Interview: "Free in the *fe fiada* anonymity of America": Greg Delanty in Conversation with Adrienne Leavy [1]

Adrienne Leavy. *You were born in Cork City in Ireland and raised in a close-knit family. In a number of early poems you write movingly of what Terence Brown identified as "the intimacies of childhood and familial domestic life."*[2] *Can you speak a little about growing up in this environment and how your mother and father influenced you?*

Greg Delanty. Yes, there was only the four of us, my mother and father and my brother, Norman, and I. We did get together with our mother's side of the family weekly. My mother was Eileen O'Sullivan and she was born into a large household of uncles, aunts, brothers and a sister on Blarney Street, one of the most working-class areas of Cork City, quintessentially Corkonian (also a street that Frank O'Connor lived on as a child). I took after my mother in many ways, including my speech and accent. It is the main street/area which folks from the Munster rural world settled when they came in their droves during the famine years and after. I have said this before but according to the BBC's "Story of English" my Cork-English is the closest in English to Irish and also to Elizabethan English. It is the city and province where Edmund Spenser and Walter Raleigh reigned, and I've always felt that I am from both and thus the Cork dialect, my sonnets, the melting pot or hellbox of both traditions.

My mother was a force. In hindsight she was a person who was trapped as a housewife. She was unhappy and she also became compulsive about the house being tidy to the point where it wasn't a home, but a museum of middle-class perfection. We could hardly sit down without denting a cushion. I used to say to her that we should have been born with wings to get into the house without having to wipe our shoes, and the water would have to be dry. She was generous, while, at the same time, careful with money – after all she came from such a poor background. She was sent to work in her bare feet as soon as she reached the legal age and worked in Sunbeam Wolsey – a red-bricked mill not unlike the mills all over New England, in cities like Manchester, New Hampshire or Winooski where I teach. She had enough of poverty and what that meant. The O'Sullivan's moved from Blarney Street up to a small corporation house in Guarranbraher. After saying all this, my mother was a character, and would start a singsong so she could sing all night. She was full of life... and that didn't make the situation of staying at home doing house work any easier for her.

My father, Dan Delanty, was a low-key, good-natured, popular, gentle man. He was a typesetter like his own father – I don't know how far in my ancestry typesetting goes back. I spent a lot of time in the Compositors' Room of Eagle Printing as a child and even worked there when I was thirteen or fourteen for a summer... mostly fixing leads, acting as a messenger boy, and cleaning. But the compositor world was a wonder to me and later, as you know, I would make *The Hellbox* out of it. I wanted to be a compositor like my father, who was the foreman also, but he said that that world was quickly on the way out, what with computers etc. I actually think that writing poems was my way of continuing the trade.

When I was a child, my mother and father and usually her side of the family, though sometimes with my father's mother – the most silent woman I ever knew – would meet on Sunday nights for many years usually in Mooney's Bar on Cook Street. I remember those times in the pubs as good times – sometimes there was a singsong. In my memory they all seemed jolly and close there. My father liked a drink and he would also go out on Saturday nights and later I would join him. Pubs for me were a kind of haven, a paradise, out of time from the normal school and work-a-day. A place where we were all together and having a bit of a laugh. I still love bars and feel quite at home in them – I have always been meaning to write a celebration of taverns, pubs, bars, saloons in poetry and, who knows, I might still.

Adrienne Leavy. *You attended University College Cork and were taught by both Sean Lucy and John Montague. Can you describe what this experience was like?*

Greg Delanty. I decided before I did my Leaving Cert that my life would be poetry. I wasn't good in school and I didn't do a foreign language in my Leaving Cert–actually I was thrown out of the Spanish class with some other boys for causing trouble. A requirement for university was one had to have a Leaving Cert pass in a foreign language. I didn't want to go to university and wanted just time to write my poems. I worked part-time jobs and worked full-time for a while in a car accessory company, A. E. Edmund Walker, as a stock-keeper. I also worked as a postman (Christmas) and a barman, mostly in The Swan and Cygnet (now, alas, demolished), but my most regular job was lifeguard, which was annual for three to four months on the Kerry Beaches. I would ask for the remote beaches like

Inch so I would be left alone and could read and write all I wanted thanks to the remoteness and the Irish weather. But after a year or two of odd jobs outside the lifeguarding from June to the end of September, I found that trying to exist like this took up too much time and was exhausting, so I took a Spanish grind for six months and passed the Leaving Cert – at that time you could repeat subjects – and went to UCC doing an English and History degree.

As it happened, Gerry Murphy, my great old friend from our younger competitive swimming days (more on those times later) also started that year and we did all the same subjects. We hung around together, swapping poems. I had met him again by accident when I was finishing my Leaving Cert and Gerry was back from working in a Kibbutz – I distinctly recall bumping into him outside of Roches Stores across from the Savoy on Patrick Street, and we got talking after three or four years of being out of touch, and I asked him what he was up to now and he simply said that he was writing poetry, and I responded in kind and we went to The Swan and Cygnet and compared notes. We have remained close friends ever since. Gerry was the poet I knew well while I was at UCC up to completing my BA, though I also became friendly with Judy Kravis, John Bourke and the poets writing in Irish, Colm Breathnach and Louis de Paor, both were writing in English at that time, or in both languages. All the older poets like Roz Cowman, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Seán Dunne, Thomas MacCarthy, Catherine Phil MacCarthy, Theo Dorgan, William Wall, Gregory O'Donoghue, Liam O Muirthile, Michael Davitt, Gabriel Rosenstock, Maurice Riordan, Robert Welch, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Aíne Miller, Ciaran O' Driscoll, Augustus Young, Derry Sullivan, and Patrick Crotty had passed through and were the stuff of legends by the time I got there in 1977. (Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and I included all these poets in an anthology, *Jumping Off Shadows, Selected Contemporary Irish Poets* – an anthology of UCC poets published in 1995 by Cork University Press along with the work of younger poets and Paul Durcan – Paul was at the college in my time there and doing an MA in archeology). I actually didn't have much contact with Sean Lucy, whom I liked, but he did not take to my efforts at poetry – he did help and bolster Gerry Murphy and his poems, which was good.

John Montague was a larger poet, established and for me more even-handed, but I think John had withdrawn from young poets by the time I arrived, a bit burned out from the young poets that went before. I went to see him ever before I thought of going to college and he was attentive and generous. I would like here to quote from a section in Adrian Frazier's forthcoming biography of John:

> Delanty was always grateful to John for his openness and generosity especially of those early days. As the years progressed John became hard to meet, circa early 1980s? John felt that the ground he opened in the Irish tradition was somewhat ignored and the Heaney phenomenon eclipsed his achievement. One couldn't bring up the name of Seamus for a time. He became obsessed with the Heaney phenomenon. This was understandable also, but understanding didn't always make for enjoying John's company. That said, Delanty wants to impress how kind John was. Montague gave Delanty books to read; one was the first edition of *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* edited by Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair. Delanty read everything from cover to cover including the letters that John left inside from Richard Ellmann apologizing for John's exclusion. It was a softback edition, and later Delanty had his father hardcover it in The Eagle Printing Company for John.
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> When Delanty spoke with John about the poetry of various poets it was also wonderful to hear that John actually had met many and knew them. Very exciting to hear his California days, Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, even the elder Kenneth Rexroth. Delanty recalls telling Montague that, apart from the prosody of the Irish tradition, that he got his short line from Rexroth and John was pleased and impressed by this insight. Delanty would be introduced to other senior poets via John, such as Ted Hughes, John Jordan, Douglas Dunn, Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, Eavan Boland.... [3]

All the above is true, and apart from going to the lectures of both, I didn't see much of either. Sometimes I'd meet John in the literati pub The Long Valley. As I said, he was more open and helpful before I went to college, when he gave me books, and even encouragement – how, I do not know, as the poems (or whatever they were!) I gave him when I called to his house were dreadful.

