
The Interpretation of Tradition by Alan Titley.

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In the introduction to his survey of Irish literature, *The backward look*, Frank O'Connor asks, 'Is there such a thing as an Irish literature, or is it merely two unrelated subjects linked together by a geographical accident?'¹ This question has been central to studies of literature in Ireland for more than a hundred years and has been answered, as could be expected, in at least two different ways. On the one hand scholars of the Irish language or of what is sometimes quaintly called 'the Gaelic tradition' have tended to ignore writing in English; while those involved in what used to be known as 'the Anglo-Irish tradition' generally treat writing in Irish as a kind of background which validates but doesn't disturb their own point of view. Thus standard works such as Douglas Hyde's *A literary history of Ireland* or Robin Flower's *The Irish tradition* and Seamus Deane's *A short history of Irish literature* or Maurice Harmon's *Modern Irish literature, 1800-1967* seem to be dealing with entirely different universes. It doth seem that 'Irish' in these interminable debates can mean anything the author chooses it to mean within a clearly defined ideological position.

Although Frank O'Connor was never one to shirk a good row or hide his heart up his sleeve, it appears that his wrestling with this problem of one or two Irish literatures was genuine. He was ideally equipped to deal with the dilemma. Not only did he speak English and modern Irish, but he also was a considerable scholar of old Irish, which he learned out of his passion for the country's literature and civilization. This love is evident in all that he wrote about it, but most especially in his many translations of Irish poetry from the earliest times down unto the nineteenth century. Unlike most other writers on this topic, O'Connor concluded that he was dealing with one subject and that this merited a unified approach. Very few people have followed him down this road, although recent work by Declan Kiberd on modern Irish literature² and Robert Welch's *Oxford Companion to Irish literature* straddle both traditions with generosity and honour.

To treat of literature in the Irish language from its beginning and to do so outside the academy of accepted scholars might have been a foolhardy thing to do. Scholars can be a notoriously prickly bunch, guarding their borders with as much zeal as any armed functionary; and scholars of old Irish in particular can be notoriously aggressive in defending their *tuath* with adzes and spears against encroaching blow-ins. O'Connor, although sufficiently knowledgeable and tough-skinned to beat off any attack, had the good fortune to be supported in some of his ventures by one of

¹ Frank O'Connor, *The backward look* (London, 1967), 1.

² See in particular Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: the literature of the modern nation* (London, 1995) and *Idir dhá chultúr* (Dublin, 1993).

the high kings of Irish scholarship, professor David Greene.³ He may also have been seen to be at a disadvantage in approaching the critical enterprise as a mere writer, but mere writers, as we know, get inside the skin of craft and of wonder in ways that nobody else can.

Writers of English in Ireland have oft been required to stake out their position with regard both to the vast bulk of writing in Irish which preceded them and to the not inconsiderable stream which flows parallel to them. They can ignore it as many do, exploit it as Yeats did, parody it as Synge did, weave through it as Joyce did, have good fun with it as Myles na gCopaleen did, or worry over it as Thomas Kinsella does. There can also be the relationship of ambiguity which Frank O'Connor had. On the one hand he stated that literature in the Irish language 'may be said to have died' with Brian Merriman in 1805;⁴ on the other, he wrote stories in it himself and translated poetry composed well after the death of Merriman.⁵ Whatever he thought about his relationship to writing in Irish during his own time – and most of his life he simply kept his mouth shut about it – he saw it as a necessary duty to translate as much as possible of the earlier literature in order to make it known both at home and abroad. His books *The wild bird's nest*, *Lords and commons*, *The fountain of magic* and *The midnight court*, later variously selected to make *Kings, lords, & commons* (1961), are among the very best translations of Irish poetry that we have. This is in itself curious because O'Connor did not have any success or much interest in original poetry himself.

