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## Chapter Ten: “Tore down à la Rimbaud”: Brendan Kennelly and the French Connection

Showed me different shapes and colours  
Showed me many different roads  
Gave me very clear instructions  
When I was in the dark night of the soul.<sup>1</sup>

In 1961, Brendan Kennelly graduated with a double-first in French and English from Trinity College, Dublin, being nominated for the University's Gold Medal in the process. The late A. Norman Jeffares, then Professor of English at Leeds, was the external adjudicator who awarded Kennelly second place. Both men soon got over this potentially embarrassing episode when Kennelly spent a year (1962/3) with Jeffares at Leeds working on his PhD thesis, an analysis of the role of the epic poem in the work of, amongst others, W.B. Yeats, Patrick Kavanagh and Austin Clarke. Kennelly, of course, went on to achieve his PhD in 1966 and only 7 years later, in 1973, he was appointed Chair of Modern English Literature at Trinity College, Dublin, a post he held until the summer of 2005. The importance of French literature in his intellectual make-up is something that he rarely alludes to but on closer inspection there is a clear and consistently radical streak in Kennelly's work that is worth exploring outside of the traditionally accepted schools of contemporary Irish poetry. Kennelly has acknowledged four poets in particular as crucial in the development of an eclectic poetic career that has stretched over fifty years, and the influence of each is there to see across his large corpus of poetry, novels, plays and criticism. These four poets share a remarkably similar

<sup>1</sup> Van Morrison, “Tore down a la Rimbaud”, *A Sense of Wonder* (music album), 1984.

history of youthful brilliance, counter-cultural social and political views, popular notoriety, a fondness for mind-altering substances, a tendency towards self-destruction and a passion for the long poem. Although Kennelly has not made the link explicit, their complex personal characteristics can just as easily be applied to him at various junctures in his eventful life.

Unsurprisingly, Patrick Kavanagh (1904-67) is a seminal figure and the first influence to be mentioned. There are strong parallels between Kennelly's unromanticised, spare and often harsh portrayal of his community and the poetry of Kavanagh in the early 1940s, both clearly displaying a natural empathy with and deep understanding of their respective birthplaces, although the poetic desire to see beneath and beyond the surface of an apparently idyllic rural existence soon emerges. It is not surprising that Kennelly recalls writing out by hand Kavanagh's excoriating 1942 epic *The Great Hunger* in the National Library in Dublin when a student in Trinity College in the 1950s, an early indication of his fondness for Irish interpretations of the epic form which were to prove such a successful poetic vehicle later in his career. What particularly attracted Kennelly to Kavanagh was the latter's debunking of a pervasive rural mythology, a literary and cultural hangover from the revivalist movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as well as a sharp observation of the ordinary events of daily life. Kennelly notes Kavanagh's wonder at 'the startling significance and beauty inherent in casual things'<sup>2</sup> and there can be little doubt that Kavanagh's poetry liberated a great many succeeding poets into writing about the commonplace, be it Derek Mahon's brilliantly evocative 'Garage in Co. Cork', Michael Hartnett's savage indictment of rural life 'A Small Farm' or Seamus Heaney's topographical masterpiece 'Bogland'. However, Kennelly work is more complex than a mere rendering of the often difficult circumstances of his rural upbringing, and it is here that the other influences begin to be heard.

The second acknowledged influence, again somewhat predictably given Kennelly's outward looking perspective, is Allen Ginsberg (1926-97), the leading light of what came to be known in 1950s America as the Beat generation of poets. Born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1926, Gins-

<sup>2</sup> Ake Persson, *Journey into Joy – Selected Prose* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), p. 122.

berg's fame coincided with that of Kavanagh's and despite their clear stylistic and thematic differences, it is easy to see how Kennelly could be attracted to both. Ginsberg's extraordinary 1955 long poem 'Howl' can be regarded as an American *Great Hunger*, a rambling tirade against the hypocrisies of Ginsberg's contemporary society and a brutally honest examination of a troubled self. Interestingly, like *The Great Hunger* in 1942, *Howl* was lifted from the bookshelves in 1957 on the grounds of obscenity, the poem dealing explicitly with the sexual conquests of Ginsberg's drug-addled fellow writers. The following obscenity trial in 1957 failed when the judge declared that the poem was of redeeming social importance and it has since gained iconic status in the canon of American poetry.

