

## Who has the Last Word? The Dead and their Lively Humour in Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille*

Roxana Doncu 

Graduate School of British, American and Postcolonial Studies, Westfälische Wilhelms University of Münster, Germany  
doncuroxana@yahoo.com

**Abstract:** All the characters in Máirtín Ó Cadhain's novel are dead people, but they continue to speak as if they were still alive, and have not realized they are actually dead. Another paradox may be that although all of them are dead, none is really interested in death or its metaphysics. They go on with their earthly interests and spites, abusing and offending one another, spilling out secrets and shouting out loud. Speaking is the only thing they can still do while dead, and they take advantage of it: it is often quite difficult for the reader to understand whose voice it is in the general uproar. Gradually, voices become identifiable and attributable to characters: the reader learns to recognize them by the bad language they use, by certain quirks or by the expression of individual snobbery, pretence and hatred. By taking dead people as his characters, and faithfully recording their imagined speeches, Ó Cadhain re-imagines and refashions satire as a specific Irish genre. The speaking dead stand for the Gaelic rural communities whose language the political activist Ó Cadhain's taught and promoted as the real repository of the idea of an Irish independent nation. The particular dialogic form of the novel, though seemingly experimental and difficult to comprehend, represents Ó Cadhain's effort to establish democracy (lacking in the real post-independence Irish state), through the multiplicity of voice polyphony implies, at least at literary level.

**Keywords:** *Irish literature; Gaelic revival; dialogue; polyphony; realism; satire.*



University of Bucharest Review. *Literary and Cultural Studies Series* <https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.13.2.2>  
<https://ubr.rev.unibuc.ro/> ISSN 2069–8658 (Print) | 2734–5963 (Online)  
Volume 13 | Issue 2 | 2023 | © The Author(s) 2023



Published by Bucharest University Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

*Cré na Cille* (in the English translation of Liam Con Mac Iomaire and Tim Robinson *Graveyard Clay* and *The Dirty Dust* in Alan Titley's translation<sup>1</sup>) was Irish writer Máirtín Ó Cadhain's first and most celebrated novel. Although it had won the Oireachtas (Irish legislature) literary prize in 1947, it was rejected by the state publishing house on account that it was too Joycean<sup>2</sup> and only published in 1949 by an independent one. The novel was chosen by UNESCO as a masterpiece to be translated into other European languages. Its author was the first Irish-language writer to be elected into the Royal Irish Academy.

A monument of the Irish language and an enduring testimony to its humour and vitality, *Cré na Cille* was born both from Ó Cadhain's familiarity with the spoken language and its rhythms (his parents, as well some of his relatives were traditional story-tellers) and from his lifelong commitment to the preservation of his mother tongue. Ó Cadhain became a teacher in Galway, and later a writer, academic, cultural commentator and political and language activist, collecting folk tales and old Irish songs. Together with his brother Seomsah, he contributed an extensive collection of linguistic material from the living speech of his native Connemara to the *English-Irish Dictionary* (Dublin, 1959). Having been appointed lecturer in Irish at Trinity College, Dublin, in 1956 he also brought out a textbook for students, *The Consonants of Irish (Ceirínínína Gaeltacht)*, published in 1961), which revolutionised traditional teaching.

In 1969, in a speech he gave in front of Cumann Merriman, an Irish cultural organisation, he emphasized that "The most valuable literary instrument I got from my people was the spoken language, the natural earthy pungent speech, which sometimes starts dancing and sometimes weeping, in spite of me" (qtd. in Mac Com Iomaire vii). This acknowledgement of the importance of the legacy of idiomatic Gaelic speech should be taken as a formulation of his peculiar *ars poetica*, for, as it has been widely noted by his translators and critics, the main character in the novel is talk.

