

Conor O'Callaghan's
THE SUN KING

(Wake Forest University Press, 2013)

READER'S COMPANION

Contents

Biographical Note	2
Editorial Reviews and Citations	3
Interviews with Conor O'Callaghan	
Nicole Fitzpatrick, WFU Press	6
Phillip Cummins, <i>The Irish Post</i>	13
Links	15



Wake Forest University Press

P.O. Box 7333 Winston-Salem, NC 27109 wfupress@wfu.edu

<http://wfupress.wfu.edu>

Biographical Note

Conor O’Callaghan was born in 1968 in Newry, County Down, Northern Ireland, and grew up in Dundalk, just south of the Irish border.

His books include *The History of Rain* (1993) and *Seatown* (1999), both published in Ireland by The Gallery Press. A pamphlet, *A History of ‘Hello’*, was published in limited edition monograph by Phoenix Press (London) in 2003. In the United States, he is published by Wake Forest University Press, which published *Seatown and Earlier Poems* in 2000. In November 2005, Wake Forest published *Fiction*, his third collection, which was shortlisted for the *Irish Times* Poetry Now Prize. He is the editor of *The Wake Forest Book of Irish Poetry, volume three*, and WFUP published his newest title, *The Sun King*, in December 2013.

His poetry has appeared in numerous publications, including the [London] *Times Literary Supplement*, *Poetry Daily*, the *Irish Times*, *Metre*, and *Poetry* magazine.

O’Callaghan has reviewed poetry extensively, especially for the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Irish Times*. Apart from poetry, O’Callaghan has written widely on sport, especially soccer and cricket. His acclaimed radio documentary on cricket in Ireland, *The Season*, was broadcast on Irish national radio. A further essay, ‘Jolly Good Shot Old Boy’, appeared in *Playing the Field: Eleven Irish Writers on Sport* (New Island, 2000) and was praised in the *Irish Times* as ‘perfectly-pitched reportage... compelling, moving and very funny’. O’Callaghan is also the author of *Red Mist: Roy Keane and the Football Civil War*, the best-selling prose memoir of the public furor surrounding Ireland’s involvement in the 2002 World Cup.

He is a former director of the Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown Poetry Now Festival. He is a former co-holder of the Heimbold Chair of Irish Studies at Villanova University, and was poet-in-residence at Wake Forest University. He lives in Manchester, England and lectures at Sheffield Hallam University.

He is the recipient of numerous awards, including The Patrick Kavanagh Award, The Rooney Prize Special Award, *The Times* Educational Fellowship in 1997, was shortlisted for the Forward Prize, and received the Bess Hokin Prize from *Poetry* magazine.



Reviews and Citations

“Conor O’Callaghan’s *The Sun King*, wherein we get the poet as world- and word-spinning recording artist, as melody- and medley-maker, assembling into mobile forms a fractured life’s broken bits and pieces, ‘dribs and drabs’ (‘January Drought’), fragments, losses and loose ends.... What Bishop regarded as the ‘purpose’ of art –‘that rare feeling of control, illumination’ –is the spirit that breathes into *The Sun King* as O’Callaghan beats radiant gold out of the dark shards, the refuse and refusals, of life, and does so across poetic lines that disorient with their strange, shifting, glancing harmonies.” Maria Johnston, *Poetry Matters, Tower Poetry*

Link to review online: <http://www.towerpoetry.org.uk/component/content/article/572>

“Conor O’Callaghan exhibits an almost Shakespearean tendency to render reality not only by means of literary devices but in terms of those very tropes and conceits. Again and again in this his superbly reflexive fourth collection parts of the world are compared to linguistic concepts, to word-play and language-stuff, to punctuation, metaphor and translation. In ‘Praise of Sprinklers’, for instance, memorably suggests how ‘Spring resembles / a crossword left unfinished on a stoop / while sassafras / gets looked up’, even as ‘Translation’, surely one of the collection’s standout achievements, invites the reader or dedicatee to ‘Imagine you are this poem / moments before it is translated’, to track an irresistible but terrifying reconfiguration into something only half-understood. In ‘Comma’, meanwhile, tenor and vehicle are thrillingly unsettled—does the comma serve as a metaphor for the bulging ‘blip’ of a rain-cloud? Or is it vice-versa, or both or neither?