There is a remarkable similarity between many of the poems in Kennelly's 1983 epic sequence *Cromwell* and the extraordinary cacophony of Ginsberg's *Howl*, with Oliver Cromwell portrayed as high on dexedrine throughout his Irish campaign, hallucinating during battle of fornicating with the recently dead, his hormones raging in an orgy of violence, brutality and sexual depravity. Ginsberg, on the other hand, sees 'the best minds' of his generation destroyed by 'the endless ride on benzedrine', the favoured drug of the Beat generation. Whether Kennelly meant this connection or not, the link between Cromwell's dexedrine and Ginsberg's benzedrine is clear, and indeed, in some poems in *Cromwell*, the eponymous Oliver rambles and experiments to such an extent that he would have made an unusual yet comfortable travelling companion for the great Beat trio of Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs. In Kennelly's work, the outward-looking insularity and celebration of the ordinary in Kavanagh's poetry is blended with the often bizarre yet nonetheless searing social commentary of Ginsberg to produce a corpus of work that challenges ideologies and conventions on a variety of fronts and which is forever shifting in terms of its focus and style.

Coincidentally, Ginsberg, like Kavanagh, was no fan of academic assessments of his work, referring to the 'blather and built-in misunderstanding' of academics and reviewers, people he condemns as 'intellectual bastards and snobs and vulgarians and hypocrites'. À la Rimbaud, Ginsberg insisted in 1961 that 'the mind must be trained, ie. let loose, freed – to deal with itself as it actually is, and not to impose on itself an arbitrarily preconceived pattern. The only pattern or value of interest in poetry is the solitary, individual pattern peculiar to the poet's moment and the poem discovered in the mind and in the process of writing it out

on the page'.<sup>3</sup> Given that two years later, in 1963, Kennelly produced his first solo collection, *Let Fall No Burning Leaf*, Ginsberg offered a Kavanaghese freedom to the burgeoning poet to plough his own furrow in search of the elusive true note. It can only be conjectured whether the title of Kennelly's collection was a tacit endorsement of Ginsberg's famous assertion that 'the only poetic tradition is the voice out of the burning bush'.<sup>4</sup>

That both Kavanagh and Ginsberg were such important figures in the development of Kennelly's poetics should come as no real surprise. Kennelly was, and still is, a voracious reader with a photographic memory, and as his style developed in the early 1960s he could not but have encountered the establishment shattering work of the Monaghan farmer and the New Jersey refusenik. Indeed, as a child, Kennelly was nicknamed 'the monk' by his siblings for his reading habits, spending long hours bent over a table by a window overlooking the main street of Ballylongford in what the family referred to as the 'big room'. His brother Paddy recalls Brendan's 12-hour study schedule, 9 till 9, seven days a week, punctuated only by meal breaks and brisk walks. This work ethic is a side of his personality that Kennelly rarely alludes to but the fruits of such concentration are clear to see in the intellectual breadth of his work. As a result of his relatively enlightened education and prodigious memory, Kennelly quickly took to languages. His natural flair for French led directly to the emergence of two other, arguably less predictable, seminal figures in the development of his poetic sensibility and technique, namely the nineteenth century poets Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) and Arthur Rimbaud (1854-91). Whilst nearly all Irish poets of the late twentieth century have emerged under the shadow of the twin peaks of Yeats and Kavanagh, few acknowledge these two giants of French poetry as determining influences, and yet their desire to break poetic conventions was, in many ways, a feature of a good deal of Irish poetry throughout the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. A common feature of their work is their concern with the marginalised, the dispossessed and the voiceless, an interest born, perhaps, out of their own troubled personal histories. Indeed, Kennelly, Baudelaire and Rimbaud, three counter-culturalists to varying degrees,

<sup>3</sup> W.N Herbert and M.Hollis (eds), *Strong Words – Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), p. 130.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert and Hollis, *Strong Words*, p. 131.

share remarkably similar biographies, from brilliant young student to traumatic adult personal relationships.