My determination to make a life of poetry was made in 1976 on Inch Beach, County Kerry when I was lifeguarding – I don't really know why then, but it happened. I made a promise to myself and I have kept it to this day. I was at that stage reading outside the poetry of *Soundings,* the Leaving Cert poetry textbook (I would later have one of my own poems come up in the Pass Leaving Cert paper between two poets that were on my own Leaving Cert, Emily Dickinson and Percy Bysshe Shelley – teachers must have been swiveling in their graves). I was finding my own way. Like my mother I have an obsessive addictive nature, and my addiction became poetry and still is. The years at UCC gave me the time to read and write, and at the time the English Degree syllabus was a syllabus for young poets. We read everything from Anglo-Saxon right through

the various periods to modern, even contemporary poets such as Robert Lowell and John Berryman – I recall Seán reciting some of Berryman's *Dream Songs* and John reciting Lowell.

Adrienne Leavy. *You have been associated with St. Michael's College in Vermont since 1987, first as a lecturer and later as their poet in residence. Do you find that teaching poetry complements your own work?*

Greg Delanty. Yes, I suppose. I am grateful to the college for giving me the space, time and salary to focus on reading and writing my poems. I began as an adjunct teaching "Introduction to Poetry" for a few terms and finally this led slowly to being more fully employed in the late 1990s. After that I was given tenure which finally led to me becoming Full Professor. I credit the college a lot as I only have a BA. I have also been allowed to choose what I want to teach, and so, therefore, I taught what I loved and that alone, I think, led to me being a worthwhile teacher. I have taught "Introduction to Poetry" (and again this term under the heading of "The Magic of Poetry" which used to have a sub-heading "Releasing Two Birds or More Birds from the One Cage"), "Modern Irish Poetry," "Modern American Poetry," "Bob Dylan, his Times, Chimes, and Rhymes," and poetry workshops.

One fact about how teaching helped me and bolstered my poems is that you really have to understand poetry to be able to face a class. I got to understand Yeats more fully, for instance, as I had to study him in a more comprehensive way in order to talk about him. All this reading of poems and performing as a professor must have helped me in various ways.

What I don't like and what doesn't help me write poems is grading and academic meetings. My real service to the college was and is in my activism and my poems. I was one of three faculty who formed the Environmental Major and taught on it via poetry. I also started what was called The Environmental Council, which was committed to environmental action in the college, and it included staff, students and faculty. A lot of good environmental change was brought about because of it. So, my activist life fed my poetry and my poetry fed my activist life. I don't believe what the great Yeats believed, that the poet has to put the life before poetry or the poetry before life – for me they are, figuratively speaking, a palindrome. I have said this literally in a poem from *The Blind Stitch* called "The Malayalam Box," "... poetry and life/ a kind of palindrome of one another like the word Malayalam...." Each add to each other, and grow out of each other.

Adrienne Leavy. *One gets the sense reading through your body of work that you see yourself as part of the global tradition of poetry, not just a writer who happens to be from Ireland and who has made his home in America. Given this broad aesthetic sensibility, are there particular poets who have influenced your development?*

Greg Delanty. I don't know who or what I see myself as. I know I am seen as a Cork poet, Irish poet, Vermont poet and so on – such capturing is fine just as long as the particular categorization does not close me and my work down. Thank you for seeing me "as part of a global tradition in poetry" – that is the most accurate and comfortable categorization I have ever been put in. I hope I can talk about categorization later in a bigger way. But I avoid thinking about how I see myself. It would seem as if I were putting the cart before Pegasus. My books and poems happen out of my life, whatever I am preoccupied with at the time. For a while it was being an immigrant/ emigrant (*American Wake*); then it was poetry and the male world of my father, printing, language, mutability – and emigration also (*The Hellbox*); then the female world of marriage and my mother (*The Blind Stitch*), then the birth of my son and the death of my mother (*The Ship of Birth*). Each preoccupation allows me get at the stuff of life. After the trilogy of books: *The Hellbox* (male), *The Blind Stitch* (female), *The Ship of Birth* (birth and the child) I turned to the Greek world. *The Greek Anthology Book XVII* (*Book Seventeen* in the US edition) gave me a kind of modern blueprint of all I was experiencing and it could hold so much and allow me get at stuff I might not have been able to write about in a more direct way.

Regarding a world perspective in my poems, yes. That issues from the Greek Anthology poems as it does in different ways from other books. The Greek world and the Christian world are the general foundations on which the Western World is built. It is through them that we see ourselves and have come to what we are. I am not just talking about myth and literature, but medicine, democracy, government, invention, mathematics and more. So what better place to write out of the world about our world, out of the Greek Anthology or Garland, the place where the word and idea of anthology was first used.

My preoccupation with the environment was always there. And I actively took part in demonstrations since I was a teenager with Cork's CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament), to getting arrested thirty years later outside the White House fighting the Fossil Fuel industry and so on.

I didn't know how to tackle the environment and the world in poetry in a large way until I came up with those *terza rima* sonnets with the ending couplet as a form to get at the whole shebang. These are poems of the underworld, which is our world, and love poems to the natural world (thus the couplet at the end).

This sonnet form coincidently is known as the diaspora sonnet – another endorsement within my work that we are all exiled, disconnected, while at the same time the form is showing us how we are connected below the surface of the blueprint of the very form itself. When I started writing these sonnets I actually didn't know that this type of sonnet was called that, as well as a *terza rima* sonnet.

With regard to poets who might have influenced me. I have been reading poetry every day for nearly fifty years and I have no doubt been influenced by many poets and in different ways and at different times. Too many to draw attention to any one or two poets. Any good writer uses their influences rather than be used by them, absorbing what has gone before into one's own character and issue from there into ink and hopefully break the ink barrier in the writing, so that a reader enters behind the ink, rather than remaining outside the ink.

I believe that a poet should be able to write in traditional forms and open (free verse, which is not free anyway by virtue of being trapped in the word) and mix both when appropriate to the subject matter. To say one should write in open or traditional form has been said and still goes on. How many poems rhyme, say, that are published in *The American Poetry Review*? Or, to say that one should write, like some New Formalists, only in traditional form is just as bad. I am more of a democratic maker – and I also feel that poets should be able to do this, learn their craft. There are poets who simply can't write in traditional structure, and therefore they condemn poets who can. Picasso could draw or sketch a portrait as good as Leonardo da Vinci before he ever painted in an abstract way.

No More Time, grand and all as it sounds, is showing, at the beginning of the 21st century, how humans and the natural world are all connected in so many ways, rather than separate and fragmented as portrayed at the beginning of the 20th century. With our environment is such a bad state I felt I had to try. We are all small and for me to attempt something so ambitious might seem much too ambitious, but maybe knowing and feeling I am unimportant allowed me to have a go, and things are so bad that it needs to be brought into art, just as action is needed. And, also, the fact that I have been such an activist gave me further license. The great environmentalist Bill McKibben has said of my work "No poet I know of has grappled more insistently and more successfully with the tough moment our planet finds itself in."

The main sequence, "The Field Guide to People," is arranged alphabetically and is a kind of integrated earthly heaven (thriving flora and fauna), purgatory (declining flora and fauna), and hell (extinct flora and fauna). The decline of the creatures and plants of the last two is due in every case mainly to humans. As you know, the *terza rima* form was first used by Dante in *The Divine Comedy*. This underworld adjusts the centuries-old western attitude that humans are apart from the environment and says, instead, that we are a part of it along with plants and other creatures. This book and these sonnets are attempting to adjust the western world's Christian matrix. It also intimates that the rush for the new in the modern industrial, scientific and artistic worlds disconnected us from the world before our modern technological world ran willy-nilly away with itself, not taking into account the good of that past world and how it was more in tune with the natural world, and how such a rush would hurt the environment and the world. I wanted to re-adjust the early twentieth-century dictum of Ezra Pound and that rush "to make it new" in poetry by going back beyond the modern era in these diaspora sonnets.