Insofar as every human character in *Graveyard Clay* is dead, the time of the action is Eternity/For Ever and the place is The Graveyard<sup>3</sup>, one may safely conclude that speech is the main character of the novel. The authorial indications at the beginning (Time, Place and range of interludes) point to the marked orality and theatricality of the 'plot'. The ten interludes may be regarded, according to Joan Trodden Keefe<sup>4</sup>, as "ten plays revolving around the same theme" (368). In

<sup>1</sup> Both translations appeared in the Margellos World Republic of Letters at Yale University.

<sup>2</sup> 'Too Joycean' meant that it contained foul language unfit for publishing.

<sup>3</sup> Although "Eternity" and "The Graveyard" are given as authorial directions, the chronotope of the novel can be easily identified from the discussions of the graveyard inhabitants: the cemetery is located in Cois Fharráige in south Connemara (the author's birthplace) and the conversation takes place during WWII, or the Emergency period, as it was called in Ireland.

<sup>4</sup> Joan Trodden Keefe, who wrote her doctoral dissertation on Ó Cadhain's novel, also provided the first translation of *Cré na Cille*. Her translation, however, was only available for consultation at the

fact, there is no plot in the usual sense of the word. By making speech the main character in the novel, the author gave up not only the linear narrative, but the idea of narrative itself. As the participants in the recorded conversation are all dead, there can be no story in the traditional meaning, no exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution. The conversational narrative unfolds in an eternal present, a post-resolution chronotope where nothing can be done or achieved any longer. Alan Titley, one of the translators, tries to provide a historical explanation for the prominence of speech in Ó Cadhain's novel:

[...] the locus of the novel is a graveyard somewhere in Connemara in the west of Ireland in the early 1940s. In that Connemara of the thirties and the forties there was no radio, except in the priest's and the teacher's houses; there was no cinema and few shops, and television had ever been heard of. The only culture was talk. There were songs and music and some dancing, but talk was the centrepiece of creativity. This novel attempts to capture the talk and the never-ending gabble and gossip of which the community was made. It might be said that all human communities before the onset of common literacy were simply made of talk. (8)

The formal and genre-specific difference between a play and a novel made up of dramatic dialogues is that, whether in the play each line is assigned to a specific character, in Ó Cadhain dramatic novel this is simply not the case. The interludes consist of interlaced speech lines, belonging to different characters, whose names are not spelled out for the reader, though many of them call their interlocutors by their names. Reflecting on this particularity, Keefe notes that without the traditional guide a play offers to who does the speaking, "the reader has trouble at first identifying the bewildering number of characters" (368). Keefe takes this apparent lack to be part and parcel of the epistemology of the particular story-world and a cue for its reading:

The idiosyncratic lack of the usual signposting is not just a wayward contrariness. The intention of the author is to attempt to define each of his *dramatis personae* by means of highly individual discourse. Only by their speech patterns can we come to recognize the characters and try to piece together what is true or hearsay. (368)

Indeed, its experimental form can drive the reader to the conclusion that what is needed is only an increased awareness on his/her part, coupled with a trained and discerning ear for the repetitions, pet words and clichés that can betray the speakers. Yet it is often impossible to identify the speaker of each line. Moreover, reading the novel with the intention of solving the puzzle of the

characters and putting together the jigsaw of truth and hearsay would be purely an intellectual task, so demanding that one would have to relinquish any other hermeneutic effort. One should also not forget Ó Cadhain's love for the spoken word, his emotional investment in it, in its 'dancing' movements or its 'weeping' as well as his acerbic social criticism.

Another salient point is that the talk which is the main character in the novel is mostly small talk, or as Tiltey puts it:

All these dead voices in the unquiet grave are concerned only with the immediate quotidian—the stolen seaweed, who is marrying whom, a donkey's trespass, what somebody's will contains, how the publican robbed them—although there are distant echoes of national politics and even of the Second World War. But all human life is here; and if you were to transfer yourself to any part of the world even today and to listen to the clatter of local voices, it would be not that much different from what you will encounter in *The Dirty Dust* (9).

