

# E A M O N     G R E N N A N

## *Interview*

Eamon Grennan was born in Dublin in 1941 and educated at the Christian Brothers, Synge Street, Cistercian College, Roscrea, and University College Dublin. In 1972 he completed his doctorate on Shakespeare at Harvard University, and since then has taught English at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. His books include *Wildly for Days* (1983), *What Light There Is* (1987), *As If It Matters* (1991), and *So It Goes* (1995). In 1998 *Relations: New and Selected Poems* was published by Graywolf in the United States, and in 2000 a briefer *Selected and New Poems* by Gallery in Ireland. His translations from the Italian, *Leopardi: Selected Poems*, was published in 1997 and received the PEN Award for poetry in translation. A book of selected essays, *Facing the Music*, is out from Creighton University Press. This interview with Justin Quinn took place on the afternoon of 10 August 1999, at the Great Southern Hotel on Eyre Square in Galway.

*In "Men Roofing" you talk of the space between "our common ground and nobody's sky". This sums up a lot about your life and work in general. To take just one context, on the one hand you find a common ground between the Irish and American poetic traditions, and yet are also moving through "nobody's sky" in that you don't fit easily into either.*

Well, that's the way that I'd like in part to think of myself. The meaning of the line to me is of course is the attempt to transcend—that's the wrong word, but I'll use it anyway—the political. The common ground is underlying the human, and then nobody's sky is what is over the human. In both cases the attempt is probably to subvert the notion of the exclusive and the notion of division. I think that is actually—though it sounds pretentious—a strain in what I do, the attempt to resist the definitions of the "political" and to push towards something more amorphous, more porous. Knowing, of course, that the "political" covers pretty well everything anyway. You also mention the Irish and American poetic traditions. I guess, because of my own history, that I do in some way stand between them, maybe belonging to both, though maybe not really *belonging* to either.

*As an Irish poet you don't take on the usual subject matter. You don't go into all the myths, as Seamus Heaney or John Montague would do. That doesn't interest you at all.*

It interests me, but I've never found a way of talking about it that would seem sincere. I mean they interest me in my head, but there are times you don't have a voice for vast quantities of your experience that exist very legitimately in your head. And being a poet the attempt is probably to expand the capacity of your craft so that the voice you have can actually accomodate more of your experience. And Irish myth, and things Irish—political, historical, mythological—are of perpetual interest to me. They're a sort of homeland. But at the same time (like my five years in Roscrea, five years in a boarding school, crucially important because they were my teenage years), I have never found a way in there with a voice that could make sense and sound sincere to me as the voice of the poem. So any of the stuff in the decisively Irish cultural context is very much at an oblique angle—mentions of saga, mentions of swans, of violence. The way I enter that area is always indirect, it's never a frontal approach. I guess it's because I came to it all, consciously at least, much later. I came to it when I was in America. Other reasons are probably temperamental. I mean the reason for both things—the resistance to political definition and the resistance to making use of given matter may be quite defensive on my part, but defensive in a good way. I defend myself from a sense of inauthenticity, I think, by not dwelling on those matters in any direct way at all.

*Irish experience seems to come with the theme of family history. The country of your parents is Ireland and of your children it's America. Irish landscape as well...*

Since I left around the age of 22 or 23, after I'd finished college, the umbilicus that remained intact was that to the family. That was what drew me home at the time, and that was the main conduit into my notion of the place, into the country. I stayed in touch by being in touch with my parental source, basically. Clareville Road in Dublin, on the one hand, and parts of the west of Ireland, on the other. Clareville Road was the given home and it's immediate surroundings: a square mile where you're brought up and where even if you closed your eyes you'd know everything, by smell, by touch. And the west of Ireland which is a kind of chosen place, from childhood in some ways (my father was a school inspector in the Gaeltacht areas of Connemara and we spent, when I was very young, summers in Carraroe), and in particular from about 1977 or '78, when I started

writing poetry and also started spending time in Renvyle. The landscape there fed my work then, and has continued to do so. It is, aside from all its actuality, a meditative space. But it's mostly personal, familial—it's not public, not political. I feel incapacitated and without authority when it comes to the public and, for want of a better word, the political. I don't feel as if something in me will say, "You have no right here". Obviously I have every right in the world. But I don't feel the right to talk about here, except in the most private of ways. But that seems a perfectly legitimate stance. As a poet, you say what you can, in every sense. And what I can say seems to be anchored very close to home.

