THE CARNIVALESQUE AGAINST ENTROPY: MÁIRTÍN Ó CADHAIN'S *CRÉ NA CILLE*

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Taking the omnipresence of grotesque humour in Máirtín Ó Cadhain's Cré na Cille *as the point of departure, this article explores the grotesque in the author's work. In so doing, it follows the theoretical framework set by the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque (or the carnivalesque as he tends to call it) is intrinsically connected to the natural cycle – it lowers its objects to the level of the earth that can be simultaneously a place of death and regeneration. This cycle – in nature, human life as well as culture – is one of Ó Cadhain's prime themes. Frequently in his oeuvre, however, he expresses the anxiety that it will bring deterioration instead of improvement, or that it will entirely come to a halt. In* Cré na Cille, *this anxiety, expressed by the voice of Stoc na Cille (the trumpet of the graveyard), is counterbalanced by the carnivalesque talk of the buried characters. Even the frequent verbal fights among the corpses delay the workings of entropy and bring a degree of 'life' into the cemetery. The carnivalesque can be regarded as relatively successful in* Cré na Cille *– in the last two interludes, the trumpet loses much of its 'divine' authority and becomes just one voice among others. Ultimately, the discussion of the carnivalesque helps to locate the novel in the context of European literature.*

Ever since the publication of his famous novel *Cré na Cille* (*Graveyard Clay*) in 1949, Máirtín Ó Cadhain has been generally regarded as the most important Irish-language prose writer of the twentieth century. For a long time, however, the author was accessible only to a relatively small group of readers with sufficient command of Irish to understand the author's rich and exuberant style. With the recent publication of the translations of *Cré na Cille* into English and other languages, the recognition of Ó Cadhain has gained momentum and his fame has spread beyond Irish shores, as indicated also by highly positive reviews in leading British and American journals. Frequent comparisons with

internationally famous authors from Ireland and elsewhere, such as James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, or Franz Kafka indicate that the novel,[1] though stemming from a peripheral tradition, is now being valued in the leading literary centres of the present and thus has reached the point of entering into the canon of world literature.[2] Time is therefore ripe for a critical reassessment of *Cré na Cille* in order to ascertain its place in this broader context. While the reviewers have had, quite logically, approached the text from various angles, there is one constant that is not lacking in any interpretation of the book. Very simply put: *Cré na Cille* is, despite its setting in the graveyard, a masterpiece of grotesque humour, a fact that has been widely recognized.[3] This article will therefore take Ó Cadhain's humour as the starting point and try to ascertain its relationship to more serious themes in the book.

Concepts of the Grotesque

In his 2016 review for the *LA Review of Books*, Mark Harman has likened Ó Cadhain's humour (and that of Alan Titley, one of his translators) to that of the Renaissance French writer François Rabelais.[4] By doing this, he continued in an already established critical tradition as this particular comparison was first made by the eminent poet Seán Ó Ríordáin in his 1970 review of Ó Cadhain's essay *Páipéir Bhána agus Páipéir Bhreaca* (White and Speckled Papers, 1969).[5] Ó Ríordáin's

1 Samuel Beckett and James Joyce are mentioned in virtually every review, given partly by the effort to introduce Ó Cadhain into the pantheon of 'great Irish writers.' The parallel with Beckett, based on disembodied voices and the similarity of Ó Cadhain's graveyard with the confined settings of Beckett's plays, was already established by Declan Kiberd in *The Irish Classics* (London: Granta Books, 2001) 575-89. The comparison with Kafka was made, for example, in Mark Harman, "'Wake Up, I Tell You': The Vibrant Afterlife of Irish Writer Máirtín Ó Cadhain," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (May 2016), https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/wake-tell-vibrant-afterlife-irish-writer-martin-o-cadhain (accessed 20 December 2017).

2 The process, albeit with a definite Gallocentric bias, was aptly described in Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

3 The earlier critics who have insisted upon humour as the key element of understanding Ó Cadhain include Breandán Ó hEithir and Alan Titley. See Breandán Ó hEithir, "Cré na Cille," *The Pleasures of Gaelic Literature* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1977) 72-84 and Alan Titley, "Ag déanamh páipéir: Foinsí ionsparáide an Chadhnaigh," *Comhar*, 40.12 (1981): 34-42.

