

## Conversation with a poet: Ciarán O'Rourke

★ Ciarán O'Rourke, who is a People Before Profit member in Trinity and in Dun Laoghaire, has recently published his first book of poems, *The Buried Breath*<sup>1</sup>. **John Molyneux** interviewed him for *Irish Marxist Review*. John prefaces the interview by saying 'I consider Ciarán O'Rourke's work some of the very best poetry I have read in recent years'. 'The Killing March', one of the poems in the collection, is appended to the article.

*JM: When did you start writing poetry and what drew you to it?*

COR: Thanks, it's good to be here. I first began writing poetry in my early teens. My parents and extended family were always involved in the arts and poetry in particular. So as a child and as a teenager poetry was available to me. It was something that was always there in my life. My aunt and uncle were practising poets so I had a way into the contemporary poetry scene and an awareness of it I might not otherwise have had. In terms of how the fever of wanting to write poetry took hold I don't have a definite answer but since my early teens, 13 onwards, I have had this compulsion to write poetry specifically and had it ever since.

*JM: Ever since then you have been writing consistently?*

COR: I write infrequently. 6-8 weeks go by and I wouldn't be able to write anything and at one point a couple of years ago I had about 12 months when I was unable to write anything and I thought I was finished as an aspiring poet. But the poetry remains mysterious, happily mysterious in that sense, but it came back and so far it has continued to come back.

*JM: Was there a point when you decided 'I am a poet'?*

COR: I still haven't decided that I'm a poet. I have this idea that poetry is not about giving yourself any particular label or title; it's more of an aspiration than something that has been achieved. For me the experience of wanting to write and trying to write is very much fuelled by anxiety as to whether I can and I want to hold on to that anxiety in order to keep going. I think it is the work that really matters and that too often we put a great deal of emphasis on the personality of the individual poet. Whereas I just want to keep working if I can

*JM: Who were your main influences?*

COR: Shelley. Percy Shelley is the one who knocked me sideways. Interestingly it was particularly after learning that he was expelled from Oxford [*for atheism -JM*] and that his first decision was to come to Dublin to stoke a pacifist people powered revolution of some sort,

that his poetry seemed to open up to me. But it is not just a biographical or historical interest; I think his poetry manages to combine a sense of personal expression with almost cosmic enquiry. He joins the dots between politics and personal emotions and a sense of the universe at large. And I think what I most value in the British romantic tradition centres around each of those points. Of course I have also read and continue to read contemporary Irish poets like Derek Mahon and Seamus Heaney and I've just finished a PhD in American literature so poets like Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams and Adrienne Rich – a more recent person – have all opened a door for me in one way or another, and I return to them whenever I can.

*JM: The quality that most struck me in *The Buried Breath* would be 'intimacy'. I'm really struck by how close in you get to whatever or whoever it is you are writing about. Does that strike a chord with you? Is it accurate? Is it deliberate?*

COR: I think for many poets the act of writing poetry is one of self expression or self release, whereas for me it is the opposite. If I have to categorise it, it is an act of self control and self understanding at an emotional level. I think that is both the limitation of my work and also where its force comes from. So it's both positive and negative in that there is a great deal of emotional

intensity combined with a desire for formal control in that blend of elements. So perhaps that goes some way to explaining why the poems can be quite intimate emotionally and sensuously.

Since I was a small child watching cowboy movies directed by John Ford I have been obsessed by cinema and this is reflected in a lot of my poems, for example *The Prisoner*, my attempted tribute to Keith Douglas, a British poet killed in World War 2. The poem zooms in on a fly that lands on the hand of the poet and at moments like that through the collection I was trying to imagine the eye of the poem as being like a camera. But in more general terms I write intuitively so it's not a matter of realising intentions already formed in my mind, more a matter of following where the poem leads. And the final thing to say on the question of intimacy in the work is that in terms of my own personality I am quite introverted and intense, so poetry is one of the few spaces where I delve into my own emotional concerns.

*JM: One of the areas where this intimacy expresses itself is in relation to nature: how often you speak of the air, the sun, the sea, the water and the rain. On every other page there is a reference to rain, 'the delicate rain', 'the usual rain', the 'rain on the window pane' – again and again.*

COR: Sometimes I think I'm obsessed with writing about the weather (lol!) . And it's strange because you can't say anything new about the weather and it's such an ordinary part of our lives. At the same time it reflects and shapes our lives. So I think if poetry or art can be interpreted as an attempt to immerse yourself in a new reality or reinvigorate a memory of a particular emotion or moment then nature

and the weather are what you have to hand, very often they become continuous with our senses.