It is doubly curious because any translator of poetry must have a lively and sympathetic understanding of the society and of the people who produced it. I cannot argue that O'Connor didn't have this, but he had a decidedly quirky and sometimes even batty judgment of writers and works of literature which is both his glory and his weakness. He can be at turns brilliantly insightful, searingly imaginative, and then just plain wrong. But we are always aware of an intense and personal engagement with the literature. He shows no tiresome detachment, no two-handed objectivity, and when he gets bored he just tells us straight on up. The result is to draw us into the debate, and when we disagree with him, as I do again and again with equal vehemence, we feel that he would thoroughly enjoy a robust altercation about the nature of Irish literature and the possibilities of translation.

In *The backward look*, for example, he has a wonderful way with sweeping generalisations. 'The Irish had the choice between imagination and intellect', he declares, 'and they chose imagination' (5). Matthew Arnold and Lord Macaulay and purveyors of the myth of the helpless, hapless Celt would agree. 'Unlike Daniel Corkery, who wrote a very lyrical and wrongheaded book on it, I can see nothing to admire in Irish eighteenth-century poetry' (*backward look*, 114). This is an awful lot of poetry, and poets, and matters, and genres not to admire. Of twelfth-century Irish literature he says, 'It has no real prose, and consequently no intellectual content' (*backward look*, 86). This will be grating music to the ears of our thousands of poets.

³ David Greene and Frank O'Connor, *A golden treasury of Irish poetry, A.D. 600-1200* (London, 1967). He also says in his introduction to *The backward look* that in his discussions on Irish literature with professor Greene 'I have long ceased to remember whose ideas I have put forward, his or my own'.

⁴ Frank O'Connor, *Kings, lords, & commons* (London, 1961), xiii.

⁵ *Kings, lords, & commons*, 131 and 132-5. Also Frank O'Connor, *The fountain of magic* (London, 1939) 64, 67, 68, 72. For one of his short stories in Irish see 'Darcy i dTír na nÓg' in Tomás de Bhaldraithe, *Nuascéaltaíocht* (Dublin, 1952) 24-32. Some of his radio essays or reminiscences which are very similar to his short stories appear in *Aeriris* (Dublin, 1976), edited by Proinsias Mac Aonghusa, under the titles 'Fiche bliain d'óige', 'Nodlaig as baile', 'Leabhar a theastaigh uaim', and 'Oíche shamhraidh'.

Ranging over more than a thousand years, he refers to ‘the Irish type of mind, which is largely the mind of primitive man everywhere’ (*backward look*, 11). This could be construed as being an insult to the Irish or more seriously to those primitive men wheresoever they might dwell.

As against such opinions, his critical comments which depend on taste and judgment are often brave and incisive. He does argue that ‘scholars who are also men of letters should trust their instincts’ (*backward look*, 33), and we suspect he might be referring to himself. His opinion of the *Táin* or ‘Cattle raid of Cooley’ as ‘a simply appalling text’ and a ‘rambling tedious account’ of a long-forgotten war strike chords in honest readers (*backward look*, 33). He captures the mood of what most aristocratic poets must have felt when poetry deteriorated from syllabic to accentual in the seventeenth century: ‘Every peasant poet was hammering it out with hobnailed boots like an ignorant audience listening to a Mozart minuet. It is no wonder if it offended O’Hussey’s delicate ear; it often offends mine’ (*backward look*, 107). We know that O’Connor despised the poetry of vassals and churls composed in the misery of their hutments. And his assertion that the golden era of early Irish literature ‘ended with what I may call the Cistercian invasion, which in intellectual matters was direr than the Norman Invasion’ may seem like the sweep of another totalizing impulse, but it does have pith and substance (*backward look*, 256).

These whanging declarations make us wake up and take note. The exaggerating posture usually contains a big truth. His humorous description of the early Irish noun having twenty-five different cases with beautiful scholarly names such as the ‘neglective, desidative, fundative, privative, comitative, ascensive, augmentative, ingressive, depositive, parentative, progenitive, circumdative, and trespassive’ (*backward look*, 19-20) has its echoes in the professor who wondered how anybody could speak Old Irish at all since its verbal system was so complicated. O’Connor set himself the task of interpreting this tradition (which he often claimed to find ‘weird’ and ‘strange’) to a modern audience through his own translations.

