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Interview with Matthew Brennan

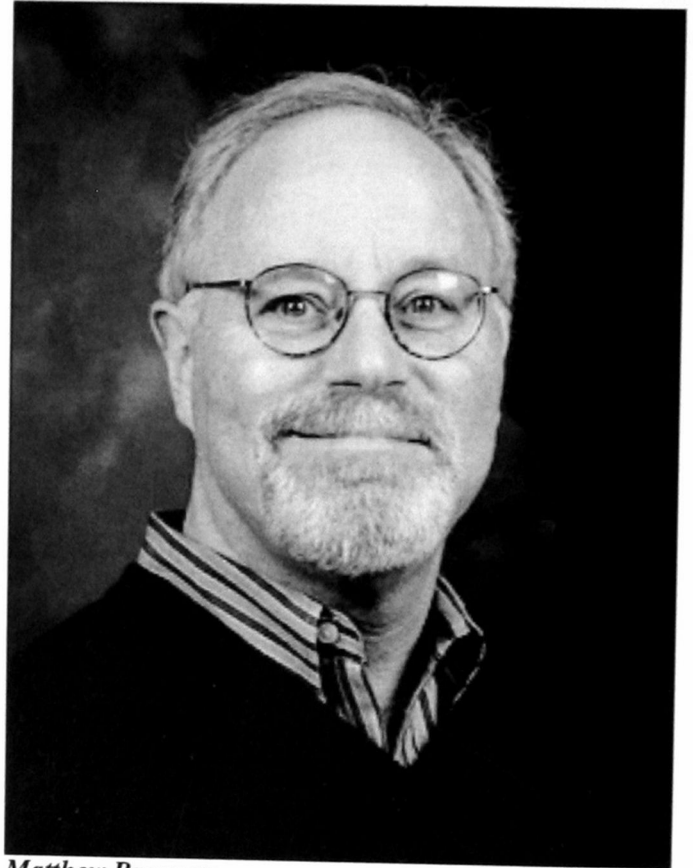
by Kevin Collins

*The visiting writer for the 2008 Westview Writers' Festival is Matthew Brennan, a professor of English who teaches literature and creative writing at Indiana State University. The author of three substantial scholarly books on the poetry of other writers, Brennan demonstrates the quality that, as much as any other, separates true poets from hacks: an awareness that poetry is an ancient and ongoing tradition, much more than merely his own voice and vision. Brennan's work on the poetic tradition (he is an expert on the Romantic poetry of Britain and America) has not kept him from pursuing his own vision: the fourth and fifth collections in book form of his own poetry are being published in 2008: *The House with the Mansard Roof* and *The Sea-Crossing of Saint Brendan*. In addition, he has published 168 poems and 42 scholarly articles in important anthologies and literary journals. Westview is honored by his decision to trust his work to us as well.*

In anticipation of his visit for the Writers' Festival, we spoke to Dr. Brennan about the romantic and the mundane aspects of writing and publishing poetry.

Westview: Even if *poets* are a diverse class of people, there must be a set of characteristics that distinguishes them from *non-poets*. What are some of those characteristics, and why are they important?

Brennan: Not all poets are the same, but they all are drawn to a love of language, to the exercise of the imagination, and to a belief that there are noncommercial ways of being that matter significantly. I suppose this could be said of many others, non-poets such as clergy, teachers, librarians, folk musicians. But poets also feel the need to live through writing, and at least since Wordsworth,



Matthew Brennan

their topics have come most often from the stuff of daily existence, which, to them, teems with meaning. What others never notice or remember can become the subject of a poem for a poet.

Westview: Tell us about the time in your life when you came to recognize some of those characteristics in yourself.

Brennan: After reading *Catcher in the Rye* at 15, I knew I was called to Literature, to put it romantically. For a while, I dreamed of being a novelist and wrote a few pedestrian short stories along the way. At 16 I started my first "novel" but abandoned it after about 10 meandering pages when I realized I had no idea what I was doing and turned the notebook into a journal. I suppose

this was the turning point when I began to do things that poets do, even though I didn't yet write poems, which I felt were a kind of code I couldn't crack. But writing in the journal made life more real: Virginia Woolf once said that she didn't feel she had really lived an experience until she wrote about it.

As a college freshman I learned to read poems from Paul Diehl and started trying to write them. He taught me how form and matter can be inextricable and how technique turns words into art. He taught me about poetic rhythm and meter. So I learned to love the language and form of poetry, not just the expression of feelings or ideas that can be paraphrased in prose.

Like many who came of age in the late sixties and early seventies, I knew the road to suburban conformity was not for me; now of course I realize many who work in the business world and struggle with its compromises do so heroically for the sake of their families, and the same could be said of my parents (my dad was an insurance executive who read novels, my mom a computer programmer who did oil paintings). While writing my dissertation, I faced the reality of needing to make a living through a stint as a full-time editor of training manuals for the securities industry. But my sensibility was set by then, and often I worked on poems at my desk during the lunch hour. I learned to take solace from Yeats's "The Fascination of What's Difficult"—a poem about suppressing the poetic sensibility during the day in order to pay the bills, and then letting it bolt loose late in the night.