In *The Sun King* the putatively real and the purely verbal change places many times, leaving it a book preoccupied—perhaps even obsessed—with how poems get made, with the ‘translation’ or crossing over from the world to the word.” Billy Ramsell, *The Stinging Fly*

Link to review online: <http://www.stingingfly.org/node/280>

“The first poem, ‘Lordship’, in Conor O’Callaghan’s new collection, *The Sun King* (Gallery Press, €18.50/ €11.95), begins in a coastal writing retreat, then shifts to a novel that the protagonist is supposedly writing, before segueing into a feverishly imagined depiction of a London affair.

The three intertwined stories might be material enough for a novel, but they are vividly, memorably brought to life in the three pages of ‘Lordship’. O’Callaghan’s lines sing, compressing stories into images, so that ordinary details crystallise and are magicked into

mysterious flares of significance, as in “the antique Nokia on the butcher’s block in the bathroom”, which “vibrates at all hours like tropical wildlife”.

O’Callaghan likes to zoom in on things as they fall apart or are unexpectedly reintegrated. In one of ‘Lordship’s interiors “Whitewashed horsehair plaster shed magnolia petals. // Whatever glare each fresh day uploaded / made a disco ball in the double glazing’s exterior smash / and blissed splinters of violet all over the upstairs.”

The poem ends, maybe thinking of the way it has distracted itself with such glittering images, by declaring of its narrative: “This is its safest keeping; nobody’s going to see it.” Such slant, shimmering, sidelong notes are a speciality in *The Sun King*, O’Callaghan’s best book to date.

O’Callaghan’s writing often seems to mimic that disco ball’s bright distortions, primarily through his distinctive use of sound and rhythm. These poems concentratedly apply assonance and the bang-bang emphasis of spondees and trochees: the striking, slow-mo rhythm of “Whitewashed horsehair plaster” or “blissed splinters of violet”, where “blissed” does its work as a verb but is really, overwhelmingly, there for the chime with “splinters” and the exotic, unwarranted happiness, the bliss, that the poem wants to convey.

Exhilaratingly contemporary in its idioms, *The Sun King* is also reminiscent of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s experiments with different metres.

O’Callaghan was, of course, associated with the poetry magazine *Metre* (and poets associated with the magazine, including the present writer, are namechecked in the book’s acknowledgments). That magazine’s title gave a clue to its interest in experimenting with poetic forms and its iconoclastic attitude to the often loose-limbed poetry of the preceding generation of poets. *The Sun King* could be seen as the consummation of that impulse in Irish writing, exercising its use of sound and rhythm in striking ways in page after page.

The Sun King also impresses with its unfussy shifts between poems set in Ireland, the US (Philadelphia and North Carolina), England (London, Sheffield, Manchester’s Chinatown) and Italy (Tuscany, Naples). What’s markedly different about O’Callaghan’s use of these places (which reflects *Metre*’s determined internationalism) is how they do not lead him into arguments about Ireland’s closeness to Boston and Berlin but are all equally and matter-of-factly at the mercy of his imaginative transformations.

That transformational imagination is clear in the way the poems set out to inhabit a future rather than revise or correct the past. *The Sun King* accesses particular moments that offer a way out of predicaments. “Mid-March on the daily a.m. drop-off,” begins ‘Swell’, recounting not a St Patrick’s Day epiphany but how “a refrigerated dairy produce truck / keeps catching almond and dogwood branches so that blossoms blizzard / the windscreen and moonroof”. But by the

end of the poem the “swell” of ordinary life, which threatened to overwhelm the poet, can no longer be avoided. “That truck and blossoms story gets longer, / hokier with each retelling”, but now the poet is “not bothered” and begins to ride its new rhythms: “Our local Y widens its opening hours a smidgen. / The clay courts opposite pock and shuffle. / I learn to swim.”

Swimming pools recur in O’Callaghan’s previous collections, and he returns to the pool a second time in *The Sun King*, in ‘The End of the Line’, a very long-lined sonnet (so long that it is printed sideways). Now the poet’s swimming lesson magnifies into something else:

I climb a lane, balloon my lungs to the diaphragm (where did the balcony go? Where did you? Where has this pool arrived from?) and fall too hard for that point of no return where the water looms deep and black. This is when it comes: drained of noise, night without rungs, no lifeguards around.