No More Time is like the return of local farms and farmer's markets in our society, to local growth and being connected in a more sustainable, traditional fashion within our communities and with the larger world. The collection itself is a biosphere of poems, each separate, yet connected to the other, doing what humans should literally be doing now.

Adrienne Leavy. *Although your work resists being defined by a strictly national or Irish sensibility, your own experience of migration to the U.S. has been a major theme in your work. Indeed, you have sometimes been described as "the poet laureate of the emigrant." Have your perceptions of this experience changed over the years and, if so, do you think this is reflected in your poetry?*

Greg Delanty. As I mentioned, the feeling of being an emigrant/immigrant did preoccupy me for a number of years and also the experience of the American Irish, and their situation. I was, I suppose, finding my place through the poems, settling down with it all, but then I moved on from it for the most part and made my peace in poems. Yes, it was Colum McCann said that in the books of the year section of *The Irish Times* when my *Collected 1986-2006* came out from Carcanet Press. I suppose I did try and get at all the angles of it, both in the book *American Wake*, and *The Hellbox* – the latter being a box in which broken and worn type was melted down and recast – a metaphor for more than the emigrant, but of words themselves and the self. We all have to remake ourselves in our lifetime and at different times and in different ways. We are each an I'm-igrant – corny, I know, but true don't you think?
After those two books I wanted to change my subject – too many poems about the same subject gets tiresome, and will hurt the poems that were achieved earlier. I am honored and glad to have achieved what I did and be called "the poet laureate of all those who have gone." As I just said, in one way or other, whether literal emigrant or immigrant, everyone leaves and moves on in their lives. After saying I'm done with this, there is a poem in the next book *The Professor of For-*

getting, that touches on those who remained in Ireland, "To Those Who Stayed." And the Irish emigration/immigration mirrors other emigrants from other countries to the US also.

I am a Dylanite and admire how Bob Dylan moves from album to album so radically in tone/style/types of music – which seems to go in three album cycles. Imagine the albums *Bob Dylan/Freewheeling/The Times They Are a Changing* (all albums in a similar, identifiable vein), moving to *Bringing it All Back Home/Highway Sixty-One Revisited/ Blond on Blond/* then *John Wesley* Harding (with a country note) and then bang, a country album: *Nashville Skyline*. Boy, does he keep himself and us on our toes. I picked up on this from Dylan, the focusing on a tone, style and subject and then dropping it, and going on to something quite different.

I have loved the songs of Bob Dylan since I was thirteen. My dad bought me a second-hand tape recorder from my cousin on my thirteenth birthday, and it came with my cousins' tapes, mostly Elvis Presley. I wasn't gone on Elvis and I found a second-hand tape and record music shop, Uneeda, which was then on the quays of the River Lee before it moved to Oliver Plunkett Street. The shop had a small amount of cassette tapes, and I didn't know any except The Beatles. I swapped my cousin's tapes for a selection of six or so tapes, one was Bob Dylan, whom I had only vaguely heard of. It was a lucky dip, and I was lucky. The tape was *Highway Sixty-One Revisited*. I played it as soon as I got home and it changed everything; the music, the words, the meaning (which I often didn't understand, but that was just fine too). So many great songs: "Desolation Row", "Tom Thumb's Blues", "Queen Jane Approximately"... I think, in hindsight the sound and words lifted me into writing poetry later, way before I was reading and writing poems – that didn't come till I was reading for my Leaving Cert. In secondary school my nickname was Bob.

And so, with each change in my life, my poetry changed and sometimes I had to force it. Twenty years or so ago my writing routine was stalled, arthritic. When I sensed a poem forming in my head I'd hold off writing it – often for a few days – as I had to write it at my desk, surrounded by my books. I was teaching in Vermont, with four collections under my belt, but I felt my poems needed to change. I wanted to write in a more immediate, open fashion, on the spot in buses, trains, restaurants, the street. I tried to break my habit, but it wasn't working. The best thing for a person with arthritis is to move. I reckoned I needed to head to somewhere alien. That might force me out of my writing ritual. I took a term off teaching and chose India since it seemed so strange. On the way to India from the States I stopped off in my native Cork to break the journey. My aunt Kitty died while I was back home. I shouldered her coffin with relatives out of the Gurranabraher church. Afterwards I walked down to the River Lee through the lanes off Blarney Street and Shandon. I loved those lanes, so characteristic of the city I grew up in, many opened like portals on to the River Lee. I wasn't to know that the next time I'd recall those lanes was when I was walking down the laneways of Varanasi to "the eternal river", the Ganges.

What a shock I got as soon as I disembarked from the plane in Delhi. I was lost, miserable without my routine in those early days, beyond my comfort zone, but determined to see the trip through. I went about in a stupor. Culture shock would be too watery a description. The crowded, traffic-mad streets – many wearing masks because of air pollution– were too much. I had to get out. On a whim I decided to take a train to somewhere called Varanasi. I paused to see the Taj Mahal en route. This edifice more than lived up to its reputation, but I felt I'd only "done" the Taj the way busloads of tourists "do" the Ring of Kerry. I continued my train trip to Varanasi. Suddenly I felt oddly at home in one of the strangest places I've ever been. Perhaps I felt at home because the city was built on hills, full of lanes leading down to the sacred river, recalling the lanes off Blarney Street and Shandon Street that I had walked after shouldering my aunt. I found a room in the Shandi Guesthouse over the Manikarnika Ghats. I could see the bodies burning from my outdoor balcony. It struck me there that the undulating Hindi reminded me of the sing-song Cork accent, and how we used words in Cork that had Hindi origin and were brought back by Irish soldiers in the British army, words like *dekho*, which in Hindi means "to look", or c*onjun,* which means box. C*onjun* comes from the word *Khajana* – Hindi for treasure– and in Cork it was our word for a child's piggy bank. On one occasion I lost my way in the maze of alleys. I stepped aside to let men wearing nothing but dhotis, three on either side, shoulder a body swathed in white cloth on a bamboo stretcher to the Ganges. Since the Manikarnika Ghats was the main burning Ghats I reckoned I'd find my way to my guesthouse by following the bier. It was here the damn broke and I began to spontaneously write freer, more open poems, beginning with "Elegy for an Aunt":

"...I stepped aside from pallbearers shouldering
a tinsel-covered body about the size of Kitty's,
whose bier I bore only weeks ago on the hills
down to the ghats
of chemical factories lining the Lee, our Ganges...."

My old writing routine was broken, poems came easy and unbidden: on the Mumbai train, Goa beaches, Varkala cliff, and so it went from book to book, my life changing my work and my work changing my life.

Adrienne Leavy. *Do you think your work would have been substantially different if you had not emigrated to the U.S.?*

Greg Delanty. I have absolutely no idea. Since my poems are driven by my life, then presumably yes, my work would have been quite different in subject matter and other ways. I would have to have a doppelganger of myself who stayed living full-time in Ireland to answer that question. If you find him, then let me know.

