

# ESCAPING THE ‘SHOWER OF FOLLY’: THE IRISH LANGUAGE, REVIVALISM, AND THE HISTORY OF IDEAS<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract.* The Irish language represents a material link ensuring continuity between the past and present of the Irish experience, but as that link has gradually been obscured, the language has become a form of alterity, indicated in the notion of Gaelic Ireland going ‘underground’. The choice between maintaining the continuity of the Irish literary tradition and abandoning it was characterized by Franciscan theologian and philosopher Froinsias Ó Maolmhuaidh (Francis O’Molloy) as the choice between keeping one’s reason and embracing folly. Thus, his envoi to the first printed Irish grammar in 1677 exhorts the people of Ireland to engage in a revival of literacy in the Irish language so as to transform their future by keeping faith with the past. Yet the desire to revive past knowledge or values is problematic. Is it possible, as the Irish revivalist Douglas Hyde desired, to ‘render the present a rational continuation of the past’? Or is it the case that revivals are attempts at a renewal of tradition, involving a dialectical transition similar to Hegel’s notion of *Aufhebung*? This inaugural lecture considers this question and the wider implications of revival by situating the Irish tradition of Revivalism within the broader history of ideas.

## I.

A certain amount of what I will have to say this evening involves what has been called ‘the backward look’.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps it is inevitable that I should speak about this, after all, having been born in Belfast during the weekend of mid-August 1969 when the Northern Troubles began, I became used to people looking back fondly to the halcyon days before the mayhem. Indeed, I soon became aware of the link between my own arrival and the disruption of peace—‘things were so good before you were born’, ‘everything was so very nice before you were born’. It took a certain effort to convince myself that my birth

1. Text of my inaugural professorial lecture at Maynooth University, delivered Thursday, 10 May 2018.
2. See Frank O’Connor, *The Backward Look: A Survey of Irish Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1967).

was not a harbinger of doom. I should also say that when I mention Revivalism and the history of ideas, this need not be by definition a departure into the abstract and the non-material. I come from an Irish-speaking family, and my parents chose to raise us through Irish. It was never an easy choice. When my mother used to bring us downtown during the 1970s, the only bus available to us travelled down the Shankill Road or the Crumlin Road—two staunchly Loyalist areas where speaking Irish would have identified us immediately as Catholics. This was in the days of wholesale sectarian murders. Yet we spoke Irish and we are still here. Of course, not everyone was sectarian nor was sectarianism exclusive to one community. My father once helped a neighbour of ours, an Orangeman, to translate the name of his lodge's banner, 'Ireland's Heritage/Oidhreachta na hÉireann'.<sup>3</sup> That was a very important conversation and one of which I am very proud. The point of telling you this is to illustrate that the subject of my talk—the Irish language, Revivalism, and the history of ideas—is not an abstract domain, free from material considerations or consequences. Indeed, the Irish language is one of the main issues in the current political impasse which led to the prolonged suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Let me say a few words about the title. The phrase 'the shower of folly' refers to one of the apologues or allegorical stories used by Irish bardic poets whose bardic schools were prestigious institutions of learning from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries. The story tells how, at the beginning of the world, thirty philosophers warned their fellow people of an impending deluge which would destroy all. Finding that no one would believe their warning, the philosophers took shelter in a cave only to find on emerging again that the population of the world had become fools through exposure to the showers of rain. They discussed their situation for a while so as to agree the best course of action available to them. Should they continue to avoid the shower of folly and preserve their faculties, their reason, or should they stand under the next shower of folly and become like everyone else? Agreeing that their wisdom was now worthless, the philosophers duly resolved to stand under the rain shower themselves so as to be like everyone else: *beag díol na cruinne dar gcéill*, as one iteration of the story has it, 'the world places little value on our wisdom'.<sup>4</sup>

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3. For an image of this banner, see *Belfast and the Irish Language*, ed. by Fionntán de Brún (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), illustration 23.