The trio endured lifelong battles with alcohol addiction although Kennelly has thankfully avoided the rather pathetic ends that eventually faced his French counterparts. Baudelaire died in 1867 of medical complications brought about by syphilis, a condition compounded by a heavy and prolonged addiction to opium, hashish and absinthe. Rimbaud did not even manage to reach Baudelaire's 46 years on this earth, succumbing in 1891, at the age 37, to complications brought about from a botched leg amputation, his life shaped by addiction, violence and a tempestuous and near fatal affair with his fellow poet Paul Verlaine. It is fascinating that a poet like Kennelly, so immersed in the forms and traditions of Irish poetry, would cite such figures as Baudelaire and Rimbaud as central influences in the development of his eclectic and prolific poetic career. Clearly his ability to read French was a crucial factor but on closer examination the stylistic innovations of both Baudelaire and Rimbaud would appear to be hugely influential. Equally important, perhaps, was their desire to question and interrogate the social and moral fabric of their respective societies, mobilising their poetry almost as a form of cultural protest aimed at they perceived to be the suffocating influence of dominant political and social discourses.

Kennelly first encountered the modernist work of Baudelaire and Rimbaud during his enlightened education in St. Ita's school in Tarbert Co. Kerry, which he attended from 1948 to 1953. The school was a fee-paying boarding school established by Jane Agnes Mc Kenna, a woman of extraordinary pedagogical vision and energy. Indeed, Kennelly's indebtedness to her influence is acknowledged by the dedication to her of his 1992 collection *Breathing Spaces*, an important book in the body of Kennelly's work as it contains a good many previously unavailable early poems. In the introduction, he notes that 'there is always the hope that education and learning, like law and justice, may occasionally coincide'<sup>5</sup> and there is no doubt that Kennelly took to this school with great relish. His sister Mary recalls 'his dedication to study' and she notes that 'when Miss McKenna was ill he filled in as teacher'.

<sup>5</sup> Brendan Kennelly, *Breathing Spaces* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1992), p. 13.

Any hope the students might have had that the youthful Brendan would be a pushover were soon dashed, however, as Mary, two years younger than Brendan, notes with considerable understatement that he was no 'soft touch'! His time at St. Ita's was filled with an eclectic reading schedule and it was here that he was introduced, under Mc Kenna's tutelage, to the exciting, challenging and complex poetry of both Baudelaire and Rimbaud, as well as the more predictable figures of Kavanagh and Yeats. From the latter he gleaned the confidence to write about the ordinary and a passionate belief in the necessity of articulating the essence of a personal vision. The fact that from a very early age he was immersing himself in a tradition outside of the familiar certainly imbues his early poetry with an air of the experimental, despite the fact that the tyranny of influence is clear in the early works of most poets. Kennelly is distinctly aware of the importance of striking a distinct note, hinted at in the concluding stanzas of his 1963 poem 'The Whistler':

But now the whistler's sauntering across a bridge,  
 Head cocked jauntily like a blackbird's  
 As he indicates a headland or a ledge

Of his delight. The simple truth, you see,  
 Is that the man is utterly himself  
 And owns you with his lucid mastery.<sup>6</sup>

What exactly one poet learns, either consciously or unconsciously, from another poet is notoriously difficult to quantify. All poets seek the establishment of their distinct, unique voice, gradually accreting perspectives and themes whilst simultaneously borrowing from the dominant movements, motifs and individuals of their contemporary time, what Seamus Heaney refers to as 'a ring of truth in the medium, the sounding out of inner workings, the sense of being in the presence of a self-absorbed and undistracted endeavour'.<sup>7</sup> In his essay 'Patrick Kavanagh's Comic Vision', Kennelly admires the 'simplicity that stems from a totally coherent