Adrienne Leavy. *You have received numerous awards throughout your career including, the Patrick Kavanagh Poetry Award, a Guggenheim Award, and most recently you were chosen as the inaugural recipient of the David Ferry and Ellen La Forge Poetry Prize in 2021. What does such recognition mean to a working poet?*

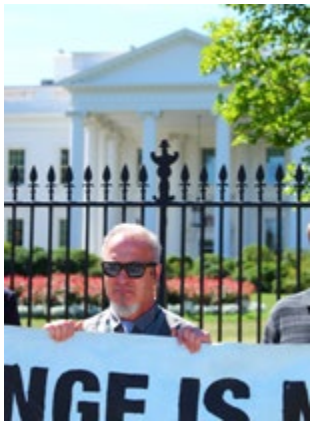
Greg Delanty. Oh, it means a lot to me – too much perhaps. I have been fortunate, for sure. I suppose the lift from getting an award is the sense that the work is been noticed, seen, read – that is the best thing about receiving one. And then maybe others will go and read the work.

Most of the awards I have been given have been adjudicated by people I didn't know personally at the time. One of the biggest awards for me was The Allen Dowling Fellowship in 1986, an award for poets outside of the US, and it was judged by Christopher Ricks. That award changed my life literally. I had to come to the US to get the award, $20,000 was put in a bank account for me, and that all led ultimately to my visit turning into a life in the US, a job, family, a house, a place to work and write. But, also, I got to know and become close friends with Christopher Ricks – he looks at most of my poems and comments on them. W.H. Auden has said that Christopher Ricks is "the kind of critic every poet dreams of finding." Only last weekend I went down to Cambridge to visit Christopher and Judith (Christopher's wife) and Christopher went over a new set of poems for a future book titled *The Cancer Club*.

I think if anyone did a survey it would be revealed that most prizes are given to people centered in the power zones – it is a bit like "out of sight, out of award." I wonder how many Pulitzers in Poetry, for instance, have been given to poets living or working in or around New York City. And now so many awards have to go to people for socio-legal reasons – understandable and good just as long as the work is good enough. I'm afraid being a white, heterosexual male is unpopular right now – we are paying, alas, for the sins of our fathers. Understandable, right even, but hard on the individual who happens to be born male, white and heterosexual. I want to impress here that I am a campaigner for equality. I have walked in many demonstrations for Black Lives Matter and I have supported human rights and equality all my adult life. I hope people will not misunderstand what I say. As one good female friend and poet told me, "You white male poets should just suck it up now." And she wasn't joking.

Adrienne Leavy. *Do you ever show fellow poets your work-in-progress? If so, do you find it helpful?*

Greg Delanty. Yes, I've always shown my poems in their earlier forms to others. These days I show them to Dan Johnson (he is an ex Saint Michael's student of mine and he did his MA in creative writing at UCC. He is also a talented poet and prose writer), David Cavanagh, and Christopher Ricks. Dave and Christopher have commented on my poems practically since I came to the US. I also may show them to others, anyone willing to, even my poetry workshop at Saint Michael's sometimes. They comment in a general larger way as well as the nitty-gritty. An example of the former is simply if they think the poem generally works and an example of the latter might be on punctuation or repetition of words. Earlier this year I had my brother, Norman, a doctor, look over the *The Cancer Club* to confirm the medical and anatomical references. I am driven when it comes to the making of a poem.



Adrienne Leavy. *One of the things that most struck me is your evolution into an environmental poet, a development which is particularly evident in the anthology* So Little Time: Words and Images for a World in Climate Crisis (2014)*, and your recent collection* No More Time (2020). *The American poet David Baker, in a recent interview where he was asked about his own environmental concerns, stated that for him, "the eco-poem is still written out of that old love of the natural but also out of a newer, perhaps drastic, sense of alarm at what's happening."*[4] *Would you agree?*

Greg Delanty. As I said: I write out of my preoccupations, whether they be the death of my father, the birth of a child, or my political concerns. I have been active politically since my teens and that my feelings and thoughts from these realms would enter my work is inevitable. I worked part-time in The Simon Community for five years as a teenager, was a CND active member (for instance with Adi Roche and Joe Noonan we were invited to the Soviet Union in late spring/early summer of 1987 and were the first outsiders to meet the victims of Chernobyl). I ran for The Green Party in Vermont way back in the 1990s, have been arrested doing civil disobedience, one time demonstrating the bombing of Belgrade, the other time demonstrating against the Fossil Fuel industry outside the

White House. This is all in my work. Life and the work are a figurative palindrome for me – I got that clarity while writing *The Blind Stitch*, which is a kind of subject palindrome. That I have been increasingly worried about climate change since the 1980s was bound to show itself in my work.

Adrienne Leavy. *As a follow up to the above question, there seems to be an increasing concern underpinning your environmental poetry about mankind's complicity in the degradation of our planet and the extinction of whole species of animals and plants. Do you see any improvement in this situation in the future? And also, do you think your poetry helps raise the level of awareness about what's happening to the natural world?*

Greg Delanty. Yes, complicity in our lives is a big subject for me and comes into most of my work. I call myself a member of the religious order of permanent Negative Capability (maybe it should be called Positive Capability) – excuse me John Keats. I hold or try to hold different beliefs open at one and the same time in a general way, and am neither atheist, Christian, Buddhist, or any other religion. I do not believe in original sin in the way we were taught it at school, but I do believe that we have created original sin in that now in this life we can't do anything without being complicit, whether it is driving a car (I gave up mine a decade ago and bike everywhere in Burlington, even in the Vermont winters), having a bank account, making the dinner and so on. For instance, the poem "Sermon" in *The Greek Anthology, Book XVII* dwells upon the fact that not even Jesus could come to earth without committing the sin of complicity:

These days the Savior could not come back
to live without sin among us, the matrix beneath the surface
of daily existence being sewn so intricately
by that crafty dark angel, tireless Complicity.
God's temples are heated by oil secured at the expense
of slaughter. The pillows He'd lie on are the down
of the bird that saved Noah. Even sackcloth
would likely have molecules of blood in its stitches.
He can't simply drop down, mosey
around town, take in His handiwork: trees rising up
from concrete, the hubbub of folk about their workaday,
a passing woman who reminds him of Magdalene, the smell
of coffee. How He envies the creature
created in His own image. How He longs to become His image.
How he pines for this earth. How absurd
the old God feels now. Our Image. Pray for Him.

Simeon the Second

The book *The New Citizen Army* is another example of this, "the matrix beneath the surface" of our modern lives by virtue of the production of the book itself. The covers are made from pulped US military uniforms that ex-Iraq army US soldiers produced on my request – a group that were called The Combat Project. We all worked to put the book together. It is a book dealing with the various ways we are complicit in our lives, whether it be war, paying our taxes, our treatment of the natural world and climate change. The subject of complicity goes back to the Spenser sonnet in the poem "The Splinters" of *American Wake* where the sonnet itself is emblematic also of complicity and the sonnet form remains so throughout my work, though mostly unseen, just as complicity in our lives is mostly unseen.

Speaking of religion, my religion is poetry, the vocation of poetry. As part of that religion I am also a devotee of simile and metaphor, both literally in my work as well as in a larger sense. Two or more different entities breaking the skin of difference and becoming renewed and one in the dynamic of becoming something new or renewed – everything from the marvelous metaphor of the hooks in the mouth of Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish" becoming "medals frayed and wavering" to the larger dynamic of a tree having literally become a page that has the ink of a poem say like "Harlem" (also called "A Dream Deferred") in which the raisin becomes what happens a dream

deferred, which in turn becomes representative of people of color and their experience, which in turn become the reader who may be white, and the white person becomes the person of color, and difference is broken down to similitude – the reader becomes the experience. Simile and metaphor develop our ability to become the other.