There is no need again to revisit the difficulties or even the impossibilities of translation. The translator must choose either sounds or sense or meter or rhyme or a combination of them, or must interpret or crib or rewrite or whatever, but everything altogether can not be done. No matter what you do, finally and in sum, a translation is not the original poem. It may be a shadow, or an echo, or a ghost, or an excretion, or alike to a discursive description of live music, or a flat photograph of a once-pulsing multidimensional image, but the real thing it ain’t. For any decent writer words are physical, tactile, sensual things and the living stuff cannot be scraped away or washed off. The translator of Lorca’s *Poet in New York*, Ben Belitt, argues that

words, in whatever language, have a history which is not Esperanto or Sanskrit, or ‘the history of mankind,’ but the cultural consequence of their activity in the linguistic experience of the group – that words must be shouted into, like wells, rather than joined in a series like pipe-lengths; and finally, that for the poet, the momentum of words is as important and mysterious a trust as their matter, and that their momentum – their brio, their capacity to reveal the spirit at work within the letter – is rooted irrationally in the densities and ambiguities of the individual language.⁶

⁶ Ben Belitt, Introduction, *Poet in New York/Un poeta en Nueva York* (New York, 1955), n.p.

A translator will usually have the humility to acknowledge that cooking the original poetic goose leaves most of the sauce ungarnered and simply go for whatever is possible.

O'Connor's best translations from the early period of Irish literature are of those brief sententious poems occasionally written on the margins of manuscripts by either bored or frightened monks. In the Ireland of the ninth century the monasteries feared the barbarian Vikings who terrorized western Europe as well as their own patch. One scribe wrote in O'Connor's version:

Since tonight the wind is high,
The sea's white mane a fury
I need not fear the hordes of Hell
Coursing the Irish Channel.
(*Kings, lords, & commons*, 45)

Brendan Kennelly's translation reads:

There's a wicked wind tonight
Wild upheaval in the sea;
No fear now that the Viking hordes
Will terrify me.⁷

It is very difficult to compare both of these verses and entirely unnecessary to do so. They are epigrams that depend for their effect on our knowledge of what they are about and on their quick brevity. There is the added simplicity that the original does not carry any echoes that we can now grasp. Even though we can discern modern Irish lurking within the old, there is no way we can extract its feel or touch its tenor. The emotional impact of Old Irish is very largely a closed book. We can make a good guess at imitating its sound system but it reverberates nowhere; nothing sticks to it. Translators of the earlier poetry have generally gone for these brief marginal pieces because they circumvent the cultural battle of dealing with longer legal or encomiastic or quasi-official verse which did have echoes and did have all manner of cultural baggage and dingleberries hanging out of it. Even though very few people ever read these marginal poems for a thousand years between the ninth and the nineteenth century – perhaps nobody at all in most cases – they appeal to a modern sensibility which smells the pristine and the fresh from the birth of the Irish world off them, a dewy voice from the dawn of civilization. This is still hard to resist and the religious verse in their midst gives succour to tired twentieth-century Catholics in search of a coffee-table Celtic spirituality.

A different cultural problem faced O'Connor in his wrestlings with the later middle ages. The poetry of courtly love was common to Ireland, Britain, France and elsewhere in Western Europe. Although he was sceptical of 'vague suggestions of influence from Provencal and Norman-French' (*backward look*, 97), it is generally accepted now that if the jongleurs themselves didn't bring their wares ashore then somebody certainly did juggle them into Ireland. The difficulty here is not one of making the strange accessible but rather a technical turn of getting complicated Irish verse into English. In a note on his own translations from the same period Robin Flower comments that

⁷ Brendan Kennelly, *Love of Ireland: poems from the Irish* (Cork and Dublin, 1989), 17.

some apology is perhaps necessary for the substitution of simpler English lyrical measures for the intricate and subtly interwoven harmonies of alliteration and internal rhyme in the Irish. But the attempt to borrow those qualities of verse could only end in a mechanic exercise, which might be a metrical commentary, but could not be poetry. And to translate poetry by less than poetry is a sin beyond absolution.⁸

