

**Email interview between Amanda Bell and Gabriel Rosenstock, July 2018.**

*Question 1:*

Literary translation can be thought of as transposing a work of art into another cultural context rather than trying to replicate the original in the target language. Nguyen Khac Vien says that ‘staying faithful [to an original work] means first and foremost seeking to recreate the work’s humanity, its universality’. I found this to be the case when I was working on *Sasquatch*, letting the work seep into my subconscious until I felt that I had absorbed the feel of it, before turning to the words themselves. As a writer who works across many languages and cultures, and collaborates widely, can you tell me what do the concepts of translation and transcreation mean to you?

*Answer 1:*

I write or translate every day, 365 days of the year. Some translations end up in my multicultural blog. I don’t like the way the English language is gobbling up so many lesser-spoken languages and even eating into major languages (in India and elsewhere) but I do greatly appreciate English as a bridge language to allow me access to extraordinary poems and experiences which would otherwise be beyond my ken, poems by the Australian shaman Parraruru, for instance: <http://newpoetryintranslation.com/parraruru.html>

I first came across the term ‘transcreation’ in a book of poems I bought in India. I don’t remember much about the book – maybe it was Urdu poetry – it was the term ‘transcreation’ that

stuck and I have used it a lot since then, when translating songs by Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Kate Bush, Bob Marley, etc., for the IMRAM festival. Creating singable versions of art songs for the LiederNetArchive is something else that keeps me on my toes as a poet-translator. Note the hyphenated term: it's not one that can be applied to every poet, or every translator, but to be a poet-translator is to experience a lot of joy and a lot of wonder. Otherwise, why bother?

At this stage, I don't differentiate at all between creative writing, say poetry, and the translation, or transcreation, of a poem. I honestly believe that they are sourced in the same pool of creative intelligence. You talk about 'absorbing the feel of it'; I'd go a bit further and use the term 'interpenetration', a concept you will be familiar with from haiku. When Haiku Grandmaster Bashō bids us to go to the pine or the bamboo, what is implied is going out of ourselves, interpenetrating with the pine and bamboo, and losing the self. Bashō also says that haiku must happen with the unthinking swiftness of a samurai drawing his sword; any wavering and the moment is lost. When you translate every day, it becomes automatic, almost, and the spontaneity of jazz takes over. It becomes instinctual. Plodding reason comes back into play again when one dons the hat of an editor to check if any revision is required. Back translation is interesting as well, translating something into Irish – let's say an English-language version of a haiku by Buson – and translating the Irish back into English to reveal a new 'transcreation'. That happened quite a lot with the Buson volume, *The Moon over Tagoto*.

Interpenetration means not holding back on your sympathies – and being non-judgemental. Japanese aesthetics even have a term for the interpenetration of fragrances – *nioi*.

Translation is the most intimate form of reading imaginable and by ‘absorbing’ the nutrients of the texts, you are strengthening and enriching your own body of work and adding something to the warp and weave of your own psyche.

### *Question 2.*

That idea of ‘interpenetration’ seems to be key to your practice, and allows for a fluidity between languages not necessarily evident in other writers who work across linguistic barriers, some of whom prefer not to have their work translated into English. The haiku spirit is clear in the short lyrics of *Sasquatch*. Your books *Haiku Enlightenment* and *Haiku and the Art of Disappearing* discuss the writing of haiku as a way of life, and as a way of perceiving the world. Can you tell me how haiku came into your life?

### *Answer 2:*

I did not warm to university life at all. It seemed to be a continuation of the authoritarian system of schooling up to then so my interests were anything and everything else but attending lectures. It wasn’t all greyhound racing and throwing darts in pubs. Someone I shared a flat with at the time, Roderic Campbell, was the campus genius and eccentric. Gérard de Nerval had a pet lobster, did he not, and I’ve seen a photo of Dali with an anteater or armadillo or something: well, they could have learned a trick or two from Roddy. Anyway, I participated in a Noh play that he produced – I don’t think it went down too well. Cork says *Noh!* He had a great collection of vinyl and we wallowed in *Carmina Burana*, Pablo Casals and maybe there