I often think that this quality of poetry has a real sociological importance and that it should be an essential part of learning in school – that it develops how people see themselves in other people, creatures and even plants and thus they may not be so quick to hurt or even kill. It helps to break down our constant categorizing, whether it is seeing another as white, female, Protestant, Catholic, Irish, Mexican, elderly, and so on. Categorizing is good in that it allows one to get a read or hold on another, but in many ways it is not good. Our ancient ancestors, living in a world of constant physical danger, had to constantly categorize or they may have been hurt or killed: that another human is part of an enemy tribe, that that creature will kill me, that that plant is poisonous. This primate, male mostly, far-from-vestigial inheritance is still, alas, in our genes and it holds sway over our intelligence, so much so that we do not know it most of the time. Modern scientific invention, such as modern regular weapons, nuclear weapons, artificial intelligence, our use of fossil fuels have therefore become terribly dangerous, including our need for a high quality of life (comforts). I watched a brilliant documentary series called *Chimp Empire* on Netflix recently – what I am saying is exhibited there and everyone should watch it. Poetry breaks through the skin of difference – a thin, but tough skin – and identifies the reader sympathetically with the other. You become the other knowing they have similar thoughts and feelings such as family problems, love problems, sickness, fears, aspirations, sorrows, joys – thus we are less likely to hurt that other. This goes for how we comprehend creatures also, and the environment. Elizabeth Bishop's fish at the beginning is just a fish and at the end it is us and more. I tell the students who take my poetry class that poetry will teach them how to shape-change, become Elizabeth Bishop's "tremendous fish," and Langston Hughes person of color – "Eat your heart out Harry Potter." The shape-changer changing and changing and changing again.

[To your question regarding] *Do you see any improvement in this situation in the future?*

Yes, as humans, we are moving in the right direction regarding getting a handle on Co^2 emissions, and this change has happened far quicker than say the change for female rights or rights for people of color – we are generally slow to change. But still the change needs to be much faster. Bill McKibben and others have been saying this for decades, but it is only as we see the results of the climate change, the catastrophes it brings, that we are beginning to move forward. It is only a matter of how fast we can change, and how bad it is going to be. Also, our political systems are not made for such change with only four-year terms. Very few politicians think beyond the four-year term. Change must also come from the individual. In addition to using a bicycle for transportation, my house runs on solar – I got rid of all gas and oil. I am putting the way I live where my mouth and my poems are and vice-versa. And as I said, I have done civil disobedience and been arrested outside the White House fighting the fossil fuel industry and also went and supported the First Peoples in North Dakota, at Standing Rock for a cold week during Thanksgiving when an oil pipeline was threatening the Sioux lands and reservations. (This comes into the Sweeney poems.) Action is hope really. And, as I say to students, who feel the weight of it all, that I do it also for myself, that I can enjoy my wine and beer better at night, that my actions help my taste and my enjoyment of life. Cheers – I am about to have my nightly drinks.

I can't say whether my poetry actually helps in raising awareness – it must, and besides I can't look at my poetry as a separate entity to and from myself – as I have said. People quote Auden's "for poetry makes nothing happen" (actually this quote is taken out of context from the poem and may not be what Auden is saying) and I don't agree with them. Poetry literally does make something happen – it, for instance, provides employment for a publisher, a printer, a bookseller, a reviewer, which they get paid for and which in turn feeds them and their families.

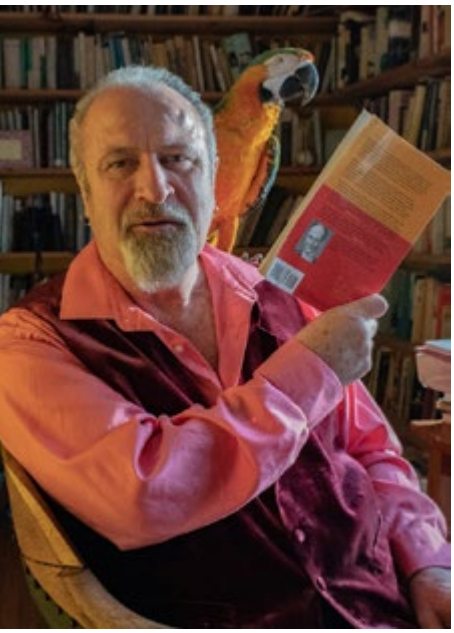
Adrienne Leavy. *Both Michael Longley and Paula Meehan explore themes of nature and the environment in their poetry. In what way if any does your emphasis or perspective differ from that of Longley or Meehan?*

Greg Delanty. I haven't thought about what ways my work is the same or differs from either of these important poets. I have fallen way behind in my reading of Paula, and only recently purchased her latest Selected Poems entitled *As If By Magic* (which I still have to read). Michael is a friend. And he and Edna played a part in encouraging me to press on with *No More Time* at a time when I was low. I admire Michael's work, of course, and as a young fellow looked up to him and the older poets, but our voices within poems and books are too distinctive to bare worthwhile comparison and contrast except perhaps in subject matter.

Adrienne Leavy. The King of the Lam (2020) *is a series of nine elegies for your close friend Liam Ó Muirthile, the Irish language poet who passed away in 2018. I'm curious if you have read Thomas Kinsella elegies for Seán Ó Riada,* A Selected Life

and Vertical Man*, as I see similarities in both of your approaches. Specifically, both of you concentrate on personal memories of your time with a deceased friend rather than writing an elegy say in the manner of Auden's elegy for Yeats which expands out from the personal to discuss broader issues such as the power of poetry. (Coincidentally, Ó Riada is also buried in St. Gobnait's Graveyard, which both you and Kinsella reference in your elegies).*

Greg Delanty. Of course I read Thomas Kinsella's elegies for Ó Riada, but that was way back in my late teens/early twenties – as I read Sean Lucy's and John Montague's. I was not overtly aware of any of these poets while writing my elegies for Liam. Liam and I bolstered each other and that helped us keep on keeping on. The stance, the rhetoric of the mighty Auden elegy would not have been appropriate for what I wanted to portray. Those elegies are part of a forthcoming book *Sweeney Now*, due out in 2026, using the backdrop of the 12th–century work, *The Frenzy of Sweeney*, *Suibhne Geilt*, or *Mad Sweeney*. They are placed in the Man of the Woods section from that 12th century work – Liam was a man of the woods; his poems are full of trees, timber, wood – for example his selected poems is entitled *An Fuíoll Feá /Wood Cuttings*, Cois Life, Dublin 2014.



Adrienne Leavy. *Your poems for Ó Muirthile do not offer a sense of consolation or closure. Instead, they present a speaker struggling to adjust to the loss of his friend, bereft and left alone, a "lone hidalgo, babbling away, far from sound." Elsewhere, the speaker reminds himself how lucky he was "to have had such a friend," yet he finds no solace in this fact, realizing "that luck turned unlucky, shrouding gratitude." Was it your intention when you set out to write this series of elegies to deliberately eschew any kind of redemptive or hopeful tone?*

Greg Delanty. No, I had no intention when setting out to write that sequence except to write them, how I thought and felt, or rather feel.

Adrienne Leavy. *You have another work of translation,* Sweeney Now*, scheduled for publication in 2026. Seamus Heaney published his version of this medieval Irish work, Buile Shuibhne, in 1983 with* Sweeney Astray. *Why this poem?*

Greg Delanty. There are a number of actual concurrences that turned me to this. Shortly before Liam Ó Muirthile died he gave me a copy of the Irish Text Society's *Adventures of Suibhne Geilt*, edited by J.G. O'Keeffe and suggested I "make something new of it." It felt like he was putting me *faoi geasa*. Seamus Heaney dedicated his poem "Sweeney Out-Takes" in *Human Chain* (the last book of his poems published before he passed away) to myself (a.k.a. Gregory of Corkus). These coincidences, along with the fact that the I took a rescue macaw for a companion whose name happened to be Sweeney, prodded the author into this tale of Sweeney. Throughout the actual story he thinks of himself as a bird. Way back, more than forty years ago, another poet, Gearóid Denvir, also dedicated a Sweeney poem in Irish to yours truly. To add to all this, my mother used to often say that "All the poets are mad."

