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REVOLUTIONIZING TROPES OF THE IRISH PEASANT: MÁIRTÍN Ó CADHAIN'S
IMAGINATIVE ENCOUNTERS WITH MAXIM GORKY

Abstract

Máirtín Ó Cadhain, widely regarded as one of the most remarkable Irish language writers of the twentieth century, agitated passionately on behalf of his Irish-language community and strongly criticized the newly formed Irish State for paying lip service to the preservation of Ireland's traditional communities and native language while doing little in practical terms to halt their decimation. His discovery of Russian writer Maxim Gorky during a period of internment for subversive activities was a significant moment in his journey to developing his literary voice. This essay will argue that Ó Cadhain's willingness to learn from his imaginative encounter with Gorky's depictions of life among the Russian peasants allowed him to transcend the limitations of the gaze he inherited from his own literary tradition and imbue his seemingly simple depictions of life in the West of Ireland with a fervour and revolutionary anger that forces a revision of its marginalization as a consequence of economic and political policies.

Keywords: Máirtín Ó Cadhain, Maxim Gorky, Gaeltacht, peasant, revolution

Máirtín Ó Cadhain, widely regarded as one of the most remarkable Irish language writers of the twentieth century, was born in 1906, in Cois Ferraige, a small rural community in the West of Ireland. Cois Ferraige was part of the Connemara Gaeltacht, a wholly Irish speaking area¹. As a writer, Ó Cadhain is perhaps best known for the extraordinary versatility, complexity and richness of the language in which he writes, a language he develops from the expressions and cadences of this community's traditions. As he put it: "The most valuable literary instrument I got from my people was the spoken language, the natural earth pungent speech" (quoted in Mac Con Iomaire, 2016: vii-viii). He won a scholarship to study primary school teaching in Dublin from 1924 to 1926. When he returned home to teach in the local school, he was shocked by the widespread poverty and neglect, and strongly criticized the newly formed Irish State for paying lip service to the preservation of Ireland's traditional communities and native language while doing little in practical terms to halt their decimation. As Séamus Blake notes, much of Ó Cadhain's writing is directed towards the preservation of the Irish language and its native speakers, his goal: "to raise awareness that the decline of the Gaeltacht was not irreversible but patently needed urgent government action to stem the tide of emigration, joblessness, and hopeless despair" (Blake, 2007:45-6). His agitation against the State took a more direct form through his involvement with the outlawed IRA, a group committed to fighting for what they saw as the unfulfilled goal of Ireland's freedom. Ó Cadhain's involvement in republicanism led to his dismissal from his teaching job, and ultimately his internment in the Curragh Camp during the Second World War. It was to this period of imprisonment that Ó Cadhain traces his own emergence as a serious writer, explaining that his time in "Sibéir na hÉireann" (Ireland's Siberia) taught him: "as much about humankind as if I had lived for a hundred years" (quoted in De Paor, 2008: 11). During his time in prison, he taught Irish language and culture classes, and read widely in the Celtic languages, English, French, German and Russian (Mac Con Iomaire: xi). His immersion in the latter writers was particularly fateful, and in a letter written in 1939, he identifies his discovery of the short stories of Russian writer Maxim Gorky as a significant moment on his own journey towards finding his voice:

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¹ For a detailed biography, see Liam Mac Con Iomaire, "Introductory Note", in Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *Cré na Cille*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016, pp. vii-xvi.

as much an eye-opener for me as happened to Saint Paul on the road to Damascus! [...] Why had no one told me that such stories existed? “I could write that” I said to myself. “That’s the kind of work my people do only they have different words for it” A kind of hunger came over me, a more unbearable hunger than the kind I sometimes felt in my stomach. Cois Ferraige, with its stony ground and bare rock, its inlets, streams, lakes and mountains, the faces of its men, women and children, began to take shape behind my shut eyes (quoted in Mac Con Iomaire: ix).

This essay will analyze the impact Maxim Gorky’s bleak but ultimately hopeful depictions of life among the Russian peasants had on Ó Cadhain’s sense of himself as an advocate for his own people in the West of Ireland, abandoned by the State, and losing their traditions, language and young people to poverty, damaging state policies and high emigration. The essay will focus in particular on “The Year 1912” (1948), one Ó Cadhain’s short stories, in which his heartbreaking depiction of a mother’s stoic but desperate preparations for her daughter’s emigration to America echoes Gorky’s anger at the economic decisions that can decimate people’s happiness and prospects through no fault of their own.

