

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

Nicole Fitzpatrick conducted this interview with Conor O’Callaghan via email in January 2014. Fitzpatrick is an M.A. English candidate at Wake Forest University and works 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 grew 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 important 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 emotion/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!