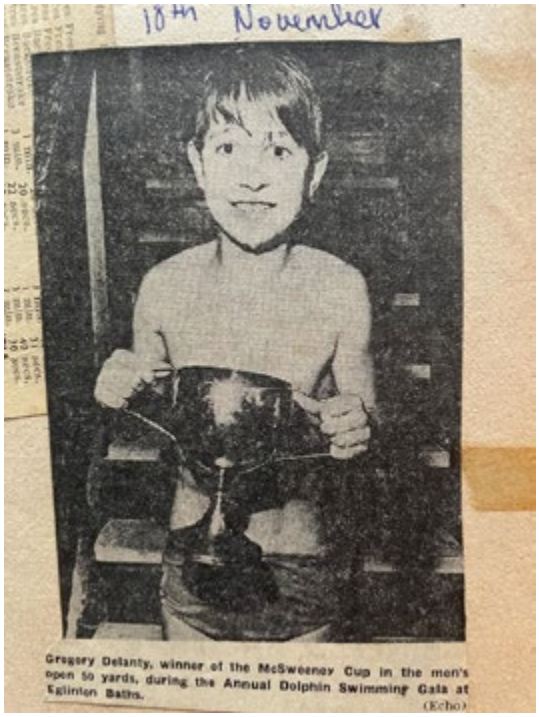
Other writers/poets have used the Sweeney tale. Flann O'Brien, of course, in *At Swim-Two-Birds* and John Montague and Trevor Joyce. I also have many bird poems throughout my work, the world between the earth and the heavens.

I suppose also more and more I feel the poetry world is a world of madness, and I am/was attempting to articulate that and what it is like to be involved in it. Writing poetry and the poetry world are opposites.... The first selfless, the second self-ful. In a way these two worlds are natural, the selfless zone when one is writing a poem and self-full when the poet has to hawk, sell their wares – the latter in necessary but sometimes it seems to me that some poets put more work into the latter rather than into writing poems.

I have put a sub-heading beneath the book entitled *Sweeney Now (An autobiography of sorts in prose and verse.)*. The book is made up of autobiographical, often humorous, reflections in carnival mirrors.

Sweeney Now is, in a way, a development of *No More Time* when I ask to be considered an animal, a creature in the introduction of the book.

Another coincidence was that only early last month Maurice Riordan sent me a newspaper photograph of myself holding the Mc Sweeney Cup. Dorothy Cross, the artist, had texted it to Mossy. Dorothy also swam in Sunday's Well Swimming Club and from the late 1960s into the mid-1970s we trained every morning in Eglantine Baths. The last time I saw that photo must have been when it was in the newspaper back in the late 1960s. I have no memory of it, nor the race I won. I have a coda poem now to finish *Sweeney Now.*



A Marked Bird

(For Maurice Riordan, Dorothy Cross, Gerry Murphy and all the swimmers)

Wow, just wow: a brother Sweeney, Mossy, unearths, comes up
with a sepia newspaper photo from *The Echo* of our one
and only Gregory (circa 1968) holding The McSweeney Cup,
the men's (he's hardly nine!) race that he's forgotten he won:
already a marked lad. Mad. Look, there he is, innocently smiling –
he can't see the flash-reflecting dicky bird on the chalice winking.

Shape-changer Sweeney has always held that swimming
competitively was the ideal prep for the solo life of poetry:
pacing up and down the foolscap-lane'd pool, practicing
and for years. He was All-Ireland Champion: butterfly, free-
style; was on a perpetual winning streak. At his peak,
head-down in chlorinated water, covered fifty miles a week.

And the galas, the meets also gave him an inkling of the low
side of the sport, the winning and losing, the psyching-
out by fellow finalists, dishonest officials, the pre-race show,
but the swim-world, in this unsporting respect, was nothing
to the shenanigans, rivalry of the poetry-world championships:
the conniving, antics, tricks, mind games, one-up-man-ships.

Ah, but just look at black and white, clueless green Gregory there,
and Sweeney winking "He's mine" blindside on the cup to us here.

Adrienne Leavy. *In an essay on your work Ó Muirthile discussed the manner in which you as a Cork poet approached the English language, writing thus:*

> *…his consistent working of Cork slang, local dialect forms, and phrases from the Irish language itself, gives his poems a tonality which could only issue out of that particular and resilient maximum-gatherum, hocus-pocus and sure-tonguedness of the English language of Cork.*[5]

There are phrases of local dialect, allusions, and slang that you weave into many of your poems which strike me as very specific to the Irish experience and something that only an Irish reader would get. Has that been your experience with an American audience if you were giving a reading ?

Greg Delanty. I suppose, but usually I explain the demotic or particular un-English words or phrases. For instance, I recently gave a reading of the baseball poem "Tagging the Stealer" and I explained what "bull's notion" meant and the reason I used it. I wanted the realm of Cork and Munster to issue through the ink, the language giving a texture to the place, both the Irish world and English world. The history of the place innate within language. When my first book was published and I won The Allen Dowling Poetry Fellow I was asked to come to Dublin for a main prime time television program after the news – I can't recall the name of the program, but while sitting in the recording studio I overheard the producer say (he thought my earphones were off) from the next room to the presenter "Could you get Delanty to please tone down that Corkonian accent of his." To add to this a short time later I was back in Cork City and the daughter of a Labor Party politician (whose father was the Cork Lord Mayor years earlier, and who herself was very progressive and working in the progressive restaurant and bookstore, The Quay Co-op,) stopped me to say how she was embarrassed by me on the television. When I asked her why, she said it was because of my Cork accent. I can remember it was outside The English Market on the Grand Parade and when I walked on and turned onto Oliver Plunkett Street I swore I would give the accent and language some dignity – tears in my eyes. I want/wanted to give the place a place in the language, in Ireland, in literature. Corkonian was the language/accent of Cha and Mia on RTE, the language of the dumbo, which it isn't. It was an accent to be embarrassed about. I was the first writer to blatantly use it in literature as part of my work – O'Connor and O'Faolain caught the atmosphere of Cork, but avoided using its lingo and accent. Now that I have managed this in my poems it is done and dusted. I have moved away from using it pretty much. I think the book that the Cork accent and lingo is embedded in most is *The Blind Stitch*.

Adrienne Leavy. *You have translated a number of classical plays including Aristophanes' The Knights and Euripides' Orestes. What inspired you to pick these particular works?*

Greg Delanty. For the most part because I was asked. After I finished *Orestes*, I did request to do *The Knights*, because it is such a political play, a parody. I retitled it *The Suits* and made it somewhat contemporary and suggested that the two main politicians vying with each could be renamed from Paphlagon and Agoracritus to Paphragan and Agoreaclintonus – Ronald Reagan was running for President at the time against his opponent Bill Clinton (with Al Gore running for vice president). This was all part of the Penn Complete Greek Drama Series. I don't think I would take on such a big task again. I had help from the now deceased Katharine Washburn, who had real Greek. I renamed *Orestes* to *The Family* and added to the introduction, but these changes never made it as they came too late in the book's production.

