

Michael O'Neill (1953 – 2018)

In his introduction to the magisterial *Cambridge History of English Poetry* (2011), Michael O'Neill writes that "contributors have been asked to highlight the formal and aesthetic features of poetry. 'Formal and aesthetic' is meant to draw attention to the fact that this is a history of poetry, and that 'poetry' involves artistic uses of language, as, indeed, many of the poets discussed in the volume insist. [...] Contributors have been asked to explore ways in which poets use form, taking that term in its widest sense to include all aspects of poetry considered as art: uses of genre; handling of metre, structure, image, metaphor, echo and allusion; deployment of diction, idiom, ambiguity; tone and mood."

It seems to me that in encouraging his collaborators not to neglect the *art* of poetry, Michael was, in fact, encouraging them to emulate his own critical stance, encouraging them not to take the easy shortcut from text to context, from poem to the author's life, but focus on the text as text.

From his earliest monographs on (*The Human Mind's Imaginings: Conflict and Achievement in Shelley's Poetry*, 1989; *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem*, 1997) to the later ones (*The All-Sustaining Air: Romantic Legacies and Renewals in British, American, and Irish Poetry since 1900*, 2007 – which traces the influence of Romantic poetry on poets from Yeats to Roy Fisher), Michael would always insist that, to the degree that we recognize form in poetry, it is self-referential, and that, to the degree that it refers to previous poetry, it is self-conscious. Even when he was asked to edit volumes for series that obviously had a different critical approach (e.g. his volume on Shelley for the *Macmillan Literary Lives* series, 1989, or the marvellous one on W.B. Yeats for the *Routledge Literary Sourcebook series*, 2004), he could always make it clear that what mattered was the poetry in poetry (cf. his Shelley volume for *Longman Critical Readers* series, 1993).

And few could bring out, as critic and editor, the poetry in poetry better than Michael O'Neill did. How so? The secret – if secret it was – was let out by Michael, when he continued, in the above-quoted Introduction, "contributors have been asked to write with first-hand consideration and depth. The watchword for contributors and the volume has been 'attention': sustained, unremitting attention to the implications and meanings of verbal structures artistically shaped by poets." Attention indeed. It was what made Michael the superb critic and meticulous editor he was. Whether in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works* (which he co-edited with Zachary Leader for *Oxford World's Classics*, 2003) or in his fabulous annotated anthology *Romantic Poetry* (2008; co-edited with Charles Mahoney – the headnotes and the annotations are so copious, the volume saves shelves of secondary

literature!), Michael always displayed this attention to minute, but telling detail – he could unravel poetry, yet let its irresolvable ambiguity reverberate with the reader. Rarely, if ever did Michael quote poetry to make a *point*. He quoted poetry to trace a trajectory, to draw attention – that word again! – to an ambivalence, to an undecidability.

It was this very attention to detail, to nuances – this mental presence – that made him such a great speaker: whether he lectured or recited poetry (*was* there really a difference? *was* not every one of his lectures at the same time a performance of poetry?), there was always this musical quality to his deliverances, both with respect to the overall architecture of his composition and with respect to the tonal changes, variations, and permutations of his *Leitmotifs*. You could really tell, if you did not know already, that Michael was himself a poet (and a published and an award-winning poet, too: *The Stripped Bed*, 1990; *Wheel*, 2008; *Gangs of Shadow*, 2014; *Return of the Gift*, 2018).

Attention was also what characterized Michael in his encounters with others. I do not think that anyone who met him at a conference could ever forget him: his ruddy face, his laughing eyes, his generosity, his wonderful irony, never hurtful to persons present or absent. Michael was a scholar of the highest calibre – he was also one of the finest colleagues I have ever had. And the same qualities singled him out in both fields, as a scholar and a gentleman: respect (for others, for the text), decency (in dealing with conflicting readings, both in human and in textual terms), consideration and circumspection in all his affairs, and, above all, integrity, that is, identity of what you believe, what you say, and what you do.

I first met Michael at the 1992 Salzburg Shelley Bicentenary conference. I think I remember we crossed our swords over the interpretation of the final three lines of "Mont Blanc" (the ones that had given the title to his first book – was I mad?). Many occasions were to follow: coffee on a sunlit square in La Valetta, Malta; his unmatched hospitality after he had invited me to give a lecture in the first year of his *Institute for Advanced Study* at Durham University; the night we spent in Schwabing, after a Munich lecture of his, when my wallet was stolen from my jacket while the two of us, totally absorbed, were discussing – poetry, of course; the conviviality, which he enjoyed so much, at the Wuppertal GER conference, and his delight in riding the *Schwebebahn*; running into him, unexpectedly, in the Bodleian – he simply had to check a Shelley autograph at the very last minute; his stellar oratory performance at the Byron conference in Gdansk in 2015, on the stage of the Gdansk Shakespeare Globe; his enviable steering of a challenging board meeting in Paris the year after that; and, most memorably, a late night talk at Grasmere, just the two of us, that lasted until three in the morning or so,

when he tried to woo me back to the Wordsworth Summer Conference – the only one to do so.

None of this is forgotten. Nor do I think I am the only one to profit so immensely from his boundless generosity, from his exceptional warm-heartedness, and from his exemplary decency. He was a singular human being. He is irreplaceable.

In his poem "There" (from *Wheel*), Michael writes about

the hope
that dreams will map coordinates of a place

breathing a stillness so like movement
he might not be dreaming but stepping

out of a house, only to enter its double,
except that where the first house now looks dark

the second glimmers – on the front door letters
beckon; he reads "There is this other place..."

After having fought cancer bravely for over a year, Michael O'Neill passed away on December 21, 2018. He will not, he cannot be forgotten.

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