One feels that O'Connor would entirely concur. He solves the metrical problems by simply ignoring them, apart from giving his poems the shape and cut of what the originals looked like on the page. And yet in many cases, the point of these poems was their metrical ingenuity. Our age would accuse them of being all technique and no feeling, whereas the truth might be that the feeling resided in the perfection of the technique. It appears to be poetry of the starched collar, but within it bulges a powerful and sinewy neck. If we compare O'Connor's 'Hugh Maguire' to James Clarence Mangan's 'Ode to the Maguire'⁹, both of which are a translation of Eochaidh Ó hEoghusa's poem to his chief and patron composed in 1601 while he was on a campaign against the troops of the strengthening English conquistadores, we can see that O'Connor at least keeps the cut of the original. He hints at tautness and makes the requisite nods towards the coiled and smouldering passion of Ó hEoghusa. Mangan on the other hand is wild and diffuse and cumulative and exclamatory and turns the author into a Jacobean mad dog.

A translation can do only what a translation can do. If it is the vector of something, even anything, of the original we can be a mite happy. If O'Connor had a knack it was to get at the spirit of the thing and let that spirit sing if it could. In translating most Irish poetry from the late middle-ages until the present century the translator simply has to dump any notion of getting the meter right. There is not much point in being a life-support system for a piece of scaffolding. A good translator must soften hard facts and a good reader must take these boobs to be self-evident. O'Connor cottoned on to this early on and chose poetry which answered his own nature and sensibility. He was distinctly uncomfortable with the literary poetry from the mid-seventeenth century on, perceiving in it too many lumpen elements with neither the craft nor sullen art of the Bardic era, or the artless facility of the folk song. Consequently, we only get the very best of Ó Rathaille from him, one solitary poem by the great word-musician Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin, and nothing at all by the who of whos of Irish poetry in the late seventeenth century, Dáibhí Ó Bruadair. Scrubbed from the record also, to name but seven more luminaries among dozens well translated by others, were Pádraigín Haicéad, Seán Clárach Mac Domhnaill, Séamas Mac Cuarta, Donnchadh Rua Mac Con Mara, Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin, Cathal Buí Mac Giolla Gunna, and Peadar Ó Doirnín. This seems all the stranger when we note his love of Anthony Raftery, a person whose works he describes as being 'as close as genuine poetry has ever come to doggerel' (*Kings, lords, & commons* 132). O'Connor, however, being the independent spirit he was, did not suffer from a literary-academic complex and hoisted from the tradition just precisely what he liked and nothing else.

He did like the two greatest poems of the last decades of the eighteenth century, and his versions of them are his finest and most important as a translator. 'Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire' (*A lament for Art O'Leary*) and 'Cúirt an mheán oíche' (*The midnight court*) were composed within seven years of each other but are about as

⁸ Robin Flower, *Poems and translations* (London, 1931; repr. Dublin 1994), 109.

⁹ In Fiana Griffin, *Extracts from Irish literature* (Dublin, 1992) 24-5. O'Connor describes it as 'a torrent of nineteenth century romantic eloquence' in *The backward look*, 101.

different as the proverbial chalk from the legendary cheese. *A lament for Art O'Leary* is a traditional keen or funeral poem composed in an extempore fashion in honour of the dead person. In this case, it was sung or chanted by Eileen O'Connell on the discovery of the body of her murdered husband, and perhaps added to by herself and by others for some time afterwards. Arthur O'Leary was an officer in the Austrian Army – the Irish having none of their own and certainly not wishing to enlist in the British one – and when on leave at home treated the authorities with much less than the obsequious respect which they thought was their due as a ruling caste. They did what all great powers do with the annoying little gadflies who nip at them. They shot him. There is some rich irony to be had in the fact that one of the great poems of the western world about death and blood-letting was occasioned by the agents of the British Vampire. The former professor of poetry at Oxford University, Peter Levi, called it 'the greatest poem written in these islands in the whole of the eighteenth century' and opined that 'Goethe, and Thomas Gray, and Wordsworth, and Matthew Arnold ... might all have thought so'.¹⁰ Whatever about the opinion, he errs a little when he refers to it being written. It was, of course, an oral artefact and survived beyond all those countless thousands of other laments because of the force of the poetry and the tragedy of the story.