Leaving aside the reductionism and essentialism of the last part of the argument (which may have been prompted by the translator's attempt to give wider focus to a masterpiece in one of the so-called 'small languages' of Europe), the small talk of the characters may point to something larger: Ó Cadhain's political involvement, namely his lifelong commitment to republican and socialist politics (Ó hÉigearthaigh 28). Conversely, Cathasaig claims that Ó Cadhain's socialism was actually left radicalism (18). In the mid-1920s he became a sympathizer and volunteer for the Irish Republican Army, and in 1932 he was already enlisted in the IRA. Arrested in 1939 under the Offences against the State Act, Ó Cadhain was interned for almost five years, without trial, in a prison for political dissidents, which, on account of its harsh conditions, he called "Ireland's Siberia" (qtd. in Ó hÉigearthaigh 29).

As an important part of the Irish nationalist movement had been the Gaelic Revival, Ó Cadhain's interest in gathering folk tales<sup>5</sup> and collecting old Irish songs points to his strong attachment to the idea of language as a symbol/repository of the nation. Language policies such as de-anglicisation had figured prominently on the agenda of many Irish societies seeking to promote vernacular Gaelic.

As Keefe remarks, Ó Cadhain belonged to one of those small rural communities with a good knowledge of Irish and a strong cultural heritage (otherwise poor and mostly illiterate) which had come to be regarded as a national resource for the building up of the country following the Gaelic Revival

---

<sup>5</sup> Though other Anglo-Irish writers like W.B. Yeats had shown a considerable interest in the folk and fairy tales of their country, W. J. McCormack notes that Ó Cadhain's interest went beyond a purely intellectual or ideological one, as he manifested "an instinctive sympathy for the awe in which folklore was once held in rural communities" (35).

movement (364). For Ó Cadhain, preservation of the language must have been synonymous with independence, self-government and an authentic national identity. No wonder that what figured prominently in every aspect of his work, be it creative or educational, was the very language which stood at the centre of the imagined (and desired) nation.

If Ó Cadhain's love for his mother tongue aligns his nationalist vision with that of the first generation of Irish nationalists who attempted to resurrect traditional culture (Éire naGaeilge – the Ireland of the Irish language), what separates him from them is his attitude to religion, Catholicism being one of the pillars on which the independent Irish government relied on in order to define national identity. Ó Cadhain's distrust of religion<sup>6</sup> may be perceived in the very texture of the novel, in the way any religious notion of an afterlife is completely rejected, and the spiritual is mostly absent from the dead's endless gossip and back-biting.

A testimony to the orality of the language which he wanted to record and preserve is the apparent musical structure of each interlude, through which courses the metaphor of moulding, its phases correlating with those of the decomposition of the bodies into clay:

Churchyard Clay is scored like a musical composition written for spoken voices. Each of the ten 'interludes' with its variations is placed in a progression which in turn is named to indicate the cyclical nature of the evolution of the human body to clay. At the same time, the progression of the clay is closely allied to the work of a potter who works in the same medium. At first the raw material is *The Black Clay*. Then comes the *Layering, Combing, Grinding, Bone-manuring, Infiltration, Shaping, Hardening, Polishing*, and the final result – *The Bright Clay* (Keefe 369).

The breaking down of bodies into clay and the progressive shaping of the same clay into a distinct artifact made for human use are metaphors of destruction and creation which run parallel in the novel: they allude to the making and un-making of tradition and community, the things which Ó Cadhain strove to preserve both through language and his political activism. The score and multitude of (often unrelated) voices can be regarded either as cacophony, symphony, or polyphony in the Bakhtinian sense, as a plurality of independent voices, merging into “a

---

<sup>6</sup> He was also highly distrustful of Church representatives, and not only on account of his leftist inclination, but also on personal grounds. As Liam Mac Con Iomaire notes, “[i]n 1936 his membership of the proscribed Irish Republican Army led to his dismissal from Carnmore National School in East Galway by his clerical manager, Canon Patrick J. Moran, and the then bishop of Galway and Kilmacduagh, Dr. Thomas O’Doherty” (ix), while Ó Cathasaigh relates that while training as a teacher on a scholarship provided by the Church, he “joined the Society of St Vincent de Paul, a Catholic relief organization, but when he was sent to poor Catholics accepting charity from Protestants or missing mass for lack of decent clothes to wear, his sympathies were all on their side, and he did not have the heart to remind them of their religious duties” (18).

combination of fully valid consciousnesses, together with their worlds” (21). This polyphony “of battling and internally divided voices” (Bakhtin 250), which speak, are heard, are denied or acknowledged, creates a dialogic and democratic space, which is placed in parentheses and made problematic by the fact that this space is in fact, a graveyard: an ironic reflection of the lack of democracy in the Irish Free State.