4. As is typical of Irish bardic poetry, more than one literal interpretation of this phrase is possible. In his first published edition of the poem 'Bíodh aire ag Ultaibh ar Aodh' ('Let the Ulaid have a care of Aodh'), in which this phrase occurs, Lambert McKenna gives the English translation, 'the world is not worth our wisdom'. However, in the notes to his second published edition (part of a major anthology of Irish bardic poetry with no English translations), McKenna advises a different interpretation, 'Is anbheag ar fad an chuid d'ar n-eolas oireas don phobal' ('Very little indeed is the amount of our wisdom that the people will need'—my translation). See Lambert McKenna, 'Poem to Aodh Mag Uidhir by Eochaidh Ó hEoghusa', *The Irish Monthly*,

Among the references to this story, collated and analysed by Mícheál Mac Craith, two poems by the Fermanagh poet Eochaidh Ó hEódhusa (c.1568–1612), stand out.<sup>5</sup> These are ‘Bíodh aire ag Ultaibh ar Aodh’ (‘Let the Ulaid have a care of Aodh’), in which the phrase quoted above occurs, and ‘Ionmholta malairt bhisigh’ (‘A change for the better is laudable’).<sup>6</sup> The first of these poems was composed in the late sixteenth century, the second in the early part of the seventeenth century. This was, of course, a time of crisis for Gaelic Ireland—the Gaelic earls having submitted to defeat at the end of the Nine Years’ War in 1603, which led then to what has become known as the ‘Flight of the Earls’, in 1607, to mainland Europe. In fact, Ó hEódhusa was endorsing the decision made by the thirty philosophers, to submit to the shower of folly.

The story of the thirty philosophers resurfaces just over seventy years later in a poem composed in St Isidore’s College, Rome, by the Franciscan philosopher and theologian Froinsias Ó Maolmhuaidh (d. 1677).<sup>7</sup> The Irish colleges established in mainland Europe from the late sixteenth century onwards were centres for Counter-Reformation theology but also, more broadly, for a renewal of Irish learning that coincided with the decline of bardic schools. Ó Maolmhuaidh’s poem was composed as the envoi to his *Grammatica Latino-Hibernica*, the first printed Irish grammar, published in Rome in 1677, and it is an appeal to ‘the young and old of the island of saints’, in other words, Ireland.<sup>8</sup> Ó Maolmhuaidh chides his fellow countrymen for having submitted to the shower of folly:

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vol. 48, no. 569 (November 1920), 593–98 (p. 597, q. 34c); Láimhbheartach Mac Cionnaith, *Dioghlúim Dána* (Dublin: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1938), note on p. 458. I am grateful to my colleague Dr Eoghan Ó Raghallaigh for his advice on this point.

5. Mícheál Mac Craith, ‘Cíoth na Baoisé, *Béaloidéas*, 51 (1983), 31–54. For biographical information on Eochaidh Ó hEódhusa, see the online *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, accessed at <http://dib.cambridge.org>.
6. For a recent close reading and English translation of this poem, see Peter McQuilán, ‘A Bardic Critique of Queen and Court: “Ionmholta malairt bhisigh”, Eochaidh Ó hEodhasa, 1603’, in *Elizabeth I and Ireland*, ed. by Brendan Kane and Valerie McGowan Doyle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 60–85. See also Michelle O’Riordan, *Irish Bardic Poetry and Rhetorical Reality* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2007), pp. 251–58.
7. For *Dictionary of Irish Biography* entry, see Ó Maolmhuaidh, Proinsias (Francis O’Molloy).
8. For a recent discussion of Ó Maolmhuaidh, his *Grammatica Latino-Hibernica*, and its envoi, see Claire Carroll, *Exiles in a Global City: The Irish and Early Modern Rome, 1609–1783* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 144–72. See also Cuthbert Mhág Craith, *Dán na mBráthar Mionúr* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967), pp. 227–29. The English translations of the verses discussed below are my own, for advice on which I would like to thank my former colleagues Professor Ailbhe Ó Corráin and Dr Art Hughes (Ulster University).

*Fōdla liu do chuaidh man gcioth*  
*I n-aghaidh sluaigh a sinsior*  
 All Ireland has submitted to the shower,  
 In contrast to their ancestors.

Rather than submitting to the shower, Ó Maolmhuaidh urges his fellow countrymen to reverse their eschewal of literacy and by so doing bring about a dramatic change in their own fortunes:

*Fill anosa, a aos mhánma,*  
*Nā bī go dian dogharmtha*  
*’s nach cian ō chathshaoirlíos Chuinn*  
*Go mbia an t-athaoibhnios againn.*  
 Return now, oh people dear to my soul,  
 Do not be stubbornly resistant to the call  
 And it shall not be long until Ireland [the noble fort of Conn]  
 Will have a second glory.

