Michael O'Neill

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PROFESSOR MICHAEL O'NEILL WAS ONE OF THE OUTSTANDING SCHOLARS of Romantic and post-Romantic poetry of our age, and a respected poet who published five collections of poetry that garnered awards such as the Cholmondeley Award (1990). Michael died of oesophageal cancer on 21 December 2018, at only sixty-five years old. Michael wrote his D. Phil on Shelley at New College, Oxford and his thesis was published in the Oxford English Monographs series as *The Human Mind's Imaginings: Conflict and Achievement in Shelley's Poetry* (1989). Michael spent his career of almost forty years at Durham University, and during his tenure at Durham, he was twice Head of the Department of English Studies (1997-2000, 2002-2005) and a founding Director (Arts and Humanities) of the Institute of Advanced Study. Beyond Durham, he was a Founding Fellow of the English Association, and served on the editorial boards of *Romanticism*, the *Keats-Shelley Review*, *Romantic Circles*, *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, and *The Wordsworth Circle*, also serving as Chair of the Wordsworth Conference Foundation until shortly before his death, and he was a member of the International Byron Society's Advisory Board. Michael was posthumously named as one of the Keats-Shelley Association of America's Distinguished Scholars at MLA in Chicago in January 2019, for Michael's instinct to serve and educate made him a vitally significant presence throughout literary studies.

Michael was born on 2 September 1953 at Aldershot, to Peter (a surgeon) and Margaret (a GP), and he was the eldest of seven brothers and sisters. The family moved to Liverpool in 1960 where Michael attended King Edward's College, and as well as distinguishing himself academically, he was a talented rugby player and cricketer. In 1973, he won an Exhibition to read English at Exeter College, Oxford, where he graduated with a double first. Most importantly, not only did Michael have a stellar academic career, but he loved and was loved by his family. Michael met his future wife, Posy McKendrick, when they were next-door neighbours in Liverpool, and she is the sister of his lifelong close friend and fellow poet Jamie McKendrick. They married in 1977, and for over 42 years, they lived in Durham with their son Daniel, now an academic in History at Nottingham University, and their daughter Melanie, whose daughter Millie (Michael's biggest fan) was born in 2012. Michael was a devoted husband, father, and grandfather, and he spent as much time as possible with his family. All of them feature in Michael's poetry from the beginning of his poetic career. Above everything else, Michael was a family man.

His career bore witness to his astonishingly wide-ranging intellectual interests. From his co-editorship of *Dante Rediscovered: From Blake to Rodin* (2007) to his co-authored book on *Auden, MacNeice, Spender: The Thirties Poetry* (1992), Michael's writing spanned centuries, languages, and genres. He was known primarily as a scholar of Shelley, and his monographs centred upon

Romantic poetry and its legacies. He was a co-editor of *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, volume 3 of The Johns Hopkins University Press edition (2012). He also edited *Percy Bysshe Shelley. The* Defence of Poetry *Fair Copies: A Facsimile of Bodleian MSS. Shelley e.6 and adds.d.8* (1994). His first monograph, *The Human Mind's Imaginings: Conflict and Achievement in Shelley's Poetry* (1989), was a landmark publication that signalled his abilities as a close reader of poetry able to reveal the roads between Shelley's poems that Harold Bloom, a major influence upon Michael, had seen as vital to understanding poetry. The reader traces, through Michael's brilliant exegesis, 'the drama of Shelley's struggle with his language, his emotions, and his imagination' (p. 3). In *Notes and Queries*, L. M. Findlay rightly predicted that Michael's 'analyses of a wide range of works will surely prove influential in the years ahead'.

With his next monograph, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (1997), Michael brought together the 'big six' along with twentieth-century poets, Yeats, Stevens, Auden, and Clampitt. The book considers the importance of thinking about 'poetry that displays awareness of itself as poetry' (p. xiii), and insists on the value of poetry as what he refers to elsewhere as 'a mode of knowing'. Recovering the imaginative and aesthetic value of poetry, the monograph insists poetry's tough-minded scrutiny of its own worth and potential. Nicola Trott praised *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* in *The*

Review of English Studies as offering readings that 'have superb emotional feel and technical know-how: they confirm that criticism has a highly developed, flexible, and above all capable language for talking about poetry—a language that has too often been shamefully neglected or disregarded. If you want to be reminded of that language at its most intricate and profitable—not to mention pleasurable—this is the book for you'. Her emphasis on Michael's ability to write critical prose lyrical in its beauty while incisive in its judgement encapsulates the pleasure of reading Michael's work. Writing criticism while being a practising poet afforded him an insightfulness and aesthetic power beyond the disciplinary norm.

His final monograph, *Shelleyan Reimaginings and Influence: New Relations* (2019), is perhaps his finest achievement. In this book, Michael shows Shelley's poetic subtlety to grow out of his responsiveness to his predecessors and peers, and Shelley's significance as an influence to be based on his openness to his reader's own interpretative modes. For Michael sought to allow Shelley's voice to lead him into new ways of understanding the Romantic poet: his erudition, insight, and vitality made him an ideal reader of Shelley, and one to whom Shelley could entrust the 'electric life' of his poetic thought. This remarkable book considers Shelley's relations to his influences and his readers from Plato, Spenser, and Milton, up to a reading of A. C. Bradley's critical response to the poet. The subtlety and erudition of the writing bears witness to Shelley's absolute centrality in the English poetic tradition and reveals how Shelley's remarkable sensitivity to his predecessors and peers helped to form some of his most distinctive poetry, prose, and drama. Thankfully, Michael was able to see bound proofs of his final book as Oxford University Press kindly expedited a copy to his home during his final days. It gave Michael enormous comfort to see his work in its physical form.