4 Harman.

5 A history of the term "raibiléiseach" (Rabelaisian) in Irish-language criticism, including Ó Ríordáin's writing, is provided in Martin Coilféir, "'Fuarchúiseach, magúil,

definition of a Rabelaisian writer is of special interest: "A Rabelaisian writer [...] casts a cold, mocking eye on human fate. [...] Remedy, pity or compassion are out of the question. Rabelais loved to see an important church official fouling his trousers out of cowardice."[6] While Ó Ríordáin's review has rightly earned the status of a milestone in Irish-language criticism and lay, for example, at the core of Gearóid Denvir's insightful analysis of Ó Cadhain's humour,[7] a connoisseur of *Gargantua et Pantagruel* may have certain reservations. Despite the merciless qualities of Rabelais' humour and his satire of the church, the university, and other institutions, his masterpiece as a whole cannot be regarded as a work of a mocking cynic – it works paradoxically also as an affirmation and celebration of life in all its aspects as well as of the possibilities of human language.[8]

Ó Ríordáin's view might be explained by his own personal pessimism, but it largely reflects the prevalent concept of the grotesque *after* Rabelais, a concept best described by Wolfgang Kayser in his influential study *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. In his analysis of the literary grotesque from Romanticism to the present, Kayser places emphasis on the "sinister" side of the grotesque, its expression of a feeling of a fundamental alienation from the world, its "abysmal" quality and the "satanic" features of its humour – entirely in keeping with Ó Ríordáin's definition.[9] The Kayserian concept of the grotesque is an indispensable tool for the analysis of the work of writers such as Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett, to whom Ó Cadhain has been also compared. However, in order to aptly grasp the use of the grotesque by Rabelais, it is better to qualify Kayser's views by those of another prominent theorist of the grotesque, Mikhail Bakhtin.[10]

míthrócaireach?' An raibiléiseachas i litríocht na Gaeilge," *American Journal of Irish Studies*, 13 (2016): 188-91.

6 "Féachann an scríbhneoir raibiléiseach [...] go fuarchúiseach, magúil ar chinniúint an duine. [...] Níl leigheas, trua ná comhbhá i gceist. Breá le Rabelais pearsa thábhachtach eaglaise a thaispeáint ag scaoileadh uaidh ina threabhsar le barr neamhchrógachta." Seán Ó Ríordáin, "Páipéir Bhána agus Páipéir Bhreaca," *The Irish Times*, 26 April 1970: 12. My translation.

7 Gearóid Denvir, *Cadhan Aonair: Saothar Liteartha Mháirtín Uí Chadhain* (Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1987) 221-23.

8 Language exuberance as a common point between Ó Cadhain and Rabelais was, after all, noted by Ó Ríordáin himself. See Ó Ríordáin, 12.

9 Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature,* trans. Ulrich Weisstein (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966) 21, 51, 58 and *passim*.

10 For the usefulness of the contrast between Kayser and Bakhtin in analysing variegated forms of the grotesque see Ondřej Pilný, *The Grotesque in Contemporary Anglophone Drama* (London: Palgrave Macmillan: 2016) 6-7.

In contrast to Kayser, Bakhtin worked with much earlier material, concentrating directly on Rabelais and his medieval sources. Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque is far from being based on a sense of alienation from the world. Rather, it returns to one of the world's fundamental material principles, the eternal cycle of death and rebirth.[11] The cyclical nature of life here is not an obstacle of progress, but rather its prerequisite – without the constant destruction of the old and the creation of the new, no development is possible.[12] The principal aesthetic means of the Bakhtinian grotesque is the human body, but conceptualized in a manner widely different to classical canons. The grotesque body, according to Bakhtin, is not characterized by its stable, ideal form, but by its physical interactions with the world, which it consumes and is consumed by it. Hence the focus on the transitions in the life of the body, its emergence, its engendering of other bodies and finally its demise and desintegration. The focus is partly on the mouth that consumes, but mainly on the lower half of the body and its functions, namely sex and excretion.[13]

The Bakhtinian grotesque is antithetical to anything rigid, ennobled or ideological, but is not straightforwarly ironic or satirical. Rather, it is characterized by a downward movement, which brings anything elevated back to the earth to perish and be regenerated at the same time.[14] In its irreverent treatment of human institutions, the grotesque coalesces with the medieval carnival – hence Bakhtin's overwhelming emphasis on carnivalesque laughter that could serve as an antidote to the rigid official ideology of the Middle Ages.[15] If seen in this context, Ó Ríordáin's example of a church official fouling his trousers ceases to be a creation of a cold-blooded, ironic mind. Rather, by emphasising the material, down-to-earth aspects of his humanity, it laughingly brings the official down in order for humankind (from which he is not excluded) to be "renewed" and continue, hopefully in a less authoritarian configuration. For reasons of simplification and to avoid terminological confusion, the term "the carnivalesque" will be henceforth used to describe Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque.