<sup>6</sup> Brendan Kennelly, *Green Townlands* (Leeds: University Bibliographic Press, 1963), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> John McDonagh and Stephen Newman (eds), *Remembering Michael Hartnett* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), p. 11.

and lucid vision',<sup>8</sup> and a good deal of his own poetry is characterised by this desire to strip away the excesses of expression in favour of an accessible, tangible form and imagery. What Kennelly has gleaned from Baudelaire and Rimbaud is less obvious but no less important. In his introduction to Christopher Isherwood's translation of Baudelaire's various prose writings, *Intimate Journals*, T.S. Eliot brilliantly summarises what he perceives to be Baudelaire's outstanding contribution to the development of nineteenth century poetry:

It is not merely in the use of imagery of common life, not merely in the use of imagery in the sordid life of a great metropolis, but in the elevation of such imagery to the *first intensity* – presenting it as it is, and yet making it represent something much more than itself – that Baudelaire has created a mode of release and expression for other men.<sup>9</sup>

Eliot's perceptive elevation of Baudelaire's use of concrete and local imagery to the level of a rare sensory and emotional intensity is an insight that could equally be applied to Kennelly. In his poetry, Kennelly consistently uses the ordinary, commonplace images of his childhood to portray the intensity of life as he experienced it. Equally, these often simple poems, revolving around the everyday activities of his village community, are imbued with the timeless significance that only a carefully constructed casualness can achieve. Although he is probably better known for his rural poems, Kennelly is an important poetic chronicler of Dublin, where he has lived for over forty years. For example, his 1995 epic sequence *Poetry My Arse* foregrounds a Dublin packed with begrudgers, chancers, spoofers, liars and hypocrites, and is undoubtedly one of the funniest, sharply observed and overlooked portraits of, as Eliot put it, 'the sordid life of a great metropolis'. Eliot's wonderfully simple and perceptive concept of the *first intensity* captures the essential power and effectiveness of poetry. Whatever about the craft of the poet, in terms of the symmetry of vowels, syntax and punctuation, a poem works if it can move the reader to a level of understanding that makes this infinitely complex world a more tangible reality. The attempt to elevate the ordi-

<sup>8</sup> Ake Persson, *Journey Into Joy* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), p.112.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*. Translated by Christopher Isherwood (London: Blackamore Press, 1989) p. ii.

nary into the universal is one of the most obvious connections between Kennelly and Baudelaire and the latter's admission that 'je finis par trouver sacré le désordre de mon spirit'<sup>10</sup> parallels Kennelly's assertion that 'poetry is a gift that challenges and questions everything, including self'.<sup>11</sup>

At his best, Kennelly presents an uncluttered, uncompromising series of images, complimented by a simple, persuasive and effective form, in which the ordinary, unspectacular experiences of rural life speak to a universality of human experiences, and there can be little doubt that it is in these poems that the influence of Baudelaire can be most readily accessed. For example, in 'That Look', a much anthologised poem first published in Kennelly's 1980 collection *The Boats Are Home*, the evocation of a dirty, cold farmyard and the quick, remorseless killing of a rat by a wire terrier is carried forward in spare, descriptive language, devoid of adjectives and adverbs. The power and intensity of the imagery is entirely complimented by the steady iambic rhythm which drives the poem forward, a rhythm perfectly in harmony with the ordinariness of the rodent's grisly death. In his *Intimate Journals*, Baudelaire writes of the primacy of 'order and symmetry',<sup>12</sup> in not only the construction of poetry but as 'primal needs of the human spirit', a view he based on his contemplation of a large ship in motion. He notes the synchronization of the ship's construction and in particular focuses on the 'intricacy and harmony' of the ship as it glides through the water. He remarks upon the 'real elements of the object', the combination of vast quantities of steel, plastic and wood that occur and reoccur in specific curves and designs. From this contemplation he posits the idea that the poetic endeavour should similarly aspire towards a 'perfectly harmonised entity' in which language, form and theme become an organic whole, one inseparable from the other.