This black vision aside, O’Callaghan’s book is all about light. The protagonist of the brilliant long poem ‘The Server Room’ surfaces from a sea of information technology whose institutional language the poem refreshes, while the Celtic Tiger gets an indulgent nod in ‘Tiger Redux’, which borrows the (trochaic, again) rhythm of William Blake to remember “fibre optics, soft-top wheels, / tax-incentive movie stills, // Xerox plants like pleasure domes” before waving a fond goodbye to “All that North Atlantic bling’s / rising tide, its waves and boom / charging in an empty room”.

That soft top reappears in ‘Comma’, one of the book’s many beautiful, quieter lyrics, which observes a moment’s silence as an “Infinite / blip that / a flyover / sped beneath / scores into / a down- // pour on the / soft-top’s / timpani”.

That kind of sonic image is also the method of ‘The Pearl Works’, the diary of a year with which the book ends. In 52 140-character tweets, almost all of which address the sun, O’Callaghan eulogises “the carnal surface” in percussive couplets that will leave any reader open-mouthed, in both senses of the phrase, as they breathlessly run out of full stops: “O slow coach, freeze mode solar yellow yoyo O hand-thrown old gold snow globe / O rose most blown O whole whorled ‘out there’ lodestar de l’aube”. John McAuliffe, *The Irish Times*

Author Interviews

“The Importance of Breathing”: An Interview with Conor O’Callaghan

Nicole Fitzpatrick conducted this interview with Conor O’Callaghan via email in January 2014. When the interview took place, Fitzpatrick was an M.A. English candidate at Wake Forest University and worked as an intern at Wake Forest University Press. O’Callaghan lived in Winston-Salem, North Carolina from 2005-2007 during which time he taught at Wake Forest University. Much of *The Sun King* connects to his time spent in NC.

NF: Your evocative descriptions make the reader feel deeply connected to very specific places. In his Irish Times review on June 15, 2013, John McAuliffe writes “*The Sun King* also impresses with its unfussy shifts between poems set in Ireland, the US (Philadelphia and North Carolina), England (London, Sheffield, Manchester’s Chinatown) and Italy (Tuscany, Naples).” Can you comment on the use of these places?

COC: TSK took 8 years and that time period involved a lot of movement, much of it painful and costly. Hence the various landscapes of the poems. Sometimes, as an Irish poet, one is expected to write an Irish landscape; to conveniently inhabit an interpretable version of Ireland.

I assert the right to write about my life, its various settings and concerns. Whenever someone says, “You can’t do that...” it makes me more determined to do so. In Irish poetry, we place too much value on tact, on secrecy and on suggestion above all else.

NF: Where did you get the idea for the title? Who is the Sun King and why the correlation with Roy, the builder?

COC: The ‘sun king’ was our family nickname for a handyman who converted an annex of our NC house into a sunroom. He was called ‘Roy’ and I, mistakenly I now realize, thought the name came from the French for king. In fact, it derives from the Gaelic for ‘red’: ‘rua’. He insisted we thank Jesus when the work was done: I scoffed, and then found myself unexpectedly moved. I suppose I like to remember him as an everyday deity. I liked the title of the poem about him as a book title because of all the sun images littered throughout the book and its concern with light. It seemed to pull lots of aspects together.

NF: Your epigraph from Gary Snyder’s “The Sweat” reads: “This life / We get old enough and finally really like it!” Why did you choose it? And what is your poetic relation to Snyder and,

along with him, the larger American tradition he inherits from William Carlos Williams? Especially in light of “Among Other Things” and “Wild Strawberries”?

COC: I like Snyder. I have a weakness for the poets of that Beat, in the most general sense, generation. They get a bad rap, often, among poets of my generation. I love the cocktail of casualness and mysticism. “The Sweat” is, as Jeff [Holdridge, director and editor of Wake Forest University Press] has written, a poem in praise of the beauty of women in middle age. I like that. Nothing more beautiful or worthy of praise. I wanted to salute Snyder, and Paul Durcan who is possibly an Irish counterpart. I wanted to identify them openly as predecessors and to salute them. Plain and simple...

NF: Your previous volume of poems, *Fiction*, uses the metanarrative of writing to test a web of truth and lies, reality and imagination, truth and deceit. In “Translation” something similar is happening, no?