was some Scottish piping in the mix too. His private library was much more interesting than the library in UCC, or so I thought at the time and, of course, he had R. H. Blyth. He would, wouldn't he? And that was the first connection with the world of haiku. Blyth was intoxicating. He has been eclipsed by other scholars, of course, but, like Pound, he was an inspired translator-commentator and he was a Zen enthusiast to boot. Zen permeates haiku and almost all aspects of Japanese culture. I know that many people (those who try to quantify things) maintain that Zen is at the most 20% of haiku and *haikai* culture in general – but without that 20% or so, I'm sure it would not have the profound effect it had on my life and continues to have. My own haiku in print, a collection in Irish called *Géaga Trí Thine* and a collection in English, *Where Light Begins*, much of which is a translation of the Irish-language collection, are more or less in the conventional or classical style, though shunning the 5-7-5 as most *haijin* do (except for such notables as J. W. Hackett and Richard Wright). I invited Hackett to Ireland – and he honoured us with his presence.

Recent haiku work has been influenced by gendai haiku – the modern movement – and, of course, I create an awful lot of ekphrastic tanka and ekphrastic haiku, responding to photography and works of art. The photograph triggers something in consciousness, or the subconscious, or superconsciousness. And so it was that a split-second meditative glimpse of a photo of the Very Reverend Chogyam Trungpa in Highland regalia triggered off 100 haiku, a book called *Antlered Stag of Dawn* (The Onslaught Press); and a photo of the same guru holding a revolver to his head triggered off another 100 haiku which you yourself very kindly reviewed on Amazon.

*Question 3:*

To what extent would you say that Zen provides a backdrop to *Sasquatch*? For me, the predominant strand in the sequence was that of profound loneliness, and I wanted to explore how changing the gender of the sasquatch would influence the experience of loneliness. The piece could also be read in terms of its portrayal of extinction, either of living organisms or of languages, or indeed of the surrender of the self. Can you tell me how the idea of the sasquatch came to be, and whether any one strand predominated for you when you wrote it?

*Answer 3:*

Oshō said, ‘we are all gods in exile’. Now, Oshō was a flawed individual in many ways, but at the height of his powers there was no one to match his sparkling insights into Zen, Jesus, Heraclitus, Ashtavakra, the Buddha and a host of other spiritual-religious-cultural phenomena. So, yes, profound loneliness is the natural condition of someone who realises that all of us are divorced from what we really are by our slavish acceptance of duality. Loneliness disappears when we are reunited with the birthless, deathless Self.

The sasquatch sequence came about from a desire to write a narrative of loneliness. I don’t know if you are familiar with the *Panhala* daily poem service? It’s one of a few poetry sites that I subscribe to, another being *Poetry Chaikhana*, *Sacred Poetry from Around the World*. *Panhala* accompanies the poems with landscape photography. I wrote the sasquatch sequence in response to photographs found on *Panhala*. Maybe a literary detective, with nothing better to do, might like to identify the

photographs or match them with the poems: oh, here's a lake, here are some ferns, some bluebells, snowy mountains, woods and so on. So, essentially it's an ekphrastic work (without the photos!).

The Sasquatch, or Bigfoot, is a symbol of the intense loneliness of the outsider. One of my early selected poems, translated by Michael Hartnett and Jason Sommer, was called *Portrait of the Artist as an Abominable Snowman* from Forest Books, a publisher that specialised in translation, so there's a precedent here when it comes to marginalised creatures! Another volume of poems, in Irish, was called *Syójó* (CIC 2001). A *syajo* is an obscure figure in Japanese folklore, a creature that resembles an orangutan; it has an insatiable thirst for rice wine, sake. Strangely enough, unruly child that I was, my mother used to call me 'The Wild Man from Borneo'. She had a way with words. Anyway, this Wild Man from Borneo was sent off to preparatory school, Mount Sackville, to be civilised; an aunt there, a nun, gave me *Little Lord Fauntleroy* to read, but another nun, Sister Celsus in Kilfinane, the village I grew up in, was a native Irish speaker and I had previously picked up enough of the ancient tongue from her to just about resist Fauntleroy-isation; then on to Gormanston where the young sasquatch rejected civilisation and was expelled for his efforts, ending up in Rockwell where he became thoroughly convinced that this wasn't a civilisation fit for a sasquatch at all; he stole out to nearby Cashel one evening where he met a curious individual who seemed to be from another planet, Roderic Campbell, who advised him to go to Cork University (not Trinity, Oxford or Cambridge), where, Roddy assured me, we would build a refuge – or a bunker if needs be – for sasquatches and multi-disciplined artists; plans were afoot but, for better or worse, I wasn't long in Cork before

I switched linguistic identity and decided I would go further into loneliness and marginalisation and ended up embracing the Irish language. No regrets. What did Frank Harris say – ‘There is a destiny that shapes our ends rough, hew them as we will.’ A comma: there’s something Zennish about commas or the lack of them.