The force of Ó Maolmhuaidh’s use of the story of the thirty philosophers is to remind us of the choice available to them and, by analogy, to the people of Ireland to whom the poem is addressed, in reclaiming their intellectual inheritance. So, that is the first thing which I wish to stress or flag up here: the revival of learning and literacy in Irish advocated by this Franciscan philosopher and theologian, Froinsias Ó Maolmhuaidh, in his poem of 1677 centres on the exercise of choice even when it might be easier to go, literally, with the flow; the realization of an alternative state of affairs even when this seems to go against the prevailing order.

The second poem which I want to mention briefly also features a devastating shower but thankfully, on this occasion, one which leads to enlightenment as opposed to derangement of the senses. This is ‘Seanchas na Sceiche’ (or ‘The History of the Thornbush’), a very long narrative poem composed in the first decades of the nineteenth century by the blind poet from Kiltamagh in Co. Mayo, Antaine Raiftearái (1779–1835).<sup>9</sup> Having vainly sought shelter from torrential rain under a thornbush, Raiftearái is soaked through and returns the following day to curse and damn the thornbush for all eternity for having provided him no shelter. Somewhat surprisingly, the thornbush speaks to him, explaining that it has been there for 1,100 years from before the time of Noah’s Ark. It goes on to relate the history of Ireland, to which it has been witness. What is remarkable is that Raiftearái should have been able to compose such a lengthy and learned poem—over 100 quatrains—giving an account of the history of Ireland from essentially the time of the Flood until the end of the seventeenth

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9. For the text of ‘Seanchas na Sceiche’, see Ciarán Ó Coigligh, *Raiftearái: Amhráin agus Dánta* (Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1987), pp. 137–48. See *Dictionary of Irish Biography* for biographical details.

century. The version of Irish history given by the thornbush mirrors the narrative provided in earlier poems such as Seán Ó Conaill's 'Tuireamh na hÉireann' ('Ireland's Dirge') which, it has been argued, maintained the native version of Irish history epitomized in Geoffrey Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* ('History of Ireland') written in 1634.<sup>10</sup> Keating's version of Irish history is from the outset presented as an alternative to the hegemony of English historians' accounts of Ireland. Thus, in his preface, Keating sets out to counter these narratives, which, he contends, have unjustly maligned the Irish—famously comparing these hostile historians to the dung beetle that prefers dung to beautiful flowers.<sup>11</sup> Keating's history of Ireland and the narrative poems which were composed as almost portable versions of the full history might be said to have sustained the continuity of the native account of Irish history, as Vincent Morley and others have argued.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the late Pádraig Ó Fiannachta, former professor of Modern Irish and Old Irish at Maynooth, described the role of Keating's history as having maintained the spirit of Gaelic Ireland after it went underground in the seventeenth century, like the mythical *Tuatha Dé Danann*.<sup>13</sup>

So, the purpose of discussing these two poems briefly is to illustrate the first main premise of this talk, which is that, while the Irish language represents a material link ensuring continuity between the past and present of Irish experience, as that link has been obscured, the Irish language has become a form of alterity. The notion of Gaelic Ireland going *underground* illustrates this alterity. If we know Irish, we evidently can connect with the historical past and also with the present: Irish-speaking communities, surnames, place names, the type of English that is spoken in Ireland, and so on. Alongside this sense of continuity, however, the Irish language represents a sense of alterity, or at least an alternative position, typified by Froinsias Ó Maolmhuaidh's poem, where he urges the Irish people not to become the same as everyone else but to be like themselves and thus different to everyone else. The question is how to do this? This is where Revivalism enters the frame, and Ó Maolmhuaidh's poem is a classic Revivalist manifesto, urging a retrieval of elements of the past to become an act of creative

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10. For the text of 'Tuireamh na hÉireann', see Cecile O'Rahilly, *Five Seventeenth-Century Political Poems* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1977), pp. 50–82. Geoffrey Keating, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn/The History of Ireland*, ed. by David Comyn and P. S. Dinneen, 4 vols (London: Irish Texts Society, 1902–14). Regarding Seán Ó Conaill (fl. 1650) and Geoffrey Keating/Seathrún Céitinn (c.1580–c.1644), see *Dictionary of Irish Biography*.