COC: Yes, there is an invisible poem within the poem, one on the brink of rendering into another foreign tongue. But I think that this is possibly true of all poems. Every poem has a poem within it, and that poem within the poem is in many respects the subject of every poem. Every poem, as Edna Longley rightly says somewhere, has poetry as its sub-text. Every poem has, if you like, two subject matters: the thing that it is about (a jar in Tennessee, a globe in North Carolina, mushrooms or whatever), and poetry.

NF: The act of swimming appears in this collection as it did in *Fiction*. What is it about this subject that interests you?

COC: I’ve been writing about pools for years. Indeed, my poem on the stocks at present is called “The Swimming Pool”! It was pools initially, the aesthetics of it: that sublime of boxed-in nature. More recently, I have found correlation between the breathing involved in saying a poem from memory and swimming.

NF: With its elongated lines and subsequent landscape format, “The End of the Line,” differs from the rest of the book. What was your motivation behind this style choice?

COC: It’s about poetry, again. It’s about how a line is meant to be a breath’s length, how the enter key in 21st c. technology represents the moment when the singer completes a metrical unit and fills his or her lungs and recommences. Like a swimmer coming up for air and going under again.

It's also about drowning. When we were leaving NC, we stayed with Irish friends on Cascade Ave. They have an old-fashioned kidney-shaped pool with a 12ft drop at its center. One afternoon, exhausted and full of food, I went down alone, did a dead man's float and hit the bottom of the pool. I had only recently learned to swim, and panicked. I thought I was gone. I really did... My son, by pure luck, had come out to the porch and heard the screams and splashes. He came down and jumped in, but he was only 7. When I put my hand on his shoulder, he went under. So I let him go. He swam to the side and I went down again. It was a split-second instinctive call, but I was not going to let both of us die. Then I saw a foam float hit the surface of the water and somehow I made it up.

This poem is the closest I ever came to writing about that moment. It had a profound impact on my life. It taught me the importance of breathing.

NF: What brings you to write a shape poem like "A Nest of Tables"?

COC: I am attracted by concretism. I like poems that look like what they mean. It's a sonnet, if you look at it again. It is, indeed, an English sonnet. But yes, it is meant to appear like a nest of tables. I am fascinated by inanimate objects, how we invest so much emotion in them that is never reciprocated. I said this at a reading in New York recently, and the wonderful Northern Irish poet, Colette Bryce, came up after and said: "how do you know that table didn't miss you?"!

NF: Can you comment on the importance of the unmanned computer in the fascinating poem "The Server" and explain why you ended playing on the line from Frost's "Directive"?

COC: Sources really fascinate me. This is perhaps true of all poets, whether in terms of etymology or geography. We want to know where things begin, where they originate. We want to navigate back to that moment, to that womb indeed. The Frost poem is a series of directions back to a house, with a mountain creek beside it and a cup hidden in a tree. The poem tells you how to get there, how to find it: it instructs you back to that source and tells you to drink from it. Amen.

I saw into the server room of my office building and was blown away by it: it was like a piece of rainforest high up in an otherwise bureaucratic landscape. Once I saw it, I had in mind that it was like Kaitur falls or something, some remote Amazonian torrent known to only a few and from which all currents emanate.

In "The Server Room" I use the Frost model to navigate back to a source. In this case, the current is the electronic all around us rather than that of a cabin-side creek. I was trying to locate a cadence poised between satire and celebration. I was trying, I suppose, to suggest that the virtual now occupies the space once held by the spiritual; that poor defunct old God, indeed, effectively served as a prototype for virtual reality.

I hadn't thought of it as unmanned, but, of course, you are right. It's like "Slip" at the end of *Seatown* and its automated lighthouse. The unmanned source... That's it, indeed. Something almost divine to that! More generally, we live surrounded by technology. We inhabit it, we have identities in it, we have addresses in it, we have friends and communities in it. I do think it to try to locate the poetic in the virtual, and not simply to bitch about it and assume that the two realities (ours and its) are mutually exclusive.

NF: What gave you the idea for "Sospeso"?