Apart from trying to recreate the natural rhythm of oral speech, Ó Cadhain's interest also lay in a realistic portrayal of the mental makeup of the speakers of Gaelic, the poor inhabitants of a dry and barren land. The harsh humour of the dead's chatter under the ground is meant as a resistance strategy to the traditional way Irishmen were depicted in English literature as well as a critical reflection on the model for an emergent Irish identity offered by the Blasket Island<sup>7</sup> autobiographies, a model which attempted to be “morally superior to the debased values of modern popular culture emanating from urban industrial England” (de Paor 10) and thus presented the Gaeltacht communities in an idyllic light. In *Utopia, Anti-utopia, Nostalgia and Ó Cadhain*, Dhiarmada contends that:

In the late nineteenth century, the revival and restoration of the Irish language itself became an important part of the Utopian project of cultural nationalism and can be read as a form of nostalgia, “a desire to go home” to a remembered pre-colonial past where the deracinated colonial subjects could locate themselves again in their own home/language. (54)

This view of language as a site of memory and national utopia prompted the nostalgic articulation of the Gaeltacht as a “living repository of the ancestral language” (54) in the Blasket autobiographies.

By trying to document the everyday routines of the Gaeltacht communities in order to hold them up as utopian models for the articulation of a post-independence Irish national identity, the Blasket autobiographers had looked at them from the outside. Instead, what Ó Cadhain set out to do was to look at them from the inside, trying to depict them in the vein of psychological realism which he had learned from reading the works of Russian authors Fyodor Dostoevsky and Maxim Gorky while interned in Camp Curragh.

One of the realistic means of depicting both the rural inhabitants of his native Connemara and their colourful use of the vernacular is through humour. In this respect, one of the very first things that the reader notices in Ó Cadhain's writing, which facilitates the reading of an otherwise ‘difficult’<sup>8</sup> author is his

<sup>7</sup> Among the Blasket Islands writers were P. Sayers, Muiris ÓSuilleabhain and T. ÓCrimhthain.

<sup>8</sup> On account of his excellent command of rural idiomatic Gaelic speech, Ó Cadhain had been long perceived as difficult author to read and to translate. Mac Con Iomaire notes that “[i]n the early reviews by T. O Floinn, D. Corkery, and D. Greene in 1950 we are told that the author has excelled in the crafting of his medium, that this medium is heavily indebted to the speech of his native Conamara

humour. Breandan ÓhEithir stated that “*Créna Cille* is a great comic work and by far and away the funniest in modern Irish. Apart from Evelyn Waugh and Jaroslav Hašek no author makes me laugh as heartily and as regularly as Mairtin Ó Cadhain in *Créna Cille*” (75). Writing about the long shadow cast by his writing on the Gaelic language writers, contemporary Irish novelist Darach Ó Scolai echoes ÓhEithir’s claim, confessing that everything he can remember from the first reading of the book was that the author’s sense of humour had more than surprised him (34). In revealing the inconsistencies between one’s inner world/worldview and the material reality which refuses definition and conscription, humour proves to be integral to the human being-in-the-world. It is through humour that Ó Cadhain manages to sketch the characters, their narrow mindset and petty jealousies, to provide important historical background to the community he describes, to deliver social comment and critique, and even to poke fun at his own condition as author. Yet it was Ó Cadhain’s humour, his hilarious use of the idiomatic foul language that also arouse controversy once it was published<sup>9</sup>.