This article purports to show that the carnivalesque lies at the very core of Ó Cadhain's aesthetic method in a large number of his works, including *Cré na Cille*. This does neither disprove the affinities with Beckett and Kafka, nor imply that Kayser's concept of the grotesque is useless in analysing Ó Cadhain – the

11 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 21.

12 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* 256.

13 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* 18-19, 26, 368-436 *passim*.

14 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* 21.

15 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* 6-10, 196-278 *passim.*

feeling of alienation from the world is, for example, prominent in Ó Cadhain's later stories about civil servants such as "An Eochair" ("The Key," 1967).[16] The carnivalesque, however, plays a role even there. Moreover, Bakhtin's theory is, to a large degree, able to reconcile the "humorous" and "serious" elements in Ó Cadhain's prose, a task that has often escaped critics.

The Cycle of Death and Rebirth

While Ó Cadhain's oeuvre can be characterized by a great diversity of focus, setting or literary technique, the one theme to which it constantly returns in various guises is exactly the cycle of death and rebirth mentioned by Bakhtin as key to the carnivalesque.[17] The theme often appears in the descriptions of nature, but ultimately refers to the human fate as well as to the future to the Irish-language culture that the author stemmed from and that he spent all his life fighting for. Sometimes the possibility of rebirth and renewal is affirmed – an example could be the short story "An Beo agus an Marbh" ("The Living and the Dead," 1967), where the main character strikes a relationship with a woman of his choice during a wake, or "An Beo agus an Críon" ("The Living and the Old," 1967), which ends with a woman giving birth inside a hearse.[18] The most elaborate example of this positive approach is Ó Cadhain's second novel *Athnuachan* (Renewal, 1995), whose main character, the aging Beartla Mór, struggles to come to grips with his approaching death. After engaging in a highly entertaining and grotesque string of folly, including taking absurd cures for constipation, gaining weight on purpose, making pilgrimages to obscure holy places and attempting to marry again, Beartla, in a passage of heightened lyricism, finally accepts his fate and dies peacefully.[19] The old thus makes room for the new and the novel ends with an evocative image of springing blades of grass in the graveyard: "In every inch of the bare stony clay there were the same pains of growth: the green Spring giving birth: death bringing growth and renewal..."[20]

16 Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *An tSraith ar Lár* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar Chonnachta, 2009) 203-59.

17 The prominence of this theme, especially in the collection *An tSraith ar Lár* and in *Cré na Cille,* was already discussed by Gearóid Denvir, although without reference to Bakhtin and the carnivalesque. See Denvir 52-93.

18 Ó Cadhain, *An tSraith ar Lár* 125-42, 111-24.

19 Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *Athnuachan* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 1995) 368-80. Although the novel was finished in 1951, it was published only posthumously.

20 "I ngach mír den chré chlochach mhaolscreamhach bhí na pianta fáis céanna: an tEarrach glas dhá bhreith: an bás ag síoladh fáis agus athnuachain..." Ó Cadhain, *Athnuachan* 396. My translation.

Even in these instances, however, the transition to the new does not take place without difficulty and without circumstances that put the "happy" ending into doubt. The birth in "An Beo agus an Críon" takes place in the hearse only because of the distrust of the local community towards the stranger and their reluctance to help her. Similarly, during Beartla's wake in *Athnuachan*, which forms one of the last scenes of the novel, it is made clear that Beartla's death has hastened the decision of many members of the young generation to leave their native place, so that the survival of the local community, despite the comforting effect of the last image, is not at all assured.[21] In other stories, this fear is even more pronounced. At the core of the psychological explorations that take place in "Ciumhais an Chriathraigh" ("At the Edge of the Bog," 1953), "An Strainséara" ("The Stranger," 1953) and "Beirt Eile" ("Two Others," 1967), there is the deep anxiety of characters who, for various reasons, have remained childless and thus are excluded from participation in the natural cycle and slighted by their community.[22] This anxiety takes a cultural turn in the story "Úr agus Críon" ("The Fresh and the Old," 1967) in which a delapidated currach at the seaside functions as a symbol of traditional Irish culture, ignored by a local tractor driver speaking pidgin Irish and finally destroyed by a group of English-speaking nuns in a a mock funeral ceremony.[23]