Paradoxically, however, each element of the poem can be identified and the internal workings quantified and measured, but it is in their overall construction that the effectiveness of the general work becomes apparent. Again, the very fact that Baudelaire regularly chose the long prose

<sup>10</sup> C.A. Hackett, *Rimbaud: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>11</sup> Brendan Kennelly, *Familiar Strangers* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2004), p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, p.18.

poem as a vehicle for poetic expression links him with Kennelly's preferred epic sequence in which dozens of poems are thematically and narratively linked in such a way as to disrupt the conventional generic expectations of the reader. Indeed, this subvention of the genres of poetry and prose was a foundational aesthetic principal in Baudelaire's work, exemplifying his doctrine of surprise: 'après le plaisir d'être étonné, il n'en est pas de plus grand que causer une surprise'<sup>13</sup>. This generic dislocation has to be viewed in the context of Baudelaire's overall intellectual agenda in his prose poems, in which, according to Sonya Stephens, 'the texts are a continuum of different views, of conflicting perspectives, as mobile and as unstable as the clouds'<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, it could certainly be argued that in the poems and letters of both Baudelaire and Rimbaud lie the roots for the emergence of the French schools which were to dominate the intellectualisation and theorisation of language studies for a good deal of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Indeed, Baudelaire's reflection on the aesthetic uniformity and beauty of the ship in his *Intimate Journals* are very similar in both theme and style to Roland Barthes' more famous 1957 essay on the Citroen DS 19, a seminal text in the development of 20<sup>th</sup> century structuralist thinking. Barthes' short essay, entitled 'The New Citroën', celebrated the production, in 1955, of the DS 19, nicknamed the *Déesse*, a car noted for its futuristic aerodynamic styling and advanced technology. The influence of Baudelaire's earlier reflections on the imperious beauty of the ship in motion is palpable in Barthes' essay and many parallels can be drawn between these two important pieces of work. Where Baudelaire sees 'order and symmetry' allied to 'intricacy and harmony' as the dominant aesthetic feature of the ship, Barthes notes a 'transformation of life into matter'<sup>15</sup> in the shape of the DS. The smooth, curved lines of the car, in which the welding and bolting are discretely hidden, prompt Barthes to claim that a new era in design has arrived, the progression being from 'a world 'where elements are welded to a world where they are juxtaposed and hold together by sole virtue of their wondrous shape'.<sup>16</sup> Similarly,

<sup>13</sup> Claude Pichois, *Charles Baudelaire – Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 2 vols., p. 323.

<sup>14</sup> Sonya Stephens, *Baudelaire's Prose Poems – The Practice and Politics of Irony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Paladin, 1973), p. 88.

<sup>16</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, pp. 88-9.

Baudelaire notes the second order of signification in the design of the ship, building on the already acknowledged symmetry and harmony of its construction, when he notes the 'successive multiplication and generation of all the curves and imaginary figures described in space',<sup>17</sup> a process whereby the ship transcends its physical construction to embody broader mythological aspirations of unity and precision. Both Baudelaire and Barthes appear to be deconstructing that which appears to be whole into its composite, physical parts, thereby denuding myth of arguably its greatest power, namely the ability to disguise ideology as part of the natural, accepted order of society. Equally, then, this deconstruction can be applied to poetry, in which the poet can recognise the crucial role played by a recognisable and quantifiable form in the construction of the poetic conceit.