I'll add that I wrote my first "real" poem in January 1977 at my parents' kitchen table. I was just back from a term in London where I learned how to see light; the poem, "Winter Light," came spontaneously and fluidly, and it led to some surreal metaphors and expressive landscape images that enabled me, for the first time, to say one thing in terms of another, to cite Frost's definition of a poem. The poet Gregory Orr picked it as a ten-

dollar honorable mention winner in the annual college contest, and with that I felt something like validation. I was hooked.

Westview: What is the state of the market for poetry in 2008 (including both readers interested in new poetry and journals/publishers interested in disseminating new poetry)?

Brennan: The market for readers has maybe never been better. There seem to be more small presses all the time, and it's easier to find out about them thanks to the Internet, Amazon.com, and large-circulation magazines such as *Poets & Writers* and *Rain Taxi* that bulge with ads for new books. It may be a less auspicious situation for the publishers, who have always had a difficult time turning a profit on books of poetry. Aside from commercial publishers such as Harcourt, most poetry publishers such as Graywolf have given up on hardbound editions. Other publishers have turned to print-on-demand, such as Word Press. It's still the case that most books of poems are sold through poetry readings. The market for poetry pretty much coincides with the college campus. Yet efforts by Robert Pinsky, Dana Gioia, Billy Collins, and Bill Moyers, among others, have helped greatly to bring poetry to the general reader.

But in 2004, when I served on an NEA panel that awarded grants to magazines and small publishers, I came away depressed by the dire straits some of these presses face, and most of them successfully print just a couple volumes a year and find their niches by specializing in publishing writers of a particular slant, gender, or ethnicity. So while the market might be in good shape for readers, it's still a struggle for many presses. Some good ones have folded, such as Zoo Press. Commercial presses more and more resist not only poetry but also literary fiction. One member of the NEA panel worked as an editor at a big New York firm, and he left a meeting several times to take phone calls: it was the day after the Democratic



convention, and publishers were scrambling to sign Barack Obama. They all hunt for the blockbuster that will keep the ledger's ink black; no book of poems will do that.

Westview: Some publication opportunities for new poets involve compromise: vanity presses, reader's fees, publishers who insist on a particular political outlook, etc. Apart from the dictates of the individual conscience, are there ways for a young poet to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable compromises?

Brennan: Even though many great writers have gotten their starts by paying the printer for their early books—Hawthorne, Simms, Auden come to mind—a young poet looking to break into print should never shell out cash to make it happen. Some contests provide a year's subscription in return for an entry fee, so these journals give you something, but as there are hundreds of journals that will read your work for nothing; why not try these first? In fact, a good place to start is local and school magazines, which actually find readers you will know. But soon young poets will want to submit to more competitive, professional venues that can showcase their work. I'd recommend multiple-submitting your best poems to journals that allow it (and keeping strict tabs on the submissions). For ultimately, poets learn that if you can't publish your best work in good places, it's better not to publish. You don't want your well-tended work surrounded by trash.

Publishing a first book virtually requires entering one of the many contests sponsored by university and small presses, and these always ask for twenty or twenty-five dollars, normally with no offer of a consolation prize such as a copy of the winning book. Finding a sympathetic small press that accepts unsolicited manuscripts is preferable, I think, but as I said, these presses tend to be financially unstable, publish only a very few poets a year, and in fact often publish poets already linked to them in some way.

It's hard for poets to stay patient—most are like Keats, who apologized in his preface for his early book *Endymion* but of course rushed it into print nevertheless. There comes a time, however, when giving in to a vanity publisher such as iUniverse may well make good sense, especially if all other avenues have been exhausted and if most of the book's poems have previously appeared in solid magazines. A better move might be starting your own small press with some like-minded writers. Putting a book behind you and into at least some readers' hands could free you to move on, I would think. There's just no easy answer, and luck plays a huge role in the process.

Westview: Who are the canonical poets who have most affected your life and your work? How? Why?

Wordsworth leaps to mind. While a student in England, I walked in the landscapes of his poetry and found an affinity for his poems that use landscape to symbolize the psyche. I also was drawn to his "spots of time," passages that revive memories and explore their incorporation into the present consciousness. Wordsworth became the subject of my dissertation, which grew into my first critical book and clinched my tenure, so Wordsworth, whom I still teach, affects my life in multiple ways. I discovered Keats as a college freshman, and was greatly moved by his life as told in Aileen Ward's bio and increasingly by his poetic craftsmanship and his bravery in facing human suffering. Yeats also has been an influence. Among contemporary poets who appear to have secured spots in the canon, I would point to Timothy Steele, who handles ordinary subjects in traditional form with admirable clarity. Also, W. D. Snodgrass, whose "Heart's Needle" sequence brilliantly presents autobiographical narratives in inventive form but also conversational syntax; its use of objective correlatives to express emotions



and to avoid cheap sentimentality is instructive. Among free-verse practitioners, Galway Kinnell, Sharon Olds, Robert Bly, and Ted Kooser have all made their mark on me too. More recently, Seamus Heaney has become a strong favorite.

