

Some of us with canes,  
Or all or none of these.  
Don't you see how death  
Will be like receiving sight?

5.

My friend, God bless; I will call  
For all angels,  
In case I don't see you.



James Matthew Wilson

**A Dedication to My Wife**

*of a book of Anne Bradstreet's poems*

If ever two were one, then why not we?  
We have begot two in our unity,  
And find these incarnation of our love.  
Whatever other mercy from above  
Rains down on me—the joys of work, the ease  
Of sunshine, peace in thought—may He still please  
To let me share these goods with you; or, better,  
To let us know them in one heart, our letter  
Sign with one name, and find in every hour  
Not failing moments but a lasting power  
That, met with suffering or trial, endures,  
Like cellared wine grow fine as it matures.

## Micheal O'Siadhail's Assent

by James Matthew Wilson

Rarely does the work of a contemporary writer inspire comparison with those poets who first determined the course of the English poetic tradition. Micheal O'Siadhail, however, is such a figure, and the poet with whom he invites comparison is that most influential of early English poets, Sir Philip Sidney. In the sixteenth century, Sidney's undertakings in poetry were determinative twice over. First, Sidney was among the small number of English poets in the late-sixteenth century who came to understand how English meter operated and brought its practice to a state of smooth refinement. He made English meter a worthy peer with the prosodies of the other modern languages and, we can say without exaggeration, he thus made the verse of Shakespeare possible. But, second, Sidney also began translating the Psalms, completing the first thirty-nine. After his death from a gunshot wound at Zutphen, in 1586, his sister, Mary Sidney Herbert, continued her brother's project, creating *The Sidney Psalter*. The *Psalter* contains one hundred seventy-two poems (including the individual sections of Psalm 119 as a poem each). Over that entire body of work, the Sidneys repeat one verse form only once. The myriad-minded genius to invent one hundred seventy-one different variations of meter and stanza in the *Psalter* led English lyric poetry to take on its distinctive character. The Sidneys inspired the great devotional poets of the seventeenth century, including John Donne and George Herbert, to concoct their own ever-varying expressive stanzas. For a century, poetic ingenuity and devotional poetry were joined together through the influence of the Sidneys.

O'Siadhail has, in a remarkable way, rekindled the spirit of the Sidneys in his latest volume, *Testament*, which includes a "Psalter" of his own along with a "Gospel." Like the Sidneys before him, O'Siadhail, in the one hundred fifty poems of his "Psalter," offers poetic prayers whose forms are frequently, not to say continuously, inventive. The opening poem, for instance, takes up a practice that Philip Sidney often used, that of pairing regular end rhymes with internal rhymes, to compose an intricate surface of sound:

My time ripens, my days **mellow**,  
The lauding **cello** of this **being**  
I bow, **freeing** up each **string**

To praise, to **sing**, to **glorify**,  
The one that **I** concealed in **lines**,  
In hints and **signs**, yet out of **view**.

Now plays for **you** and hums your name. (Psalm 1)

End rhyme announces itself, but to rhyme the last syllable of a line with an interior one of the next is indeed to have “concealed in lines . . . hints and signs.” This prosodic practice is at the service of a genuinely Psalmic one. As O’Siadhail notes in the introduction to the volume, after decades of having held his religious devotion and his poetic practice at a distance—so that they only converged by way of “hints and signs,” while his faith was kept “out of view”—*Testament* will be just what its title indicates. The volume as a whole is a statement of faith, a great hymn of praise, a direct address, to the Father. It is at once a poem and a prayer.

One would expect writing on such a grand scale from O’Siadhail. The great Irish poets of the second-half of the twentieth century, including Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon and Michael Longley had built their work out of the convergence of two impulses: one for the well-made poem and another to allow poetic form to explore, however obliquely, the political and cultural questions raised by the Troubles in Northern Ireland. O’Siadhail attained an international reputation as a poet, and his poetry frequently took for theme political questions, but neither his language nor his attentions were as provincially focused as his older contemporaries. His poems were often more purely lyrical than theirs, but also, when those poems evoked the political, they did so on a more international register. This may seem the more remarkable given that O’Siadhail wrote his first three books in the Irish language, before turning for good to his native English.

Nothing O’Siadhail had written, however, anticipated the philosophical ambition of *The Five Quintets* (2018). Inspired by Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, O’Siadhail attempted to provide a vast genealogy of modernity as it, first, seemed to narrow, foreclose and disenchant civilization, and second, opened once more to possibility in a genuine post-modernity. Following Taylor, O’Siadhail indicated by the “post-modern” a provisional freedom, a work-in-progress of decentered but proliferating meanings, but also an overcoming of the reductive vision scientific modernity attempted to impose on all aspects of life. This civilizational narrative O’Siadhail tells in five frames: that of “Artistic creativity, economics, politics, science and the search for meaning in our lives.”