Its orality presents its own problems to the translator. And not just the fact of its being spoken, or rather sung, or chanted, or wailed, but the fact of its being torn from its natural surroundings of death and performance. 'Natural' here is also difficult. The lament was generally composed and performed at the wake of the dead soul. These wakes were, more or less, a party for the departing person (and a celebration of life for those still around) accompanied by booze and whatever passed for debauchery at that time. The corpses themselves were often brought into the music or the card games or even the dance (which is probably the origin of the stiffness of Irish stepdancers). This pagan relic was, not surprisingly, in constant conflict with the church, which viewed death as a much more solemn occasion. The traditional lament was a composition without prayer or angels or devils or intimations of the other world. It was an explosion of remembered life in the presence of death. And while there were probably no fun and games at Art's wake, because of the unnatural nature of his murder, it had its origin and its being in this strange ritual as exotic to us now as the burning of Hindu widows or the tying together of Chinese female feet.

O'Connor could only translate the words ripped from their sockets. He gets the rhythm dead-on, so to speak. It is a rhythm based on a long breath and on a single thought. When the breath gives out and the thought finishes, the stanza, if that's what they are, dies. A kind of pantometer. There would have been some break in a longer piece like this, which speaks for itself:

My love and my mate
That I never thought dead
Till your horse came to me
With bridle trailing,
All blood from forehead
To polished saddle
Where you should be,
Either sitting or standing;
I gave one leap to the threshold,

¹⁰ Peter Levi, *The lamentation of the dead with 'The lament for Arthur O'Leary' by Eileen O'Connell translated by Eilís Dillon* (London, 1984) 18.

A second to the gate,
 A third upon its back.
 I clapped my hands
 And off at a gallop;
 I never lingered
 Till I found you lying
 By a little furze-bush
 Without pope or bishop
 Or priest or cleric
 One prayer to whisper
 But an old, old woman,
 And her cloak about you,
 And your blood in torrents –
 Art O'Leary –
 I did not wipe it off,
 I drank it from my palms.¹¹

The original is as simple as that also, and as direct, and as uncompromising. It is difficult to foul up on the headlong rush of the poem and most translators have simply opened the gates and let it rip. The only infelicities take place with exclamations and endearments, which can be very culturally and linguistically specific. O'Connor, for example, translated Eileen's 'mo chara is mo lao thu!' as 'my love and my calf.' Cara is certainly more colloquially 'friend' than 'love' although it is analogous with other Indo-European languages that have the 'Car' bit linked with love; lao is certainly and literally a calf, but it hardly has romantic echoes for the normal twentieth-century English speaker who might not appreciate being compared with a young cow. Eilis Dillon gets round it differently by speaking of 'My friend and my treasure,' or 'My friend and my heart',¹² while Brendan Kennelly makes do with 'My lover' or 'My man', which may not be accurate but are at least sayable (*Love of Ireland*, 57-64). On the other hand, O'Connor can hardly be faulted for a line such as 'You gave me everything', which later became the first line of an early Beatles song and now jingles in the head accordingly.

The midnight court, which Frank O'Connor published in a separate volume¹³, has a much more sensibility-friendly look to it. It is a poem of more than a thousand lines of rhyming couplets in which the women of Ireland put their men on trial for being sexually timid, or just plain no good. It is funny, bawdy, explicit, dramatic and intelligent and in one declamation seems to destroy the stereotype of the repressed and puritanical peasant. That is to say, it is a poem which represents the direct opposite of the regnant assumptions of those ignorant of Irish culture. Apart from it being instantly attractive, and instantly accessible to people without any background in Irish society or history or literature, people are drawn to it because it is an endless source of ammunition for cultural and ideological battles. To the anti-clerical it is anti-clerical, to the libertarian it is libertarian, to the nativist native, to the Europhile Europhiliac, to the modernist modern, to the feminist it is pro-women or anti-women depending on which side of that particular Paglian-Dworkish camp they belong. This is partly because we know so little about the intentions of its author, Brian Merriman, and,

¹¹ *Kings, lords, and commons*, 111-12. This is a slightly different version from that published originally in *The fountain of magic* (London, 1939) 75-85.