Admittedly, in all these cases the cycle of death and renewal still goes on, despite heavy losses suffered either on the personal or cultural side. In two stories, however, Ó Cadhain envisages a total breakdown of the cycle and the replacement of renewal by entropy. In "Gorta" ("Famine," 1967), the starving protagonist reaches for a blighted potato, from which even a worm recoils after tasting it.[24] A gruesome repetition of this action occurs after the man's death when a carrion bird pierces his eye with his beak, only to disgustedly fly away at the prospect of such a meagre repast.[25] Unlike most of other Ó Cadhain's stories, death is an "unnatural" occurence in "Gorta," an event which does not offer nourishment to other life forms and thus brings the natural cycle to a halt.

Probably the most shattering image appears in the apocalyptic story "An Sean agus an Nua" ("The Old and the New," 1967), no doubt inspired by the wide-spread fear of nuclear warfare. The short poetic text starts with a description of

21 Ó Cadhain, *Athnuachan* 393-96.

22 The first two stories are available in a bilingual edition: Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *Dhá Scéal/ Two Stories* (Galway: Arlen House, 2006). "Beirt Eile" was published in Ó Cadhain, *An tSraith ar Lár* 97-110.

23 Ó Cadhain, *An tSraith ar Lár* 49-54.

24 Ó Cadhain, *An tSraith ar Lár* 29.

25 Ó Cadhain, *An tSraith ar Lár* 31.

an imaginary utopian city characterized by perfect harmony between the old and the new, tradition and modernity. The city has seven hundred years of history behind itself, palpable from "its grey beard, rising from its reverend stones."[26] But it would be merely a ruin without the new – "a factory chimney like a Titan puffing at a pipe, glass buildings rubbing the sky like enormous fingernails trying to take the sun down from it and bathe the city in a yellow liquid."[27] The harmony and progress reached in organic growth (the result of the natural cycle applied to the urban realm) is symbolized by the city's temple, which comprises all the architectural styles from "Byzantinism and the Romanesque to the surrealism of our century."[28] Indeed, the aptest metaphor for the city is a "live being," a "spreading tree with a trunk, branches, foliage and blossoms, with each part different from the others, but perfect in its own terms."[29]

This utopia, however, is utterly destroyed by another creature that circles in the air and finally discharges its deadly load, which, although the term is not mentioned in the poetic description, is clearly the A-bomb. When the mushroom cloud disperses, nothing is left, but "a castrated groin of earth, if earth it was, dirt that couldn't be called stone, brick, concrete, cement or plaster [...]. Not even rubbish or clay."[30] The strength of Ó Cadhain's image of nuclear holocaust does not reside so much in the amount of destruction suffered by the city as in the denial of any possibility of regeneration, such as the one inherent in the ambiguous image of the clay.

The Trumpet of the Graveyard

What remains to be discussed at this point is how precisely the carnivalesque elements relate to the theme of the cycle of death and rebirth in Ó Cadhain's oeuvre. And there is no text more suitable for this exploration than *Cré na Cille*

26 "féasóg liath, as a clocha urramacha aníos." Ó Cadhain, *An tSraith ar Lár* 9. My translation.

27 "simléir thionscalach ar nós Tíotáin ag stolla tobac; árais ghloine a bhí dhá gcuimilt féin de mhulach an aeir, mar ollingne ag iarra na gréine a sciocha dhe anuas agus an chathair a fholca i lacht óir." Ó Cadhain, *An tSraith ar Lár* 9.

28 "ón mBiosantachas agus ón Rómánsachas go dtí uasréalachas an chéid seo." Ó Cadhain, *An tSraith ar Lár* 9.

29 "dúil beo," "crann cairithe len a thamhan, a chraobha, a dhuilliúr, a bhláth, gach ball dhe neamhchosúil len a chéile, ach gach ball foirfe ina cháil féin." Ó Cadhain, *An tSraith ar Lár* 9-10.