Ó Cadhain, through both his writings and his political activism, articulated a life-long antipathy to the economic and cultural policies adopted by the Irish State towards the Gaeltacht regions. Lack of investment meant that these areas suffered particularly high levels of economic stagnation and emigration, a situation made all the more frustrating by the State’s contradictory romanticization of their central role in the nation’s imagined identity: “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” (Nic Dhiarmada, 2008:55). Official policy was based in part on the misguided decision to underline Ireland’s independence from Britain by locating national identity in the constructed, pre-colonial figure of the Irish-speaking, Catholic peasant, spiritually connected to the land and the traditions of his ancestors. The prevalence of this trope, what Mairéad Nic Craith describes as “a form of restorative nostalgia” (Nic Craith, 2020: xxi), is evident in Taoiseach Éamon De Valera’s speech to the nation on St Patrick’s Day, 1943, his vision for an ideal Ireland firmly rooted in the rural imaginary:

The Ireland that we dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit - a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads [...] whose fire sides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age (quoted in Brown, 2011: 146).

This insistent romanticizing of rural Ireland and wilful blindness to its decimation by economic and industrial neglect is a key theme in Ó Cadhain’s writings. In a lecture he delivered to Cumann Merriman, the Irish cultural organization, he complains that urban dwellers, who visit the Gaeltacht only in the summer and can thus afford to romanticize its remoteness, fail to understand the hardship of eking out a living from its barren land. He is determined that his will be a more truthful, realistic voice: “It is no romance to be in dire want! [...] Readers prefer romantic stories. Many of them won’t be too happy with my efforts [...] They spent happy summer months in the Gaeltacht [...] and saw the landscape through the eyes of the summer [...] You can’t imagine the everlasting daily struggle in Tir na nOg!” (Ó Cadhain, 1995: 45, my translation). As well as criticizing the Irish tourist gaze, Ó Cadhain also targeted contemporary writers, whose misty-eyed portrayals of life in the West of Ireland resonated with the themes and tropes he despised. One of the most popular genres of Irish language texts in 1930s Ireland were autobiographies of island life, texts that supported the identification by the State of the rugged rural peasant tirelessly working the land and adhering to the customs of his ancestors as the central repository of Irish identity: “The heroic endurance and social solidarity [...] their self-reliance and stoic acceptance of God’s will in the face of economic hardship and personal trauma, appeared to confirm the exemplary values of traditional, rural, Irish-speaking, communities in the west of Ireland” (De Paor, 2008: 10).

Ó Cadhain was equally sceptical about official Irish language policy, claiming that it regarded the language as an historical artifact to be preserved rather than a living language to be supported. He was scathing in his reaction to An Gúm, an Irish language publisher founded by the Department of Education to supply Irish language textbooks for schools and publish new works of Irish literature (Staunton and Decottignies, 2010:61). The kinds of novels it was willing to publish, he complained: “are

as harmless as cement or tractor novels [...] everything that was to be written in Irish was for children or nuns” (Ó Cadhain, 1971:147). The stranglehold that the State, and its ally the Catholic Church, held over culture is also noted by Brain Ó Conchubhair who observes that: “the Free State Irish-language novel was an innocuous and inoffensive object which re-enforced Catholic doctrine and offered no challenge” (quoted in Staunton and Decottignies: 61). The problem was that the language was regarded more as a link to the past than as a vibrant part of the newly emerging modern state. The consequence, as Bríona Nic Dhiarmada noted, is that: “The Gaeltacht, the living repository of the ancestral language, thus became a fossilized, idealised embodiment of what had been lost, imagined now through a haze of romantic nostalgia” (Nic Dhiarmada: 54). Ó Cadhain’s representation of the Gaeltacht and the vibrant, complex Irish language in which he wrote all of his fiction, can best be understood as his determination to move beyond what Louis De Paor describes as: “the anthropological impulse to document and exoticise the external lives and daily routines of traditional communities that is central to the enduring appeal of the autobiographies” (De Paor, 2008: 10). Nic Dhiarmada suggests that his work can best be described as “anti-utopian, anti-nostalgic”, noting that he strives through both his representation of characters and the style and form of his writing to “foreground rupture and discontinuity” as part of his rebellion against the state-approved formulas and conventions (Nic Dhiarmada: 53-4). The challenge for Ó Cadhain was thus not only to represent his community truthfully, using his unique insider perspective, but also to subvert the official representation which continued to imbue life in the West of Ireland with a romantic nostalgia that airbrushed uncomfortable realities like poverty and emigration.

It is clear that the official definition of Irish identity as constructed through official policies in the early decades after independence was narrow and static. Part of the problem was the conservative, Catholic hegemony that dominated political discourse, ensuring that the diverse social and ideological groups who had cooperated together to fight for Ireland’s independence had become homogenized and ideologically stagnant: “After the success of the revolution [...] Irish society began to revert to type [...] became more than ever sectarian, utilitarian [...] vulgar and provincial” (Frank O’Connor, quoted in Brown: 154-5). The determination to shape cultural representations of Ireland and force them to conform to a fixed ideology is what Robert Welch calls “a totalitarian rewriting of history”, an approach that results only in stasis and division (Welch, 1993: vii). Moving on from this, he notes, involves a willingness to challenge received narratives and invite fresh perspectives to coexist with and enrich traditional interpretations, thus renewing: “the unpredictability of the event or text by subjecting it once again to the challenges and opportunities of contingency. The thing is lived again, and it re-enacts its completeness in the new context” (Welch: vii). Welch’s use of the term “translation” to describe the transformative impact contemporary perspectives can bring to traditions is particularly appropriate for this essay, which will argue that Ó Cadhain’s willingness to learn from his imaginative encounter with Gorky’s depictions of life among the Russian peasants allowed him to transcend the limitations of the gaze he inherited from his own literary tradition and imbue his seemingly simple depictions of life in the West of Ireland with a fervour and revolutionary anger that forces a revision of its marginalization as a consequence of economic and political policies.