The thematic ambition was paired with formal ambition. O’Siadhail’s *Quintets* were composed in long sequences of sonnets mixed with haiku; regular sequences of blank and rhymed stanzas; blank iambic pentameter, including extended, distinct sections of headless or trochaic pentameter; and finally terza rima. The quintet on “meaning” explores

philosophy and theology in a heavenly dialogue and does so in terza rima; this made comparisons to Dante inevitable and, in fact, such comparisons were more just than they generally are. There are moments in the poem where O'Siadhail renders poetry capable of expressing the invisible beauty of music, as in his sonnets on Olivier Messiaen. The dialogue in heaven, with its sustained and substantive engagement with the highest forms of thought, really does achieve the sublimity of Dante's *Paradiso*.

*Quintets* was not without its weaknesses, however. Although his versification was assured, the sketches of artists he drew in his sonnets could sometimes be superficial and border on doggerel, a quality both expressed and specifically described in these lines intended to be about Handel:

The fireworks of my mind I can't refine—  
My patience is for work not self-control—  
I don't fly off the handle by design,  
My raw nerve ends just rush from role to role. ("Making")

The headless pentameters tended to thump rather than roll. The effort to define, to provide a panoramic account, of the modern sometimes miscarried, especially when O'Siadhail could not put aside his personal distaste for someone, as occurs in the Quintet on politics, when he discusses Margaret Thatcher. When I first read the great cantos on heaven, I thought it rather impertinent and premature for him to place there Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, who was "in love with all the least," given that Vanier was still alive. In fact, Vanier wrote a blurb for the poem! He died the year after the poem was published, but within months of his passing, reports of his systematic and extensive, decades-long, cultic sexual abuse of women began to appear. Call no man a saint until he be dead.

Overall, however, the *Quintets* had achieved something that poets had been struggling to realize for a century: a poetry capable of giving form to serious and extended thought and to give condign representation to the theological heights of reality. Not since Wordsworth's *Prelude* had a poem of sustained reflection succeeded, and O'Siadhail's intellectual range far surpassed the romantic poet's. Even Dante and Pope had not dared to allow ideas to hold center stage in their poems the way O'Siadhail did.

To find O'Siadhail, then, in his next book, turning to the divine in such a concentrated and unreserved manner seems destined and desirable. Few things have proven more difficult for modern poets than to rejoin poetry and prayer in a compelling manner. Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Claudel's *Five Great Odes* are among the greatest poems of the twentieth century and provided O'Siadhail a partial model in *Five Quintets*. To turn,

however, from the meditative and descriptive poetry of the *Quintets* to something like pure prayer was bound to prove a difficult challenge. The direct address of prayer to God rarely includes the redundancy of exposition; after all, God knows all and only awaits our engagement with him in orison. Prayer often leads us to self-discovery through speaking plainly rather than through speaking poetically; when we do deploy ornate formulae, they are generally in union with the Church and intended to be at once impersonal and liturgically precise. In brief, several qualities of prayer do not obviously lend themselves to lyric poetry.

Sometimes, O'Siadhail unites them nicely, as in these lines which paint a scene before prayer rises beyond it:

It has dawned again on all you move,  
You have drawn the curtains from your skies.

As in paradise so too on earth  
Insurgent love as you entice the sun

Now to silver our East River's flow;  
All creation's on the go once more. (36)

Sometimes he finds a striking and delightful figure for the expression of praise and devotion:

Your glory sings out among passers-by—  
So let the world and who lives here shout for joy!

Even the honk of commuting cars acclaim  
Your splendor and exalt your name tonight.

The bricks and girders of buildings bend to you . . . (55)

Along the way, he strikes us with his Sidney-esque ingenuity in verse, as in the eighth psalm, where almost all the lines run in what is called a "broken-backed" (missing an unstressed interior syllable) tetrameter:

You fought me off, turned away—  
I yearned for you, hidden God.

Unbidden love you reveal  
Renewing me by surprise. (6)

Other psalms run in quatrains and tercets with mirrored rhymes. The victory in the volume as a whole, I must confess, is pyrrhic. O'Siadhail sustains his high note of praise for one-hundred-fifty poems, but the praise itself is too rarified, stripped of its particular circumstances, its dramatic occasion, and also, much of the time, from distinctly memorable expression. Poems are essentially bound to these things in a way prayers are not.

O'Siadhail's typical language is colloquial, and he welcomes into his verse the figures of speech of everyday life. He is hardly alone in that, but when most poets use the familiar and common as pigment for their art, they make the familiar unfamiliar in order to deepen our understanding. Consider, for example, the great sixteenth-century song of John Dowland, "Fine Knacks for Ladies":

Fine knacks for ladies, cheap, choice, brave and new!  
Good pennyworths—but money cannot prove  
I keep a fair but for the fair to view  
A beggar may be liberal of love

Though all my wares be trash  
The heart is true, the heart is true.