30 "bléin choillte de thalamh, má ba thalamh, conús nach bhféadfá clocha, brící, coincréad, stroighin, táthán [...] a thabhairt air. Fiú bruscar ná cré féin." Ó Cadhain, *An tSraith ar Lár* 10.

itself. In their analysis of the novel, many critics were puzzled by the juxtaposition of the lyricized pronouncements of "Stoc na Cille" (the trumpet of the graveyard) at the beginning of Interludes Three to Eight and the earthy, indeed carnivalesque, speech of the graveyard's inhabitants in the rest of the text. Daniel Corkery, for example, dismissed the trumpet's passages as an incongruous instance of romanticized language that tries to make the novel more "elevated" than it is,[31] other critics treated them as principally an ironic device, a parody of the authorial voice.[32] Admittedly, a certain parodic effect is present, given by the stretch of some of the metaphors and by the fact that the inhabitants of the graveyard do not heed the trumpet in the least. Viewed in the context of Ó Cadhain's oeuvre as a whole, however, the actual content of the speeches is undoubtedly serious as they address precisely the relationship between growth, decay and entropy described above.

Despite the variety of metaphors used in the trumpet's speeches, ranging from agricultural life to weaving and calligraphy, the basic structure of the passages remains the same. At the beginning, the voice asserts its authority, then describes in metaphoric terms the dismal region of the grave and the process of decomposition that takes place there. In the next paragraph, the focus moves to the world above ground, presented in images of growth, fertility and beauty. However, the gloomy note returns with full force in the following paragraph, where natural processes of aging, weakening and decay are foregrounded. The speech invariably ends with the repetition of the statement of authority: "I am the Trump of the Graveyard. Let my voice be heard! It must be heard!"[33]

The authority of the voice is supported by references to the Bible. The very word trumpet immediately calls into mind the seven trumpets of the Apocalypse and the Biblical resonance is strengthened in the first speech by the following words: "For I am every voice that was, that is and that will be. I was the first voice in the formlessness of the universe."[34] Róisín Ní Ghairbhí has plausibly located the source of this passage in the famous opening sentence of St. John's Gospel, "In the beginning was the word."[35] The voice thus clearly presents itself

31 Daniel Corkery, "Review: *Cré na Cille* le Máirtín Ó Cadhain," *Daniel Corkery's Cultural Criticism: Selected Writings* (Cork: Cork University Press: 2012) 83.

32 Notably Kiberd 583.

33 "Is mise Stoc na Cille! Éistear le mo ghlór, caithfear éisteacht!" Ó Cadhain, *Cré na Cille* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2009) 82. The translation is taken from Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, trans. Liam Mac Con Iomaire and Tim Robinson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016) 66.

34 "Óir is mé gach glór dá raibh, dá bhfuil agus dá mbeidh. Ba mé an chéad ghlór in éagruth na cruinne." Ó Cadhain, *Cré na Cille* 81; Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay* 65.

35 Róisín Ní Ghairbhí, "I dTosach do bhí an Briathar: 'Deacracht' *Cré na Cille*," *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 34.1 (2008): 50.

as the voice of God, the ultimate authority in the universe. In contrast to the Biblical God, however, it does not offer the slightest prospect of salvation, but rather announces the end of all things in gradual decay. It was undoubtedly this feature of the trumpet that lead the critic Pádraig de Paor to characterize it as the voice of the Second Law of Thermodynamics.[36]

Cré na Cille thus belongs to the works by Ó Cadhain that reveal a serious anxiety about entropy and the collapse of the natural cycle. It does not do so, however, with such a tone of finality as the stories "An Gorta" and "An Sean agus an Nua." The solemn pronouncements of the quasi-divine trumpet are counterbalanced by the earthy voices of the rest of the graveyard's inhabitants, who effectively ignore the trumpet's pronouncements and whose use of language is, paradoxically, exceptionally lively. The linguistic contrast between the trumpet's passages and the rest of the text can be analysed through another term of Bakhtin's, heteroglossia. The concept points to the fact that beyond any unified, standard language, there exists a whole sea of differentiated languages – those of social classes, professional or age groups, or even individuals and particular moments in individuals' lives.[37] The novel, according to Bakhtin, is the most suitable form to provide an image of language through this diversity.[38] *Cré na Cille* does that abundantly, not only by juxtaposing multiple variants of Irish and even other languages, notably French and English, but by letting them enter into dialogue and mirror each other. The speeches of the trumpet, however, stand apart – they embody an instance of a monologic discourse of authority that cannot enter into direct communication with the other voices in the novel.[39] The earthy speech of the characters and their refusal to pay any heed to the trumpet can be thus understood as an expression of defiance to its authority and the message of entropy that it brings. The fact that this defiance comes from characters that are buried and thus are, in a material sense, entropy's victims, makes it even more poignant.[40]

36 Pádraig de Paor, "Ends, Endings and Endlessness in *Cré na Cille*," *New Trails and Beaten Paths in Celtic Studies*, ed. Maria Bloch-Trojnar et al. (Lublin: Wydawnictvo KUL, 2016) 76.