11. Geoffrey Keating, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn/The History of Ireland*, vol. 1, p. 5.

12. This particular theme is the subject of Vincent Morley, *Ó Chéitinn go Raiftearaí: Mar a Cumadh Stair na hÉireann* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 2011). It is not surprising to see devotion to Keating's work reaching into the twentieth century, where it is mentioned in Pádraig Ó Conaire's portrayal of a London Irish immigrant community in the early twentieth century in his 1910 novel *Deoraíocht* ('Exile'): Pádraic Ó Conaire, *Deoraíocht* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1973), p. 89.

13. See Morley, *Ó Chéitinn go Raiftearaí*, p. 107.

renewal in the present. In order to understand the type of Revivalism espoused by Ó Maolmhuaidh we need to situate it within the history of ideas, that is to say, the history of the expression and espousal of particular ideas. This brings me to the second main premise of this talk, which is that revivals and Revivalism have had a profound influence on the discourse of Modern Irish, particularly its literature, for at least four hundred years, and that revivals and Revivalism can be understood only within what we call the history of ideas. I want to spend some time now looking at that particular issue, how revivals and Revivalism relate to the history of ideas.

## II.

We tend to speak of revivals as specific movements—the Greek Revival, the Ghost Dance Revival, the Gothic Revival, and of course the Gaelic Revival. Yet the recurrence of different types of revivals throughout the ages merits, I think, some consideration of what, if any, commonality they share. I think it is fair to say that each individual revival looks back to an earlier period where some important tradition or value prevailed, and that the revival sets out to recover this. What revivals begin with, then, is a return, a backward look, recollection—how does this occur in the history of ideas?

The Platonic notion of anamnesis, by which all learning is recollection of previous knowledge, is one indication of the importance of anteriority in Western tradition. Anamnesis is the recovery of what is already there, bringing to the forefront of the mind what lies at the back of it or recapturing a memory which we hazily retain. In discussing this part of Plato's theory of knowledge, I. M. Crombie refers specifically to anamnesis as a *revival* of true belief through experience.<sup>14</sup> The most well-known explanation of anamnesis occurs in the *Meno*, in which Socrates succeeds in getting a slave boy to prove a geometrical theorem by asking the appropriate questions which allow the 'spontaneous recovery of knowledge that is in him'.<sup>15</sup> So, the idea that enlightenment is something which we look back to has very deep roots. Similarly, the concept of 'eternal return'—a prevailing feature of ancient religious traditions by which it is understood that the cosmos and society are constantly recurring and returning to earlier states—indicates that the basic premise of a revival, a return to or a retrieval of past knowledge, has very long antecedents.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, although revivals typically invoke a return to a particular past, they involve more than this initial return. A key distinction here must be made be-

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14. See I. M. Crombie, *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines*, vol. 2: *Plato on Knowledge and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 143.

15. Plato, *Protagoras and Meno*, trans. by W. K. C. Guthrie (London: Penguin, 1970), 85d, p. 138.

16. See Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954).



tween return and renewal, with renewal entailing not just a return to a past practice or value but rather a re-establishment of that given element after a period of interruption. This renewal is a key feature of the body of writing in Irish that emanated from the Irish colleges in the seventeenth century, an example of which is the work of Froinsias Ó Maolmhuaidh, of which I spoke earlier, and other Irish Counter-Reformation writers of the seventeenth century. The Irish Counter-Reformation, which was generated from the numerous Irish colleges of mainland Europe, is particularly noteworthy for having brought about the first sustained project of printing in the Irish language.<sup>17</sup> Renewal was at the heart of this project, a renewal of faith but also, crucially, of language. The idea of renewal espoused by these clerical scholars was very much part of the legacy of northern European Renaissance humanism, whose influence is particularly evident, for example, in the work of Giolla Brighde Ó hEódhusa (d. 1614), the author of the very first Irish Counter-Reformation printed book, *An Teagas Críodaidhe* ('Catechism'), which was printed in Antwerp in 1611.<sup>18</sup> In his discussion of the poem 'A fhir léghtha an leabhráin bhig' ('O man that reads the little book'), which is Giolla Brighde Ó hEódhusa's address to the reader of *An Teagas Críodaidhe*, Ailbhe Ó Corráin explores the influence of northern European Renaissance humanism on the poem. This influence is evident in its very opening lines, which encourage the reader to return *ad fontes*: 'féch an tobar ó ttáinig' ('take heed of its source').<sup>19</sup> Ó Corráin's close reading of this short poem points to the poet's desire to promote the virtues of renewal, initially a renewal of the faith which was central to the aims of the Counter-Reformation, but also a renewal of language and nationhood. Another example of this conscious consideration of renewal occurs in the preface to the manuscript of Fr Nioclás (Fearghal Dubh) Ó Gadhra OSA, an important collection of Irish bardic poetry which was mostly written in Lille between 1655 and 1659. In Pádraig Ó Macháin's discussion of the preface to this manuscript, written by its author in 1686, he draws attention to Ó Gadhra's reason for writing: in the preface 'he establishes that the regeneration or recycling (what Ó Gadhra calls *athnua-chradh*) of tradition from age to age is standard practice in both biblical and pagan literature.'<sup>20</sup>