It may seem remarkable, as De Paor comments, that an Irish language writer like Máirtín Ó Cadhain, steeped in and deeply committed to his community, should find: “the bleak socialist realist style of the Russian author more closely related to their own personal experience than the work of any of their celebrated Irish contemporaries writing in English (De Paor, 2008: 12). Maxim Gorky, described by Tova Yedlin as “the first so-called proletarian writer”, was born Aleksei Peshkov, in 1868, in the old city of Nizhny Novgorod (Yedlin 1999: 1). The pen name by which he is best known translates as “Maxim the Bitter”, a reference perhaps to the anger he expresses throughout his writings at the treatment of the Russian working classes by a State whose whole-hearted pursuit of industrial growth came at huge cost to its workers’ welfare and quality of life. Nizhniy was an industrial town, the majority of its inhabitants employed in shipyards and living in “a squalid swamp of poverty and ignorance” (Yedlin: 1). Although from a relatively privileged background himself, a job as a construction foreman brought Gorky into contact with migrant labourers, many from a peasant background, who had left their homes in search of work and had become a drifting, homeless sub-class, a “dreadful waste of human potential” that greatly affected him (Yedlin: 4). Writing in his autobiography *My Childhood* (1913-4), Gorky recalls the hardship and repression of everyday life among the working classes:

Now in recalling the past, I myself find it difficult to believe, at this distance of time, that things really were as they were, and I have longed to dispute or reject the facts – the cruelty of the drab existence of an unwelcome relation is too painful to contemplate. But truth is stronger than pity, and besides, I am writing not about myself but about that narrow, stifling environment of unpleasant impressions in which lived – aye, and to this day lives – the average Russian of this class (Gorky, 2016: 4).

The violence and cruelty of everyday life also suffused his own family, whose relationships he describes as seething “with mutual hostility” (Gorky, 2016: 4). After a particularly vicious beating by his grandfather, which left him bed-bound for a number of days, Gorky had what he describes as a spiritual awakening: “I began to experience a new solicitude for others, and I became so keenly alive to their sufferings and my own that it was almost as if my heart had been lacerated, and thus rendered sensitive” (Gorky, 2016:9). Significantly, his own experience of brutality enables him to develop an insider’s empathy with the Russian poor, an emotion that differs significantly from the more patronizing sympathy one may feel towards a group from which one is distanced by economic or social privilege. A prevalent theme in Gorky’s later writings was in fact a cynicism about the intentions of the Russian intelligentsia whose attitude to the poor he found condescending (Yedlin: 27). He was equally unconvinced by the glorification of the Russian peasant as the embodiment of all that was good and beautiful, and by the populist insistence that the peasant collective was where the glorious future lay for Russia. The conflict between the rights of the individual and the responsibility to the collective is, Yedlin states, a central and unresolved theme throughout his texts (Yedlin: 7). Writing of his unease at the ideological elevation of the peasant class, Gorky states:

When they spoke of the *narod*, I felt with astonishment and distrust in myself that on this point I could not think the way these people thought. For them the *narod* was an embodiment of wisdom, spiritual beauty, and benevolence, a god-like creature [...] I did not know that kind of *narod*. I have met carpenters, stone masons [...] but (the populists) spoke of the consubstantial *narod* and put themselves somewhat lower in dependence of its will (quoted in Yedlin: 11).

What Gorky is advocating here is a more realistic representation of the Russian peasant that, similar to Ó Cadhain, will resist their romanticization. Yedlin notes that the publication in 1898 of the first volume of his short stories made Gorky one of the most read and discussed writers in the country, and that although some criticized his choice of heroes and themes, others saw in his works something new and refreshing: “Gorky emerged as the champion of the underdog; his stories were seen as a protest against the existing social and economic order and as a revolt of the individual rising to defend his rights” (Yedlin: 25-26). De Paor argues that there was a political purpose to the realistic portrayal of the material conditions that repressed his characters and kept them from achieving their full potential: “By identifying the economic inequalities which distort the lives of individuals and their communities, he makes clear to his readers that their personal failures are to be attributed to social injustice rather than deficiencies of character. In anatomising the dehumanization of the individual, he provides the justification for social revolution” (De Paor, 2008: 12). For Gorky, the peasants are not responsible for the deprivation and lack of opportunity they suffer, but crucially they hold within them the strength to overturn the system and demand a better future. Communicating this message of hope and rebellion is a key aim of his writing:

And there is another and more important reason impelling me to describe these horrors. Although they are so disgusting, although they oppress us and crush many beautiful souls to death, yet the Russian is still so healthy and young in heart that he can and does rise above them. For in this amazing life of ours not only does the animal side of our nature flourish and grow fat, but all this animalism there has grown up triumphant in spite of it, bright, healthful and creative, a kind of humanity which inspires us to look forward to our regeneration, to the time when we shall all live peacefully and humanely (Gorky, 2016: 92).