37 Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination,* trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press: 2008) 288-92.

38 Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" 336.

39 It can be argued that the language of the trumpet represents an instance of "authoritative discourse," as described by Bakhtin, a kind of discourse that is "incapable of being double-voiced." Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" 344.

40 This reading can be supported also by a common 'biographical' interpretation of the trumpet, which sees it as being inspired by the loudspeakers in the prison camp where Ó Cadhain was detained during the Second World War. See, for example, de Paor 77.

The Carnivalesque Treatment of Characters

While the ominous voice of the trumpet is countered only in general terms through difference in language, another treatment is reserved for speeches of characters who, in the community of the corpses, aspire to an elevated status. These become invariably the target of the downward movement inherent in the carnivalesque, which is manifested both on the linguistic and conceptual level. The most prominent of such characters is the Big Master, a local teacher who looks down at the other corpses because of their lack of education, frequently speaks in literary Irish, and engages in long stretches of romantic talk about love. His pretensions, however, are soon shattered in the multi-voiced world of the novel where social distinctions invariably crumble. His literary taste is put into doubt as we learn that he indulges in trash novelettes obtained second-hand at a discount from an itinerant bookseller.[41] Moreover, he turns into a butt of ridicule as he becomes obsessed by jealousy after learning about the marriage of his widow to the local postman Billeachaí. His grotesque "bringing down" takes place often within his own speeches when he moves from poetic metaphors to the grossest vulgarities whenever his "rival" is mentioned. And the other characters make their contribution as well – the Master's romantic stories about his relationship with his wife in Interlude Six are interrupted by Máirtín Pockface, who utters equivocal comments "I know what you mean, Master,"[42] and offers his own accounts of having seen the Master and his wife in secluded places, with a clear implication of what they were doing. In the end, when describing having watched the Master and his wife through the school window, Máirtín resorts to an explicit statement: "you were screwing her inside."[43] The idea of romantic love is thus reduced to the basic level of biological fact in a carnivalesque manner that has an age-long tradition – one is reminded of, for example, Chaucer's similar treatment of courtly love in "The Miller's Tale."

Another good example is Nóra Sheáinín, a woman who makes advantage of her time in the graveyard to acquire 'culture.' Her pretensions are betrayed by her very language, which features fashionable English words ("honest") and banal truths taken from the Master's novelettes. In one of the most exquisite moments of the novel, she is brought down by her antagonist, the novel's main character Caitríona Pháidín, who reproduces (if she is to be believed) what the late pub-keeper said about Nóra:

41 Ó Cadhain, *Cré na Cille* 135; Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay* 112.
42 Ó Cadhain, *Cré na Cille* 187; Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay* 158.
43 "bhí tú dhá cláradh istigh." Ó Cadhain, *Cré na Cille* 187.

> What was it he called her? […]. Bitch and harlot and hussy! Nóirín Filthy-Feet. Nóirín of the Sailors. The Drunkard from Mangy Field of the Puddles and Ducks. He said she was drinking secretly in his snug; that she often had to be carried home; that she began to sing at the top of her voice when Tiúnaí Mhicil Tiúnaí's funeral was passing his door; that she robbed a cattle-jobber from down the country inside in his parlour; that she drank porter from the black butler the Earl used to keep; that she began to throw bottles when she was drunk; that she brought Seán Choilm's big puck goat into the shop in a drunken bout, got it in behind the counter, perched it up on top of a tapped half-barrel and started combing its beard and plying it with porter; that she used to be hugging Tomás Inside […].[44]

The passage is a crystalic example of the carnivalesque, featuring feasting, sexual innuendo and even a billygoat – a carnivalesque animal par excellence, complete with a mock-human face and purported prodigious generative powers. It is enough to think about fauns in Classical mythology to see what ancient traditions are, again, invoked in this image.