The theme is traditional: the lover has nothing in a material way to offer the woman he loves, but he does have the sincerity of his love, which may prove more valuable than jewelry. What he says is not new; how he says it is. Dowland has the lover speak in the language of a merchant barking his wares: his love is like a fine jewel, and yet cheap (free), choice (rare, exclusively for her), brave (well-made, stout, faithful) and new (virginal). It is cheap as a penny, but money, he proclaims, does not matter. He keeps a "fair," a shop stand, but for the "fair" (the beautiful) to see. And so, though he is a beggar, without money, he can be liberal, large-giving, with the currency of love. His external wares are "trash," but it is the interior heart that he would sell to his beloved. In sum, the language of the marketplace illuminates, makes fresh and unfamiliar, the common experience of love.

O'Siadhail does not metaphorically transform the colloquial so much as settle for it. The alarm clock goes off: "My wake-up bleep announcing praise" (7). The labor of Adam's curse is brilliantly joined to the language of modern trucking—"Sweating our brow on heaven's long haul" (17)—but O'Siadhail does not develop the conceit, but simply moves on. When he sins he has "missed the mark, / Falling short," but lest despair set in, he longs for God's "olive branch" (50). He wants life in the world to continue, so he's a "Peter Pan" (48). The clichés remain inert clichés. Any

of these passages may plausibly find its place in a poem, but the poem needs to transform and examine their meaning. Instead, they come to appear as simply under-thought, overly-familiar expressions.

Sometimes O'Siadhail does deploy familiar language to develop a sustained conceit, a pattern of figures of speech that *could* amount to a whole greater than the sum of the parts. This he essays when he speaks of memory as a "database," love "scrolling down screen," of God's omnipotence as a "cradle of meshed nanowires," and concluding:

So sustained by your being's own worldwide web,  
I will trust in the linkage of your all-seeing love. (59)

I applaud what is clearly a risk of vulgar taste to explore whether the argot of contemporary techno-speak might reveal something about God and man, but this particular "yoking by violence" of the heterogeneous, as Johnson put it, is, again, inert.

What exactly is this fault I am finding? For contrast, consider John Donne's "Holy Sonnet XIV." There, Donne compares God and his grace to an army besieging a town. Over the course of those fourteen lines, Donne discovers that only a conquering army can break down his unjustified walls; the interior of his soul is ruled by a "viceroy" captive to the devil. Only the rapture of grace can save him, but that means he must be conquered by a spiritual good analogue to those grave evils of raping and pillaging:

for I,  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

Donne's wit is strenuous, and he strains us to imagine how radical is religious conversion. For a quieter but no less brilliant use of wit, consider George Herbert's sonnet, "Redemption." Like the O'Siadhail and Donne poems, Herbert explores a single conceit across the poem, that of Christ as a "rich Lord" and Herbert himself as suing for "A new small-rented lease." The tenant searches for his Lord in great places all over, but at last comes across him only among "thieves and murders." The Lord replies, "*Your suit is granted*" and dies. The very notions of what it means to be a rich lord and what it means to have this lease of life from God are deepened through Herbert's conceit.

O'Siadhail in several verses introduces just such a conceit. He prays that we learn "To treasure this habitat we loan / . . . / As tenants at will we're passing through" (66). And, at the very end, he deploys a scheme that

is quite evocative: “Show us your caretakers how to care” (66). The repetition of “care” focuses our attention on what it means to be a “caretaker,” that is, someone charged with tending something that properly belongs to another and is, therefore, more properly the object of someone else’s deepest care. And yet, real-estate, for Herbert, was a metaphor for salvation; for O’Siadhail, it’s the literal stuff of the environment in crisis. We find several such fine, if under-imagined, moments in *Testament*.

My argument is not that Donne and Herbert are superior at a common poetic practice to O’Siadhail, but that, most of the time O’Siadhail’s practice is different in kind. He embraces overly familiar language as if it sufficed in itself to make good poetry, rather than, as it were, torturing it until it becomes revelatory, to make us see the universal mysteries in striking new light. This kind of revelation is the essential function of the lyric poem; the lyric mode takes the universal and so also the typical for theme but makes it unfamiliar either by a) its vivid, concrete realization of the particulars of that theme or b) by figurative language that makes us see the previously invisible implications of the visible.

O’Siadhail can do this. He just does not do it enough. In consequence, *Testament* begins to feel like a long slog, repetitive, inert and dull. For my part, by the time I reached “Gospel,” I was enervated and could see it as doing little more than offering extensive but undeveloped paraphrases of episodes of the Gospels. In consequence, we can praise O’Siadhail as an innovator of poetic form and as a poet to whom we must look for ways by which the realms of metaphysics, theology and prayer can find plausible and compelling poetic expression. In this, he’s a figure on a scale with Sidney. But critics have long said there was something essential missing from Sidney that made his work technically brilliant but intellectually shallow. There is something missing from O’Siadhail’s book, too: the inventive wit that delights and engages precisely because it can take even the most hackneyed stuff of everyday life and make it shine forth with surprising depths.

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