

THE COLOURS OF MAN

Micheál Ó Conghaile



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Mar leacht beag cuimhneachán ar fhear mór

Mike Diskín (1962-2012)

INTRODUCTION

Brian Ó Conchubhair

Micheál Ó Conghaile, born in 1962 on Inis Treabhair, an island off the Connemara coast, is well known to Irish-language readers as an award-winning writer. His three collections of short stories, *Mac an tSagairt* (1986), *An Fear a Phléasc* (1997) and *An Fear Nach nDéanann Gáire* (2003), some of which have been translated into various languages including Albanian, Croatian, German, Macedonian, Norwegian, Polish, Romanian and Slovenian, have garnered numerous accolades.

One may legitimately ask, therefore, why Ó Conghaile would translate his work into English rather than assume a political stance on translation à la Biddy Jenkinson, Louis de Paor and Michael Hartnett? His attitude is, perhaps, informed by several factors. Ó Conghaile has argued for translating the best of Irish-language literature and contends that translation into English promotes Irish-language literature internationally by facilitating its translation into other languages. As Michael Cronin posited in the *Irish Times* (7 April 2001): ‘no matter how often a book is

praised, the praise is meaningless for English-language readers without Irish until they can read the text in translation.’ Fundamental also, perhaps, is Ó Conghaile’s experience of submitting ‘Athair’ to the *Sunday Tribune*. The story lingered, receiving neither acknowledgement nor acceptance until a year later when Ó Conghaile serendipitously submitted ‘Father’, its English-language translation. Published and placed on the *Tribune*’s shortlist for story of the year, it subsequently won the competition outright and earned Ó Conghaile the prestigious Hennessy Writer of the Year Award. Recognition is important for authors and few authors are willing for their works, however pure or serene, to blush unseen in dark, unfathomed caves of Irish-language journals or on the bottom shelves of bookshops.

Ó Conghaile’s decision to write in Irish is neither politically motivated nor culturally charged. He writes in Irish not for love of the language but because it is his first language – the language in which he best creates. Were he more comfortable writing in English, that would be his medium of choice. He never envisions himself writing in English, but is nevertheless happy to have his work translated:

Dá mbeinn níos fearr ag scríobh i mBéarla, scríobhfainn i mBéarla le bheith fírinneach. Ní le grá teanga atá mise ag scríobh i nGaeilge ach le grá don ealaíon atá idir lámha agam. Ní bheinn ar mo shuaimhneas ag scríobh i mBéarla ... Ní fheicim mé féin ag scríobh i mBéarla go deo ach ba bhreá liom dá n-aistreofaí an chuid is fearr dá bhfuil scríofa agam agus go mbeadh fáil níos leithne air.

[Were I better at writing in English, I would write in English, to be truthful. I don't write in Irish for love of the language but for love of the art I'm engaged in. I wouldn't be at ease writing in English ... I never see myself writing in English but I would like if the best of what I have written were translated and more widely available.]

This urge has as much to do with attracting and enticing readers as it has with recognition. Writers write to be read, not to be admired for cultural nationalist principles or praised for principled linguistic stances. Writers pine for responses, for connection from readers. The urge to be translated is a need to expand the potential readership and render the labour of love accessible to as broad, as wide and as diverse an audience of readers as possible. It is in essence a democratic urge to share, commune and connect; to engage with a broader and wider spectrum and enter the light of other languages and cultures.

Ó Conghaile's use of language is contemporary, uncluttered and comfortable in its own skin. In keeping with the thematic consistency of these stories, there is here an embrace and celebration of the demotic, the natural spoken vernacular, rather than a kowtowing to some idealised petrified form of language. If the scenes are at times fantastical, the language is always grounded and playful, honest and true, yet keenly aware of, and alert to, its own hidden meanings and metaphorical potential. *Mac an tSagairt*, his first collection, stirred controversy not only for its thematic focus on abortion, suicide, marital break-up, expulsion from home and children born out of wedlock, but for its then sensational use of colloquial Irish, heavily laced

with English borrowings, international cognates and Anglo-American syntax. Subsequently Ó Conghaile explained in an interview in the *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* (2005, 56) that his objective was:

to capture the contemporary language of the characters in the *Gaeltacht* [Irish-speaking area] I was writing about. I suppose as a writer that is the best thing I brought with me from my home and from being an Irish speaker. An ear for the spoken language ... or I should say languages as there are different levels of the Irish language spoken in the *Gaeltacht* ... Normally, when writing conversation, I would stick to that and that might mean mixing some words or phrases in English in through the Irish. There are times when the word in English is a lot stronger than the word in Irish. It can hit a lot harder. If the English word is used in the *Gaeltacht* it has a stronger register for me as a reader and a writer than the Irish translation ...