Also the ubiquitous verbal fights among the corpses, featuring inventive terms of abuse and elaborate curses, fall into the category of the carnivalesque. In Bakhtin's analysis of the work of Rabelais, the act of abusing is ambiguous, degrading the targeted person, but also paradoxically praising them, by bringing them close to regenerative carnivalesque images connected to fertility, feasting or excretion.[45] One example that he gives is an exchange between Panurgos and Brother John that makes use of lengthy litanies consisting of the repetition of the word "cuillon" (a vulgar word for "phallus") with various incongruous epithets.[46]

[44] "Céard é seo a thug sé uirthi? [...]. Raicleach agus rálach agus raibiléara. Nóirín na gCosa Lofa. Nóirín na Mairnéalach. Druncaera Ghort Ribeach na Lochán agus na Lachan! Dúirt sé go mbíodh sí ag ól ar chúla téarmaí ina chailleach; gur minic ab éigin a hiompar abhaile; gur thosaigh sí ag gabháil fhoinn chomh hard is a bhí ina ceann, agus sochraide Tiúnaí Mhichil Tiúnaí ag dul thar a dhoras; gur rubáil sí ceannachóir beithíoch aníos amach istigh ina pharlús; gur ól sí pórtar ón mbuitléara Black a bhíodh ag an Iarla; go dtosaíodh sí ag caitheamh buidéil ar a cuid óil; gur thug sí pocaide mór gabhair Sheáin Choilm isteach sa siopa as craic mheisce, agus siar ar chúla an chúntair, agus gur ghróig sí thuas ar an leathbhairille coctha é, agus gur thosaigh sí ag cíoradh a mheigill, agus ag coinneál phórtair leis; go bhfáisceadh sí barróg ar Thomás Taobh Istigh [...]." Ó Cadhain, *Cré na Cille* 139-40. Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay* 116-17.

[45] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* 415.

[46] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* 416-18.

An analogous instance can be found in *Cré na Cille* when the Big Master, in various places, abuses the postman Billeachaí, taking recourse in alliterative expressions that invariably evoke phallic imagery.[47] The point here is not so much the Big Master's anger at Billeachaí as the sheer inventiveness of his epithets, which transcends the purpose of simple abuse. Rather, it adds to the overall carnivalesque nature of the novel, degrading the postman, but also paradoxically regenerating him in an image of what is essentially potency and fertility.

Strife is Better than Solitude

From the point of view of the reader, moreover, all the instances of verbal fighting bring liveliness to the graveyard and thus have the power to stave off the decomposing power of entropy, as announced by the trumpet. The situation, in principle, is similar to the passage in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* where Vladimir and Estragon engage in a game of verbal abuse in order to combat boredom in their similarly liminal state, doomed to (probably eternally) wait at the crossroads.[48] A grudge, such as the main character Caitríona Pháidín bears against her still living sister Neil, is often the only motivating force of the characters in the peculiar afterlife of the graveyard world – other examples include the Republican continually abusing his killer, the Free State supporter, who is lying in a grave next to him, or the two characters continually arguing about the results of a particular football match.[49]

Behind the obsession with these fights, one can see the fear of the void that would be the only thing that would remain once these stopped. This can be felt in Caitríona Pháidín's panic in the fourth interlude where it seems, for a moment, that the decomposition of the corpses' tongues might put an end to the chatter in

47 Examples include: "an sáiteáinín santach," "an cocbhodalán," "an breillbhodairlín," and "an bodairlín bíogach." Ó Cadhain, *Cré na Cille* 158, 199, 262, 273. The published English translations are not of much use here as they tend to erase the phallic connotation (or indeed denotation) of these words but it suffices to know that "bod" means "phallus" and "sáiteán" "a stake" in Irish.

48 Samuel Beckett, "Waiting for Godot," *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990) 70. On the other hand, Beckett's use of the grotesque is generally more Kayserian than Bakhtinian, and therefore Vladimir's and Estragon's 'abusing game' does not have the regenerative power of the carnivalesque. A thorough comparison between Beckett and Ó Cadhain as regards entropy and the grotesque is, however, a matter for a different essay.

49 Ó Cadhain, *Cré na Cille* 25, 128-29 and *passim*; Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay* 15, 107-108 and *passim.*

the graveyard. She has all the authority of the Irish tradition behind her when she utters the proverb "strife is better than solitude."[50] Her fears are, however, not fulfilled as everybody seems to chatter on and on, regardless of the natural force of decay. This is supported by the title page of the novel, which along with the place, "an chill" (the graveyard), sets also the time, "de shíor."[51] While this phrase is rendered as "eternity" and "for ever" in the English versions of the novel,[52] Pádraig de Paor has pointed to the fact that an apter translation would be "endlessly" (in contrast to the noun "an tsíoraíocht," which means eternity 'proper').[53] It is possible to follow de Paor in seeing this endless Rabelaisian bickering and chatter as Ó Cadhain's way of showing "the absurdity of what our world would be like without human ends."[54] In the light of the above, one may, however, opt for a more positive interpretation. As was mentioned, the voice of the trumpet, despite its Biblical language, announces a world where God is absent, being replaced by the principle of entropy. Carnivalesque talk, however cyclical and repetitive, is the only way for the corpses to fight back, to affirm their liveliness against the rigid rule of decay.