¹² See Levi, *The lamentation of the dead*, 23-35.

¹³ Frank O'Connor, *The midnight court, a rhythmical bacchanalia from the Irish of Bryan Merryman*, translated by Frank O'Connor (London and Dublin, 1945).

intentional fallacies apart, so very little again about his life, origins, or literary circle. It was the kind of debate Frank O'Connor jumped into with his two feet flying and his two fists flailing.

His translation was published in 1945 and was promptly banned. This lengthy quote from his introduction gives a fair idea of the flavor of the ideas he was furthering and the battles he was fighting with this work:

There is no tablet in Clare Street to mark where Bryan Merriman, the author of *The Midnight Court* died, nor is there ever likely to be, for Limerick has a reputation for piety. Merriman [*sic*] was born about the middle of the eighteenth century in a part of Ireland which must then have been as barbarous as any in Europe – it isn't exactly what one would call civilized today. He earned five or ten pounds a year by teaching school in a god-forsaken village caled Feakle in the hills above the Shannon, eked it out with a little farming, and somehow or other managed to read and translate a great deal of contemporary literature, English and French. Even with compulsory education, the English language, and public libraries you would be hard set to find a young Clareman of Merriman's class today who knew as much of Lawrence and Gide as he knew of Savage, Swift, Goldsmith and, most of all, Rousseau. How he managed it in an Irish-speaking community is a mystery. He was obviously a man of powerful objective intelligence; his obituary describes him as a 'teacher of mathematics' which may explain something; and though his use of 'Ego Vos' for the marriage service suggests a Catholic upbringing, the religious background of *The Midnight Court* is protestant, which may explain more. He certainly had intellectual independence. In *The Midnight Court* he imitated contemporary English verse, and it is clear that he had resolved to cut adrift entirely from traditional Gaelic forms. His language – that is its principal glory – is also a complete break with literary Irish. It is the spoken Irish of Clare ... Intellectually Irish literature did not exist. What Merriman aimed at was something that had never been guessed at in Gaelic Ireland; a perfectly proportioned work of art on a contemporary subject, with every detail subordinated to the central theme. The poem is as classical as the Limerick Custom House; and fortunately, the Board of Works has not been able to get at it. (*midnight court*, 1-2)

There is very little in that chunk above that is defensible on even mildly scholarly grounds. Even if we allow the entirely understandable barbs against Limerick and do not deconstruct the idea of a 'powerful objective intelligence' there is enough bullshivism in it to keep us busy for years to come. O'Connor's picture of an Irish-speaking world completely cut off from the rest of the universe is a picture of his own invention, and his assertion that Merriman imitated contemporary English verse has been easily demonstrated to be false. It can only have been because he was at constant war with the kind of Victorian Catholicism which held sway in Ireland that he imagined Merriman to be an 'intellectual Protestant', even though others might see that to be a contradiction in terms. There was always a kind of lapsed Irish Catholic having recovered from their scars who confused tepid Protestantism with a liberal point of view. Add to that O'Connor's (let us call it) hatred of de Valera, whom he saw as a severe, controlling, puritanical figure and whom he associated with devotion to the Irish language, and we can follow his train of thought that Merriman had to be influenced by English literature and by the philosophy of the Enlightenment. He went further and asserted that Merriman's ideas and spirit came directly to him from Robbie Burns; when it was pointed out to him that Merriman came first he simply declared: 'On his own statements the scholars believe he came before Burns, but the thing is

impossible. He must derive from Burns!’¹⁴ A classic case of if you don't like the evidence, deny it.