One of the poems that partly translates and partly pays tribute to the El Salvadorean poet, Roque Dalton, begins 'And so I say the earth is beautiful, and belongs like poetry and bread to all of us'. And that is partly Dalton and partly myself speaking at that point. But if you have an awareness of the natural world as precious and something that art relates to in some way that can lead easily to more radical and political ideas as to where we are at as a society and as an individual. In that sequence of poems I try to bring out that idea a bit.

*JM: That's very very relevant to the word today. The same closeness comes when you're writing about other poets. To me it seems you really penetrate their consciousness. I don't know what the consciousness of Catullus or Virgil was really like but you are trying to write as if you were them or were with them.*

COR: The poet Stephen Spender called his memoir *World within World*, which I read in my early 20s, and I think that what he was getting at was that he was moving away from an understanding of history as an accumulation of dead facts, and it is very easy for history or poetry to move along those lines, and what he was moving towards was that the world was reborn within the world so that in the life you are living now, you can find shades and echoes of the aspirations and emotions of other people in another time. And I think in the poems that address the work of other poets, I'm attempting to reach past the images of the canonical poets or "the heroic dead" to find some sort of living presence that is a heightened version of my own. You can say that this is an

artistic fabrication and that it strays away from fact or from formal fidelity to the original, but in some ways that attempt to rediscover the past in our present moment – you can interpret that politically as well – is part of what drives my poetry. I'm not sure if I have exhausted that impulse or not.

*JM: Are you influenced by Walter Benjamin? Because that is a very Benjaminesque thing you just said.*

COR: Yes, I have a guarded echo of Benjamin in one of the poems called *The Killing March* where I imagine the angel drowning in the bricks of the raised city<sup>2</sup>. Partly that refers to European cities – it could be Dresden or Hamburg – but it was also intended to speak to atrocities in Aleppo or Kabul or Gaza today. And so not just trying to recreate a moment in European history but trying to make it speak to the times we are living in today.

*JM: There's a line which I made a note of "history is just one disaster feeding off another" which is such an echo of Benjamin's angel of history.*

COR: Yeah – the Paul Klee painting. That image is propelling that particular poem.

*JM: But you also say that "history is an insect caressing the skin". Is that connected? That's a film?*

COR: That moment when the poem pivots into close-up, that's a filmic technique. But it's also specifically a reference to a poem by Keith Douglas where he imagines the mosquito, which he calls 'death', landing on the corpse of his friend who has been killed in the North African campaign. So it's partly a specific echo and partly an attempt to meld the big idea with the sensuous experience.

JM: Again that's an example of intimacy in the sense of being intimately tied to the moment of history.  
COR: Yes. Absolutely. And if you're speaking to dead poets all the time, suddenly everything becomes more fragile and more urgent.

JM: The classical influence is very striking in your work, and unusually in a contemporary poet. Maybe not that unusual but at first sight its surprising. Two or three poems to Catullus<sup>3</sup>, but also Virgil, Attic Detail, and your use of language is quite often... (COR : Roman?) Yes. How come?

COR: When I look at myself objectively I think the book is quite conventional. It has all the hallmarks of the middle-class white male poetic tradition. Right so I learnt Latin in school, so that's where, in a very practical way, those poems are coming from. If I didn't have that grounding in school, I don't think I would have written them, at least not in the same way. And yes it's difficult not to think of the Latin language as in some ways a precursor to the English language; it's a global language which speaks to many cultures. But it's also an imperial language with an imperial history and is intimately tied to it. The question of the complicity of the poet in the history they are trying to speak to is an interesting one. But in terms of a more normal level, the Latin poets, or the translations of them I have read, are important to me. Again, maybe it speaks to that thing of the past becoming present again.

JM: I also wanted to ask you about the artists who you relate to. This is partly because it's a big interest of mine but I was very struck by the number of poems that relate to artists and indeed to particular paintings, eg Francis Bacon, Winslow

Homer, Sean Scully etc.

COR : With Francis Bacon one of the most searing qualities of his work is that he seems to paint whatever essence is left after the particular body or soul has been obliterated completely. You would imagine that would be impossible to do. But that is exactly what he gives us. So it's more visceral than just being haunting, but his work grips you at some deep rooted level and doesn't really let you go. I wouldn't say the particular painting I write about, 'Man Kneeling in Grass', is my favourite Bacon, but it is a painting which when I picked up a postcard of it – it wouldn't let me go. The poem was just an attempt to articulate that sensation in some way. Then, in terms of my own life, whenever I can I wander to the local gallery whether it's the National Gallery of Hugh Lane here, or the Ashmoleum in Oxford, where I lived for a year. So yes I actively seek out visual art when I can.