The language Ó Cadhain’s characters use is definitely at odds with that of the Gaelic communities described by the first Gaeltacht writers like Seamas ÓGrianna (Maire), who, according to Dhiarmada, “indulged in an overly sentimental and idealised view of Gaeltacht life” (54). Caitriona Phaidin, newly buried, is a sharp-tongued woman modelled, according to Keefe, on the mythical Irish character of the Hag of Beare<sup>10</sup> (369). The novel begins with her monologue:

I wonder am I buried in the Pound Plot or the Fifteen-Shilling Plot? Or did the devil possess them to dump me in the Half-Guinea Plot, after all my warnings? The morning of the day I died I called Pádraig up from the kitchen: “I beseech you, Pádraig, my child,” I said. “Bury me in the Pound Plot. In the Pound Plot. Some of us are buried in the Half-Guinea Plot, but even so...” I told them to get the best

---

Gaeltacht, and that, while this is a criterion of excellence in itself, the text is difficult” (xxiii). One should not forget that his first published translations in English appeared almost fifty years after the author’s death and almost seventy years after the novel’s publication in Gaelic.

<sup>9</sup> Controversy seems to have been Ó Cadhain’s middle name. In an article written for the writer’s 100 commemoration, Le Declan notes that “Ó Cadhain was a man of contradictions – born into a poor family in An Cnocán Glas a century ago but ending his days as a resident of Dublin’s southside; a passionate advocate for Irish who nonetheless made savage criticisms of Gaeltacht summer schools in a column called ‘Irish Colleges: Big Business’; an erstwhile IRA man who became a Fellow of Trinity College, Dublin” (16).

<sup>10</sup> According to Hull, the Hag of Beare (Cailleach Bheare in Gaelic) or the Old Woman of Dingle is a mythological pagan goddess, present in the folklore of Ireland and Western Scotland, belonging to a “large class of Hags or Cailleacha, who are builders of dolmens and hills, and guardians of wells and mountains, and who are connected with old age and winter” (254), similar in some ways with the Romanian Baba Dochia. The Hag of Beare is the subject of an Irish medieval poem (*The Lament of the Hag of Beare*, 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> C), is mentioned in a 12<sup>th</sup> C satire (*The Vision of Mac Conglinne*) and appears in many Scottish and Irish legends as a wise or a witch-woman.

coffin in Tadhg's. It's a good oak coffin anyway... I have the scapular mantle on. And the winding-sheet. I had them left ready myself ... There's a spot on this sheet. It's like a daub of soot. No it's not. A fingermark! My son's wife for certain. It's like her sloppiness. If Nell saw it! I suppose she was there. She wouldn't have been, by God, if I could have helped it. [...] The crucifix is on my breast, the one I bought at the mission... But where's the black crucifix Tomaisin's wife got blessed for me at Knock Shrine the last time Tomaisin had to be tied? I told them to put that one on me too. It's much better looking than this one. The Saviour on this one is crooked since Padraig's children dropped it. The Saviour on the black one is gorgeous. But what's the matter with me? I'm as forgetful as ever! There it is under my head. It's a pity they didn't put that one on my breast... (3-4)

Her first concerns after death have nothing to do with salvation. Religion is there, of course, but only in its material form: the scapulars, the winding sheet and the dilemma of the two crucifixes. Like in any small, isolated communities where people know one another closely and good and evil are never really forgotten or forgiven, she strives for higher status even post-mortem. Good quality and cleanliness, these are the virtues of every respectable housewife. As a mother and mother-in-law, she demands respect from those whom she raised, as well as from their consorts. In a parody of class divisions, the organization of the graveyard mirrors the three estates: the Pound, the Fifteen Shilling and the Half-Guinea plots. There is an ongoing class struggle among the corpses in the graveyard, revitalized by each incoming deceased person.

