Carmody at the scene of his death somehow reached a semi-heroic status themselves and gained present authority from this mythical past as if the hero's blood possessed some transcendental power. This is yet possible only because in this circular conception of time Eddie Carmody is not merely Eddie Carmody but stands for all the many martyrs of the Troubles:

⁹⁹⁰ PMA, 118.

⁹⁸⁹ Ibid., 39.

⁹⁹¹ ST, 19.

What history keeps distinct, this common memory of the Troubles joins together. History insists that Eddie Carmody's death was the particular death of an Irish countryman at a particular place and a particular time... But to see all these deaths within the frame of the Troubles is to understand the dying differently. They are not multiple deaths in the Troubles, there is but one death endlessly repeated. 992

Although some critics have found Cromwell heterogeneous in its composition, it would be argued that it was Brendan Kennelly's talent to render through his epic poem the necessary confusion implied by oral and mythical time. In order to do so, he provided himself with a strong historical background on the Cromwellian period and from this knowledge, worked towards a literary version of this past. The many voices in the book - Oliver, Buffún, Ed, the Belly, the Mouth and others - provide the reader with the various layers and facets that are typical of mythical time. As opposed to this, History aims at one version and one truth that is ambitioned as final. Just like Eddie Carmody had become a one sided character through mythification, Cromwell had become the arch-enemy. In his telling of his encounter with Ballylongford community, Richard White mentions how any questioning or doubt proferred over the Kerry people's approach to their past is felt as deeply unsettling and next to offensive. Any attempt at questioning the living myth leads to a sense of tragedy. Although with Cromwell Brendan Kennelly did not merely address his native community but in the first place his fellow Irishmen, a similar disturbing effect was achieved. The book indeed forces the reader to consider the multiple sidedness of Cromwell, including his human sides, while in the same process the density of mythical time and its circular rather than linear progression is maintained. Circularity is among other devices expressed through repetitions of certain themes and images. The first poem of the collection "A Host of Ghosts" deals with night vision "Night: the pits are everywhere," while the book closes with the break of a new day in "A Soft Amen": "The unbelievable

⁹⁹² Richard White, 39.

⁹⁹³ C, 16.

dawn is again / Upon me like a chain-letter"; "He" that is the second poem reappears in the last five pages of the collection in "He, Again", which seems the second part of "He", that ends up on the question: "where are my shoes?" and "He, again" concludes by providing an answer: "He handed me my shoes."

III.3.2 Kennelly, Memory and St Augustine

Paradoxically Kennelly's representation of mythical time is tied with influences from Augustine's philosophy. The philosopher rejected the pagan conception of cyclic time and believed in an irreversible process moving in a definite direction. ⁹⁹⁶ It is not yet this aspect of Augustine's reflection on time that Kennelly turns to. It has been shown indeed that his verse clearly remains faithful to the cyclic pagan time as opposed to the Christian representation of time in the shape of a linear process. What caught the poet's attention was Augustine's view of time as an extension of the self. ⁹⁹⁷ The poet worked on the idea of the possibility for man and for the poet in particular to expand his self, in time but also towards otherness. For Augustine, neither the past nor the future exists and the present has no extension. What we have is a present image of the past in our soul and a present anticipation of the future. Consequently, rather than the three times one usually speaks about (past, present and future), according to Augustine the three types of times are the present of the past, the present of the present, and the present of the future. Time is nowhere to be found but in our soul.

It would here be argued that this assertion of continuity through the mind and this concentration of time in the present is not totally estranged to mythical time. In particular, they share a sense of continuity that does not require a spatial representation of time for its

⁹⁹⁴ Ibid., 156.

⁹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁹⁹⁶ M.C. D'Arcy et al., St Augustine (New York: World Publishing Company, 1957), 68-69.

⁹⁹⁷ Cf. Brendan Kennelly's personal papers.

understanding. According to this conception, history has to be thoroughly distinguished from the past while mythical time can be called "the past." The former is external while the latter which is internal directly proceeds from memory. As explained by Eric Havelock, in an oral⁹⁹⁸ society, this past is preserved in the living memories of successive living people through the spoken word; and as shown by Richard White in his study of Ballylongford, the collective past is also the individual past. Old songs and ballads orally travel through time according to a similar mode of transmission, that led Irish traditional singer Frank Harte to frequently quote Brendan Kennelly's statement that "All the songs are living ghosts / And long for a living voice." 999

Kennelly's interest in Augustine's philosophy is manifest in repeated references to the philosopher. This can take the form of the name of a street: St Augustine Street, that appears in several instances in Poetry My Arse or in a more direct way as in "St Augustine on God" and "Saint Augustine's Toc." In his preface to Familiar Strangers, the poet underlines the contrast between external and internal time, the linear time of chronology and the time of the mind:

> There is the straightforward, necessary, chronological way, the way of the clock, the watch and the calendar. Then there is the sudden, surging way of memory and dream, of lightning mental relationship, of surprising, even shocking connection, of image begetting image, of 1950 leaping forward unstoppably to 2004. 1002

Most interestingly when considering the measurement of time, Augustine analyses the recitation of a poem, an example that did not fail to capture Brendan Kennelly's attention. The philosopher notes that a poem is measured through space by feet and syllables 1003 but

⁹⁹⁹ FS, 463.