“A Woman”, from his collection *Through Russia* (1921), serves as an exemplar of Gorky’s clear-sighted critique of life in Russia. It articulates his indictment of the economic and political

priorities that make it all but impossible for the working classes to live comfortable, free lives; his location of hope for the future in the unquenchable spirit of the Russian peasant; and his use of a variety of narratorial techniques to imbue the story with his revolutionary message and fervour. This story also locates much of the hope for the future in the figure of the silent but stoic Russian woman, a characterization that resonates strongly in Ó Cadhain. Gorky's own grandmother was precisely such a woman, protecting him from the wrath of his male relatives and engendering a love for the traditions of his homeland. The following description of his grandmother beautifully captures the mixture of romance and unvarnished realism that characterizes his writing:

So she always talked, using such peculiarly harmonious words that they took root in my memory like fragrant, bright, everlasting flowers [...] What spoiled her was her bulbous nose, with its distended nostrils, and red lips, caused by her habit of taking pinches of snuff [...] and her fondness for drink. Everything about her was dark, but within she was luminous with an inextinguishable, joyful and ardent flame, which revealed itself in her eyes (Gorky, 2016: 2).

The story takes place in a small Cossack village, in the Russian Steppes, on the eve of the Feast of the Assumption. This occasion draws a number of different social groups together, allowing Gorky to examine their interactions. It begins with a glorious description of the landscape of the Steppes, the strong wind and fast-moving clouds suggesting great life and movement: "The wind is scudding over the steppe, and beating upon the rampart of the Caucasian heights until their backbone seems to be bellying like a huge sail" (Gorky, 2014: 62), an image signifying perhaps the strong, stoicism at the core of Russian identity. Just as Gorky's words veer towards the transcendent: "one can scarcely draw one's breath for the tension, the rapture", the reader is brought down to earth with a reference to the "black, sootlike dust" through which the Cossacks toil to bring in the harvest, leaving them with: "eyes reddened with exposure to the wind, and beard matted, seemingly solidified, with dust and sweat" (Gorky, 2014: 62). Gorky notes that the Cossacks, although well-fed and prosperous, are dour and silent, traits he attributes to overwork: "the full fed country people of the region laugh but little, and seldom sing" (Gorky, 2014: 62). Gorky is not very sympathetic in his portrayal of the Cossacks, suggesting that they are uncaring towards those less fortunate than themselves, throwing them into prison rather than being sympathetic to their plight, and, worst of all, unthinkingly subservient to authority. He is much more interested in the large, diverse groups of migrants, who have gathered in the village for work and to take advantage of the hospitality dispensed during religious festivals. Referred to variously as "strollers for work", "nowhere people", and later on as "famine folk", Gorky is struck by the lack of autonomy such groups have over their fate, subject to economic decisions that serve only to disenfranchise them: "The vagabonds, huddled against the churchyard wall, look like litter driven thither by the steppe wind, and as liable to be whirled away again whenever the wind shall choose" (Gorky, 2014: 62). Notwithstanding the sympathy apparent in this description, Gorky refuses to blame external factors alone for their plight, cynically commenting that too many of them have simply given up trying to seek employment, preferring instead to embrace the constructed helplessness of begging and stealing: "Dull, or cowed, or timid, or furtive of eye, these folks have lost all sense of the difference between that which constitutes honesty and that which does not" (Gorky, 2014: 62) - a description considerably at odds with the glorification of the peasant suggested in populist propaganda. Gorky seeks to further understand some of the factors that result in a life of migration by inserting himself directly into the story as a character, who strikes up a conversation with one of these vagrants, a man named Konev, who is travelling with two female companions he has met on the road. All four are detained for the night by the local authorities as their papers are not in order. This temporary, enforced companionship gives Gorky the opportunity to engage in conversation with, and thus develop an insider's perspective on, their plight.

