

# M I C H A E L   H A R T N E T T

## *Interview*

Michael Hartnett is stepping cagily down the rain-lubricated stairs to the Poetry Ireland office in the basement of 44 Upper Mount Street in Dublin. I have been watching anxiously for him, checking the time, staring through the barred window, wiping a peephole in the condensation with my sleeve, peeking out above the competition entry forms and the poster poems. He is a little late, a little diffident, shedding his wet anorak, eyeing my recording machine warily—but settling straight down to business, like a patient awaiting a medical probe, resigned to his fate but not pretending to be enamoured of it. Michael was probably in his corduroy jacket phase at the time, the sideburns long, the cigarette smoke thick, the shirt collar open, the cap flat, the manner quiet and almost courtly...

The interview took place on 12 December 1986, a Friday afternoon; but I had met Michael on many previous occasions, the first dating back to the 1970s in University College, Dublin. As a Law student infiltrating a meeting of the English Literature Society, mingling with genuine students of English literature like Colm Tóibín, Aidan Mathews and Eamonn Wall, I heard him read from the sublime *Selected Poems* which he had published as a mere twenty-something year-old writer. Employed as a telephonist, he was on “sick leave” at the time of the reading. The one thing that seemed to trouble him about the job was the prospect of promotion: “If I stay long enough in the place, they will want me to be a supervisor—and then the trap will snap shut.” His arm crashed down on the table like a spring.

Telephone exchanges remained central to his life, long after he had become a full-time writer. Out of the blue—perhaps during breaks from concentrated writing—he would phone me at my office for a chat and a joke. I know that I was not alone in receiving telephone calls from his solitary study, sometimes on the attention-grabbing pretext that I (or whoever he happened to be phoning) had featured in some dream he remembered from the night before.

Most of my personal encounters with Michael were as random as dreams: chance meetings on the streets around his shopping and drinking haunts in central Dublin, usually during my lunch breaks from Dublin Castle. Michael might be carrying a rattlebag of fresh oysters or a newly-minted circle of Lombardian focaccia. His tastes in poetry, as in food, could range far beyond Munster. At the U.C.D. reading, he revealed a love for Wallace Stevens’s work, divulging that he had persuaded Pearse Street library to order the American poet’s *Collected Poems* so that he could borrow the book and repeatedly renew the loan. Cosmopolitan though he was in many respects, Michael could also play the rustic in urbe—but one who was insistent that the rural Limerick which had nurtured the Gaelic poets of the eighteenth-century Maigue school was not to be denied its own

rightful claim on home-grown sophistication. He and I had both been reared in small-town Munster: he in Newcastle West, I near Thurles; so his remark in the interview about my having made “a very bad error” in denying sophistication to Newcastle West was more in-joke than rebuke from a poet for whom I had arranged a reading (“£20 including expenses is my normal fee”) before a large audience in Thurles as long ago as August 1975.

One of our more unlikely street encounters was in October 1985 when, after the hanging by the South African authorities of the poet-activist Benjamin Moloise, Michael and I joined an anti-Outspan, anti-apartheid protest by poets outside Dunne’s Stores in Henry Street in Dublin. Taking stock of the taller poetic profiles massing around him, Michael turned to Julie O’Callaghan saying: “I’m glad to see you. I was afraid I was going to be the smallest person here!”

I never doubted Michael’s stature and I was—and am—convinced that he will stand far taller in the pantheon than his critical standing at the time of his death suggested. Had I known what scant critical attention he would receive and how frustratingly little of him would remain on record in interviews, I would have conducted a longer dialogue. But he comes alive for me when I read this exchange again, the verbatim views of a 45 year-old bilingual poet for whom poetry was a passion that needed no defence, no apology. We are back in the musty basement, seated together at a table near the front door, overcoming the awkwardness of a recording session and determined to make the encounter as natural and unselfconscious as one of our spontaneous lunch-hour adjournments to pub or sandwich bar. The Poetry Ireland office is an oasis of calm, a drop-in centre for refugees fleeing the Christmas shopping streets. As a prelude to the interview, Michael is warning me in a typically mischievous tone: “I always lie at interviews. I don’t lie as such; but I change my mind so often... I refuse to have what is known in the trade as a ‘coherent metaphysic’.”

The RECORD button is pressed...

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He was an ice-cream chimes ringing in an Inchicore estate.  
 He was the commotion stirred up at a country wake.  
 He was a game of hopscotch played in Maiden Street.  
 He was a plaintive flamenco note picked out by a gipsy.  
 He was the palpitation of hooves at a small-town horse fair.  
 He was a book-barrow dictionary, teeming with disused words.  
 He was a neglected cottage where a songbird nests.  
 He was the full-moon shedding light on Newcastle West.

—DENNIS O’DRISCOLL

*The most obvious initial reaction to your work would simply be wonder at how much of it there is.*

There seems to be a lot but there isn't really. I published approximately eighteen or nineteen books but some of them are re-hashes. I started writing in 1955, but seriously writing in 1958. In that period—almost thirty years—I've written about 120 poems, which couldn't be described as prolific by any means.