*Question 4:*

*The Song of Amergin* seems to exert a strong influence on *Sasquatch*, particularly in its portrayal of the merging of the individual with the totality. Paul Muldoon suggests that the figure of the Milesian bard is crucial to understanding how the role of the Irish writer has evolved over the centuries, and yet neither the figure nor the poem are widely known. Can you tell me about Amergin, and how the influence of the *Song* has shaped Irish literature, as well as to what extent it has influenced *Sasquatch*.

*Answer 4:*

*The Song of Amergin* is a remarkable text. My friend Frank Corcoran set it to music but, of course, it has an intoxicating music all of its own. Film maker Donal Ó Céilleachair has used the text to great effect. But, alas, in this era of ‘fake news’ one must be wary: you see, it may well be something of a fake text, that is to say, its provenance is sketchy at best. I’m not a scholar of Old Irish but it would seem that the bards at the time sensed that their influence was on the wane; they concocted a mythopoetic text, meant to sound like an authoritative, mantric utterance from the soul of some shaman or druid, runic,

fragmented, cryptic. Well, whatever it is, it's still better than much of the poetry that gets published today. Myles Dillon says: 'Besides the druids, there were two other classes of learned men, *vates* and *bardi*, prophets and bards. All of this is fully confirmed by the evidence of Irish sources. The long training – in Ireland it lasted for 12 years – the oral transmission of learning, and the exalted status of the druid. (We are told in the *Táin* that the king might not speak before the druid.)' So, *The Song of Amergin* is really the last hurrah of the old order.

Have a listen to *The Incantation of Amergin* by Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YGBWdEnN3fg>

Clearly this is being transmitted on a different wavelength to that which transmits or receives the news headlines, let us say. Modern poetry has become leaden as it moves away from the beauty of the voice and our age-old instinct to chant. I'm interested in the notion of chant. The oldest form of poetry still practiced today is tanka; tanka were chanted in ancient times and I'm currently working on versions in Irish and English, of tanka master Saigyō, retaining the 5-7-5-7-7 syllabic structure. The Irish versions are easy to chant but the English not so, as consonants cut off the breath.

You know Heaney's poem 'The Given Note' (it's in my own translation of Heaney, a volume called *Conlán*). The story is that fishermen heard fairy music at sea and, back on dry land, the air became known as *Port na bPúcaí*. I actually met some of those Blasket-islanders when trying to improve my Irish in the Dingle Peninsula.

Fairy music, spirit-music, that's the myth. The reality is that the fishermen may have heard whale song. In a sense, both



interpretations are beautiful and it's beautiful to have the two stories, side by side. The two sides of *The Song of Amergin* are also beautiful in their own way, the existence of such a poet, our own Taliesin, and the debunking of that myth. Zen is anti-Romantic and insists that what is beautiful is what is real, not imagined. In any event, I've also written a ghost-music chant called *Port na bPúcaí* and it's one of the poems on the UCD Special Collection: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ile\\_\\_p81E8k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ile__p81E8k)

Am I fooling myself and others with this chant, or making a real connection with something as old as *The Song of Amergin*, the roots of which are prehistoric? I don't know. You tell me!

For a while I was interested in the primitivist philosophy of John Zerzan, Wolfi Landstreicher and Derrick Jensen so I'm sure there's a bit of Green Anarchism in the sasquatch sequence as well. I have corresponded with anarchists such as Paul Cudenec (and subscribe to his newsletter) and have written on this theme, and others, in a book of essays in Irish: *Ag Éisteacht leis an gCruinne*, published by Evertime. The struggle for Irish – and what a struggle it is – is a struggle for survival and meaning. Without Irish, your grandchildren will not be able to listen to *The Song of Amergin* in the original, or recognise a single word or phrase.