*By spending so much time out of the country you feel that you wouldn't be able to address these more public things?*

That's it. I resist the notion of *commentary upon*.. Because you have to write out of where you are and it must come not *about* but *out of* something, some source, and the lack of authority for me really means (when it comes to the North or something like that, or even the South, or some political issue) I would have no language. You, for example, have a very decisive language, as a poet, for commentary on political, historical, sociological forces. You're very alert to them and you feel authority as a poet to comment on them. Your work certainly suggests that authority. I, in a generation different from yours, older than you, oddly enough wouldn't feel that authority at all. In part because I left, and in part because of temperament. Because even had I stayed and then written poetry out of being here—as an *unamphibian* poet or person—my instincts are all anti-historical and anti-political, or apolitical, ahistorical; they somehow, and for whatever reason, resist those categories. I think they try to exist in a different zone of the real—ethical and personal and erotic zones, as well as in some zone of connection between the human and the natural world, which is I suppose ethical (and maybe, in a way, erotic) at its source. Zones of pleasure, too, the pleasures of being as well as the difficulties of being, but mostly aside from more explicitly public issues.

*I'm trying to think about how that would work in the American context, America as a place that you do know for many years now. You don't feel drawn to the broader panorama there either.*

Right. But that would be true, I'd say, for a great many poets writing in America.

*You remain very much a domestic poet. I mean, that's your chosen sphere.*

Fair enough. And the domestic here would cover it seems to me the challenges to the domestic. It seems to me that a lot of my poems are about place in the widest and narrowest sense of the word. The word “domestic” gets used, too, about things I write about the natural world. It’s not the wilderness. But I think that it’s important to see—important for me anyway—that mixed in with registrations of that “domestic” reality there is always some challenge to it. I mean that’s where my politics are, if you like. They’re in a certain kind of commitment to celebration of and resistance to certain things, in the domestic world, the world of human relations, and the natural world. The poems are trying to suggest (I think) a perpetual sense of presence that’s momentary and needs to be celebrated. There’s something there to be celebrated, but usually in the shadow of a distinct sense of *process*, of things passing, changing.

*This has something to with the poem when you’re cooking the lobster. The wonderful sensual pleasure you get from these momentary things. But then the price exacted.*

The lobster poem is exactly it. Maybe that’s where my morals lie, if I have any at all, they must lie in a slightly melancholy, gloomy sense of the price exacted, I mean for anything. Maybe I can’t have a voice for the explicitly political because I’m too taken up with stuff which you might call pre-political. But of course that could carry some sort of political *implication*.

*We’re dwelling on the gloom, but reading the poems is... a very cheerful experience. Celebration is everywhere, and so much energy channelled into them. When I compare you with the Martians—they were brilliant at conjuring wonderful metaphors, but they’re so melancholic; but you have a little of that, it’s very much weighted towards celebration.*

Maybe it’s the difference between Catholic and Protestant. I do think there’s a Catholic strain in the celebratory. When I say gloomy, I don’t so much mean gloomy as price exacted: the counterpoint of whatever light there is is shadow, okay? It’s always the registration of shadow. I think too that to take book titles like *As If It Matters* or *What Light There Is*, both of them are an attempt to say in a phrase something that is clearly two-toned. One tone being the tone of celebratory embrace—you do something as if it *matters*, or what *light* there is! And the other being a slightly laconic sense of passage, a kind of sense of, well, so what, this is all there is, a sort of shrug. It’s that end of the spectrum. So on the one hand there’s a sort of Wordsworthian thing in some of his moods (the heart dancing with those daffodils),

and on the other there's a touch of Leopardi and *l'infinita vanità del tutto*. There's a Romantic streak in there, in me. So I would want a poem to give that sense of pleasure, because what the hell is the point otherwise, but at the same time to have a kind of ballast, and the ballast would be some quality of recognition. So it's both vision and recognition—the counterpoint of vision and recognition. Because I think on the vision side I must have some kind of sacramental residue, and on the recognition side I'm a creature of the late Enlightenment, of scepticism, of (in some literal sense) materialism. So those are certainly two things I want to acknowledge in my poems.