In relation to his successful translations of Martin McDonagh's plays and the incorporation of a similar linguistic strategy, he rationalised his approach in a lecture at the 2012 American Conference for Irish Studies in New Orleans as follows:

Bhí na focail Bhéarla i bhfad níos láidre, níos cumhachtaí agus bhí níos mó fórsa ag baint leo – rud a bhí an-soiléir domsa ón gcaoi ar ghlac an lucht éisteachta san amharclann leo. Glacaim leis gur bochtú ar an teanga – an Ghaeilge – é focail dá leithéid a úsáid ach is saibhriú ar an dráma, ar an léiriú, é – agus b'in an phríomhaidhm sa gcás seo. Go deimhin b'in an dualgas a leag mé orm féin ... An

chúis ná go bhfuil na focail Bhéarla úd níos cumhachtaí, níos scanrúla agus níos pianmhara ná na haistriúcháin Ghaeilge i síce an chainteora Gaeltachta.

[The English words were stronger and more powerful – something that was very clear to me from the way the theatre audience reacted to them. I concede that the use of such words is a degradation of the language – Irish – but it is a bonus for the play, for the production, and that is the objective here. Indeed that is how I tasked myself ... The reason is that those English words are more powerful, more intimidating and more painful for the Gaeltacht-speaker's psyche.]

This metalingual aspect, more often than not, is lost in translation. The hues and shades of competing languages, diglossic exchanges and the hidden linguistic and cultural history they betray are homogenised and standardised when translated. The metalingual back and forth and the code switching from the acrolect to the basilect, a key trait of Ó Conghaile's work, is as much a reflection of the community's personality as it is the author's creation, and gives an immediate and distinct style and location to the stories in the original. The minute gradations and imbalances are flattened; the interplay and chemistry between English, Irish, Hiberno-Irish and Mid-Atlantic-global-*english* are shredded in the linguistic blender, and English, as the dominant flavour, overpowers the delicate tastes, resulting in a powerful but less sophisticated linguistic palate. Such is the cost of translation. Narrative structure and thematic coherence may be maintained, but linguistic and stylistic integrity and interplay are often lost in the processed product. The translators here have embraced different styles

to re-create the strangeness and quirkiness of the original, but the task they faced was herculean given the linguistic constraints: reproducing a sophisticated cocktail using only one ingredient.

Ó Conghaile practises different genres but also embraces different styles – as Alan Titley observed in an early review in *Comhar* entitled ‘An bobailín á scaoileadh amach’ (December, 1987). Regardless of styles – realist, magic realist, postmodern or social realist – a compelling artistic and articulate use of language is constant. If best known for the fantastical, postmodern, non-realist stories (some of which appear in the 2001 collection *Twisted Truths*) chronicling incredible events, unlikely happenings and bizarre acts – often grotesque and unbelievable – such as many of the stories in *An Fear a Phléasc* and *An Fear nach nDéanann Gáire* – he is also adept at classical realism. *Mac an tSagairt*’s honest and realistic depiction of rape, suicide and abortion generated controversy – referred to in the 2005 interview mentioned above. In more recent collections, readers find additional realist stories such as the award-winning ‘Father’, ‘Lost in Connemara’ and ‘The Book of Sin’ competing with magic realist and postmodern stories such as ‘The Man Who Exploded’, ‘Seven Hundred Watches’ and ‘No Room in Heaven’. In his realistic stories Ó Conghaile depicts contemporary Ireland, specifically contemporary Connemara, at moments of intense emotional crisis: cancer, suicide, coming out, final moments before (and after) death. These touching and tender stories contrast with the verbal energy and black humour of his postmodern stories but speak to the varying styles and techniques evident in his three collections to date, and the story ‘No Room in Heaven’, from

a forthcoming collection entitled *An Fear ar Ball*, suggests yet another stylistic string to his bow, an evolution that speaks to an engagement and re-imagining of folkloric narratives.

