

A poem wants to change a perspective on the world. That is its ambition: An Interview with Pat Boran

Melania Terrazas

Pat Boran attended the conference 'Irish Itinerary 2018 (EFACIS): Trauma and Identity in Contemporary Irish Literature and Culture' at the University of La Rioja, Spain. The following interview took place there on 15 February 2018, and covered Spanish translations of his work, poetry writing, formal innovation, ecocriticism, Imagism, photography, friendship, Irish poetry and broadcasting. Boran offered a number of insightful responses and shared his most honest thoughts on aesthetics and motivations to write poetry.

Portlaoise-born poet, writer and broadcaster Pat Boran currently lives in Dublin. He is an elected member of *Aosdána*, the Irish association which honours distinguished artistic work. He is one of the most widely acclaimed Irish poets of his generation. His work has been translated into several languages and received numerous awards. In 2008, he received the Lawrence O'Shaughnessy Poetry Award of the University of St Thomas, St Paul, Minnesota.

He has published more than a dozen books of poetry and prose – among them *The Next Life* (2012), *Waveforms: Bull Island Haiku* (2016), and *A Man is Only as Good: A Pocket Selected Poems* (2017), as well as the humorous memoir *The Invisible Prison* (2009) and the popular writers' handbook *The Portable Creative Writing Workshop*. Besides these published works, Pat is a former presenter of *The Poetry Programme* and *The Enchanted Way* on RTÉ Radio 1, and works part-time as a literary editor of Dedalus Press. He has edited several anthologies of prose and poetry, for example, with Gerard Smyth, the anthology *If Ever You Go: A Map of Dublin in Poetry and Song*, the *Dublin: One City, One Book* designated title for 2014, and, with Eugene O'Connell, *The Deep Heart's Core* (2017).

Melania Terrazas: Pat, thank you very much for accepting my invitation to be a Keynote Speaker at Irish Itinerary 2018 (EFACIS) and agreeing to this interview. I would like to start with a few general questions before I focus on other issues in some specific works in more detail. Please, tell me, has your poetry been translated into Spanish? If so, have you read it, and how did it feel to read a Spanish version of your work?

Pat Boran: Apart from a single poem here and there, I haven't yet had the good fortune to find someone to translate my poems into Spanish. (It's always a mysterious process when this happens: all one can do is wait and hope!) But there have been three editions of my work in Italian, for instance (which is at least another Romance language), and I feel I can recognize something of what is happening on the page in this second language. Of course, as an English reader, one recognizes elements of the common Latinate origins of much of the vocabulary, but because those same Latinate words in English often have a more authoritative, even a more learned feel, it is difficult to tell how successful a translation is in finding the right tone, the right sense of intimacy – which is something that is very important for me in writing the English language originals. In the end, one has to trust a translator and spend time worrying about other things.

MT: Your poetry is a brilliant example of new creative risks and possibilities. While the formal strategies may change, however, the motivating doubts and questions behind the work do not. What is it that makes poetry so good a genre to achieve your creative goals? Why?

PB: One of the things that is really attractive about poetry is that it is restricted - not that it is not open, not that it is not accessible, but that it is not reliant on and need not be shared by a large audience. Anybody can elect to be the audience, and anybody is welcome. A poem can be successful if there are one or two good readers, because its ambition though not small may be numerically small. It does not want to change the world. It wants to change a perspective on the world. That is its ambition.

To me, doubt is a considerable part of the motivation to write, to explore in words. Wallace Stevens said: "Ignorance is one of the sources of poetry", and I agree with that very strongly. The writer may set out from a place, a feeling, even an opinion that feels known and familiar, but the point is to go beyond that familiarity and to discover something new. Otherwise, we are not really talking about poetry but something like Hallmark greeting card verse, which borrows some of the techniques of poetry to disguise banal ideas. In the same way that a musician can 'discover' a piece of music by playing an instrument without any particular idea or destination in mind (finding the melody as it emerges), so too a poet can discover the poem in the act of writing it. And the power of the poem, when it works, is not that it passes on its conclusions but that it reenacts for the reader the very process of discovery itself.

MT: In his introduction to your *New and Selected Poems*, the late Dennis O'Driscoll asserted that your style shows "an objectivity which might be described as scientific; an ability to maintain a determined detachment from his subject-matter, to distance his poetical 'I' from an empirical self in order to gain a clearer perspective on the word" (151-152).