*I wanted to ask you about the religious diction in the poems. When you say at the end of "Men Roofing", "They intercede", it's obviously a very weighted verb; and there's "Sunshine, Salvation, Drying Shirt", so many religious words, "salvation", "radiance", "ascension", "soul"; and then there's the other poem where I became very suspicious when you mention how you were driving to work one Sunday morning. But you obviously in the poems don't rest these words on any kind of institutional belief, and that doesn't seem to play an important role. Yet these words are a residue that remains important to you.*

Not only a residue. The words encapsulate something and therefore are used (probably over-used) as a kind of shorthand for something that can be said no other way. There's that little poem on Vermeer, "Woman with Pearl Necklace", where I try to get at that very tricky four-letter word "soul". What Vermeer was trying to do in this picture—and this is probably my own pure fantasy—getting her *look*, the way it's a "marriage of modesty and rapture", that's a note I would like to catch. All of this picture is celebratory of the young woman, it seems to me. Then at the back of this painting as it faces us, the thing that catches the attention, is the wall, which is partly white, a magnificent radiant white. And my sense of him as a painter in that particular picture is that he has registered in his own medium, entirely material medium, something that is unspeakable, inexpressible, namely... I don't know what to call it, the presence of the spiritual, and for which we have the word "soul". I think I said that "the soul itself, it seems, assembled for once / on the very brink and fleshly lid of things". I'm always interested in that cusp or threshold. There's another poem ("That Ocean") which says "to love the scrubbed exactitudes / and the dimmer thing / that shivers at the brink". I don't know what that means, exactly—maybe a poor man's mysticism—but it's tending the same way. So Vermeer has registered in that whiteness all colour... fullness. He's registered in his medium the presence of whatever poetry is after, or at least poetry I love is after. We

come across a post-Christian like Wallace Stevens and we find in him again and again the push toward the unspeakable, the most articulate and wild and lively modern push toward the inexpressible, and in full knowledge of, somehow, it's not being there. I love that. Whether I'm writing about love or the kids or the landscape or the daily stuff, I think something in my natural tendencies as a poet put me on the alert for that, that's where my dowsing wrists dip.

But yes, non-institutional. I'm a "post-Catholic," God help us, and by that I'd mean the loss of the institutional stuff but the residual presence of the savor, the *frisson*, the speechless interior, for which some of the old words become a kind of shorthand.

*To take it from a different angle, and how, say, the Language movement would critique your work. The domestic sphere, the moments of spiritual insight—they might say that it's a completely systemic thing, completely pre-programmed by your class, your background, job, things like that. They'd point to the fact that a lot of your poems happen while you're on holidays. They're moments out from the usual routine. How would you respond to that?*

Well, first I'd agree [*laughs*], in order to disarm them! And then I'd say, "So what?" That'd be the quick first answer (and it might be the best one). But a second answer would be, "Isn't that how we all are?" We do divide our lives between—there's the poem I wrote about Kira coming home on the bus and I'm at home, working, and I'm aware, at that threshold of taking her in, of her coming in, aware of the moment "between the silence of almost infinite possibility and that/ explosion of things as they are". That's basically the way I think life is, which isn't really an answer to the Language lads, because I am a bourgeois, I am privileged, I have a good job (good in quotation marks, and job in quotation marks too), and all of those things they say would be quite right. There is a *sabbatical* aspect to my work in its very matter. There's always that sense of moving to the margins. So I accept that and a defence of it, had I to defend it, would be that from very early on, as a kid, as a student, what fascinated me was the pastoral, a genre which we can piss on in whatever way we like, but is for me an entirely interesting genre. Stevens was one of my exemplars of it, a late exemplar, of the pastoral in a certain sense, i.e., it is that kind of emancipated zone in which art takes place in order very often to restore us to a deeper understanding of that which lies outside that zone, in the place we live. He sometimes called it "pure poetry". I might even say that Language poetry is the new pastoralism...