COC: Wanda Balzano [Director of Women's and Gender Studies at Wake Forest]! I read a poem called "Fall" in Chatanooga. The poem alludes to the gorgeous European tradition of leaving a spare drink for someone less fortunate than you. After the reading, Wanda told me how they do that in Naples and call it a *sospeso*, or suspended drink. Loved it... It seemed so like a poem, the act that is, a leap of faith in the name of good fortune.

NF: Do you nod to Joyce in "Three Six Five Zero"? The culminating snow in the poem feels very much like Gabriel's epiphany at the end of "The Dead".

COC: I do, I suppose. The thing is, whenever an Irish writer mentions snow, it seems to echo "The Dead". It really does! I didn't have it in my head writing the villanelle, but I can see that it does. Like people, poems carry baggage that is only obvious to others. This is one of those poems: the love story, the falling snow enveloping both living and dead into one narrative. There is one poem in Fiction, "The Burbs", which does very consciously play with Joyce's great story.

NF: Your translation of Lorca's "La Casada Infiel" ("The Unfaithful Wife") is set apart from the rest of the poems in that it is the only translation in the book. For what reason did you include it?

COC: Why? Because it's mine... And it fits, thematically. This is the difficult truth about all translation, something Lowell says in his intro to *Imitations*: we don't translate poems into English, we translate them into ourselves. Though obviously based upon the Lorca original, this is all mine. Lorca didn't write a word of it!

NF: The volume is overall a powerful evocation of desire, but there is as much ruefulness as pleasure in many poems, particularly in poems like "The Unfaithful Wife" and "Translation".

COC: I suppose “The Unfaithful Wife” and “Translation” could be read as a piece. In the former, I was trying to use the Lorca to think about fidelity. Does 'fidelity' mean the same thing in literature that it does in love? I realize now that I deliberately altered the sense of Lorca's ending, as if acting out some paradigm of infidelity. The parallels between translation and marriage: the immovable need to be faithful and the irresistible desire to be free. The inner negotiation of the translator is very similar to that of the husband/wife.

In “Translation” I was thinking too about a student at Wake who turned out to be deaf, and how translating can feel like colonization: a big rich language moving in on the literature of a smaller poorer language, in spite of being deaf to the nuances of its apparently outmoded terms of reference, such as 'soul'. If I recall correctly, I got it into my head that 'soul' had become the dirtiest word in poetry, that the Poundian suspicion of abstraction by which we have all worked has become a *cul de sac*.

NF: Where did you come up with the idea for “The Pearl Works”? How did this process differ from your usual approach? Did you receive positive virtual feedback (retweets, favorites, etc.)? Any plans for another Twitter experiment?

COC: I really got the idea from AR Ammons' Tape for the Turn of the Year. I was introduced to the book by Susan Chambers who taught at Wake 2006-7, before moving to Yale. We had a poetry reading group and Susan chose the Ammons. I loved it, and set it in my upper level course when I came back for spring semester. I even got students to take turns on the typewriter and a roll of add machine paper, and eventually did bits myself. I wanted us to engage with the Ammons original and to think about how the shape of paper impacts on the forms poems take, on the line.

From that time, I had in my head the idea of something along those lines: like a diary, confined by a set time period and confined too by the constraints of a particular medium. With Ammons, the constraint was the width of the paper; with me, it was the size of a tweet. Did the process differ hugely? Not really... I mean a sonnet is, if we think of it mathematically, 140 syllables (14 x 10). It is, arguably, a totally arbitrary unit. 140 syllables means about as much as 140 characters including spaces. It's just something we do as poets in order to create some resistance to the material. We choose this otherwise meaningless grid and pour all the molten motion/belief/idea into it and see how they react. Like most things, language is rendered interesting by its confines. The beauty of the tweet is its very specific limitations.

I did find the improvisatory nature of the medium a buzz: it made me far more inclined to take risks and break free of caution. I suspect, looking back, that I knew it would. I got so jaded with the Larkinesque hang-dog sardonic realism. I wanted to write something more expansive, more visionary, and this (oddly) proved the ideal context. By the end of the year I was so high on doing it, and I think it shows in the final invocatory sequence to the winter sun.