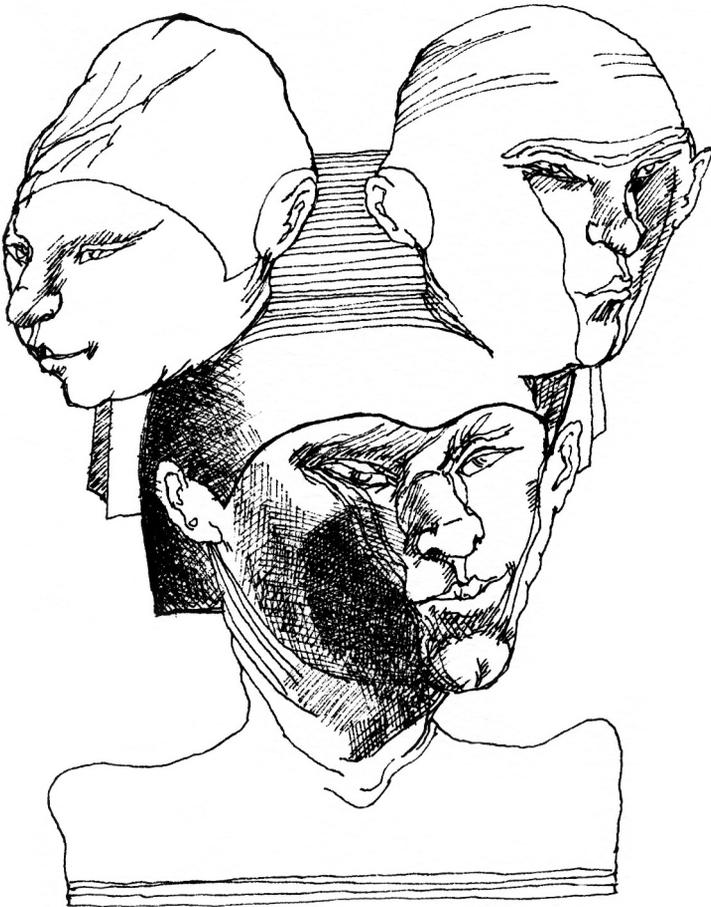
The dazzling colours of this collection laugh aloud and shout to us to join them in their riotous travels and call on us to reflect on moments of profound loss, serious challenges and deep fears. The tone, however, is reformist rather than revolutionary with change a constant factor, be it in ‘The Rock’, ‘The Book of Sin’ or ‘Father’. The old master narratives (truth, chronology, morality) are surely and steadily destabilised and undermined in stories such as ‘The Man Who Exploded’ and ‘The Man Who Never Laughs’. Yet in such stories that challenge and reject standard religious dogma and institutional authority, there is nevertheless a very strong sense of spirituality and wonder, and an equally strong concern with issues of forgiveness, repentance and mercy. The shock and aftermath of loss and the emotional human void left in the wake of deep personal injury is a recurring theme in all of Ó Conghaile’s work and no less so in these stories. And many of the finest compositions are those realist stories that tackle visceral emotive questions with searing honesty. The question of how to respond to emotional crisis is a frequent trope in his realist stories. As the character in ‘Father’ says, ‘A deadly silence is unworkable, impossible, as long, drawn-out and painful as a birth.’ When such questions are answered, they elicit black humour in many of his postmodern and non-realist stories – which establishes a binary between the realist and non-realist stories. Stories such as ‘The Mercyfucker’, ‘The Colours of Man’, ‘Father’, ‘Junctions’ and ‘Lost in Connemara’ speak to trans-

formation, loss, empathy, risk and truth. These stories tackle serious social issues that often emerge from broken and deeply flawed institutions and cultural practices. In several instances the trauma is exacerbated by mainstream culture's failure to recognise the existence of these 'illicit' and 'unofficial' relationships and their subsequent loss. Inherent in these stories is a subtle condemnation of greed, commercialisation and all-encompassing doctrines – be they moral, commercial, political or environmental crusades – that fail to recognise or accommodate human desires, failings and frailties. If there is a recurring motif in these stories, diverse in terms of themes, style and tone, it is the recurring chorus that living rather than life is sacred, à la Hazlitt's 'On the Love of Life'. Extracting the maximum from life and time is a repeated trope, particularly in 'At the Station' which stands in direct contrast to 'The Rock' and 'Whatever I Liked' where the character claims in court that he is guilty only of 'being alive'. These stories do not celebrate the oppressed or marginalised; to do so would reduce them to polemic. Although the stories have been welcomed by the gay community, they recognise and acknowledge submerged populations, and rather than apotheosise them, show them at their most vulnerable and weakest – under attack, grieving, recoiling, retreating, struggling to survive. This pluralistic collection celebrates the profusion of all the colours of man and all the shades, hues and tones of the spectrum contained within man and humankind. These colourful stories tell of people who cry out for understanding and shelter and who plead for permission and the right to live according to their needs and desires rather than abide by strictures and arbitrary codes that refuse to acknowledge or

accommodate them. This collection of seventeen stories, encompassing stories from a twenty-six-year period of writing, demonstrates not only a variety of styles, both literary and linguistic, but a deftness of style that characterises Ó Conghaile's stories and marks him among the most accomplished and distinctive short story writers of his generation writing in either English or Irish in Ireland. His work to date has found homes in various European languages; it is both fitting and timely, therefore, that a collection of his finest work should now be available to readers of English in a single volume.