*You've got me there...*

In the sense that total adherence to the reality of the language itself is a kind of final chapter in the notion of the pastoral as an escape, or retirement, or abandonment, or turning away from the quotidian, the palpably out there, the actual. I would see it as a kind of cerebral pastoral, and smacking of all sorts of privilege, the way every version of pastoral is.

*A zone that is cut off from everyday life?*

Precisely. Language poetry is implicated in everyday life by representing how language registers consciousness, or how language is a kind of picture of consciousness. But it's still clearly a highly refined, esoteric zone of linguistic behaviour... But what we're really talking about here is probably subject matter, whether you have subject matter or not, and what its nature is. And while my stuff is accessible and obviously has some sort of subject matter "out there," I'm still interested in a kind of unanchoring from that too. The poems in what I hope will be the next collection seem (to me) much more speedy, and bouncing around from one thing to another, less shaped by some *narrative* sense, much more interested in trying collage, moving between things in a less predictable way...

*These are the thirteen-liners?*

Yes, or things in a series I've called "Approximations" which are much more... more fractured things, more angular, and less linear, so I'm very interested in that. But while being a bit more experimental in these, I'm still interested in an old-fashioned way in *seeming* to talk about something. As for the more experimental poets themselves, Michael Palmer is a poet I have great admiration for...

*Really?*

Oh yes, and Jorie Graham's work. Palmer and Graham, and McGuckian too, and someone like Anne Carson—I love their speed and zig-zag, I envy that. What I would see in this selected poems of mine (to take a very remote view of it) is four books in which somebody is trying to make himself into a poet basically, but a poet of the ordinary and a poet of the everyday, under such influences as Coleridge, Keats, Wordsworth, and after that people like Williams, Stevens, James Wright, Bishop, Kavanagh—poets I always go back to and am refreshed by—not to mention, as a huge exemplar, Yeats, Yeats's attempt to turn the poems into an adequate accounting of the full life. I mean there's a vast gulf between Yeats and the likes of

me, of course, but what I have always admired about Yeats was his way of managing to keep pace in his work with his life. How he's an exemplar for us, I think, is the degree to which he can change himself as a poet in order to be honest to that life unfolding.

*Obviously Yeats metamorphoses from a stylistic point too...*

That's right, the style changes, it's evolutionary. I got together a selected poems at this stage, because I felt that those poems completed a kind of cycle—of a certain kind of attention, a certain manner. Now, as with most of us, I no doubt *imagine* more differences between what's there and what's coming. Much more, probably, than anybody will ever notice. But what I'd like for future work would that it would seem a bit different from what goes on in these volumes, would seem a little jumpier, less the walking pace (the pedestrian mode, right?) of the earlier stuff.

*What about your sense of audience? There's one of your poem that mentions trash, either trash or garbage... You plumped for the American usage...*

I plumped in that poem for the American, but in another poem, still in the American context, I used "dustbin", and I regard it as my good luck to be able to use either of these, and their like, without affectation or without embarrassment or without feeling as if I'm introducing local colour. In some poems I might use American or Irish idioms or vocabulary alternately. As to audience...

*By your answer you're saying that you write for both audiences. You wouldn't feel as though you're sending the stuff back home, or turning your back on what's going on back home...*

No... Sometimes I'd be aware of a poem that might work better, be read better, in Ireland, but very much after the event. First of all you write your poem. Then you figure out the business of sending poems out. But I wonder do I ask myself will this be understood? My position between the two places might make me a little more alert to that problem. Though I'm not doing anything very esoteric, or difficult in any way, but at the same time the question which I think confronts at some point someone writing poems is "Will I be understood?" and finally it is the question you answer by instinct. At times you may, if someone says to a poem you've written, "That's too private, I don't get the allusions there", you may say "That's too bad. That's the poem I had to write". As to actual idiom, vocabulary, that sort of thing—anything that makes us more *tuned* to what language



is about and what its limits are, and what it's doing, is good for us. That's where we live, in the language. Mostly, as far as Irish or American is concerned, I move by instinct. But I'm pleased if a reader hears something like you do in "dustbin" and "garbage can", and also at the end of the roofing poem, the way you hear the word "intercede" and all that it carries. Because of course it's there, but it may take a kind of tuning to hear it. But that's the satisfaction for us as poets, when somebody hears what we're after. Or even the word "covenanting", with all its black sabbath implications, at the end of the "dustbin" poem, where I'm thinking of the Last Judgement. Such lovely richness in English, mongrel as it is.