PB: We have this idea that with the Romantic poets, what made them so great was that delivery of emotion, but actually what makes them good, and sometimes great, is the presentation, the physical remembering, if I can put it like that, of that emotion, and the connecting of the things that they can relate to us. When someone asks you to look at something that has drawn her attention, the act of looking has the power to transfer to you the emotion that makes that original perception possible. My job is to see the world as accurately as I can, from where I am, in space and time, and on my emotional see-saw (as we all are), and trust in that. That is the boat in which I put my perception, my being. Otherwise, there is nothing. If there is an analogy between the scientific approach and that of the poet, it is that exact, careful and precise observation is essential to both. The poet can learn a great deal from the scientific method, striving for accuracy and detail, a kind of empirical subjectivity, I might say, in which the unknown and the contradictory is never to be avoided but the vague flourish or neat conclusion is always suspect.

MT: Some other poems of yours use natural elements recurrently. "Waving" is a good example of it. What do you make of this idiosyncratic aspect of your poetry?

PB: Poems, for me, often being as visual observations and animate the way a short film might in the mind of a director. If I feel I can see my way in, and then see my way back out of the world of a poem, that is often enough to persuade me it might be worth spending time in its

imagined landscape. The world of the poem might have a lot in common with the world of the writer; in the act of composition it might even stand for the real world, but they are still different and distinct places. The world of the poem is a simplification, an editing down and a condensing of elements that may result in amplifications and even distortions. And what is true, or feels true, in a poem may not be so in the real world, and vice versa.

When someone travels and wants to impart some of the experience of that travel, the obvious method is to draw on the senses and to remake aspects of that observed place, in words or pictures, say, in order to set the stage for the emotions, thoughts and revelations encountered there. So too it is with poems. Feelings, thoughts, perceptions must be embodied; the ‘where’ and the ‘when’ of an experience do not just limit or define but also enable that experience, and allow for its recollection, its further exploration and re-examination.

In making a poem, in being, as it were, the first person to enter a world and to have an experience, one wants to recreate for the reader (which, of course, includes the poet him/herself) the particulars of that experience. For this reason alone the sequence, colour, tone and intensity of observations are fundamental. The techniques of the storyteller, the journalist, the painter, the musician – all have to be drawn on in order to produce the most affecting possible experience, whether or not the world described be naturalistic or otherwise. The result of that kind of attention to sequence and detail is often a temporal dimension, a sense in the architecture of the poem that movement not only in place but, deriving from same, in time is also possible. Even in a short lyric, the reader’s journey takes time, and the discoveries along that timeline (the things that will determine whether or not the poem succeeds and is worth the patience and commitment of a reader) run in parallel to those of the writer. Just as the reader may, the writer must go through some kind of discovery, change, growth. That seems to me to be the purpose of poetry. Not just to record discover, change, growth, but in fact to enable it.

MT: Now, I would like to talk about your latest work, *Waveforms: Bull Island Haiku*, because it is quite unique¹. The following haiku is a good example:

Two boys with a kite
made from twigs and plastic bags.
Wind shrugs: “Oh, all right.”

You have expressed reservations about what are often seen as ‘traditional’ haiku in English, where humour, detailed sensual observation and linguistic tension appear unwelcome or are sacrificed in order to present a determinedly ‘watercolour’ view of the world. However, the haiku I have just read, “Two Boys with a Kite”, and many others from *Waveforms*, are as economic, full of wisdom, personal and scientific as many visual haikus written by some Modernist English authors, those written by Ezra Pound, for example. What’s more, your visual work or photography in *Waveforms* is as meaningful as the haikus, and the visual aspects of your haikus are *evocative as the words themselves*. Here, all the reader’s senses work at once in order to grasp the sense of the image captured in words. Has Imagism influenced your haikus?

PB: Just to be clear, it’s not so much that I dislike ‘traditional’ haiku in English (there are many great and inspiring examples), it’s just that so often the essential perception and moment of realization seem missing for me; often it seems that the haiku writer in trying out a new form abandons all of his or her acquired skills and produces a kind of pastiche rather than an actual poem. For me, I wanted to keep the precision and focus of what I think are the best poems, in