THE COLOURS OF MAN





I was with him that night. Indeed, I was the last person to see him, bolting the gate from the inside. He was wearing a red polo neck, blue jeans, and a scarf the colours of Man United.

I thought he was in great spirits that night. We started off in Greens. Couldn't say exactly what time. It was well after seven, maybe nearer eight. You have to go out early on Sunday nights. You have to have an early start, he used to say, cursing the pubs. Ten o'clock was no hour to be closing, not at all. Not that he would drink an awful lot; he liked a few pints, that's all. Craving for a drink wasn't what brought him to the pubs.

He had four pints that night. I'm sure he had no more. He was only out for the company, like myself. The fun. The lads. Meeting people, that's what he wanted. I don't think I ever saw him stuck to a seat in a pub. He'd normally be standing at the counter, gabbing away. He'd stop people going by and pick on them, or pretend to, or ask them about something. They'd talk of drink, dances, football, women. He'd an eye for the ladies, like myself. What's the harm in that? A young lad. He would have been twenty-one next autumn. I don't think he was going steady with anyone at the time. I'd have known. Pauline had left him a long while ago, coming and going. Róisín, he dropped. She was no good, he said. None of us had a woman with us that night.

There was nothing cooking in Greens. We went off to

Doody's. It was coming up to nine. The music was great, but we were packed like sardines. We stayed there until closing time. It was good crack. We spent most of the night with the lads. Sussed the place out a few times, but got nothing. Bit of skirt there all right, talkative and lively among themselves, until you'd say something to them. We tried our best with them, but it was useless. They'd too many excuses. Didn't want to dance. Had boyfriends of their own. Had no interest in us. They were in company. Most of them looked at us brazenly, sour-faced. All we were after, in the heel of the hunt, was sex, or so they seemed to be telling us. We didn't care.

We finished at the disco. We didn't leave the corner of the hall until we'd demolished a six-pack one of the lads had brought in under his coat. The place was packed. We spent the rest of the night on the scent. 'How ya, how's it going?' We elbowed our way into groups. Circular groups knitted together. We weren't always welcome. They didn't need us. Too busy whispering, acting the fool, repeating stories.

We moved about. Spoke to a lot of people. Got the odd dance too. I remember he danced his heart out. He'd always liked a bit of footwork and that night was no different. As I said, he hadn't much taken and he had his wits about him. He danced to all types of music and fairly shook the floor. The Boomtown Rats had the most effect on him: 'I Don't Like Mondays'. He liked the music, the movements, and he moved with them. He would sing the words with gusto. Knew them all. I was out dancing too. You'd think by the end of the night that he hadn't got much out of it; or maybe I'm just thinking that now.

'We didn't do too good,' I said, ragging him a bit. 'Not a skirt or even a hem.'

He lit a fag. Inhaled deeply. A tunnel of smoke came from his rounded mouth.

‘Says who? What put it in your head it was a woman I was after?’

That stopped me in my tracks. For a second it wasn’t him that was there at all. Somehow it wasn’t him, but then it was again.

I made little of the outburst. ‘You wouldn’t say that now if you had an armful of one, or if you were saddling one up for yourself after the first whiff.’

He pretended not to react, but I saw signs of a smile on his mouth. He took another drag. Suddenly he burst out laughing. It was after one o’clock by then.

We spent about another hour hovering around outside. Someone took off to the chipper and came back with burgers and chips. We were messing around, lighting up, blathering and arguing about women. In praise, in blame, and, sometimes, in judgement. The Sunday match was talked about. The team was blamed; the referee damned. We talked about powerful motorbikes; Suzukis were praised and others. The great big cars we would like to drive some day if we won the Lotto. The Subarus and the BMWs that the joyriders in Dublin go for. We cracked a few jokes. Some of them foul.