The male characters in the story are predominantly violent drunkards, who assert themselves mostly through physical strength and crude language, invariably directed towards the women in their environments. Konev's description of his wife is typically disrespectful, inscribing her firmly within her domestic duties, while he claims his male right to escape from them: "we just got married, and brats began to come tumbling from her like bugs from a bunk [...] poverty is wearing me down, and when, last winter, my old woman went to pieces I set forth (for what else could I do?)" (Gorky, 2014: 62). Over the course of their night in detention, Konev subjects his female companions to drunken beatings

and attempted rape, although in the latter he is thwarted by the strength and composure of the older woman, known only as Tatiana from Riazan. She becomes the focus of Gorky's interest, elevated above her companions by the intelligence and light he observes behind her calm exterior. Musing that she stands out like: "a fragment of copper flung into the midst of some rusty old scrap-iron", he cannot help regretting the uninspiring masses he usually sees around him, suggesting that trying to help such people is a waste of his own energy as they simply are not capable of helping themselves to rise above their limitations: "never do I seek to project a spark of my own fire into the darkness of my neighbour's soul but I see that spark disappear, become lost, in a chaos of dumb vacuity" (Gorky, 2014: 62). He begins to imagine how he would inspire those around him through the elevating sentiments of his words:

there begins to wail in my soul an insatiable longing to breathe forth words of sympathy with all mankind, words of burning love for all the world, words of appreciation of, for example, the sun's beauty as, enfolding the earth in his beams [...] Yes, I yearn to recite to my fellow-men words which shall raise their heads. At length I find myself compounding the following jejeune lines...Meanwhile from the women's corner there comes a soft, intermittent whispering (Gorky, 2014: 62).

The deliberate juxtaposition of the (male) desire to sing expansively and the quiet but, as we shall discover, stoic advice Tatiana is offering her younger companion very effectively conveys Gorky's message about the limited value of inspiring language to a group of people who have been ground down by the violence and repression they experience on a daily basis. His grandiose vision contrasts sharply with Tatiana's depressing if pragmatic advice that women should never react when beaten by a man: "Never ought you to show that it hurts you [...] PRETEND. That is to say, when he beats you, make light of it, and treat it as a joke". Women must accept such violence within their relationships, she suggests, not because they are the weaker sex, but quite the opposite: their performance of submission allows men to think they are in charge, a subterfuge that allows society to function: "And particularly should a woman so face things; for upon her everything depends" (Gorky, 2014: 62).

Later Gorky finds himself alone with Tatiana and learns more about the circumstances that brought her wandering on the roads looking for work. From a well-educated background, she was unhappily married to a friend of her father's, "a libertine and a drunkard" who eventually died of his vices. She took to the road seeking "a chance of happiness", her dream to meet a nice *muzhik* (peasant) and build a life for themselves amongst like-minded people:

there we shall set our place in order, and lay out a garden and an orchard, and prepare as much plough land as we may need for our working [...] And when we have put everything in order, other folk may join us [...] Also, children may one day play in that garden, and a summer house be built there. Ah, how delightful such a life appears! (Gorky, 2014: 63)

Concerned about the unattainability of her dream, Gorky tries to temper her expectations for her future, but he is unable to shake her confidence, partly because it is infused with a realism that sees value in the aspiration as well as the fulfillment of her dream: "Amid a great sorrow [...] even a small joy becomes a great felicity" (Gorky, 2014: 63). Gorky is initially buoyed by her combination of strength, determination and self-belief: "I sense an extraordinary lightness to be present in my breast, a radiant void through which joyous, intangible words and thoughts keep flying as swallows wheel across the firmament"; and yet bitter experience has taught him that women in her circumstances rarely manage to overcome the significant obstacles placed in their paths to achieve their dreams: "my rapture dies away, and turns to sorrow, heartache, and tears. For in me there is a presentiment that before the living juice within that bosom shall have borne fruit, it will have become dried up" (Gorky, 2014: 63). Gorky's presentiment turns out to be correct. He is reunited with Konev in the closing pages of the story five years later in Metechski Prison in Tiflis, both incarcerated "without cause". He learns that Tatiana too has been "merely the victim of an accident", found guilty and convicted to ten years penal servitude. Hearing that her dreams have been crushed by a corrupt judicial system uninterested in serving its citizens, his final words express his anger and frustration: "Wearily my mind recalls the many scores of Russian folk whom it has seen perish to no purpose. And as it does so it feels crushed, as in a vice, beneath the burden of great and inexorable sorrow with which all life is dowered" (Gorky, 2014: 63).

“A Woman” is an excellent example of “social realism”, a genre Gorky himself defined as presenting an unvarnished picture of the hardships endured by ordinary workers, while inspiring a revolutionary desire to effect radical social change. In an address delivered to the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, on August 17th, 1934, he defined the aims of the genre in the following terms:

Social realism proclaims that life is action, creativity whose aim is the unfettered development of man’s most individual abilities for his victories over the sources of nature, for his health and longevity, for the great happiness of living on earth which he in conformity with the constant regrowth of his requirements wishes to cultivate as a magnificent habitation of a mankind united in one family (quoted in Hnatiw, 1967: 63).