There is nothing in *The midnight court* that is not the common stock-in-trade of European mediaeval literatures. All of the themes of free-love, unmarried bachelors, horny priests, unfulfilled women, lusty young men, deceived cuckolds, healthy love-children and dicey marriages were as much part of literature in Irish as of literature in any other tongue. What made Merriman different is that he bound it all together in one large dramatic and poetic work of art which was driven by a bonking swashbuttoning style. If O'Connor's judgments were simply wrong he gained a kind of victory when his translation was banned. It gave him publicity which he would never have got otherwise and proved once again that too much moral fiber produces a lot of crap. Consequent on the Censorship Board's banning, O'Connor wrote to the *Irish Times* and his letter was published on 17 July 1946. Part of it read:

Under the Censorship Act imposed on Irish writers by the Cosgrave government there was established a secret tribunal, empowered, without hearing evidence and without having to answer for its actions in law, to inflict some of the penalties of a court of law: to deprive an Irish writer of his good name, to seize his property and destroy his livelihood in so far as any writer earns a livelihood in this country. Thus, murderers, abortionists, bookies and publicans continued to retain the protection of the law, while literary men – some, like Mr. Shaw, the glory of their country – were outlawed ... The Censorship Board banned my translation; they did not ban the original ... The implication of this was clear; that I had deliberately introduced material which was not to be found in any other edition, and that this material was sufficiently indecent to justify the banning of the whole work.¹⁵

If O'Connor wanted a debate on the specific question of his translation of *Cúirt an mheán oíche* and on the more general one of censorship he certainly got it. The correspondence continued through July and August of 1946 and is one of the very few examples of a lengthy discussion of the merits of a work of Irish literature carried out in the public domain of a newspaper. One reader from County Mayo wondered what all the fuss was about:

The more I read the correspondence on this subject, the more I admire the sturdy virtue of my grandmother. For everybody who knows that famous, but disastrous, poem knows that the original is far more hectic than Frank O'Connor's (more or less) bowdlerized translation. Yet that heroic woman (my grandmother) must have heard that poem recited scores of times at wakes and weddings (as I have) and with additions more lurid than any lines which have been printed. Yet somehow she managed to go to her grave with her character intact.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Kings, lords and commons*, xii. O'Connor sees revolutionary mores and boldness of spirit where others simply see good rustic fun. David Daiches (in his *Robert Burns and his world* (London, 1971) writes, 'But though Burns' sexual problems proved to be unique, he was far from unique in his country fornications. The simple fact is that such activity was one of the few pleasures available to the Scottish peasantry, and in spite of the thundering of the kirk ... it remained extremely common throughout Burns' lifetime' (29).

¹⁵ Frank O'Connor, 'Justice – how are you?', Letter, *Irish Times* (17 July 1946).

¹⁶ J.B.S. Co. Mayo, 'The midnight court', Letter, *Irish Times* (1 Aug. 1946).

More seriously and to the point the Censorship Board itself was drawn into the fray and required to defend its actions. James Hogan was its chairman and had little enough time for Merriman and probably less for O'Connor:

His [i.e. O'Connor's] letter is a typically arrogant production. No one, apparently, unless he is a minor poet, or at least of Mr. O'Connor's literati, can possibly rise to the level of one of Mr. O'Connor's masterpieces ... He would like them to regard him as the modern Irish literary equivalent of a Servetus or a Voltaire, a sublime victim to a wretched clique of obscurantists ... it was not enough that Merriman's *Cúirt* is an immoral poem (to put it very mildly). It must also be made to sound a note of blasphemy.