Westview: Tell about the ways that teachers or mentors have affected your development as a poet.

Brennan: First, a confession: I never took a creative-writing workshop. Paul Diehl, my intro to poetry teacher, read some of his poems with a German prof who had just gotten a poem published, and this experience deeply impressed my freshman mind. Mike Cavanagh, who taught the British survey and thus introduced me to all kinds of poems and techniques I'd try out in early efforts, stopped me one day on the sidewalk to pass along that another prof had been reminded of Eliot by a poem I'd submitted to the annual contest. I lost, but the remark encouraged me. In grad school I learned a great deal about poetry from G. T. Wright, a great scholar who himself published poems in *The New Yorker* and *Sewanee Review*. He was the model I wanted to emulate. I took his courses on Yeats and on Form in Contemporary Poetry. But my best mentors were fellow students—writers such as Dex Westrum, Mick Cochrane, Michael Kleine, Alan Altimont, Dave Garrison. We'd meet at each others' houses to read new work and sometimes trade poems for a response. But camaraderie was what mattered. Having a writers' group outside of school kept the writing a pure source of pleasure and kept us in touch with an audience.

Westview: What about ways that non-poets influenced your development as a poet?

Brennan: My late mom was a painter and her creativity and commitment to art made my wanting to be a poet a natural ambition. And from her I saw firsthand the process of how art gets made, that

some false starts get tossed aside or painted over, that other works attain a grace beyond the reach of art. I have four of her paintings hanging in my house. In her I also witnessed the struggle to create art while working in a world completely alien to art. I have to nod as well to my older brother who majored in English as an undergrad and influenced me to follow a literary bent. He was a hard critic of my work, but I respected his opinions and felt validated that he took my writing seriously.

Westview: To what extent can the craft of poetry be taught?

Brennan: To a great extent. Poets need to find teachers who will show them how to read as writers. Reading professional models is essential to learning technique and how poems are made, as is learning to revise; students in workshops can be led to see problems in their poems and ways to overcome them through technique. The craft isn't learned overnight, but it can be learned. I think teaching craft in creative writing workshops helps me as a poet, reinforcing what I have already learned and sometimes leading me to learn new aspects of technique. Regularly reading new poets, as well as revisiting the old ones, helps the learning of craft become life-long.

Westview: What aspects of poetry writing cannot be taught?

Brennan: I don't think you can teach imagination. You can't teach a poet how to come up with a great idea for a poem or how to construct brilliant metaphors. You can expose apprentice poets to displays of imagination and examples of vivid figurative language and perhaps have them practice making metaphors, but I have never been big on exercises. There are things vital to making a poem that happen in creation and cannot be explained. It's like trying to teach a would-be saint to have visions.



Westview: There are some self-evident *disadvantages* to trying to pursue poetic visions while simultaneously trying to fill the roles of teacher, scholar, husband, baseball fan, competitive drinker, etc. What are the *advantages* that such distractions might offer to a poet?

Brennan: Well, the advantages of life's various distractions are that they sometimes provide the experiences that spark poems and also keep you in touch with your potential audience. And if you couldn't find ways other than writing to occupy your mind you'd go crazy. Writing is solipsistic enough without becoming a sentence of solitary confinement. The roles of teacher and scholar have the advantages of being closely related to poetry-writing and can complement it. When the muse refuses to cooperate, these related distractions can still feed the intellect and imagination and keep you in touch with language, even if they don't provide the same exhilaration poetic visions serve up.

Westview: Tell about *The Sea-Crossing of Saint Brendan*? What is it about the historical/apocryphal events that drew your attention sufficiently to inspire a book-length poem?

Brennan: The fantastic idea that a group of monks in a boat made of hides made it to North America centuries before Columbus captivates me. I've been on the Atlantic a couple times (off the coast of New England) and the sublime experience the ocean provides stirs my romantic impulses. Reading Tim Severin's book about recreating the voyage in 1976 inspired me too.

Westview: The form of the *Saint Brendan* poem is notable and unusual. What is the relationship between the form and the content of that poem?

Brennan: Though the Latin original is in prose, the events it narrates occurred in the 7th century, a time when accentual, alliterative poetry was being written in Ireland and would soon be used by the *Beowulf* poet for his medieval epic. Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* of course approximates the Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse, and I decided to employ a similar form as a way to impressionistically imply the movement of Brendan's voyage. So every half-line consists of two stressed syllables, and every pair of half-lines employs some form of alliteration or assonance to bind the halves together.