A key requisite of social realism, as De Paor notes, is that the text links certain political aims with the form of the storytelling, so that medium and message are completely aligned: “It is obvious that Gorky imagines an active aim for his stories, that his readers will be inspired to action [...] The spirit of these stories springs from their political hope in the endurance of the person to overcome their environment and tear down the unfair system” (De Paor 1990: 51²). The reader, in other words, should feel angry and inspired to action by the call to revolution issued by the writer.

De Paor describes the resonances between Gorky and Ó Cadhain as a kind of “imaginative brotherhood” (De Paor 1990: 51), based on their realistic appraisal of the “hardship, suffering and selfishness” of the lives they portray. Gorky’s hatred for the upper classes and call to overthrow the unfair social forces that repress people and “pulverize the goodness” out of them (De Paor, 1990: 51) had obvious resonances for Ó Cadhain, already well known before the publication of his first stories as a “committed left-wing republican, deeply implicated in subversive activities” (De Paor, 2008: 11). In the context of this essay, his activism on behalf of local rather than national causes is of more interest. Micheál Ó hAodha notes that many of his characters exhibit a significant paralysis, trapped within their unfulfilling lives by a combination of “pre-ordained fate that chokes their emotional and inner lives” and their daily labour “long hours doing back-breaking work” (Ó hAodha, 2016: 49). Taking these points in reverse order, it is intriguing to note that Ó Cadhain differs quite significantly from Gorky in their attitudes towards the land. Gorky’s texts are filled with beautiful, transcendent descriptions of the Russian landscape, its vast glories, as suggested in the analysis of “A Woman”, reinforcing themes of Russian strength and unity. For Ó Cadhain, notwithstanding its beauty, the poor, arid land in the West of Ireland is precisely what keeps his characters impoverished and unfulfilled. Welch suggests that Ó Cadhain goes further than any other Irish writer in outlining the huge physical toll exacted by life in the Gaeltacht: “Ó Cadhain’s descriptions of work are stripped of any romantic or nostalgic aura and the crushing pressure of unremitting effort is presented. Endurance, toughness and animal energy are what the bare stony fields and the shores with their narrow inlets require of the man or woman who wants to survive” (Welch: 149). The fact that “the traditional Irish reverence for place was subverted within the harshness of a tyrannical landscape” (Ó hAodha: 49) constitutes its own revolutionary break from traditions of Irish literature that presume a quasi-religious communion between people and land. De Paor notes that Ó Cadhain eschews conventional representations of the landscape as a comforting presence, depicting instead a complex interdependence between land and inhabitant: “a tyrannical master that leaves the characters physically and emotionally exhausted and yet is intimately linked to their individual and community identity, their sense of home and belonging” (De Paor, 2008: 13). This willingness to subvert the traditional Irish sense of place in order to advocate for an enhanced quality of life for its inhabitants also manifested in Ó Cadhain’s social activism. Most notably, he was centrally involved in the relocation of native Irish speakers from the West of Ireland to more productive farm land in the East of the country in 1935, resulting in the establishment of the still-thriving Ráth Cairn Gaeltacht (Mac Con Iomaire: viii), an excellent example of the fusion of his literary and political activism.

² De Paor’s article is written in Irish. All translations are my own.

Another interesting resonance Gorky has for Ó Cadhain is his uneasiness about the role of community in shaping and determining the choices open to his characters. Many of his stories depict individuals, quite often women, subduing their individual desires and needs to communal pressures to behave in socially sanctioned ways. De Paor cites the contrast between what the characters say and do, and how they think and feel, as a key feature in many of the stories, noting that the actions of individuals: “are controlled by the conventions and expectations of the community and [...]they rarely if ever resist or transgress the laws of the community” (De Paor, 2008: 12). This tension between their public behaviour and their private thoughts and feelings is central to the dramatic structure and psychological insights of these stories. The reality, Welch explains, is that a close-knit community is an economic necessity in a disadvantaged environment like the West of Ireland, crucial to its survival. However, as well as operating as “a network of mutual assistance the community is a system in which people are on the lookout for weaknesses in others” (Welch: 150). Nowhere is the dichotomous nature of community more evident than in Ó Cadhain’s portrayal of his women characters, who are frequently forced to sacrifice their needs and dreams to the dictates of the community. As well as imbuing his stories with emotion, this obligation to put economic need above individual fulfilment enables him to align his sympathy for the women with his anger at the failed economic policies that have made poverty and emigration an everyday reality for many inhabitants of the Gaeltacht. The fact that so many of his women characters survive these attacks on their individual agency, demonstrating remarkable endurance and resilience, reflects the often quiet but steely stoicism also found in Gorky’s women.