He went on to accuse Merriman of 'searching for what he would like to find in the way of scandalous and offensive meanings' but he really dug his canines into O'Connor: 'I would also like to make it clear ... that altogether apart from Mr. O'Connor's gross mistranslations, his *Midnight Court* is, in my opinion a book which should not be allowed in public circulation ... I do not think there is a magistrate in Ireland who would allow this book to pass.'¹⁷ This was not the kind of letter designed to cool the atmosphere, and O'Connor replied that 'Whatever one may say of Merriman's poem, it is not immoral. Mr. de Valera's favourite author, Machiavelli, is.'¹⁸ Hogan returned serve with: 'Mr. O'Connor was ill-advised to call his *Midnight Court* a translation. As an adaptation to his own humour and prejudice, his *Midnight Court* may have some merit here and there; as a translation it has none.'¹⁹

This was one of the first references to the merit of the work *as a translation*. Much of the discussion had been predicated on the belief that a translation is a faithful rendering of an original, a kind of surrender and regrant which only changed the outer appearances. James Hogan drew the line between them. Then the editor of the original poem (who had produced an excellent scholarly edition in 1912 on which O'Connor's translation was based) entered the lists. In his letter he said that he had met O'Connor on College Green and they fell to discussing the *Court* and the correspondence in the papers. And then:

On my asking why he had not made a close translation, which might be of use to some, his reply was: 'Were I to do that, I should only be trotting after Merriman.' So we may conclude that what he has produced is the result of a trot on his own account, and a most miserable result it is. I have no hesitation in declaring that it is a misrepresentation, a distortion of the sense, a false picture, and in one line in particular, theologically offensive ... Altogether, it is enough to cause Merriman to turn in his grave.²⁰

It was probably quite unusual to have the contents of a private conversation aired so publicly. O'Connor denied what had happened but added 'But I now perceive the value of my wife's remark that in a country like Ireland a man who values his reputation will use an elaborate filing system.'²¹ The editor, Risteárd Ó Foghludha, was not at all happy to be accused of lying and reasserted his version of events. He said of O'Connor: 'He must be the victim of a most serious lapse of memory, but he

¹⁷ James Hogan, 'The midnight court', Letter, *Irish Times* (27 July 1946).

¹⁸ Frank O'Connor, 'The midnight court', Letter, *Irish Times* (3 Aug. 1946).

¹⁹ James Hogan, 'The midnight court', Letter, *Irish Times* (9 Aug. 1946).

²⁰ Fiachra Éilgeach, 'The midnight court', Letter, *Irish Times* (9 Aug. 1946).

²¹ Frank O'Connor, 'The midnight court', Letter, *Irish Times* (10 Aug. 1946).

might remember a particular question which he put to me, viz., 'When are you bringing out a new edition (of the original) so that I may crib?' These are his actual words: my memory is excellent.'²²

Although this debate solved nothing it at least raised publicly, however tangentially, the important issues of the morality of literature and the nature of translation. And even if O'Connor's own evaluation of the nature of the poem is generally dotty he managed to access enough of the spirit of Merriman to make the finest of the (at least) ten full translations of the poem that have so far been done. The frabjous love of life, the Rabelaisian pisstake, the spirited admixture of the comic and the serious is not confined to any one culture or era. It is a universal cast of mind. Some have it, some don't. In the end it does not matter much what *The midnight court* is supposed to be about. Some Irish culturists have a vested interest in the primitive, the pagan, the folk, the poets in their darkened booths with stones upon their bellies pumping their brains; others wish to see the Irish world as utterly cosmopolitan, ultimately derivative, a part of the main. O'Connor veered between these depending on when he wrote and who was the enemy. His idea of Irish being a primary literature, meaning one 'that is in the main original' (which he put forward in *The backward look* [41]) has some credence for the earlier period. His assertion that 'the only significant element is English' in the Irish literature of the eighteenth century is pure tosh (*The backward look* 109).

What can never be denied is his passionate love for the thousand and a half years of literature in the Irish language. His translations lift the cloak of time and give the general reader an entrance into the Gaelic Irish tradition. Prescinding from all that stuff about stylistic equivalences, and how much a cultural conduit can carry, and what is or is not spirited away in translation, he presents the Gaelic world through time and form with an energy and courage that creates its own validity and truth. And he does this because behind every poet he translates we can clearly hear his own integral voice growling unmistakably away. Whatever gets lost in translation, Frank O'Connor certainly does not.

²² Fiachra Éilgeach, 'The midnight court', Letter, *Irish Times* (11 Aug. 1946).