*Do you try to set aside a space in every day for writing?*

No, I can't. I have blank periods which last anything from six months to two years.

*Have you discarded a lot of your poems?*

Indeed yes. Over the years—both in Dublin and in Co. Limerick—I have accumulated two trunks full of discarded material: poems not finished, half-begun, bits and pieces of experiments. Whether it be in Irish or English, I find it very difficult to write. It costs me as much sweat to write in English as it does in Irish. Sometimes it happens that I could sit down and write maybe ten poems in one night and they would be acceptable to me. Then sometimes one poem might take me three years to finish. "We must labour to be beautiful..."

*In "Maiden Street Ballad", you remark that "a poet's not a poet until the day he/ can write a few songs for his people". Does this summarise your notion of your ideal audience?*

No. I mentioned earlier about the coherent metaphysic. I wish to avoid all labels. In my opinion, one of the most interesting poets was the Portuguese poet, Pessoa, who had three or four personae or masks (to use a Yeatsian and very bogus term). He was three or four different poets. I work like that—I write ballads, serious poetry both in English and Irish, blues, both in strict metres and in freer verse. I've been trying to pin myself down very deliberately, especially in the last five years. But I can't do it—neither am I a butterfly nor is my other self a lepidopterist.

*This makes your writing sound very much a voyage of self-discovery.*

It is all the time, yes. I'm basically a poet who has a way with words. I refuse to accept that there should be any basic intellectual or philosophic background. I deliberately try to avoid allusions in poetry to any other man's or woman's philosophy.

*From the beginning, your work has been sophisticated and urbane—not perhaps what might be expected to come from Newcastle West.*

You're slipping into a very bad error. You're excluding Newcastle West from being either sophisticated or urbane—which is a dreadful mistake to make about any small Irish town. I was educated locally by the Sisters of Mercy and in the local secondary school which was—fortunately for me in the '50s—a lay school. Also, my father was a very well-read man. There were always books in the house. My grandmother on my mother's side was also well-read. I was reared on a dose of ballads and Canon Sheehan's novels (which, by the way, were not bad for their time at all). So I was very much aware of literature. I joined Newcastle West library in 1945, when I was four years old—I was able to read then. I was the first person in Newcastle West to order, in 1958, *Doctor Zhivago*. Dr Robert Cussen used occasionally loan me his copy of *The Irish Times* and I read about this Russian, Pasternak, and I was fascinated. I was incredibly impressed by the book. Apart from the novel itself, which is a flawed novel *qua* novel, the poetry showed how surrealism, suppressed surrealism, should be handled. He knew how to use it, like Lorca did in the earlier poems—not later Lorca.

*Lorca has clearly loomed pretty large in your life also.*

I went to Spain in 1964, deliberately to learn Spanish so that I could translate Lorca. He was able, up to his visit to the States, to handle and subdue the surrealist wave that was breaking over Europe, without going verbally mad. He *did* go mad in the verbal sense in his long diatribe, "The Poet in New York". It's an extraordinary book; but I parted company with him then, verbally.

*Turning back to your own work, you have remained faithful over the years to quite a short line.*

That's more or less true. I think John Jordan called me a "master of the short line" in 1965—but "master" I doubt! I always believed in economy of means. This had to do with my reading of early Irish poetry, which was syllabic and demanded perhaps too dreadful a discipline.

*But, against that economy, you have used a fair bit of repetition as a device.*

Repetition, yes, and the notion of the catalogue. I've noticed in many of my poems that when I want to build up the character of a person I don't catalogue them or their physical attributes as such but rather their belongings. When people die, you begin to lose sight of what they looked like but you can build up a picture of what they actually were from physical objects they left behind, such as a pipe, an overcoat, a cigarette lighter or whatever. I try to build up those little objects which have resonances. It *can* turn out to be a totally banal list or catalogue but sometimes it works.

*You haven't shown yourself to be afraid of rhetorical language, even in your first book, Anatomy of a Cliché.*

I am the only "recognised" living poet who was born in Croom, Co. Limerick, which was the seat of one of the last courts of poetry in Munster: Seán Ó Tuama and Andrias MacCraith. When I was quite young, I became very conscious of these poets and, so, read them very closely indeed. Through them, without going into their elaborate syntax, I became unafraid of rhetoric as such. I have been to hundreds of poetry readings and I have seen "the best minds of my generation" ruining their own poems because they are such bad readers. I believe, in an old Irish fashion, that you must be able to deliver the goods, stand up and give it out. So I am pro-rhetoric, but not fustian or bombast or anything like that.

*To move on to a few specific poems, beginning with "Notes on My Contemporaries"—are these about particular people?*

Indeed they are. It began as a book that was to be my second book from The Dolmen Press but it never came to fruition. There were a few poems in it that Liam Miller didn't like. The "Prologue" is about McDaid's and the Dublin literary scene in 1969. I was still a country boy and the ghost of Patrick Kavanagh loomed very large at the time. "The Poet Down" is obviously about Kavanagh—I used to drink with him and indeed back horses for him (he owes me £3-10s, for the record). "The Poet as Master Craftsman" is about Tom Kinsella in the throes of translating *The Táin*: I used to call round to him.