JM: And it often becomes an inspiration for poetry.

COR: Yes, I don't necessarily go looking for pictures that can be converted into poetry – it's more it just happens. And it could be several years after I've picked up a post card or seen a painting in person that the poem arrives on the page. That is the case with 'Crucifixion' based on the Grunewald panel. I saw that in 2012 (JM: The original?) Yes, in Alsace. And four years later the poem arrived and the sensation I experienced when encountering that painting obviously germinated inside of me over that time. It is very difficult to predict how poetry will happen, but there is certainly a relationship between painting and poetry.

JM: Some formal questions – how would you label the form or forms

that you use? Would you just call it free verse? It is obvious that form is important to you.

COR: I would say that most of my poetry is written in shoddy pentameter. Even if the lay out doesn't reflect a traditional iambic pentameter<sup>4</sup> almost every poem has an echo of iambic pentameter in there; it's just sliced in a particular way. But certainly in terms of the actual writing it is quite free flowing. Most of my poems are quite short lined but every line encapsulates a breath or a heartbeat even. If the eye will roll down the page in that rhythm, that's the balance I try to strike.

JM: You don't use much rhyme but you use a lot of alliteration.

COR: Yeah. I think its rhythm that drives the poems and it's an attempt to get the soundscape to match up to that rhythm. I have written three or four villanelles<sup>5</sup> which are quite strict in terms of their rhyme requirements as well as every other way but I didn't include them in the collection. Partly this was because every so-called 'emerging' poet is expected to prove their mettle by reproducing that very traditional form and to me that seems to be quite an artificial idea of what poetry is about. I think that in basic terms rhythm and rhyme and the formal elements of poetry are just means to an end. It's about expression and communication and I wanted to reflect that in some way.

JM: As far as alliteration is concerned I noticed particularly, I don't know if you are aware of this, that you alliterate words beginning with b and with h.

COR: That's not something I was aware of!

JM: 'The buried breath'!

COR: Yeah!

*JM: And there's lots of 'bone-brittles'; barely beatens' and 'hunger hauntings'. Anyway the other thing I wanted to ask, just out of curiosity, is about your vocabulary which is generally very simple using everyday words most of the time, but from time to time you use words I've never heard before – glur, shruggle, bullows, blit – and I didn't know if you made them up or they are obscure.*

COR: Made up! Pure invention! Thank you for picking up on these.

*JM: I thought maybe you had a wider vocabulary than me.*

COR: No quite the opposite. I am attracted to the idea, maybe it ties in with my fascination with Catullus, for example, that every book should serve as a lexicon of the past and that poetry has to speak the language of its moment. It's a nostalgic idea, I suppose.

*JM: Who was the last old poet? Was it someone specific?*

COR: That poem began as a love poem, a personal love poem, then it morphed into a tribute to one American poet and then into poetry in general. Do want to suggest anyone?

*JM: Lawrence Ferlingetti, Allen Ginsberg ?*

COR: You're spot on! Frank O'Hara was in there too, and Whitman, but it's mainly an ode to American poetry or my experience of it.

*JM: You have a poem about Oxford. How do you feel about Oxford*

COR: I studied in Oxford for a year. I feel privileged to been able to do that and I met some interesting people there. But I was surrounded by people who weren't necessarily the cleverest in the world, as Brand Oxford likes to suggest, but were universally coming from privileged backgrounds and were almost all ruthlessly ambitious at some level;

again there were some very humane people as well but that privilege was the common denominator. And it was at that point in my life that I began to think critically about myself and about politics. It was an eye-opening experience for me. I've mixed and strong feelings about Oxford; I studied Shelley there and that was intense mind breaking work in academic terms, but also a joy.

*JM: Politics- how do you see the relationship between your poetry and politics?*

COR: The poem Postcards from Palestine, which is in the book, was the first poem where I managed to express a political emotion as opposed to explaining a political issue. It's very difficult to write issue based poetry and it can be quite condescending and ineffectual. Whereas with Postcards from Palestine I was writing as I would with any other poem- a love poem or an elegy – except I was attempting to express a political emotion. In a sense that was a clarifying moment for me because I realized there isn't that much difference between examining your own life and examining the world around you.