Caitriona's monologue goes on for quite a while, touching on all her relatives and neighbours, especially her sisters Nell (whom she has been bearing a grudge since she married the man Caitriona loved) and Baba (like many Irish, an emigrant in the US), proffering insults at whoever dared not to mourned her properly ("Nell crying and not a tear on her cheek, the pussface!") or happened to have climbed even an inch further on the social ladder (6). Because she bears a grudge against Nora Sheainin (Filthy-Feet)'s daughter, she starts slandering her mother in front of the Big Master:

Take care that you pay no heed to her, Master dear. If you knew her as well as I do you'd sing dumb to her. I've spent the last sixteen years bickering with her daughter and herself. You're poorly employed, Master, squandering your time on Noirin Filthy-Feet. She never had a single day's schooling, Master, and she'd be more familiar with the track of a flea than her ABC... (16)

Nora Sheainin, the object of Caitriona's malice, is no innocent character either. Though illiterate, she thinks very highly of herself, for in the course of the conversations with the Big Master she acquired what she regards as 'culture': "She gave me a bad name with the Big Master, Caitriona Phaidin. I wouldn't mind but I never did anything to deserve it. You well know, Muraed, I never interfere in anybody's business, being always busy with culture. And I have a



fine flashy cross over me too. *Smashing*, as the Big Master says” (21).

Nora Sheainin’s notion of culture boils down to inflated words peppered with quotations that she learned from the Master<sup>11</sup>, and her description of herself shows her to be nothing more than a cultured wannabe:

*Honest*, Muraed, I have forgotten everything concerning Caitriona’s affairs on the plain above us. Culture, Muraed. It elevates the mind to the lofty peaks and opens the fairy palaces in which is stored the protoplasm of colour and sound, as Nibs says in *Sunset Tresses*. One loses all interest in the paltry trivia of doleful life. A glorious disorder has filled my mind for some time now, brought on by an avalanche of culture... (23)

The parody of culture which the character of Nora Sheainin offers can be regarded as Ó Cadhain’s commentary on the cultural policy of the post-colonial, post-independence Irish state, which was essentially duplicatory towards the very people it tended to idealize. As Dhiarmada contends,

the State’s neglect of the Gaeltacht regions which led to economic stagnation and a higher-than-average level of emigration made both Ó Cadhain and his contemporary, the Aran poet Mairtin ÓDíreain, internal migrants in a country where State ideology paid lip service to the Irish language, idealised the Gaeltacht as a nostalgic Utopia – the true repository of national identity – while allowing the living Gaeltacht to be denuded of its youth and vitality through emigration (55).

The figure of the bard, sage or storyteller, as a representative of traditionally recited Irish poetry/epic is also present in the graveyard. From time to time, the dialogue is interrupted and fragments of popular verse are inserted: they are the work of Coili, reflecting humorously on the foibles and the squabbles of his dead neighbours. The folk tradition of reciting poetry and narratives is compared and contrasted with the modern profession of being a writer. In the character of the writer, Ó Cadhain’s own experience becomes the target of satire. After sending the manuscript of the novel *An Gum*, the official publishing house for whom he had been working as a translator, Ó Cadhain found out that it had been rejected on account of his controversial use of popular idiom: “If you intend to take up writing, Coili, remember that it is taboo for An Gum to publish anything that a daughter would hide from her father” (19). The writer’s long diatribe and patronising tone towards Coili, however, earn him no favour with the graveyard people, who seem to prefer the storyteller’s “hackneyed beginning” of “Long, long ago there were three men” to the intricate philosophy of how to write a story with a beginning, a middle and an end. From the writer’s confession, the

---

<sup>11</sup> She also calls one of her graveyard interlocutors, Dottie, “my fellow-navigator on the boundless sea of culture” (23).

reader is given to understand that it might have been this futile effort who led him to an early death: "Look at the way I would have ended *The Re-Setting Sun*, which I was working on when I dropped dead with a spasm of writer's cramp" (20).