*The poem, "U.S.A.", has always surprised me by its vituperation. It refers to the inhabitants of that country as "the scum of Europe", whereas many Irish would think of it as the place where their more unfortunate relatives were forced to emigrate.*

I was always treated well on my visits to the States. But I was taken to an Indian reservation in Minnesota and to various burial grounds. I felt the incredible lack of the Indian nation and the total lack of knowledge of the Indians on the part of the people who were living on their lands. Europeans of whatever origin are tarred with the same brush in the poem. When I see soft-centred American TV programmes about these brave people going out to cultivate their lands and grow pumpkins, I get annoyed.

*A fair proportion of Volume 2 of your Collected Poems is taken up with your versions of Tao and Ssu K'ung T'u. Is there something in the Oriental way of life as well as its literature that attracts you?*

It was a combination of both. I did my version of the Tao in 1963. In London in 1960, I did judo and was interested in the philosophy, especially Taoism. It contains very much an Irish sensibility: things happen, you cannot direct your fate (though I'm not a fatalist or anything). I read the Tao in Victorian versions. I didn't know any Chinese at the time but went out of my way to pick up a few characters, or rather to learn a few characters. Actually, I picked up a few characters as well in Chinese restaurants but that's another story! It appealed to me because gentility is out of place, especially in literary and academic

worlds. It appealed to me because I was Taoist already.

*Was there any sense on your part that Taoism was taking the place of Catholicism in your life?*

I was never a Catholic. I mentioned already that I went to a lay secondary school. I was fortunate to be born in a house where my father was not a Catholic. He was a socialist with Taoist leanings—though to say this is to talk with hindsight; like all poets, I can foretell the past. He certainly had that attitude of “live and let live”, basically a Taoist thing, but you have to be, as well, capable of fighting your corner in the world, not giving in. The original Tao work fascinated me by its conciseness and its connection with early Irish nature poems—no verbiage.

*Did your eventual decision to renounce English have anything to do with the capacity—or rather lack of capacity—of that language to say what you wanted to say?*

It had to do with a few things. My lack of capacity to say certain things and the attitude of the government of the time—a coalition government containing Conor Cruise O’Brien et al. Irish was an embarrassing language to have—you couldn’t trade with it in Brussels. I wanted to make a stand, for what it was worth. I wasn’t aware of what was happening at the time in Cork, for instance, with the young poets like Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Gabriel Rosenstock, Michael Davitt. They were doing much the same work without making any sort of pompous or public stand. I made my announcement in the Peacock Theatre, reading with Máirtín Ó Direáin. Up to the time when he published his first book, a whole twenty years had elapsed since 1922 and the poetry being written in Irish was dreadfully bad. It was published because it was Irish—there was no other criterion.

*Your poem, “An Phurgóid”, seems to have stemmed from a crisis of language.*

I was dissatisfied with not just my version of the Irish language. I wanted to write a poetry which contained no adjectives and no allusions. I found that worked, up to a point. I was almost taking a Beckettian stance of writing a poem which would have one

syllable. That was at the end of a ten-year period of writing in Irish exclusively. Then my lifestyle changed: separation, moving from a mountain six miles from the nearest town up to working-class Dublin and I suddenly started writing in English without any deliberation—it just came out as haiku.

*Now that you are essentially a bilingual poet, is there any way in which you can tell in advance whether an idea for a poem will find expression in Irish or English?*

No, I can't tell. I've got over the notion of having intellectual schizophrenia about it. There was a period, especially in the beginning, when one line would come out in English and the next in Irish. "The Retreat of Ita Cagney", for example, almost broke my heart and indeed my mind to write, because both languages became so intermeshed. One is not a translation of the other. They are two versions of the one poem; but what the original language is I don't know. Translating helped me enormously to come to terms with both languages. I translated Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill—I was very lucky there because I know Nuala and, when I was in difficulties with the phraseology, I could ring her up (especially as she occasionally uses phrases from the Dingle peninsula which I wouldn't be au fait with at all).

Also, I had been reading for years in various translations a long poem by Ferenc Juhász, a Hungarian poet born in 1928. It's a fine poem, very Irish or very pan-Celtic I suppose, called "The Boy Changed into a Stag Cries out at the Gate of Secrets". It's over 500 lines long—that's being published by Coiscéim in an Irish translation.

*Are you content to be a writer? Is there something else you would like to have been?*

I am a chef manqué all right; I trained as a chef for a while. Again, that involves creation and the poaching of other men's recipes and ideas. But as I started to write poetry, or verse at least, when I was thirteen years old, any ambitions I had in any other direction were pre-empted by that immediately.

*How important to you is recognition beyond Ireland?*

Our sense of “abroad” in Ireland is Britain. For years, we have been up against the great bulwark of England between us and Europe. I’ve been translated into Swedish, Italian, Hungarian and Spanish. But I have never been translated into English, if you know what I mean, but that isn’t important to me. I like being a small fish in a small pond, even though this particular pond happens to be full of piranhas!

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