
Michael Cronin

WAYWARDNESS

Ulick O'Connor, *The Kiss: New and Selected Poems and Translations* (Salmon Poetry, 2008), €12.

Ulick O'Connor is known primarily as a dramatist, literary critic and biographer. Although his first volume *Life Styles* was published in 1973 by the Dolmen Press, to be followed by five further collections, his name does not often feature in the agora of poetic remembrance or celebration. *The Kiss*, which includes new and already published poems, is therefore welcome in offering a critical overview of O'Connor's work as a poet. What is immediately striking about the poems gathered here is the ease with which O'Connor moves between private statement and public pronouncement. He clearly has a sense that private and public histories are more porous than the constabulary of fact would have us believe and that poetry can be as much about expressing an uncomfortable political truth as giving voice to the key-hole surgery of jealousy. Yeats is an inescapable presence here, though O'Connor is more tentative, less tempted by the marmoreal self-fashioning of the Public Figure.

One of the consequences of having lived through and extensively studied and commented upon the Irish twentieth century is O'Connor's ability to restore a living presence to the people, both the exalted and the humble, who have shaped the island. In his 'Homage to Sean MacBride' MacBride is presented as both the gifted offspring of a privileged family, magnified by the dual mandate of history and culture, and as the relentless activist, unremittingly ordinary in his daily grapplings with injustice ('In that book-lined room I watched many a night / You finger out a clause, begin the fight / To save some man'). MacBride emerges not as the plaster saint of right-on hagiography but as a man whose past became a resource rather than a burden. The range of intelligent sympathy extends poetically to the world brought to bear on the young O'Connor as he was taken around the Church of the Three Patrons in Rathgar by his nanny, Ann Bell. Even though he can no longer share the piety of his childhood nursemaid his poem has due reverence for the integrity of her belief and the rituals which sustain her living self. Part of the attentiveness to people involves an attentiveness to their practices and contexts. O'Connor tries to capture what is distinctive about both the season and the session. In 'Autumn Scare', for example, he uses the language of menace to define the dramatic flare of an Irish autumn:

But today fear crackled off the crop,
Time has telescoped to make it seem
A week since Fall last fired the trees' top.

Looking to do that most difficult of things, evoke the music of performance in the music of a poem, O'Connor in 'The Piper's Club' wonders what kind of utterance might match the disciplined abandon of the fiddler 'Who saw a blackbird in a gap of light / And trapped its sweetness on a tightened string.' If the early Clarke is somewhere close, it is in part because O'Connor too discovers, through the good offices of the poet and scholar Gerald Murphy, the lyric expressiveness and vernacular energy of writing in Irish. Part of the debt is reciprocated in his rendering of an Irish-language poem by Brendan Behan concerning Oscar Wilde. There is a danger, of course, attendant upon too much informed sympathy – national hubris, Ireland and the Irish as the Chosen Ones. O'Connor is saved from the vaporous self-importance of national myth-making by a robust and combative satirical sense.

In a poem written at the time of the Papal visit to Ireland in 1979 and entitled 'The Department Regrets', the poet excoriates 'our concerned Rulers' who made sure that beggar children were removed by the police from O'Connell Bridge 'Concerned that His Holiness might see / How we Christians love one another.' The chilling title of the poem has an even more disturbing resonance in terms of what we now know about institutional child abuse as practised by Church and State. In 'Easter Week 1986' O'Connor comments on the absence of an official commemoration of the 1916 Rising and the actions of the Gardaí in firing live ammunition over the heads of unarmed demonstrators outside the GPO:

Divided, exhausted, confused spectators
Of an uneasy dawn,
While police fire above the head
Of crowds, for imagined slights,
Their backs turned on that sacrificial shed.
How long before they lower their sights?

On a less despairing and more puckish note, O'Connor in 'One Up' describes how he bested his French rivals for the affections of one of their compatriots intimating that eight hundred years of misery could be turned to good account:

None of her fancy French boys
Could do what I could do