And there is even a ray of hope that this "endless" fight is not completely futile – the fanfare of the trumpet disappears in the last two interludes to be replaced by a dialogue of voices which can be seen as representing the principles of life and death. Even if the voice of death is a continuation of the trumpet, it can't be denied that it loses its metaphoric power and descends from a position of ultimate authority to an equal level with life, an integral part of a *yin*/*yang*-like arrangement. Death is suddenly conceptualized not as entropy omnipotent, but a necessary part of the life cycle: his is, on the one hand, the "arterial system that brings the gangrenous blood of depression to erupt on the smiling cheek," but on the other also "the hidden ducts of every flower" and the "root system that sends growth to rose leaf."[55] At the same time, the voice of death is no longer ignored by the graveyard's inhabitants, but, to a degree, enters their dialogic,

50 "is fearr an troid ná an t-uaigneas." Ó Cadhain, *Cré na Cille* 131; Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay* 109.

51 Ó Cadhain, *Cré na Cille* 9.

52 Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay* 1; Ó Cadhain, *The Dirty Dust,* trans. Alan Titley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) 1.

53 de Paor 78.

54 de Paor 87.

55 "an chóir fhéitheacha a thugas fuil mhorgtha an lionnduibh ag madhmadh ar gháire na grua," "fiodáin fhalaithe gach blátha," "an fréamhra a chuireas an snofach go dtí billeog an róis." Ó Cadhain, *Cré na Cille* 285; Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay* 246.

carnivalesque world.[56] All in all, by the splitting of the trumpet's monologic message, the balance between the cosmic forces of growth and decline is somehow restored on the 'cosmic' level of the novel and a possibility is opened, just as in *Athnuachan*, that the life cycle shall go on, after all. The carnivalesque talk of the corpses is an integral part of this process.

Conclusion

In his use of the carnivalesque Ó Cadhain was in keeping with the Irish-language tradition, which has often taken recourse to this principle since the early Middle Ages: one may think of texts such as *Aisling Mec Coinglinne*, *Páirlement Chlainne Tomáis* or *Cúirt an Mheán-Oíche*, to give only a selection of the most famous ones. As evidenced from *Cré na Cille* and his other works, Ó Cadhain was well acquainted with these texts and often made allusions to them in his writing. This is, however, a matter for a different essay. What is crucial at this point is that the carnivalesque as a principle can be hardly limited to Ireland. While the focus of Bakhtin's analysis is the work of François Rabelais, he is able to trace the principle back to the Roman feast of the Saturnalia and the urban folk culture of the Middle Ages while pointing to its presence also in many later periods.[57] The carnivalesque can be thus seen, if not as a general anthropological constant, then at least as one of the ubiquitous elements of European literature and art. As Ó Ríordáin put it: "Neither was the French priest François Rabelais the first Rabelais, nor is Ó Cadhain the last."[58] Given the crucial role that the carnivalesque plays in *Cré na Cille,* it is thus possible finally to place the novel on the map of European writing – alongside works that use language creativity and experiment, as well as images connected to the lower part of the body, in order to counter rigid conceptual systems and monological voices of authority. It is not a coincidence that many such books count among masterpieces of European literature – alongside *Gargantua et Pantagruel* we may name Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,* Cervantes' *Don Quijote,* but also later novels such as Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Joyce's *Ulysess* or Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk.* It is my view that *Cré na Cille* by right belongs to this choice company.

[56] In the middle of Interlude Ten, one corpse's sigh, "Dhá mairinn scathamh eile" (If I'd lived another while) is answered by an unknown speaker with, "Ba mhaith an mhalairt duit é" (It was a fair exchange for you), which mirrors a similar pronoucement from death's dialogue with life at the beginning of the interlude. Ó Cadhain, *Cré na Cille* 335, 322; Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay* 289, 278.

[57] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* 4-24; 34-58.

[58] "Níorbh é an seagart Francach, Proinsias Rabelais an chéad Rabelais ná ní h-é Ó Cadhain an ceann deireanach." Ó Ríordáin 12.