

The theologians' poet laureate

Micheal O'Siadhail's work is admired and quoted by leading theologians. As his poetic output is gathered into one collection, he talks to *Pádraig Ó Tuama*

I ASKED Micheal O'Siadhail how many languages he spoke. "Oh, I've kept up with seven or eight," he says, "English, Irish, Welsh, Icelandic, French, German, Norwegian, and Japanese."

He worked as a linguist for almost 20 years, beginning teaching the subject at Trinity College, Dublin, in 1969. His academic career included two university posts in Dublin, and visiting lectureships in Harvard, Yale, and the University of Iceland.

He understands himself as a poet first, and a linguist second, however. "I learnt linguistics in the way a sculptor learns geology."

Far better known in Ireland than in the UK, O'Siadhail has been prolific, producing 13 volumes of poetry since his first, in 1978. Last year, these were compiled by Bloodaxe into a collected edition (Books, 29 November).

His plentiful words are carefully chosen. His topics range from private to public concerns, and his writing is imbued with a deep belief in what he calls "the ministry of meaning". Meaning is a word he returns to throughout our conversation. Even when writing about the most dreadful circumstances, like the recent death of his wife, his firm focus on life in the midst of decay is arresting.

Now 66 years of age, he is a tall man, with a soft accent, and I am aware of a quality in his tone of voice, which I can only call kindness. He married Bríd Ní Chearbhaill, from Co. Donegal, in 1970, and they made their home in Dublin.

Bríd spent most of her life as a teacher, and, later, headmistress. She died, after a long illness, in June 2013. While O'Siadhail's early poetry is full of sensual references, and warm praises of love, it was his 2005 collection of poems addressed to Bríd, *Love Life*, that caused the Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, David Ford, to call her "the most written-about woman in Ireland".

O'SIADHAIL'S first collection, *The Leap Year* (1978), is filled with a certain foreboding about ageing. "I had a terrible dread of death as a child, and I have tried to face it," he says. "I am trying to make it so that death doesn't have the last word. There are much worse things than death: to become bitter, warped, or dead as I live. I try to be in love with life. And this is my resolution and I stick to it."



GILLIAN BUCKLEY

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"My conclusion is that, by facing finitude, you release yourself from compulsions — I think of addictions like drink and drugs, but also overwork, which is the acceptable drug these days. By facing finitude, we might be released to savour, released to enjoyment."

The new collection, unusually for a book of poetry, has a thematic index, which is helpful for exploring its underlying intuitions rather than just its chronology. Intriguingly, it contains more than 40 references to jazz. Jazz captures him because it has "an exuberance which has transcended suffering".

In "Glimpses", he writes:

Depths of survival. Klezmer or jazz or céili,
A story squeezes at the edge
clamours of music;
Out of darkest histories,
profoundest gaiety.

He is also drawn to the improvisation at the heart of jazz. "Creation is always some kind of improvisation," he says. "So, in a manner of speaking, creation is itself jazz."

O'Siadhail is a man of faith, although he will not describe himself as a "religious poet". None the less, his poetry has gained traction

through its appeal to theologians, notably Professor Tom Wright, and Professor David Ford, a close friend.

I ASK what he thinks about the statement by the poet Patrick Kavanagh that every poet must be a theologian. He replies: "I suppose it must mean that both poetry and theology are in the project of seeking meaning." I wonder whether he could imagine a conversation between jazz and theology, and he directs me towards his friend's comments on jazz.

In Professor Ford's forthcoming book *The Drama of Living*, a commentary on St John's Gospel, he draws (as he often has) on O'Siadhail's poetry. Jazz, he says, can teach us about the drama of living. Just as musicians must work within a profusion of melodies and possibilities in a reciprocal improvisation, to come up with a coherent performance, Professor Ford argues, so, too, must human communities. "In the drama of living, the deepest understanding is shown in the wisest improvisation."

There is a long and warm friendship between Professor Ford and O'Siadhail, built on a shared love of words, and professional collaborations in performance, and print. I tell O'Siadhail that, when I saw

them share a reading at Greenbelt in 2005, what struck me most was the deference and respect that each showed for the other's work.

"Friendship is improvisation," he responded, "but also, at the heart of friendship, is vulnerability, which has an element of jazz, too. In friendship there is the vulnerability of one person saying to another 'You are important to me.' With this must come trust and loyalty."

"I went to boarding school from the age of 12 to 17; so, in a way, I was brought up by my friends, and friendship is in many ways the axis of poetry and theology. I find meaning in human relationships: the greatest meaning is found there. There is a perichoresis in the dance of relationship, love, and friendship."

It was Professor Ford's references to O'Siadhail's poetry which brought it to the attention of Professor Wright. Professor Wright told me that he was immediately struck by "a sense of celebration even of the sad and puzzling things life. . . I recognised so much in those poems; as always, with good poetry, he drew attention to things I recognised at once, but hadn't put like that to myself."

THREE of O'Siadhail's poems appear as motifs in his recent book *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, building on what Professor Wright called "a collaboration of theology and the arts to make a performative celebration of belief".

Professor Ford tells me that he "most often finds more in Micheal's reflections on the Gospel than in a foot-high stack of commentaries". O'Siadhail's conjoined poetic and linguistic vocation form their own commentary in "Logos", a poem that reflects on the inclusion of the word in the opening of St John's Gospel:

Although its root had only meant
"to pluck"
Or "gather" and then "to read
together",
"To tell", "to speak", and so to
"the thing said"
Which in turn takes on a life of its
own.

Professor Wright says that the collection *Tongues* reflects the integration of the poet and linguist. "So many pictures, so many vivid images, and just as he has taught us to celebrate the rich diversity of life as a whole, so these poems teach us to celebrate the rich diversity of human language, from grammatical constructions and verbal conjugations through to the extraordinary complexity of those Chinese characters."

He also recalls a recital, when he was Bishop of Durham, in Auckland Castle. The poetry bill for the evening was to have been a reading by O'Siadhail from his collection *Love Life*. The setting for the reading was a firelit room filled with Zurbarán's oversized paintings of the 12 sons of Jacob. With such company, O'Siadhail interspersed love poems with those from *The Gossamer Wall*, which deal with the Holocaust.

"Micheal was standing in front of the log fire with some of the room in semi-darkness," Professor Wright says, "and it was almost as though he was himself one of the figures in the paintings, having stepped down from the wall like the portraits in *Ruddigore*. It was an utterly memorable evening — unique, and rich, and moving."