In specific terms, for many people who are quite well intentioned there is a difficulty of connecting issues that you see in the news to your own life, whereas with Palestine the penny finally dropped for me. That poem was written in 2014 during the Israeli bombardment of Gaza and, in biographical terms I was receiving a scholarship from Trinity College which was not only doing business with state sponsored institutions in Israel but was actually engaged in knowledge exchange with Elbit Security Systems, a drone manufacturer, and this was at a time when student unions and trade unions in Palestine were calling for a peaceful boycott on human rights grounds

and school children who were living in a state of siege anyway, were literally being bombed in their beds. Often people like to explain away these situations by saying it's all very complicated so you can't take a side. But suddenly at that point in time the world seemed to work in very obvious ways and the poem that I wrote was just one small expression of that realisation and my attempt to take a side. I think art can do that. I would be reluctant to say that it's the most important or effective way of taking a side in a political conflict but it's one way of doing it and it's important.

*JM: It seems to me that with some artists they are deeply political people so if they write a poem or paint a picture it is likely to have politics in it, not because they set out to write a political poem , its just there. But there's also artists who deliberately choose to use their poetry or music or whatever as a weapon in the struggle. You strike me as more of the first kind – true or not true?*

COR: True I suspect. There's a line that is often quoted from one of Seamus Heaney's essays that 'poetry never stopped a tank'. My attitude is do we expect poetry to stop tanks? People do and people have and its people who in the long term write and read and need poetry in their world. And perhaps that's all very vague but I think the necessity for art exists at a different level, the urgency is different.

*JM: The people who stop tanks are often sustained by poetry.*

COR: Also whatever form of communication and fulfilment poetry hopes for will be an integral part of the world that those people – the radicals, the revolutionaries – are trying to create. But in terms of my own political engagement I think that 'handing out leaflets' is a way of responding in a more immediate, more

practical way to political issues, than writing a poem and expecting it to have some kind of palpable impact. But I don't have a very definite answer, that's clear.

*JM: From where I'm sitting you are still very young. Do you have any idea where you are going to with your poetry?*

COR: I have a rather morbid idea that for me if you are faced with a book or you have a poem in your hand, the best approach to take is to imagine that the author is already gone, dead. So what you are left with is this particular imperfect record of a life or view of the world and then as a reader you have to see what can be done with this imperfect record. So my hope is that if I do keep writing, and I hope to, I intend to, I will produce a serviceable body of work. But in terms of my career goals as a poet I don't have any really. I want to keep working if I can.

## The Killing March

(Miklós Radnóti, 1909-1944)

*Ciarán O'Rourke*

Each day permits  
the old atrocities  
again –  
the necessary deaths,  
the far-off scream  
come near,  
the itch of madness  
spreading  
on the hands and hair...  
History is one  
disaster, feeding

off another, or:  
what poems are made  
to witness  
and withstand.  
You taught us that;  
or someone did,  
whose teaching stemmed  
from what he saw,  
from the hunger hushing  
through him like a mist,  
his head adrift  
with grief, or sleep,  
but not dead yet  
on the killing march.  
Against all murderous  
decrees, and against  
the unreturning cities  
razed, the angel  
drowning in the bricks,  
the roads  
where beggars roam  
and drop, it's true:  
the oak trees  
still are breathing,  
and the fist,  
which ice and metal  
hammered once,  
can furl  
to feel the winter  
easing,  
in a luff of rain.  
So it is, poet,  
in this barbaric language,  
built from pain,  
I imagine echoing  
to be enough  
to raise  
your sightless eyes  
and famine face,  
and faith  
in breath, a force  
to conjure  
youth again:  
that place  
of which, you say,  
the music speaks  
in mutter-tongues  
and morse. Love-poet,  
eternal pastoralist,  
in the din of one more  
ending world,  
I commemorate your corpse.

## Notes

1 Ciarán O'Rourke, *The Buried Breath*, The Irish Pages Press, 2018.

2 This discussion relates to a passage in Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: 'There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awake the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows ward the sky. What we call progress is this storm.'

3 Catullus (c 84 –c.54 BCE) was a Latin poet of the late Roman Republic who wrote mainly about personal life rather than the classical heroes and was known for his explicit sexual imagery.

4 Iambic pentameter is a type of metric line used in traditional English poetry and verse drama. The term describes the rhythm, or meter, established by the words in that line; rhythm is measured in small groups of syllables called "feet". "Iambic" refers to the type of foot used, here the iamb, which in English indicates an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (as in a-bove). "Pentameter" indicates a line of five "feet". Iambic pentameter is the most commonly used meter in English poetry, including in Shakespeare.

5 A villanelle is a nineteen-line poetic form consisting of five tercets (group of three lines) followed by a quatrain (group of four lines). There are two refrains and two repeating rhymes, with the first and third line of the first tercet repeated alternately until the last stanza, which includes both repeated lines. Dylan Thomas's *Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night* is an example of a villanelle.