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17. The importance of Irish literary culture to Irish nuns of the seventeenth century and their contribution to it has been discussed by Marie-Louise Coolahan with specific regard to the Poor Clares. See Marie-Louise Coolahan, *Women, Writing, and Language in Early Modern Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 63–101.

18. Bonaventúra Ó hEodhasa, *An Teagas Críodaidhe*, ed. by Fearghal Mac Raghnaill (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976).

19. See Ailbhe Ó Corráin, *The Pearl of the Kingdom: A Study of 'A Fhir Léghtha an Leabhráin Bhig' by Giolla Brighde Ó hEódhasa* (Oslo: The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 2011), p. 10.

20. Pádraig Ó Macháin, "One Glimpse of Ireland": The Manuscript of Fr Nioclás (Fearghal Dubh) Ó Gadhra, OSA, in *Irish Europe 1600–1650: Writing and Learning*,

The question that naturally arises at this juncture is how this renewal or revival can faithfully re-establish what has already ceased to be. If the continuity of a cultural tradition has been interrupted, can it ever be restored? The issue of continuation or renewal in Revivalism in some ways reflects the difference between *being* and *becoming* in pre-Socratic philosophy. Parmenides maintained that the world was defined by a constant state of being. This argument countered the case, made previously by Heraclitus, that change was the only constant; in other words, that things are continually becoming rather than being. In a similar way, Revivalist movements often oscillate between the desire for a faithful transmission of continuous tradition and the attempt to renew that tradition by means of an active, radical intervention. This raises the question of how we preserve the authenticity of something that we seek to continue or renew. Can a tradition be authentic if its continuity has been breached, or is it the case that continuity is itself an illusion if we hold the world to be in a constant state of flux?

What seems fairly evident is that renewal and revival involve some form of active transition in which past and present are engaged to bring about a new state of affairs. One way of describing this transition is given to us in Hegel's notion of *Aufhebung*, a dialectical transition in which both elements are negated but partially maintained.<sup>21</sup> The literal meaning of *Aufhebung* is, paradoxically, 'abolition' and 'preserving' as well as 'raising up'. The obscure English term 'sublation' has been most commonly employed as a translation. An example of *Aufhebung* is presented in Hegel's discussion of how the family and civil society are 'sublated' through the development of the state. The state supersedes both institutions, the family and civil society, by cancelling them out but at the same time retaining them. So, for example, the state *maintains* the institution of family by securing its position but, at the same time, *cancels it out* by allowing for a new *higher* type of family in which people are bound together through their identification with the nation. Where revival is concerned, the transition described as *Aufhebung* reflects both the paradox and the resolution of the attempt to revive past values in the present. Both the past and the present are transformed in this dialectical sequence, and what remains is both a negation and preservation of each.

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ed. by Raymond Gillespie and Ruairí Ó hUiginn (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013), pp. 135–62 (esp. p. 155 and also the appendix, pp. 160–62, where the author gives the full text of Ó Gadhra's address to the reader with an English translation).

21. See Ermanno Bencivenga, *Hegel's Dialectical Logic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 32–33. See also Ralph Palm, 'Hegel's Concept of Sublation: A Critical Interpretation' (doctoral thesis, Catholic University of Leuven, 2009). Available at <http://lirias.kuleuven.be/bitstream/123456789/234670/1>; accessed 1 August 2018.