I suppose the big important question is why? What is it about the nature of the medium that lent itself to that kind of poem that “TPW” reached? I don't know, is the most honest answer. I

wish I did, but I really don't. I could guess, but it is only guessing... The immediacy of the medium felt like an 18th c. broadside: you dashed it off and put it out there. The hit-and-miss nature of the thing generated great freedom for me. As its name suggests, the 'tweet' is a form of casual song, it is a fleeting mating call in cyberspace. There is a carefree ecstasy to that, an openness to throw voices and try new notes, like a nightingale whooping to himself in a valley.

I got lots of retweets. I think my record was 12 for one, and that was the final one! That bit was nice, and really gratifying. It restored my trust in readers and their discernment: the lesser tweets (there were lots not collected) got no retweets, whereas the very best of them got picked up straight away. It took a lot of will power not to keep going, but I had one year exactly and I'm chuffed now that I stuck to stopping after one year.

One aside... It was made into a little chapbook, which was done by old school handsetting. The guy who was doing it had to reduce the number of couplets per page towards the end because there weren't enough Os for more than a couple of tweets. I took great heart from that: I was writing poems that emptied the O jar, and felt sure that I was going in the right direction!

NF: There seems to be an Italian influence that underscores "TPW". You mention that some of the entries were posted from San Martino in Lucca. Can you elaborate on how the area influenced your work?

COC: Just to extend from the previous point, the O prevalence and the Italian influence seem to go hand-in-hand. The letter O is central to Italian, it seems to me, and gets used far more than in English. So many of its core words end in that rich, round vowel. This, they say, is what makes the language so perfect for song and opera, that it is so vowel-based. English, by contrast, is laden with clacking consonants. I spent 9 weeks in Tuscany during 2012, and I think the experience of that had a huge influence on the composition of the "TPW". Not simply the landscape, which is present obviously, but also the vowel-centered music of the language all around me.

I was living in a converted barn in a hilltop hamlet. The acoustics in the places were great and so, to fill the empty hours of evenings alone, I printed off old song lyrics and sang aloud. By the end I was booming them day and night! I became obsessed, if I am honest, with the idea of Tuscany as one of the great sources of the lyric tradition as we now know it; of the origins of the lyric tradition in song; of that O that is the Buddhist symbol of perfection, and of that O as the center of all sung sound. All of these things overlapped at once towards the end of "TPW". So that the sequence is festooned with Os, with the images of cycles or circles or revolutions: the year, the wheel, the ball, the disc, the clock, the mouth, the sun...

NF: How do you feel about using social media such as Twitter as platform for poetry? Do you think it diminishes the effect of poetry? How important do you think it is for contemporary poets to reach out to their readers via social media?

COC: I have no strong feelings on it. I don't believe that poets should write on social media, any more than I think poets should write sonnets or pantoums. They should do it only if it stirs them imaginatively. Twitter seemed interesting to me because of its confines. A Facebook post has no limits and therefore is uninteresting to me. A tweet at some point attracted me as a little box that I might try to use as a poetic unit. That's all, really.

More generally, I do feel the web and technology are probably changing poetry in ways that are invisible to us now. In 200 years' time people will look at our age and identify it as a threshold. Poetic form has been influenced by the shape of paper: we all write poems for the A5 page, and the forms our poems take generally react to that shape. It seems to me that there is a generation, after me, who are not writing for that paper template. They are writing for the screen, and it is inevitable that this will impact the forms poems take. Poetic form evolves, changes, and usually at points of social upheaval or technological advance. This is surely one of those big thresholds.

NF: Poets of your generation have often been defined in hostile relationship to Ireland as a subject for Irish poetry. Justin Quinn has gone so far as to write: "Poets such as Heaney and Hartnett, even though they have invested much of their imaginative life in matters of 'Ireland', clearly also relish the prospect of getting rid of it." You, on the contrary, have expressed more mixed feelings about this. Can you expand?

COC: I love Ireland, but I do take it with a pinch of salt. I remember saying to Wanda how much I love Italy. She was very sanguine and witty about it: she rolled her eyes and said "Italy's such a cliché!" Yep... Feel exactly the same about Ireland. Love it, but it's corny, especially as subject matter for poems. Time was, I felt confined by Ireland and Irishness as poetic subject matter, and that made me frustrated and inclined to articulate that frustration at Ireland's expense. I don't feel confined by Ireland any more, poetically, and that makes me feel warmer towards it. I can't wait to go home and I can't wait to leave!