⁹⁹⁸ Illiterate.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Ibid., 231.

¹⁰⁰¹ Ibid., 486.

¹⁰⁰² *Ibid*., 19.

¹⁰⁰³ M.C. D'Arcy et al., St Augustine, 189.

that in time, when we recite the poem, syllables can be lengthened or shortened at will. From this he concludes that time is not external but internal, that its siege is located in the mind, and that time is an extension of the mind.

During the recitation the mind comprehends both the unit of every syllable and the whole of the poem in the present, an experience Brendan Kennelly would be most familier with. Augustine uses this as an image to explain how our concentration can lead us to behold eternity. We have to abstract ourselves from time passing through meditation to contemplate eternity. It is this type of contemplation that led Patrick Kavanagh to write "In a crumb of bread the whole mystery is."1004 The Monaghan poet's thought had also been influenced by Agustine.

With Glimpses Brendan Kennelly began his poetic quest to capture the instant that is, according to Augustine, the time unit that cannot be divided, an insecable spot in the flux of time. Consequently with Glimpses Brendan Kennelly's poems shrank drastically until they reached the minimal form of triplets with Now. Strikingly enough, Kennelly's letter to his publisher, Neil Astley, dated 10 November 2000 opens with "Now that I have to say, I don't seem to have anything to say," a formula that directly echoes Augustine's comment on defining time: "If no one asks me I know; if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not."1005 Strangely enough in a couple of lines, Brendan Kennelly - with or without awareness - encompasses the various aspects of times on which Augustine had pondered: the flow of time, and the flash, the sudden instant that cannot be divided but that continues to live in the memory, even the crumb of bread in which Kavanagh witnessed the presence of God is referred to in the opening of the letter:

 ¹⁰⁰⁴ Selected Poems, 27.
 1005 St Augustine, De Civitate, XII, xiii in M.C. D'Arcy et al., St Augustine, 189.

I think I got a glimpse or glimpsing one day of haste when I spotted, in that state of haste, a one-legged pigeon battling for a crust with one or two other able-legged pigeons. I kept going, I had to, to be on time for my appointment, for which I was already late. But the glimpse stayed with me. 1006

Evoking the state of meditation and rest of the intellect, Augustine advocates to contemplate eternity Brendan Kennelly proceeds by quoting William Henry Davies: "We have no time to stand and stare" and mentions Keats's awareness of the blindness that accompanies the sense of purpose. Both remarks find echoes in the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh: "To look on is enough / In the business of love," and "My purpose was to have no purpose." Brendan Kennelly's further definition of the glimpse very closely recalls the philosophy of Plotinus and of St Augustine in so far as they believed in the "mystic flash," the instant in which the soul can behold the totality of time that is eternity:

The glimpsc has something of lightning in it, a sideways flash or eyelighting. But it's not just a sideway flash. It is also a backward flash and a forward flash. It is a lightning relationship with the past and the future, with memory and anticipation, with what is burried within us and naked before us, outside us. 1010

The type of language used here by the poet strikingly ressembles Plotinus' when he advocates how to perceive God and Eternity. His method is actually not to be looking for this perception but to let it surprise us, when we do not expect it. The direct approach cannot succeed: "we must not look, but must, as it were, close our eyes and exchange our faculty of vision for another." 1011

¹⁰⁰⁶ Brendan Kennelly, letter to Neil Astley, n.p.

¹⁰⁰⁷ William Henry Davies, The Collected Poems of William H. Davies: With a Portrait (NY: A.A. Knopf,

¹⁰⁰⁸ Patrick Kavanagh, Selected Poems, 124.

¹⁰⁰⁹ lbid., xxxiv.

¹⁰¹⁰ Ihid., 2.

¹⁰¹¹ Pierre Haddot, Pierre Haddot, Michael Chase and Arnold Davidson, *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 30.

Maybe because *Now* was written just after Brendan Kennelly retired, that is at a turning point in a life when the question of time becomes more pressing, the poet's reflection on time seems to have been better ordered and deepened in comparison with *Glimpses*. Unlike most of his collections, *Now* does not bear any dedicace but opens with a quotation by Samuel Taylor Colleridge that perfectly matches Augustine's considerations on time: "And in today already walks tomorrow," and the poet's opening words in his preface also sound like a comment on the philosophy of St Augustine when he refers to the present: "What is 'now'? This moment, gone as soon as mentioned?" 1012

¹⁰¹² N, 6.