Adrienne Leavy. *Derek Mahon devoted a considerable part of his career to translating Greek tragedies and also poetry from other languages and cultures, including translations of Aristophanes, Goethe, Victor Hugo, Paul Verlaine, and Bertolt Brecht. Do you think you will devote more time to this kind of work in the future?*

Greg Delanty. We'll see, but this is true of a lot of poets, not just Derek. I have just finished reading Derek's *The Poems (1961-2020)*. Wonderful. "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford" is such a great poem – speaking of metaphor – among the most important poems written from the viewpoint of Northern Ireland protestants, unionists – but larger than that too. Even the most stringent Catholic becomes Unionist in it and with sympathy. And then there is Seamus's Heaney's metaphor of the bog and the turf bodies as metaphoric of Northern Ireland and Northern Europe. And then Michael Longley's Greek Homer poems. I better stop doing cartwheels on metaphor before I get dizzy with it all.

Adrienne Leavy. *In keeping with your interest in the classics, in 2012 Carcanet Press (Oxford Poets Series) published* The Greek Anthology: Book XVII*, which was subsequently published in the U.S. in 2015 by Louisiana State University Press under the title* Book Seventeen. *This collection is a contemporary companion to the original Greek Anthology which comprises 16 books of short poems attributed to many different authors ranging from the seventh century BC to the tenth century AD. Your book presents a wonderful variety of poems from different fictional authors that are alternately humorous, satirical, declamatory or deeply poignant, and they aim to cover a similar range in terms*

of tone, style and subject matter to the original Greek Anthology. What was the inspiration for this work and how long did it take you to craft it?

Greg Delanty. The original Greek Anthology is made up of short poems about the like of hair combs, boats, kings, religious leaders, other poets and so on – it couldn't be more varied. My own book, *The Greek Anthology,* Book XVII, adds a modern work to the original sixteen, and is similar in its range of tone and variety of subject matter. The "authors" of the poems are fictional creations, again after the original, which I later based on the names of friends, fellow poets, and my family where I saw appropriate – for a bit of a laugh. So, you'll recognize variants on the names of well-known poets of our day such as Heanius who, as I mentioned previously, dedicated a poem in *Human Chain*, to one Gregory of Corkus. The poems give a sense of having already existed in another tradition and another language – a kind of parallel universe of our past and present and future. In my introduction I claim only to be their translator, translating in the style of Dryden's third category of translation: "imitation" – "a translation in which the poet worked from the original but departs from word and sense as he sees fit, sometimes writing as the author would have done if he had lived in the time and place of the reader." I've tried to conjure old and new ways of looking at our contemporary world. It is also an obvious way of renewing, talking about our world in all the different ways we engage with it. The book is a whole world and I think, easy and enjoyable to read.

Adrienne Leavy. *Seamus Heaney praised* Book XVII *as one which "gets in all your voices, the extent of your knowledge, the intensity of your commitments, the delight of your skepticism, the weight, as Shoneen Keogh would say, of your passion, your rage for justice, your gumption and humor, your stylistic agility. The scope of your imagining."*[6] *You have shared with me that you were disappointed by the book's reception and felt it should be better known. Why do you think this work is not as well known as some of your other collections, and would you consider doing a staged reading or recording of the entire work?*

Greg Delanty. Oh, difficult to talk about this (or any of my work) without sounding self-important, but yes, I was/am disappointed. The *Irish Times* review pegged the poems as tributes to my friends and fellow poets. I never had anyone in mind when writing the poems, except for the poem, "Concealment," dedicated to Seamus and for obvious reasons. The names were included after the poems were finished as a kind of fitting entertainments and, yes tribute to my family, friends and other poets. Many of the names were made up from various versions of my own name, Daniel John Gregory Delanty, thus the name "The Watchman of Sparta" (Gregory means watchman in Latin) and Gregory of Corkus, of course. When Seamus was finalizing *Human Chain,* he asked me which name he should use to dedicate his Sweeney poem to, my own name or Gregory of Corkus, and I said the latter. I thought maybe it would bring attention to the book. Hopefully the letter you reference above, which is included in the forthcoming Seamus Heaney letters, and which is a dream letter regarding this book, will draw attention to *The Greek Anthology Book XVI*.

Maybe Seamus's response got my hope up too much, but there were others. Christopher Ricks for one, who actually wrote the blurb for the back cover of the Carcanet version of the book – you can hear his voice if you read it, but he wanted to remain anonymous. Christopher said that I may have to wait till after I die before people give it proper attention, and I joked "Much good that is to me." We laughed. Perhaps it went under the radar because there is not anything really entirely like it. Christopher says at the end of what he wrote for the back cover, "Unprecedented, this collection, in more ways than one. Great company, they speak and sing, thanks to Greg Delanty." It never got even shortlisted for any awards or prizes such as the *Irish Times Award,* the Michael Hartnett Award or any of the English awards. I can dwell as much as anyone on the bad side of things and ignore the good side – and I have so many good sides in my life. And for sure, I have gotten good prizes and awards and prefer awards going now to the younger poets. Though presently I could do with a prize to help me pay off my hospital bills. Another funny story about the book getting literally misplaced was when the book came out first and my brother, Norman, mentioned to me that he couldn't find a copy in Waterstones or Hodges Figgis and at the time I was back in Ireland and I went into Waterstones and the kind shop assistant assured me they had copies, and we finally found them in The Classical Section. I thanked him and joked – "an honor but not yet please."

I also felt that the names put too much weight on the particular poems (at the time). All some people wanted to know was if they were in it. I recall at the Dublin launch (which Terence Brown introduced) Anthony Cronin and Seamus Heaney agreeably disagreeing with each other about whether I should have put in the names the way I did. Seamus was for having them in and Tony for having them out. In the US Edition, I cut some of the poems and just put the author names in the contents. I think if the book was being produced now I would have done it the LSU Press way with the names just in the contents. Then the poems can be read for themselves.

If I sound like I'm dropping the well-known names of poets then that is fine – I name them in part because their endorsement and belief in the book may have got my expectations up – even if they were right and I am grateful to them. All these older poets were gods to me, and it was something else to have them think of my work as they did. Can

you imagine? One other fantastic similar occasion was when I was invited to dinner in New York with Sharon Olds, Galway Kinnell and Michael Longley, and Michael and Galway argued briefly about which of my books they thought the best, Galway preferred *The Hellbox*, and Michael *The Ship of Birth*.... God if there was only a recorder there – I could have wept, but I just listened, gob-smacked.

As for the staged reading: boy, would I love that. And I have always thought of *The Greek Anthology, Book XVII* as a dramatic work – a play for voices. A bit like *The Spoon River Anthology*. Even a selection of the voices. I hoped originally to have all the characters in the book record their allotted poems, but that seems to have drifted away and then some poets have passed away.

I also was going to do a *Book Eighteen*, or *Greek Anthology Book XVII* , writing poems myself via Gregory of Corkus and The Watchman of Sparta "et al," as well as asking various poets whose names are hinted at in *Book Seventeen*. A workshop in England who used *The Greek Anthology, Book XVII* as an exercise for the poets in the workshop, was sent to me and the result was very good. I would include them for sure. The thing about the whole enterprise is that one couldn't or can't go wrong. Since I was suppoed to be the sole translator, I made all the various so-called Greek Anthology poems sound somewhat in tune with my voice – but if others took part it would spread out the variety perhaps of voices, poems and translations. Ah well, we dream.

But what a time I had in writing this book – wonderful. And because I got a Guggenheim around then I got off teaching and I went back to Greece and wrote more.

Adrienne Leavy. *You have also translated the work of the Irish language poet Seán Ó Ríordáin and in 2021 you published* Seán Ó Ríordáin: Apathy is Out*, which is the first time one writer has translated the majority of Ó Ríordáin's poems. What drew you to this project?*

Greg Delanty. Perhaps here, it might be better to quote from the introduction to that book of Seán Ó Ríordáin, *Apathy Is Out*:

> A handful of poets kept writing in Irish alive before 1960, and the most important of these poets is Seán Ó Ríordáin. He combined the world of Irish literature and the world of modern English and European literature, and revitalised poetry in Irish. His achievement is the fecund ground out of which younger poets writing in Irish and in English bloomed from the 1960s onward.