*The very title of the selected poems, Relations, too... of course there's familiarity there, but it also has more abstract meanings, relations between man and the universe and everything like that...*

Not to mention the slightly more erotic implications too. Along with all the things you have in mind, the word has that too, which may be a nerve running through a lot of the poems, not necessarily in any deliberate way, even if their subject is landscape. It's the erotic that gives things very often their existential... vibration, and so if you look at a landscape it's often charged with some kind of energy running through you that has an erotic source. Also, I think *Relations* as a title could call up notions of relativism, the relative nature of things.

*What I enjoy is the way that the erotic appears in unexpected places. There's one poem I like very much, "Stone Flight": the course of the poem was so unpredictable, and the erotic comes out in the middle in a very forceful way, and then it withdraws...*

I think in some ways that's a poem that looks forward to later things, in terms of its zig-zag. It's also a kind of signature poem, in the sense that it is a poem about meditation. You pick up the tiny object, the stone, and then fifty lines later put it down, and what's happened as you move through the object into the meditation could be anything. I could have had four other kinds of meditations there. But clearly the erotic was part of that collage. It's twinned there with an image of parental distress and death. Those are the notes I tend to strike quite a lot and not always in the same poem, but the very way that this poem moves from one thing to another would be something I'd like to do without making it feel arbitrary.

*I wanted to ask you about novels and novelists. Have any novelists changed the way you think about poetry?*

Joyce, as a kind of ground bass for sensibility and for linguistic verve and the excitement of the language itself. Not to mention a character like Bloom, with whose sensibility I find myself in tune. Well, parts of it anyway. The activity of the mind receiving the multiple stimuli of the world and turning them into a fairly immediate language of reflex and response. That I love. And I suppose most of us, educated males anyway, in Ireland have been tarred with the Stephen Dedalus brush in some way. So the very rhythms of that book are probably engrained in my sense of things. After Joyce, down a few pegs, somebody like McGahern, very important to me in terms of tone and in the way consciousness finds a language that seems true to its own nature. The grainy, entirely trustworthy quality of his voice. Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* has always been a treasure. I also like people like Alice Munro and Richard Ford, love the speaking voice of those narrators. In the Irish context I admire very much—because it seems so truthful and exacting verbally without being high jinks—the work of William Trevor. When I was younger, the novelist that provoked me to try to write verse was Faulkner. I appreciate prose that hops off the page, or winds and winds us about—Austen, Dickens, Henry James. But nobody that I would think of as being particularly involved in the poems, I guess, with the exception of Joyce, who is, I think, in the grain.

*You publish rarely in English magazines.*

I've had a piece in *Thumbscrew* and a couple of pieces in the *TLS*. I haven't in fact often sent out stuff in that direction. I'd like to send more. I started writing what I thought were worthwhile poems quite late and I felt I had to run very fast to just try to catch up, and I had the Irish thing I wanted to do and the American thing. England wasn't part of my horizon. It wasn't where I was looking either for appreciation or for interest or for nourishment, except incidentally in poets like Hughes and Hill. But I'm beginning to be more interested now, and read people like Iain Crichton Smith, a Scot of course, and a number of younger people. Some of the women are very good, more lively to my ear than many of the men.

But what was happening in Ireland was much more interesting to me and also that was my umbilicus. If I read Heaney, Longley, Mahon, Ní Chuilleanáin, Kinsella, Montague, Hartnett, Durcan, Boland, I was reading something that had the word "home" with all of its complicated resonances implicit in it, and I was reading it for news. I wasn't reading English poetry for news then. I might start reading it for "poetry news," but that's different. And I wasn't reading American poetry for that sort of "home" news, either. I was reading it for a kind of personal endorsement, nourishment, excitement,

another sort of poetry news—as well, of course, as what we’re always reading for, signs of some fresh knowledge of the world, whatever it might be. To be surprised, and deepened.