This close attention, one could almost say obsession, with form characterises Baudelaire's musings on the nature of poetry writing. For Kennelly, there is a similar if redirected passion for the perfect poetic structure. It is clear from Kennelly's earliest poetic publications that he is engaging with Baudelaire's distinction between the 'dessin physiognomique' and the 'dessin de création',<sup>18</sup> and this engagement is one that he has continued throughout his career. Nearly every poet will, at one time or another, experiment with form, and Kennelly has ranged over the historical epic, the ballad, the sonnet and the epigram in the attempt to strike what he refers to as the 'true note'. Again mindful of Baudelaire's legacy, Kennelly has often eschewed the application of a recognisable regular form altogether, relying upon his astute knowledge of rhythm and its melodic undertones to produce an often unexpected response in the reader. Indeed, the more this is explored, the more fascinating the connections appear. In 1865, the 21 year-old Paul Verlaine published a series of articles in the magazine *l'Art* where he praises the bold, imaginative and increasingly free-verse work of Baudelaire, and these articles were later referred to by Arthur Rimbaud as significant in his poetic development. In 1871, Rimbaud encouraged his fellow poets to 'trouvez une langue' - 'find a language...this language will be of the trou and for the soul, summing up everything, perfumes, sounds, colours, thought seizing thought and extending it'. This move towards a less formulaic poetics

<sup>17</sup> Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, p. 45.

was paralleled later in Ireland principally in the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh, when he advocated the local over the national as well as a stylistic move away from dominant poetic forms. Indeed his magnificent 1942 poem *The Great Hunger*, one of the seminal poems in the development of contemporary Irish poetry, was given a mixed critical reaction, and the February 15 review by Roibeard O'Farachain from *The Irish Times* refers to one of 'Kavanagh's old faults' as 'a lack of form', noting the poet's 'blindness to the fascination of the stanza'<sup>19</sup>. Clearly, even as late as the 1940s, the critical responses to a poetics that challenged and manipulated traditional forms was lukewarm at best. Baudelaire's chief legacy, herefore, as acknowledged by Kennelly, lies in his championing of the power of words and their innate ability to define and refine our perception of the world. This in itself is hardly radical, but placed in the context of a parallel shift in what was considered as suitable material for poetic enquiry, a clear platform for the emergence of a less formulaic and more locally based poetics begins to emerge. Given this, it is perhaps surprising that more Irish poets fail to acknowledge the role played by Baudelaire and Rimbaud in the increased democratisation of poetry throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a process that was to find a more complex expression in the Modernist literary movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The fact that Kennelly has cited Arthur Rimbaud as another of his seminal influences appears, on the surface, to be a natural progression from his interest in Baudelaire. In a letter to Paul Demeny in May, 1871, Rimbaud remarks: '*Baudelaire est le premier voyant, roi des poètes, un vrai Dieu*' (trans. 'Baudelaire is the first visionary, the king of poets, and a true god'). Rimbaud constantly referred to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* as a seminal text in his development as a poet and there are strong Baudelirian undertones in his 1886 collection *Les Illuminations*, particularly in his desire to write what for many critics was a revolutionary style of freeverse poetry. Cecil Hackett identifies Rimbaud's central theme as the 'alternation and conflict between forces of destruction and creation' while his dominant stylistic features are detailed as 'vivid images, dynamic and rapidly changing rhythms, swift transitions from short sentences to sustained rhetoric, abruptness and finality of utterance'.<sup>20</sup> This emphasis on the clear, unambiguous image, underscored with an unobtru-

<sup>19</sup> *The Irish Times*, February 21, 1942.

<sup>20</sup> Hackett, *Rimbaud: A Critical Introduction*, p.51.