Ó Cadhain’s short story “The Year 1912” (1948) is narrated through the innermost thoughts and emotions of a mother, whose daughter Máirín is about to emigrate to America. As was traditional in Ireland, on the evening before her departure an “American wake” is being held in the house. This was an opportunity for the community to gather and bid farewell to the emigrant, who in all probability would not be returning home. The American wake had a formulaic structure, involving food, drink, music and dancing, and culminating in a communal lament led by women hired to kean: “Women renowned for their ability to lament were invited to give emotional eulogies about the departing emigrant. They traditionally delivered the eulogies in a high-pitched wail, resulting in rooms full of wailing women and weeping men” (O’Brien, 2020). The similarities between the American wake and the funeral rites are deliberate – both marked departures that were in all likelihood permanent - and the narrator often evokes language more commonly associated with death to convey her emotions as she prepares to bid farewell to her daughter. She vents much of her rage at the trunk, newly purchased to carry her daughter’s belongings to America, an innocuous item she imbues with an otherworldly malevolence: “a ghost from the Otherworld come to snatch away the first conception of her womb and the spring of her daily life” (Ó Cadhain, 2004: 255). The dramatic evocation of superstition in the first half of this sentence almost overshadows the simple yet complete love for her daughter she expresses in the second. Throughout the story, she continues to avoid contact with the trunk, making frequent references to the bereavement it heralds for her as a mother: “It was of pale yellow timber [...] the face of a corpse after a long wake in the sultry weather” (Ó Cadhain, 2004: 256). Lloyd suggests that a further connotation of the trunk is with the so-called “coffin-ships”, in which so many Irish emigrants died on their journeys to America in the aftermath of the 19th century famine (Lloyd, 2008: 70).

From the start of the story, the mother is pretending to be at ease with her daughter’s impending journey, conscious that it is a common destiny for young people in the community and that she has a duty to pretend that it is an acceptable part of everyday life. She reflects on the prevalence of emigration in her own family, noting however that habit has done nothing to ease the pain engendered by each departure: “That their daughter should be off to America was no surprise to her, no more than the eight sisters of her own whose going was a bitter memory still. She had been schooled by the iron necessities of life to keep a grip on her feelings and throttle her motherlove” (Ó Cadhain, 2004: 255). Conflict between her individual emotions as a mother, heartbroken at the loss of her beloved daughter, and the inevitability of emigration for any young person with aspirations for a better life, suffuses the story with an almost unbearable poignancy: “Flickers of affection, flashes of insight from shutaway feelings, were setting her sense and reason aglow with the knowledge that this going into exile was worse than the spoiling of a church or the wreck of a countryside [...] But it was destiny, must be attended to” (Ó Cadhain, 2004: 255). Her frustration that she has to accept the loss of her daughter clearly articulates Ó

Cadhain's anger at official Irish policy that consistently saw emigration to America as a safety valve, a way of avoiding the radical, potentially expensive measures needed to create opportunities for young people in their local communities.

Much of the emotional tension in the story stems for the juxtaposition of the increasingly raucous community gathering and the storm of unexpressed emotion that grips the mother. Forced to make small talk and exchange clichéd expressions of regret and hope with her neighbours, she is caught between her obligation to play her socially expected role and her yearning to spend her last few hours alone with her daughter. Listening to the lyrics of the songs being played by musicians, which fluently articulate the long history of Irish emigration to America, she is filled with frustration that the magnitude of the occasion is stifling her own ability to speak. The pure, almost primitive love she wants to express to her daughter remains hidden inside, any words she might use hopelessly inadequate to convey what is in her heart: "She had so many things on the tip of her tongue to say to her, the intimacies, the affectionate things saved up in motherlove, her life-stuff, from the moment she feels the quick seed in her womb until the flush of eternity puts out the twilight of the world" (Ó Cadhain, 2004: 256). The poetry in Ó Cadhain's description contrasts beautifully with the mother's silence throughout the story. His eloquence in describing her desperate but inarticulate emotion is very affecting, linking her plight to the paralysis he notes as widespread among a community long used to having to put up with hardship and sorrow not of their own making: "as soon as she thought to break the crust of speech she couldn't find a word to say but stood stockstill staring at her daughter, Hands fiddling with the folds of her apron. Blushing, tears and smile painfully together in her cheek. Humps and wrinkles of distress coming in her forehead like keys struggling with a lock" (Ó Cadhain, 2004: 258).

Compounding the mother's distress is her inability to spend a few moments on her own with her daughter. Emigration, after all, is a communal event, and both mother and daughter find themselves coopted into the social rituals required to mark it. Overhearing her daughter's promise that she will in turn send money home to enable her younger siblings to join her in America, the mother realises the relentless toll emigration exacts on families who it appears will never free themselves from its grip: "The mother felt a bleak touch of her own death hearing the greedy begging voices of the pair. Years of delay were being heaped on her daughter's return, as shovelfuls of earth are heaped on a coffin" (Ó Cadhain, 2004: 260). Her own desire to keep her family together is no match for the predetermined fate that ensures that emigration is the inevitable destiny for many of the young people: "The young women were chirruping of America [...] Typical of a race whose guardian angel was the American trunk, whose guiding star was the exile ship" (Ó Cadhain, 2004: 259).