Someone mentioned the casinos. We’ll go. It’s too early to go home. Who’d want to go home this early? Would we go or not? What’s the point? What’s the point going home? We have to go somewhere. Eventually a gang of them went there. Everybody, except the two of us, myself and himself.

We went straight home. I asked him into the house for a while; it was fast approaching three o’clock. I knew the old folks would be asleep and we’d have the place to ourselves.

In we go. I plugged in the kettle. Put out an ashtray. Took down the coffee and biscuits. Two hours we spent talking, about this and that, at our leisure.

We'd been to the same school and we talked about it. We'd left the same year. Dole after that. Often doing nothing. Quiet during the week and out at the weekends. Sleeping it off in the mornings. Doing the odd little job, here and there. Half thinking of going to England. Never did. Stuck around Galway. The odd trip to Dublin. He'd often say, actually, that he would like to live there. That was one of his plans. We talked about the girls we had ... the type of woman we'd like to settle down with someday ... films we enjoyed ... countries we'd visit ... the type of work we'd like to get. Work that would bring us money and bring meaning to our lives.

He'd stay until morning, you'd imagine, if I could keep up with him. No sign of sleep at all on him. From watching him and listening to him, you'd think he was only coming into his own. At last, whether I liked it or not, my eyes began to close and I conked out on the sofa.

'Wake up!' he said rudely, giving me a good shake. He stubbed out a butt in the ashtray. 'It's time I went home.'

I roused myself. It was making for five a.m. He wrapped his scarf around his neck. I was only thinking of sleep, exhausted. Strange, though, that I should walk out with him, and his people's house only a couple of hundred yards down the road. Maybe it was just to fill my lungs with fresh air before sleeping, to sharpen up a bit? Anyway, I went out with him.

Down the road we go, in the faintly brightening morning. That walk, that time of the night, I often remember now, as though a spirit were following me, a ghost. It was chilly. No

light shone from any house. He didn't say a word along the way. I often thought since then that I would have been happy had he spoke – about anything – so that I would remember that journey. We stood at the gate a mere moment. All I wanted – and I hate saying it now – was to hurry off home out of the cold.

A sharp knock on my bedroom door woke me. It was only seven. It was my mother – to break the bad news. News that left me frozen, lifeless in the bed for a long while. Who'd ever think it? What a weak and miserable little bird was this world, the way you could change it so drastically with the flick of a wrist.

What had he been bottling up all this time? Now, suddenly, I had a thousand questions to ask him. Wasn't I in the same boat as him? That's what I wanted to say. What a pity he hadn't told me of this plan, if he had it planned at all; I was his best friend. He played a trick on me and he won. In a way, it was easy to blame him. I remember now, I felt nausea and even anger. I didn't know rightly what to do.

I didn't go to the funeral at all. I couldn't. I took one single look at him in the coffin, that's all. I wanted to die myself. It was worth dying. We might be together again, the two of us and, if not, could it be any worse than now?

I was brought up to the graveyard some days later. They thought it might help me; that I'd have to go early or it would get worse with the passing of time. I could spend my whole life and never go there.

It taught me a lot. I understood things properly, I think, for the first time. Life was over, for ever. Football matches were over ... hanging around street corners ... winking at the girls ... all the plans we had ever made.

I won't visit the grave ever again, I'd say. It's safer that way. The grave's teeth are sharp; they've gone through me already. No, that's not how it should be. That's not how I want to remember him. I'd prefer to remember him young, full of fun, twenty years old, bursting with vigour, free and easy. And the two of us planning something new.

I visited his people that evening. I thought it best to get it over with. They were welcoming and friendly. Considerate. We drank a cup of coffee together. Coffee and biscuits. We were very nice to each other. The most difficult part, for me, was to know what to talk about. I spoke about him. They spoke about me, about themselves, about life, even about the weather, about everything. I decided not to go near them again for a good while.

I prefer now not to bring it up in conversation. I talk to myself about it a lot. Asking myself and tormenting myself. I haven't started answering myself properly yet. Maybe that's the way it suits him? That's why, maybe, he never told me anything. I'm the best friend he ever had, you see. He respected me too, I'm sure of that.

Do you know, sometimes when I stroll downtown I half expect to see him. He'll come loping around some street corner, his hands sunk deep in his pockets, keenly gazing at the world around him, whistling brightly the latest tune in the charts.

And I was with him that night. Indeed, in a strange way I'm happy that it was me who last set eyes on him ... bolting the gate from the inside. He wore a red polo neck. A red polo neck, old blue jeans, and a scarf the colours of man.

Translated by Gabriel Rosenstock