whatever form, and in some way marry what I was already doing to a tradition that has in many ways evolved independently, and in doing so discover some new perspectives and ideas. Of course, as has been noted by others before, there are also interesting similarities between the haiku tradition and the small nature poems to be found as marginalia or verbal doodles in the Irish monastic tradition. If the form is not exactly the same, the intention is often similar. It struck me too that when Wordsworth went to write his poem about daffodils, he started out with “I wandered lonely as a cloud” etc., etc., the typical approach of the western writer to nature: here I am, and here I go a-wandering, and, oh, look over there ... and then he, at last, turns his attention to the daffodils. The haiku poet, not least because the form demands it, cuts straight to the subject: ‘Golden daffodils / beside the lake, beneath the trees, / dancing in the breeze’ or whatever. And then, once I had formulated that general idea in my head, I wondered about the 3-line form itself, about how the sequence could make all the difference, or at least subtle differences. Thus, I might try out, for instance: ‘Beside the lake, beneath the trees, / dancing in the breeze – / golden daffodils’, which creates a different kind of narrative, a different kind of discovery or revelation. After that, I started thinking of the thorny matter of syllable count. And, after that again, I wondered if I could make things harder on my lazy mind by looking to recognize the language’s tendency to rhyme. And out of all that juggling and revising, I ended up with a form that over a year delivered to me about 250 haiku, which were whittled down to the selection that make up the book.

MT: How have the experiences captured in these photos affected your decision to write haikus in particular? I mean, does the visual aspect of this poetry have any relationship with the characteristics of photography as an art form in your poetry? And its pocket-sized format?

PB: The connection between the photographer’s focus (pointing out and away from himself) and that of the haiku poet was one I found very inspiring. And though the photographs were taken digitally in what is known as RAW format (i.e. with colour and a lot of other information till intact), I further simplified the idea by reproducing them, in this little edition at least, in monochrome and on basic bookwove paper rather than on photographic paper. As I might have said elsewhere, for me one of the real liberations of this project was the large number of limitations that it imposed on me. Without them I don’t think I would have stayed with it or, certainly, ended up with a book-length volume.

MT: Pat, is there any relationship between *Waveforms* and the poem “Waving”? If so, could you explain its significance?

PB: It’s interesting you ask about a relationship. It had not occurred to me before but, yes, I can see there is one there. The poem ‘Waving’ approaches its conclusion by saying that ‘whole humans – arms, legs, backs and bellies – / are waving away, flickering on and off / in time and space ...’ And I suppose that is a direct prompt (although it took me nearly 20 years to respond to it) to the haiku that make up ‘Waveforms’. As I say in the afterword to the book, I had recently lost my close friend and had taken to walking every day on Bull Island, where the book is set, often finding myself looking at only a vague horizon through a haze or mist or what passes for a sand storm in Dublin Bay. And that sense of everything scarcely holding together, of being on the point of blowing apart, was very much what I felt in my period of loss. At least, until I realized that that same sand storm (that felt so painful and, as it happens, on one occasion almost destroyed my camera) was the island creating itself under my feet. The chaos

of emotion I felt was not the end as one might easily have interpreted it but the on-going creation of something. These tiny grains that were stinging my eyes were the stuff the world was made of. It seemed only obvious and natural to respond to them though haiku, to write a kind of creation myth that begins with nothingness ('First, a mystery, / the absence of things ...' then records the arrival of the sand itself / Grain by tumbling grain, / the world forms before our eyes, / and may fade again / and, after that, aspects of the flora and fauna that not only depend on the new island but, literally, hold it together. / Light-headed or not – / hills of swaying marram grass / rooted to the spot. / After that it was a case of turning up every day and paying attention.)

MT: Quite recently, *The Irish Times* website published the tributes of a wide range of poets and writers whose lives and work were enriched by Irish poet Philip Casey². You contributed to that online archive with a prose recollection and introduction to his poem 'Machine Buried'. I know you were a very good friend of Casey and you admired the magic and depth of his poetry. In your tribute, you said something that I found particularly evocative: 'We lose our loves and our friends, but something we write as in a dream, or stumble upon by accident in a public library on a rainy afternoon, becomes our farewell message to the world, and someone's lifelong companion'. Would you mind telling us what makes 'Machine Buried' special to you? Which poem would you like to be your farewell message to the world, and why?