Besides religion and culture, another topic for discussion among the corpses in the graveyard are politics, booze and football (the matches between Kerry and Galway, two football teams still in existence and still playing against one another). Discussion means, in this context, arguing. The two characters who fight over who was right, Arthur Griffith or Eamon de Valera – the Griffith supporter having stabbed the de Valera supporter (an IRA member) in the back, in a reverse mimicry of the Irish Civil War – paradoxically draw on the similarities between the two leaders:

- Hold on now till I read you the Declaration issued by Eamon de Valera to the people of Ireland: "People of Ireland..."
- Hold on yourself till I read you the Declaration issued by Arthur Griffith to the people of Ireland: "People of Ireland..." (40)

Their mentality, in spite of the different party they support, is the same: they rely on their leaders to give them a sense of personal value and direction, thus proving that there was no true democracy in Ireland at that time:

- There was a representative from Eamon de Valera at my funeral and the tricolour on my coffin...
- There was a telegram from Arthur Griffith at my funeral and shots were fired over my grave... (166)

At some point elections are going to be held among the inhabitants of the graves, and each of the three estates (the Pound, the Fifteen Shilling and the Half-Guinea plots) have to elect their own candidate for the general election. This is when a long and heated argument breaks out among the corpses, with those in the Fifteen Shilling plot angry at the Pound Party and its main representatives, Suan the Shopkeeper and Peadar the Publican. Past wrongs come to the surface, and under everybody's fire, Peadar the Pub retaliates by disclosing to his "Fellow Corpses" that Nora Sheainin, "the joint candidate" of the Fifteen Shillings was a "drunkard". His speech makes a perfect example of political discourse, in which the *argumentum ad hominem* is both denied and used to attack the candidate of the opposing party:

I am going to divulge information that is not very complimentary to Nora Sheainin [...] Nora Sheainin was a friend of mine. Although I oppose her politically, that doesn't mean that I couldn't respect her and be on cordial terms with her. For that reason, I hate to talk about this matter. I find it painful. I find it repugnant. I find it distasteful. But it was yourselves, the Fifteen-Shilling crowd, who started this incivility. [...] You are very proud of your joint candidate. She could hold her head

up in any company for decency, honesty and virtue, if what you people are saying is true. But Nora Sheainin was a drunkard. (88)

Peadar's accusation, though regarded as inaccurate by Nora Sheainin, triggers a side reaction on Nora's part, which can give insight into the social meanings of drink among the Gaelic communities. Nora is more inflamed that she had been accused of drinking porter (and not whiskey) than she is of having been unjustly accused:

Did you hear what Peadar the Pub said about me: that I used to drink four or five pints of porter every day above ground. *Honest!* Porter! If he'd said whiskey, even. But porter! The most uncultured drink of all. Ugh!...Of course you don't believe that I drank porter, Dotie! It's a lie! Filthy, black, uncultured porter. It's a lie, Dotie! What else. *Honest Engine...* (91)

The only foreigner in the graveyard is a French pilot whose airplane had been shot down, who, understandably, does not comprehend a word of Irish. His efforts at making others speak French or trying to pick up Gaelic from a textbook give rise to hilarious misunderstandings:

- “Zee dog is sinking.” *Le chien pense, n'est-ce pas?* “Zee dog is sinking.” *Mais non!* “Zee dog is sinking.”
- How would a dog be sinking, you numskull? Maybe he was thinking, or drinking, or even stinking. But it wasn't sinking. Sinking! The devil a dog I ever saw sinking (137).


In the end, sick and tired of making the Frenchman pronounce correctly, his teacher concludes, with the typical Irish satirical wit: “If it's sinking let it sink. The devil a thing we can do about it, or about whoever put it in the book either. Maybe it went drinking, and then it started sinking on account of the hangover and the empty pockets...” (137).