*It would seem to follow from what you’re saying that finally you see yourself fitting into an Irish poetic context, that’s the background against which you’d like to have your work seen and against which you see it yourself.*

I guess that is the way I feel about it. It’s inevitable. I would almost prefer to develop an indifference to the question, and not to worry about it at all. But I think my last twenty years have been marked by an anxiety to, I wouldn’t say to be seen as, but to feel that what I did might be seen as an element in that larger picture. As to how big an element, or how important—well, I’m ambitious like the next person and vain like the next person, but I know that you can’t make this come about; you do what you can, and let the rest happen.

Another aspect of anxiety for me would be that in both places I’d be irrelevant. (I’m not talking about the value of the work now—just about these mundane anxieties.) So, for the Americans I wouldn’t belong: they’d say “Fine and all that, middle ground, poems in *The New Yorker*, but nothing really to say to us”. And in Ireland the same thing being said, not mattering, “He’s out there in America, what could he have to say to us?” I guess I have been anxious in some fairly narcissistic way about that. By now, though, I think I’ve developed some degree of indifference to it, not worrying about it. Impossible to escape the heartburn of your own vanity and anxious sense of self worth, of course, but so what? In this country, there’s an extremely small literary pie and there are many hungry mouths. Remember Milton’s “Lycidas”, “The hungry sheep look up and are not fed”: that’s Irish literary life. Not fed with praise, with position, with power, all those things, that to some degree, while as vain as the next person, I live at a prophylactic distance from, being in the States.

So, the first answer to your question, my ego’s answer, is yes, that’s where I’d like to fit. I read those people, my contemporaries and predecessors, for news and I suppose I’d like them to read me that way too. But even your generation, now, I read less for that kind of news. I mean the news you’re bringing me is fascinating but remote. It’s nearly a foreign country I find there. Because my impression is that your generation is different from us in very decisive ways. What you’re interested in and have been informed by are very different sets of realities—economic, personal, political, historical, a whole range of things. I think that may boil down to a major divide. It seems to me that Irish poetry from Yeats to my contemporaries is a very clear trajectory that comes to earth again around now, as people of my generation come to maturity. Your generation are doing other things. Not

entirely unconnected, but it is, I'd say, the beginning of another kind of trajectory. I do think the range of interest and the sense of what matters, that those things are different for you. In some ways you're less "anchored" to what has anchored your predecessors. It seems to me that new beginnings are being made here now, while what was happening between 1920 and 1980 was a series of movements forward from, and reactions to, and spirallings from some common source. Does that make sense? Generalisations like this make me come out in a rash. Maybe my own work, for all I'm saying about being connected to all that, is itself rather unanchored.

*Yes, I would definitely think this younger generation is much less anchored for instance when it comes to theme. They just don't care about the whole Irish thing. And it seems that your work while it might not have fitted in a previous context when people were talking about Irish myth, finds a surer position now.*

There were three generations or four here and they kind of exhausted a single wave of need, which I would call the first great wave of Irish independence, which I wouldn't confuse with an overly narrow political meaning of independence. Your crowd really can take that for granted, you can take that kind of independence for granted. I don't mean it politically, although it has political ramifications. It's larger than that. You're already very different from one another, while those *generations* became different from one another, from the Revival to the Civil Rights movement. And my own stuff, while being part of my generation, seems slightly out of step with it. This is aside from questions of value... .

*But it's often a question of the context a poet is read against. That's often crucial in establishing value.*

I think that's true. But that's the residual anxiety. To have appeared as part of that picture would have pleased me, but it's not something that one can bring about—it's something that happens or doesn't happen, for whatever reason. And if it hasn't happened in my case, fair enough. *So It Goes* is a title chosen with some care in that respect. Ditto *As if It Matters*. But things like that are, in the final analysis, trivial enough, aren't they? I mean, what really matters is the next poem, wherever it comes from, the one that'll work just as you want it to. These questions of place, belonging, recognition—at least in our more honest and less self-indulgent moments—they all have to take a distant second or third or fourth place to that, to the poem itself. You just, you know, want it to *work*. To say fully and well what you want it to say. That should be enough.