##

“It's a Foolish Idea That Poets Should Be Broke”: An Interview with Conor O'Callaghan

An article by Phillips Cummins in the Irish Post.

DUNDALK poet Conor O'Callaghan is pacing the corridors of a Drogheda hotel.

There are only a couple of hours to go until the launch of his latest collection of poetry and the 45-year-old is in a reflective mood as he teases out why it has taken nearly a decade to produce *The Sun King*, his fourth collection of poems and his first in eight years.

“I do think that writing poems is to do with energy,” he says of his ‘slow grafter’ approach and carefully spent time in crafting a new body of work. “Michael Hofmann [the German-born poet] once said ‘the hardest thing about being a poet is continuing to be one’.

There are loads and loads of reasons for that: reputation, lack of encouragement, lack of money... the older you get, the more your energy gets used on other things.

There’s no way you can get up every morning and do it. Poets can’t write programmatically like novelists and dramatists. The energy comes and goes.”

It’s clear that that energy and inspiration is currently in abundance for the Dundalk man, who is now based in Manchester. If O’Callaghan doesn’t seem short of ideas for poems, it’s perhaps because his work is steeped in the materials of the modern world.

He is also energized by the work of his contemporaries and is more than aware of his generation’s lineage. “I definitely think that the generation of Irish poets that I belong to tried to bring in influences from outside Ireland.

“We all read voraciously – American poets, Australian poets – and we tried to bring in those influences to freshen up the Irish lyric.

“And in British poetry, too, there are loads of people that I really admire: Simon Armitage, Sean O’Brien...poets who were massively important to me.

“I really admired how they got things from our world – the late 20th century / early 21st century – into poems, without compromising too much in terms of style or grace; that you could still write beautiful lyrics yet still have photocopying machines, greyhound tracks and Chinese takeaways in the poems.”

O’Callaghan’s passion for the 21st century lyric – for poems by Irish poets that move on from the Heaney-esque descriptions of the landscape – lead me to ask him if the commonly held perception of an Irish poet is somehow misjudged?

He's in no doubt about this. "When I lived in Ireland in my 20's, I used to be involved in Poetry Ireland's Writers in Schools program, teaching writing to primary school children.

"One of the first things I would always do in the classroom is ask the children "When your teacher told you that there was a poet coming here today, what did you imagine that I would look like?"

"Based on their suggestions, I would draw an identikit. That identikit would always resemble Patrick Kavanagh: Patchy jacket, a bottle of whiskey, craggy-looking ... it was always a dishevelled, bearded old man.

"There was a definite sense that, as an Irish poet, you were expected to fit a particular profile.

"Similarly, poverty was a given with poetry. I remember being interviewed on an arts radio programme on RTÉ and the interviewer – who shall remain nameless – asked me 'how do you make ends meet?' in a very sympathetic tone.

"Now it was the high years of the Celtic Tiger! We were doing okay! And I couldn't resist saying to him, 'You know what? I'm fine, thanks! I'm making loads of money!' And I tackled him about it: I said, 'Do you expect me to be broke?'

"I'm not going to pretend to be poor just because there's this expectation that I should be poor. Patrick Kavanagh, someone who I revere very much, clearly went through this long period of poverty.

"But the poems weren't the result of poverty; the poems happened in spite of the poverty. It's a bull**** idea that poets should be broke."

For link to complete article: <http://www.irishpost.co.uk/entertainment/interview-conor-ocallaghan-its-a-foolish-idea-that-poets-should-be-broke>

Links

Review of *The Sun King*: <http://philipcummins.com/2013/04/12/conor-ocallaghan-and-maurice-riordan-irish-poetry-collections-to-look-forward-to-in-2013>

Two poems from *The Sun King* featured on poetry daily:
<http://poems.com/feature.php?date=16106>

“Ten Questions with Conor O’Callaghan”: http://makingwritingmatter.co.uk/?page_id=89

Conor O’Callaghan reading “Fiction” and “The Flat Earth”:
<http://archive.magazine.wfu.edu/2008.03/wfupress/part5.html>

Wake Forest University Press’s Conor O’Callaghan page:
<http://wfupress.wfu.edu/authors/conor-ocallaghan/>

The Poetry Foundation’s Conor O’Callaghan page:
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/conor-ocallaghan>