

*Echoes in a World  
that Dreams of Ending*

Brendan Kennelly, *Begin*. Bloodaxe, £8.95.

Brendan Kennelly's latest publication, *Begin*, consists of poems written and rewritten over a period of almost forty years. In addition to some new, previously unpublished work, it features poems from earlier collections, making it a kind of sequel to his *Selected* from 1990, *A Time for Voices*. As with that book, Kennelly has rearranged his material in this volume, not wishing to stick to the given chronology of composition and publication dates. Instead he has sought to highlight what, in the preface to the book, he calls the "echopower" of poetry.

On one level, "echopower" refers to the "intellectual, emotional and spiritual electricities that can come only from the poem's own life reaching out to the life of another poem". Kennelly elaborates: "Once written, poems have their own lives. They have the right to lead themselves as they see fit". Fair enough, though paradoxically Kennelly's lengthy preface also betrays a need to control and police the selected material, and so threatens to defuse the sparks of surprise that the book may have to offer. Especially when he provides glosses to illustrate just how some of the poems reach out and connect in new and thematically surprising ways, the poet seems too unwilling to let go and entrust us with his work. On the whole, the preface leaves you wondering if it is also out of a sense of frustration that Kennelly observes (with reference to Valéry): "poems are never finished; they are merely abandoned".

According to Kennelly, poetry's essential autonomy and "echoing powers" are further manifested by what he describes as the art-forms' "shocking democracy". Seeing his own poems as stepping-stones, the author finds that they often bid him (and his readers) to listen to voices that we don't normally hear, and will not want to hear. This is central to the kind of learning offered in *Begin*, and it con-

nects with Kennelly's ambition in previous works—most notably *Cromwell* (1983) and *The Book of Judas* (1991)—to open his mind to the experiences of people whom he has otherwise been taught to fear, hate and condemn. The outcome is often a demonstrably altruistic voice, a poetry that constantly seeks to challenge our inherited cultural prejudices. Thus, in *Begin* we encounter Will Flint, a London bus driver who speaks candidly of his years in the Black-and-Tans, murdering “bloody rebels” somewhere in Cork (“A Black-and-Tan”). Through his story we are asked by the poet to listen for the decency and generosity in a man who conceals nothing.

More chilling and less predictable, perhaps, is “Hear the voice of the bomb”, which addresses our shared history of destructiveness, and traces it all the way back to Genesis:

Though I nestled in Adam's brain  
he'd no time to think of me when  
day and night he longed for Eve  
and the inane birth of human love.

Following the bomb's presence as an “alert, indifferent star” through the ages, the poem ends:

...I'll go into the dark once more  
till a chosen child will find me there  
and his heart will hurt with joy  
hearing my heart, Destroy, Destroy!  
I rest my case until you find  
Me ready in your ticking mind.

The combative relationship between light and darkness is central to the way in which Kennelly deals with human experience. Indeed, apart from a handful of lighter aphoristic verses, most of the poems in *Begin* are concerned with a world that is continually suspended between glimmers of hopeful possibility and an encompassing darkness of destitution and despair. The title poem, for instance, concludes the collection with these lines:

Though we live in a world that dreams of ending  
that always seems about to give in  
something that will not acknowledge conclusion  
insists that we forever begin.

Still, it is symptomatic of Kennelly's poetry that while there is hope in these lines, it is markedly subdued. If Heaney—who belongs to

the same generation as Kennelly—has learnt to credit marvels in later years, Kennelly is more preoccupied with a world that dreams of ending. This often manifests itself in a kind of Dublin spleen that exposes him to poetic mannerisms. In “Warning”, for instance, “Rain of cancer/ corrodes the wheat,” while “berries steeped in the wind’s poison/ burst inside the mouth”. Similarly, in “A Special Odour”, the poet portrays his city as a spiritual wasteland:

Up from the Sunday morning river drifts  
 a special odour of corruption,  
 the Dublin fog of foulness never lifts,  
 the dead are abed,  
 the living seek their temples of delusion.

There is a rhythmical monotony and a flatness in tone here that makes you wonder if Kennelly has striven deliberately for a poetic form that may enact the theme of spiritual decay and exhaustion. Thus, the passage recalls Eliot’s use of an unvaried metre and rhyme scheme to describe an act of dispassionate love-making in *The Waste Land*: “The time is now propitious, as he guesses,/ The meal is ended, she is bored and tired...” Still, trying to account for the stylistic awkwardness of “A Special Odour” in this way is not altogether convincing. The question remains, should we be entirely happy with the metrical regularity in these lines, the rather clumsy-sounding “Sunday morning river drifts” (which I think requires the main accent on “drifts”), and the heavy alliteration in “Dublin fog of foulness never lifts”?

Interestingly, the most convincing moments in *Begin* are when Kennelly manages to temper his dark, apocalyptic vision with a more celebratory mode, and thereby lives up to the imperative of the book’s title. In “The Limerick Train”, for instance: “Hurtling between hedges now, I see/ green desolation stretch on either hand/ while sunlight blesses all magnanimously”. Although partly intended as a lament over the present state of Ireland (“no phoenix rises from that ruin”), “The Limerick Train” also reads as a tribute to the poet’s own creative force. The moving train becomes the rhythmical vehicle of the piece, which hurtles along in terza rimas that propel the mind of the traveller:

A church whips past, proclaiming heavy loss  
 amounting to some forty thousand pounds,  
 a marble Christ unpaid for on His Cross

accepts the Limerick train’s irreverent sound,

relinquishes great power to little men—  
a river flowing still, but underground.

Through his tight control of the medium in “The Limerick Train”, Kennelly manages to exploit the expansive energies offered by the terza rima, turning a physical journey into a meditative odyssey of contemporary Irish culture, an odyssey that blends historical pain with a tentative vision of the future, all of which is gleaned from “the land’s uncertainty” seen through the window of a train. It is in instances such as this that we are assured of Kennelly’s command as a poet. However, in *Begin* as a whole these moments are too few and far between.