His career as a poet was similarly impressive. He wrote four collections of poetry and won the 1983 Eric Gregory Award and the 1990 Cholmondeley Award. *The Stripped Bed* (1990), was praised by Alan Ross in terms that stress the unusual brilliance of the work: 'Once or twice in a decade, certainly not more often, an original talent emerges'. The poems are suffused with a wry wit and an affecting personal voice, where the presence of one manages to heighten rather than undermine the presence of the other. 'The Irish Connection', where Michael played on the politics of writing poetry, has a knowing archness to it: '"With your name you should plug the Irish connection" / says a friend, his ear to the publishing ground // rather than my RP.' Revealing, with Byronic mocking detachment, the machinations behind even something so apparently high-minded as poetry, the poem moves far beyond scornful mischievousness into 'a rumour of green at the edge of the eye', seeking and finding something far beyond the quotidian realities of the marketing of art. *Wheel* (2008), saw Michael's work become still more accomplished, coaxing its reader into entering into its imaginative universe. 'Guilt' is one of the high points of the collection. Its tough-minded though haunted unlined couplets express the lurking fear of never reaching his earlier

safe harbour: 'with the absurdest fear you can't expel / that never again, not in all eternity, // will you be permitted to genuflect / while the sun flares through the great rose window'. The imagination and formal cunning of the poet propels his poetry into meditations that retain an accessible quality even as they paint gorgeously personal images. 'Adoption Hearing', withal its tension and frustration, closes with a portrait of his then tiny daughter, Melanie, 'wispy princess in your highchair, / wave the splodged sceptre of a spoon'. Shifting and dipping from tone to tone, *Wheel*, reveals the glorious multifacetedness of his perception as virtual reality and imagined states jostle for space.

Return of the Gift (2018) saw Michael's poetry ascend to new heights. William Boyd describes the collection in these terms: 'These are wonderful poems — wry, moving, wise — and written with a beautiful precision of language', and the emotional breadth and formal ambition of the collection repays his compliment. To take a couple of examples, 'To Do List', a deeply moving but oblique elegy for Michael's mother who died in 2016, swoops from the mundane frustrations of organising the funeral and reporting her death, to affecting, quasi-Yeatsian imaginings: 'dream / of her return as a young woman; live / with the images'. Stumbling through the motions, the poem embodies rather than records the baffled compulsions of grief and duty while spectres of the woman lost hover always on the borders of vision. 'Return of the Gift', the titular poem, shows off the poet's mobile, playful, but searing intelligence. When buying a copy of his first collection to give to a friend, Michael traces his realisation that he had purchased the very copy that he had gifted to other friends, who must have chosen to give away his work. Grinning and snarling, the lines trace 'a dead self down / in the cemetery of dead / friendships, deadened and dying', courting his reader's laughter while keeping us alert to the very real anger and loss in the poetry.

Crash & Burn (2019), Michael's final collection of poetry, was written while suffering from the cancer that would eventually kill him. Yet it is alive with the bravery, even bravura of the poetry he most admired as he sought and wrested beauty from pain. 'Crash and Burn' manages the Coleridgean feat of the conversational tone that careens into visionary splendour, and his description of the aftermath of a major operation thrusts the reader into his near-obliterated mind: 'a blinding Catherine-wheel of light, and then / a dizzying, relentless army of images / that seared their life on my pyretic brain'. Writing to Posy, Michael's adored wife of over forty years, in 'Spill', love becomes the final affirmation of the poem. '*I'll never / deserve you / never*', with heartrending cunning, subtly displays the poet's awareness that there is no time left. There is only the knowledge that nothing can follow. 'Never' stuns the lines into silence. He was always, as he writes, 'a surgeon's son', alluding to his father, Peter, who survives Michael. As such, the poetry is all taut sinew and carefully precise with its scalpel-like wit. He chose to close his collection with 'Hamlet', the play that Michael read again and again in his final days. Writing to that 'sweet prince', Michael writes to himself, of course, as great poets must, and like his hero, he 'dared to leap / or dared us to think we might leap or sleep'.

Michael's poetry, in its serious play between zestful verve and detached subtlety, showed his absolute fidelity to language, to the possibilities of meaning, and his unfailing attention to the question of the value of poetry. He was a poet-critic, ever aware of and alive to the power of words.

A prolific scholar, poet, and editor, Michael was also a gifted teacher who cared deeply about communicating with generations of students at Durham University. Michael taught impressively widely across the curriculum, lecturing on writers from Chekhov to Hart Crane, the Book of Job, and everything in between. His students were passionate about his teaching, from his undergraduate tutees to his PhD students. A large part of that owed to Michael's love of poetry that was entirely without ego or agenda. Michael did not try to teach his students to think like him. He resisted the Svengali model of teaching and instead he inspired his students to think in the best way in which they were capable of thinking. He taught his students to come to a poem on its own terms, to take pleasure in uncertainty, and to take risks imaginatively. As my PhD supervisor, and as one of my dearest friends, he taught me that poetry must be at one's fingertips, felt on the pulses, and central to life. His generosity, luminous intelligence, and fascination with literature, made being his student a privilege to any lover of poetry. Those who were fortunate enough to hear his lectures frequently remarked on the compelling power of his talks that made the poetry live a new life as he revealed its shape, meaning, and nuance to his audience. Michael's great gift was to teach with the same passion that he wrote.

Many of us working on Romanticism owe Michael a debt. He was an unfailingly generous mentor; not only to his own PhD students, but also to those he was an external examiner for, to those for whom he wrote references, and to those who simply heard him speak about the poetry that he loved. For what remains of Michael is love: love of poetry, love of teaching, and more than anything else, love of his family and of life itself. We were lucky to know him.

Michael and the author, Madeleine Callaghan