PB: The loss of Philip Casey was, in so many ways, a huge loss to contemporary Irish poetry, though Philip was the last person who would have thought of himself in such a way. Not only a sensitive, thought-provoking poet and novelist, Philip was also a real champion of writers and writing, of the whole idea of a writing culture. For instance, out of his own energy and enthusiasm, and without payment of any kind, for many years he maintained a website presenting biographical and bibliographical information on many hundreds of Irish poets and writers, when none of the official institutions charged with the promotion of Irish writing was able to do the same. He did this because he truly believed that writing is a meritocracy, that good writing will find its way in the world and that all of us in the writing world owe it to each other as well as to ourselves to encourage and support. Because the truth is, none of us knows where the next great work of literature will come from. It might be from a Nobel Laureate or it might be from a schoolchild up the road or a newly arrived immigrant writer putting her thoughts into words for the first time. As I mentioned in that piece about Philip and his poem 'Machine Buried', which is far from his most accomplished piece, sometimes it is hard to say why a poem continues to haunt us or work its particular magic on us. But it is so often true that the poem that someone makes, almost by accident, almost automatically (with little planning or preparation or thought) becomes the poem they struggle to repeat for the rest of their lives, while the poem that is worked on over a long period and indeed almost perfected (if such a thing were possible) often appears overworked and cold and lifeless when returned to years later. The mystery of the process is that good poems (poems that seem as fresh as the day they were first written) almost always involve a lot of luck, a sense that the writer only had to keep up with whatever was happening or being channelled through the air at that time. Of course, there is often a considerable amount of rewriting to be done and, even where the rewriting is only minimal, the job of changing a single word can be much more difficult than rewriting a whole poem: that is the nature of the small machine that is a lyric poem.

MT: You also work as a broadcaster for RTÉ. Does this inform your work as a poet and a

writer? What is special about poetry reading on the radio?

PB: Yes, it really has an effect. I am not of the generation of performance poets, but I came into poetry because I was involved in music. And that immediacy, that connection you have, even with one other person when you are playing music, however poems are constructed, their success or lack of success, for me, is always how bound up intimately in how they sound. It has always been that way, and if I wasn't writing poems, I would still be making them up in some other form. I used to dictate them over the phone, but there has always been an audio aspect to it. I really only know if a poem is finished when I hear it aloud, when I see if it feels right in the saying. In that sense broadcasting feels much more natural than writing in some ways. As I said earlier, to keep yourself emotionally honest, you have to listen to yourself. When there are big ideas in one of my poems, I tend to drift towards the Latinate part of our language, but the experience itself is very often 'Germanic', as it were. One moves between these two dominant linguistic streams carefully. When I am speaking now, when I am reaching for the big ideas, I am reaching towards the Latinate, instinctively; it is how the English language seems to work. When you are a poet, indeed a creative writer of any sort, you discover there are certain effects, increases in tension, opportunities for shock, revelation, comic surprise etc in stepping, unexpectedly, from one linguistic stream into another. With the exploration of gender, politics, ecology, privacy, religion – the big issues of our time – this becomes even more important in order to move from the authoritative 'overview' and instead engage the reader on an emotional, intimate basis. The paradox of radio broadcasting, for instance, is that it affords a poet or writer simultaneous to an audience of a considerable size while at the same time allowing her or him to establish an intimate relationship with each member of that audience. For a poet, perhaps more than for a fiction writer, this is a huge attraction and undoubtedly my experience in the medium has shaped, for better or worse, at least some of my own subsequent work.

MT: Could you say something about your next project?

PB: My new book of poems, *Then Again* (March, 2019), is very much taken up with looking outwards, in that the majority of the poems begin with a place or object or encounter rather than with an episode in autobiographical experience, as has, to an extent, defined much of my work to date. That is not to say that autobiography has ever been my motivation; on the contrary, I think that a poet who responds to autobiographical impulse must always be careful to look beyond that impulse and the 'reportage' that may issue from it in order to discover the larger themes of the work. That something is true, one might say, is not enough to guarantee it has the ring of truth. Again, for me, much of the motivation is to discover something new, to step into a kind of unknown realm and examine what I find there. As in dreams, personal issues and interests will always find their way to the surface. What is important, I think, is always to start somewhere new and slightly unfamiliar. What a poet knows, sitting down to write, is far less interesting than what might be discovered in the act of writing.

MT: Thank you so much for this interview, Pat Boran. I wish you all the best for your future work/s.

PB: Sincere thanks for all your work, Melania.

Notes

- 1 Pat Boran's *Waveforms: Bull Island Haiku* (2016), Dublin: Dedalus Press.
- 2 See Martin Doyle and Katie Donovan's "Tributes pour in for much-loved writer Philip Casey (67)", *The Irish Times*, 5 February 2018, (<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/tributes-pour-in-for-much-loved-writer-philip-casey-67-1.3380535>) (accessed: 05/02/2019)