It is this sense of profound irony and sarcasm, which can be traced as far back as Jonathan Swift's work, which lends the novel its unmistakable Irish flavour. Whether it is everyday matters, a stolen animal or a plot of land, politics, religion, history, culture or just booze, the dialogues reveal not only character, but a language's sense of place and direction. Humour creates the premises for de-stabilizing the Free State national narrative, which relied on idealized stereotypes of native Irish speakers (Ó Conchubhair 212-5). Though seemingly experimental in form, *Graveyard Clay* fits perfectly Bakhtin's definition of the novel as a polyphonic space. Yet apart from the lively humour, the fact that the Gaeltacht community is a graveyard leads us to believe that Ó Cadhain's hopes for a long-term revival of Gaelic were not very high. It is this rather pessimistic view which determined the preservation of his native idiomatic speech in *Graveyard Clay*.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

Roxana Doncu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1305-9397>

## Works Cited:

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Edited and translated by Caryl Emerson, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- De Paor, Luis. "Introduction: Introducing Máirtín Ó Cadhain", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 34, no.1, 2008: 10–17. Google scholar
- Dhiarmada, Bríona Nic. "Utopia, Anti-utopia, Nostalgia and Ó Cadhain", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 34(1), 2008: 53–57. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25515708>
- Hull, Eleanor. "Legends and Traditions of the Cailleach Bheara or Old Woman of Beare", *Folklore*, 38(3), 1927: 225–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587x.1927.9718387>
- Keefe, Joan Trodden. "The Graves of Connemara: Ireland's Máirtín Ó Cadhain", *World Literature Today*, vol. 59, no. 3, 1985: 363–373. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40140843>
- Declan, Kiberd. "No Ordinary Man", *Irish Examiner*, 15th February 2006. [www.mairtinocadhain.ie/mairtin-o-cadhain-no-ordinary-man/](http://www.mairtinocadhain.ie/mairtin-o-cadhain-no-ordinary-man/) Accessed Sept. 2023.
- Mac Con Iomaire, Liam. "An introductory note", *Graveyard Clay*, transl. by T. Robinson and L. M. Con Iomaire, New York, Haven: Yale University Press, 2016: vii–xxxiii.
- McCormack, W.J. "Máirtín Ó Cadhain as folklorist: a bibliographical note", *Hermathena*, 113, 1972: 35–39. <https://doi.org/10.2307/23040254>
- Ó Broin, Brian. "Máirtín Ó Cadhain's "Créna Cille": A Narratological Approach", *Irish University Review*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2006: 280–303. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25517313>
- Ó Cadhain, Máirtín. *Graveyard Clay*, translated by Tim Robinson and Liam Mac Con Iomaire, New York and Haven: Yale University Press, 2016 (1949).
- Ó Cadhain, Máirtín. *The Dirty Dust*, translated by Alan Titley, New York and Haven: Yale University Press, 2015 (1949).
- Ó Cathasaigh, Aindrias. "A Vision to Realise: Ó Cadhain's Politics", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 34(1), 2008: 18–27. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25515701>

- Ó Conchubhair, Brian. “The Novel in Irish since 1950: From National Narrative to Counter-Narrative”, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 35, Irish Writing since 1950, 2005: 212–31. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3509335>
- Ó hÉigearthaigh, Cian. “Máirtín Ó Cadhain: Politics and Literature”, *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 34(1), 2008: 28–32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25515702>
- Ó hEithir, Breandan. “Cre na Cille.” *The Pleasures of Gaelic Literature*, ed. John Jordan, Dublin: Mercier Press, 1977: 72–84. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25515704>
- Ó Scolaí, Darach (2008). “L’ombred’Ó Cadhain sur les écrivains de langue gaélique”, *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 34(1), 2008: 34-5. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25515704>

### Notes on Contributor(s)

**Roxana Elena Doncu** is a member of the international research group on Literary Modeling and Energy Transition at the Westfälische Wilhelms University of Münster, where she is teaching at the graduate school of British, American and Postcolonial Studies. She has completed her undergraduate, graduate and post-graduate studies at the University of Bucharest. Her research interests cover areas such as postcolonial and post-communist studies, world literature, translation and medical humanities.

**Citation:** Doncu, Roxana Elena. Who has the Last Word? The Dead and their Lively Humour in Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s *Créna Cille*. *University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series*13(2), 2023: 15–27. <https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.13.2.2>