sive, natural rhythm that is designed to engender a vitality and tangibility into the poem, is an element of Rimbaud's aesthetic that is apparent in Kennelly's statement that 'what matters is not time but intensity'.<sup>21</sup> Of course these sentiments are not entirely new, given that as early as 1800, in his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth wrote of 'the real language of nature' being the desired goal of poetry, and asking the question 'how, then, can the poet's words differ in any material degree from that of all other men who feel so vividly and see clearly?'<sup>22</sup> Rimbaud's 1886 work, *Une Saison en enfer*, is a model of personal reflection and self-laceration, the archetypal self-analysis that characterises much of what passes for Modernist literature. The book is dominated by Rimbaud's attempt to articulate and occasionally reconcile the dominant antitheses that characterise his perception of the world, juxtapositions that Hackett describes as obsessions with 'God and Satan, Good and Evil, Sin and Innocence, Past and Future, Body and Mind, and at least thirty other antithetical couples'.<sup>23</sup> Rimbaud himself is playfully elusive in all of this, acknowledging 'Je suis caché et je ne le suis pas',<sup>24</sup> his feeling of being lost merely adding to the wonderful ambiguity of so much of *Une Saison en enfer*. Equally, in the 'Acenote', the introduction to *Poetry My Arse*, Kennelly celebrates what he refers to as 'the unique vitality derived from feeling a bit lost'<sup>25</sup> and the style of this introduction, as well as many of Kennelly's other introductions to his work, echo Rimbaud's epigrammatic comments on the nature of the human condition. Rimbaud states that 'La vie est la farce à mener par tous',<sup>26</sup> while Kennelly notes that 'in Dublin, the joke is king because the reality of any person, even a great achievement can be measured by the extent to which he or she is parodied, twisted and caricatured'.<sup>27</sup> Both Rimbaud and Kennelly, perhaps somewhat disingenuously, continually attempt to elide the importance of the ego in the poetic exercise, a move ultimately designed to place the

<sup>21</sup> Kennelly, *Breathing Spaces*, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> M.H. Abrams et al. (eds), *Norton Anthology of English literature, Sixth Edition, Volume Two* (New York: Norton and Co., 1993), p. 151.

<sup>23</sup> Hackett, *Rimbaud: A Critical Introduction*, p. 87.

<sup>24</sup> Hackett, *Rimbaud: A Critical Introduction*, p. 90.

<sup>25</sup> Brendan Kennelly, *Poetry My Arse* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Book, 1995), 15.

<sup>26</sup> Hackett, *Rimbaud: A Critical Introduction*, p. 91.

<sup>27</sup> Kennelly, *Poetry My Arse*, p. 16.

text at the forefront of the interpretive engagement between poet and reader.

The link between Kennelly, Baudelaire and Rimbaud becomes more apparent when one examines the dominant concerns apparent in the work of each poet. Kennelly has long set himself against social conventions and norms, resisting the tendency towards social and cultural labelling while railing against the hypocritical nature of historical constructs. His anger, like Rimbaud's, is often clearly directed towards a particular target, and there is a strong inference in the longer poems of each poet that they need the discipline of poetry in order to give their invective a sharper focus. In his 1871 poem 'L'Homme juste', Rimbaud rails against the hypocrisies of those who set themselves up as the moral guardians of the state, in almost precisely the same way that Kennelly attacks a variety of social pretensions in his 1980 poem 'Six of One'. Kennelly's clever poem isolates six manifestations of the social and moral hypocrisy that so infuriated Rimbaud. In a particularly Irish context, he sets his sights on, amongst others, the body politic who have used an unquestioning acceptance of a brutal nationalism to establish themselves as the arbiters of historical hermeneutics, portraying themselves as 'pregnant with honour in service to The Cause'<sup>28</sup>. This zeal is allied to a religious pragmatism that transforms the collective faith of a people into yet another arm of state control, again disallowing any critical reflection on the role of the individual in the construction of identity. 'Six of One' is a powerful indictment of the Irish version of Baudelaire's 'l'homme juste' and it is perhaps fitting that, as the least man standing, so to speak, the last word should be left to Kennelly:

The area is limited, it is true.  
 His knowledge of the area is not.  
 Right from the start, he knew what to do  
 And how to do it. All the fish he caught  
 Were salmon of knowledge and not once  
 Did he burn his thumb although he touched the fire  
 Of minds zealous as his own. God's a dunce  
 When the expert pronounces in his sphere  
 For he has scoured the fecund libraries

<sup>28</sup> Brendan Kennelly, *Familiar Strangers* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2004), p. 317.

Till each one yielded all its special riches.  
Prometheus, overworked and undersexed,  
Files in his mind the succulent clarities  
Knowing, from the ways of pricks and bitches,  
Living is a footnote to the authentic text.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Kennelly, *Familiar Strangers*, p. 316.