The story ends as the daughter bids farewell to her home and begins the first stage of her journey to the docks in Brightcity. Ó Cadhain describes the procession of friends and neighbours who accompany her to the limits of the locality as akin to a funeral procession: "They had all the appearance of a sacrificial procession: the sidecar like a funeral pyre ahead, puffs of the men's tobacco-smoke hanging in the early morning air" (Ó Cadhain, 2004: 263-264). His anger at the toll that years of failed economic policies have taken on the community resonates in his description of each departing member as a sacrifice. As demanded by convention, the local women begin to keen, their wailing expressing the anger of a community at the perennial loss of its young. The mother, however, finds that she cannot find comfort in this display of solidarity, her own grief too immense to be easily incorporated into, and thus contained by, a ritual designed to assuage rather than facilitate the expression of rage: "The women started in to sob, and the sobbing lifted into a loud wail of words, expressing no real anguish the mother thought, beyond voice and tears. They wouldn't leave her even the comfort of keening alone. And she shed no tear" (Ó Cadhain, 2004: 265). The early light of dawn brings no comfort, serving only to emphasise the aridity and poverty of the surrounding landscape, unable to sustain or provide a living for its own people: "There was a mild red light from the sun just up. Field walls and piles of stone grinned bleakly. In the little pokes of fields slanting and rugged the tramped stubble was like the head of Samson having suffered the shears of Delilah" (Ó Cadhain, 2004: 264) – the choice of Biblical image again reinforcing what Ó Cadhain perceives as the betrayal by the State of its own citizens. The story ends with the mother's resigned acceptance of her fate, which will see the departure not just of this daughter but in future years, inevitably, of her siblings: "The mother realised she was but the first of the nestlings

in flight to the land of summer and joy: the wildgoose that would never again come back to its native ledge” (Ó Cadhain, 2004: 265). Ó Cadhain’s evocation of metaphorical language in this closing sentence is in stark contrast to the measured narratorial attitude adopted throughout the story, suggesting perhaps that the recourse to cliché is the only way to manage or hide from the pain of emigration.

It is certainly no coincidence that Ó Cadhain uses so many references to the rituals of death and burial in this story about emigration, as the individual departure is a clear symbol of the demise of the once vibrant Gaeltacht communities and their native language. Commenting on another of Ó Cadhain’s stoic but resigned women characters, Welch notes that their quiet resistance in the face of unimaginable obstacles should be read as a metaphor for the wider challenges facing Gaelic Ireland, a once thriving nation that survived long centuries of colonialism only to be almost crushed by the indifference of the post-independent Irish state (Welch: 156). Taking his cue from Gorky, Ó Cadhain does not try to romanticize the challenges facing his native people, nor does he envision the emergence of articulate, heroic characters who can guide their community to safety. Instead, he locates his hope in the fortitude and stoicism of the ordinary rural people, especially the women, who accept the burdens fate forces them to carry but refuse to allow themselves to be defeated by them. The unfair system, as De Paor argues, does not break the spirits of Ó Cadhain’s women, for even though they submit to the values of their community, their spark of individuality is unquenched and it is this “inner energy (that) carries the writer’s hope, the revolutionary hope that inspires action” (De Paor, 1990: 54). The inner strength demonstrated by many of the women may be misread, Gearóid Denvir suggests, by contemporary feminists, alienated by their willingness to cede to the prescriptions of patriarchal traditions, but this would be to misinterpret Ó Cadhain’s message: “that is an outsider’s perspective: it is not the evidence of those who would be familiar with the situation, the women who put up with hardship and the fulfillment of their duties as they saw fit themselves within the unspoken laws of their people. They not only understood where they came from, but who they were themselves. They had a certainty about who they were” (Denvir, 1987: 25³). It is worth noting that, in fact, the majority of Ó Cadhain’s women are not silent at all, but rather take every opportunity they can to gossip, badmouth and rail exuberantly and often vituperatively against the forces that attempt to constrict them, carrying their articulate bitterness with them even into the grave. It is in this refusal to be silenced that the revolutionary spark remains alive. Reflecting on the deliberately difficult and complex language in which Ó Cadhain writes all his fiction, Welch suggests that the effort required of the reader to decipher the texts symbolizes the tenuous position of the Irish language, almost eliminated by the machinations of modernity, but deeply rooted nonetheless in the rocky soil that engenders it: “though pushed out to the edge of a driving and driven Europe, is still there, still capable of the act of self-expression which is essential to survival” (Welch: 156). Ó Cadhain, as a writer and political activist, was well known for his often vicious verbal attacks on policies and public figures he felt were inimical to his beloved Gaeltacht community and its culture. This essay has argued that his writings, suffused with anger, link his determination to speak out on behalf of those who are voiceless and marginalized with the revolutionary spirit that germinated for him through his intercultural conversation with Maxim Gorky.

³ Denvir’s article is written in Irish. All translations are my own.

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