It is not an exaggeration to say that poetry in Irish has reached a level of achievement within the Irish tradition equal to any period before the nineteenth century, regardless of the state of the Irish language today in general.

I have lived in the United States since 1986 and have taught modern Irish poetry at Saint Michael's College, Vermont, for over thirty years. The poetry written in Irish has to be related to the students in translation. The crux was that there was only a half-dozen or so poems of Ó Ríordáin translated into English until up to 2014 when a *Selected Poems/Rogha Dantá* was published with translations by sixteen different writers (Cló Iar-Chonnacht and Yale University Press). That it took this long to publish such a book is a mystery in itself. In 2016 Louis de Paor's dual language anthology *Leabhar na hAthghabhála: poems of repossession* (Bloodaxe Books/Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2016) also includes a large selection of poems by Ó Ríordáin with translations by four different translators. My own translations were to have been published in 2007 with the blessing of Ó Riordáin's family and estate. The translations of that unpublished book have been revised and added to, and are all now finally appearing in this dual language edition.

Back in 2002 I asked the poet Liam Ó Muirthile – himself a major poet among a group of poets who were spurred by the achievement of Ó Ríordáin's – if he would help me translate the poems. Since I am from Cork I also felt I should know the poems of Ó Ríordáin in a fuller way. From approximately 2002 to 2005 Liam sent me cribs and advised me on my translations, and that is how this present book came about, a book which I hope will complement the aforementioned translations of Ó Ríordáin's poems. *Apathy is Out* hopefully also adds to the unified sense of Ó Ríordáin's poems by being translated by one individual. I am from the same part of the country as Ó Ríordáin, but writing in English. I hope I catch "the music you still hear in Munster, even in places it is gone under."

Adrienne Leavy. *You write in both free verse and more formally following the rules of rhyme and meter. A good example of the latter is the twenty-six sonnet sequence in* No More Time. *When you begin a new poem, do you decide on the form first or does the material dictate your technical approach?*

Greg Delanty. It depends: as Theodore Roethke says in his villanelle: "I learn by going where I have to go," but certainly I am aware and keen that form and content are in synch – part and parcel of each other or rather parcel and part of each other. I spoke about this earlier

Adrienne Leavy. *You have experienced some significant health challenges in the past few years. Would you mind talking about your health and medical issues and the extent to which they have impacted your work?*

Greg Delanty. In April of last year, 2022, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. I was kept under what my urologist called "Active Surveillance." While I was back in Ireland we found the cancer was spreading and I had my prostate removed in late January of this year. I am still recovering – but since it has preoccupied me now for about a year I have gotten another book of poems out of it entitled *The Cancer Club*. LSU Press are booked out to beyond 2026 and doing two of my books already, *The Professor of Forgetting* in late August of this year and *Sweeney Now: an autobiography of sorts in verse and prose* is slotted for 2026. They won't look at anything of mine for a number of years, so I may have to go elsewhere.

Adrienne Leavy. *What advice, if any, would you give to younger poets starting out?*

Greg Delanty. Read and read and read poetry, everything from Anglo-Saxon to now and also in somewhat of a chronological way. Unless you know what has gone before you will never be able to renew or write in a fuller way. Also reading other poets' poems is a kind of spirit nourishment, and you will need that. And read poetry from everywhere in English, and not just the US or Britain or Ireland – read the exciting Australians, New Zealanders, and Canadians. To boot, be prepared for a figurative rope-a-doping. To take a pummeling from editors and reviewers. And one more thing: avoid power cliques of poets – you are alone, and use all you can out of your own personality and let that become your ink. Yes, you will need poet friends, but that is different.

Adrienne Leavy. *You have two new poetry collections coming out later this year and next year:* The Professor of Forgetting *(Fall 2023) and* Behold the Garden *(2024). Can you speak a little about this work and what inspired the poems?*

Greg Delanty. *The Professor of Forgetting* swings back and forth on the fulcrum of what we call "Now," mulling on the meaning of "Now" and our notion of time from the very first poem "Going Nowhere Fast," the crux of now being even in the playful title: are we now here or are we going nowhere? In my poems I try to keep the clever stuff and allusions under the surface a bit like how Robert Frost hid things though not in the same way – which gives a more readable quality to them. If anyone wants to think about what's beneath then they can go and look. The poems run the gamut of thought and feeling from "Going Nowhere Fast" to the title poem "The Professor of Forgetting", the final poem which brings together much of what the book dwells on. The book is also, of course about memory itself, the mother of the muses, which implies the elephant of the cover designed especially for the book by the artist Vivienne Roche and titled "Mnemosyne, Our World, Remember", which in turn is connecting to *Terra Mater* suffering from Alzheimer's in an untitled poem from *No More Time*.

Behold the Garden has a subtitle now "Another Book of Barbaric Poem" and it is a twin sibling of *No More Time*. These poems were almost all written between 2015 and 2017 for the latter, published 2020. Putting more poems on this subject and form into that book would have overwhelmed it – although I regret not having put in "Virus," which unwittingly presages Covid. Some of the poems here may be overly didactic, evidence, perhaps, that language itself cannot contain what humans have brought about – a good excuse for bad poems, but also a real and authentic artistic reason for unsuccessful poems, arch as that sounds. Who knows, but this mite of a collection, snubbing tergiverse, might still manage to lift above it weight like the ant of "*Formicidae."* This book will be published by a local publisher, Fomite, who also published another book entitled *Loosestrife*, which dwelt on complicity to boot. I am just going to leave it come out for the records and do no publicity for it. The book is dedicated to the young, many newborns of friends and they are named.

Adrienne Leavy. *As a University professor your career allows you the opportunity to spend a significant amount of time back in Ireland when college is not in session. Do you ever see yourself moving back to Ireland permanently?*

Greg Delanty. When I can afford to retire we will see. I love Vermont and I love the Cork/Kerry world. I have been living in both – after all, I return each year to my home in Derrynane, County Kerry. I purchased the land that my house is built on from money I got from a poetry award and I paid off the house from the payment I received from The National Library of Ireland when they acquired my papers back in 2010 – they

have my papers up to 2010 and last year they were made public, "unmasked" is what the library term it. UCC acquired my papers up to 2015, but those papers have yet to be unmasked. I call the house in Kerry "the house that poetry built" and my mother got to see it shortly before she died – that was something marvelous for her and me because at the beginning she wanted me, understandably, to get a decent job – how would I make a living out of poetry?

But back to your question about whether I will move back to Ireland permanently. I will live in both permanently until I kick the bucket.

As the poem "Birthdays" (with a sub-heading mentioning Eastern Standard Time) in the forthcoming book *The Professor of Forgetting* says at the end, and which you will probably have to read to get: "I am the gray-haired man with the twenty-nine-hour day."

Adrienne Leavy. Thank you, Greg.
May/June 2023.

Notes

1 From the poem "We Will Not Play the Harp Backward Now, No."
2 Terence Brown, "Greg Delanty and North America," in *Agenda Atlantic Crossings: 50th Birthday Celebration for Greg Delanty* (Agenda and Editions Charitable Trust: East Sussex, 2008), 44.
3 Adrian Frazier, forth coming biography of John Montague. Publication date 2024.
4 Renee H. Shea, '"Singing about the dark times': A conversation with David Baker." *World Literature Today* June, 21 2022.
5 Liam Ó Muirthile, "Natural Tongues" in *Agenda Atlantic Crossings: 50th Birthday Celebration for Greg Delanty,* 48.
6 Private letter from Seamus Heaney to Greg Delanty.