An example of such a transition in Irish literary Revivalism is Máirtín Ó Cadhain's 1949 novel, *Cré na Cille* ('The Dirty Dust/ Graveyard Clay').<sup>22</sup> Ó Cadhain (1906–1970) was a native speaker of Irish whose literary career belonged to an era in which, as he himself remarked, everyone's Irish was Revivalist.<sup>23</sup> As a writer, he was also aware that his greatest inheritance was not the Irish literary tradition but rather native speech. It is fitting, then, that Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille* eschews narrative conventions, such as a narrator/narrators and indirect speech, and is presented instead entirely as direct speech. By so doing, he engages retrospectively with one of the defining debates of the Gaelic League Revival, namely, the *caint na ndaoine* ('speech of the people') versus *Gaeilge Chéitinn* ('the Irish of Keating') argument. The debate, which dominated Revivalist polemics from the 1880s to the 1920s, was about which form the literary language of the new Revivalist literature should take: the contemporary speech of the people, or the historical corpus of the seventeenth century, exemplified in the writing of Keating.<sup>24</sup> The lines were drawn between those who held that any new literature in Irish had to be based on a definite historical precedent, and those who thought that any such return to the standards of the seventeenth century would be a contrivance and thus doomed to failure. Ó Cadhain's novel, comprised entirely of speech, is clearly an endorsement of common speech as a literary medium, but it also transforms that speech into an instrument of modernist literary expression. At the same time, it retains the prestige of the historical literary corpus by creating a novel so esteemed that it is now deemed peerless and therefore equal, if not superior to, the seventeenth-century 'gold standard' of Keating. In so doing, it simultaneously cancels out and preserves both common speech and literary precedent, raising each to a higher level of development.

Hegel's notion of *Aufhebung* or sublation is, I think, a very useful model for understanding the dynamics of the transition or renewal that is a common feature of Revivalism. However, Hegel saw the dialectical transitions of which he wrote as being part of a totalizing system, a teleology guided by a higher force. This is not an idea that sits well with the notion of Revivalism being, in its best iteration, a type of creative, dynamic renewal. Yet the type of dialectical transi-

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22. Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *Cré na Cille* (Dublin: Sáirséal agus Dill, 1949); Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *The Dirty Dust/Cré na Cille*, trans. by Alan Titley (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015); Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, trans. by Liam Mac Con Iomaire and Tim Robinson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

23. See Ó Cadhain i bhFeasta, ed. by Seán Ó Laighin (Dublin: Clódhanna Teoranta, 1990), p. 90. See *Dictionary of Irish Biography* for biographical details.

24. See Philip O'Leary, *The Prose Literature of the Gaelic Revival* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pp. 45–49; Cathal Ó Háinle, 'Ó Chaint na nDaoine go dtí an Caighdeán Oifigiúil', in Kim McCone, Damian McManus et al., *Stair na Gaeilge: in ómós do Pádraig Ó Fiannachta* (Maynooth, Co. Kildare: Roinn na Sean-Ghaeilge, 1994), pp. 745–93 (pp. 754–64).

tion described by Hegel bears many similarities to the type of higher synthesis which Revivalists seek to bring about.

So far, I have been speaking about how Revivalism relates to ideas which occur in Greek philosophy, in Renaissance humanism, and in Hegel, which brings us up to the nineteenth century. The relationship between being and becoming and Revivalism in the modern era is particularly evident in Nietzsche's philosophy. His first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), engaged in a revival of sorts, specifically an attempted retrieval of elements of Western culture which had been lost or repressed, particularly the meaning and use of tragedy.<sup>25</sup> Nietzsche's subsequent interpretation of being and becoming and his model of 'eternal recurrence' speak to the interrelation of past and present in modernity, something which is fundamental to Revivalism. His presentation of eternal recurrence as a continual return to what has already been, and his insistence on a form of radical becoming in response reflect, in many ways, the essential challenge of Revivalism: to make the revisitation of the past an act of creative renewal. For Nietzsche, the willingness to embrace the endless repetition of all the trials of life was a test of strength and an opportunity to affirm a yea-saying attitude to living. Central to this attitude was Nietzsche's views on becoming, which he interpreted as a dynamic exercise of the will. Tellingly, in the following piece from *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), he identifies becoming rather than being as a quintessentially German trait: 'The German himself is not, he is becoming, he is "developing". "Development" is thus the truly German discovery and lucky shot in the great domain of philosophical formulas.'<sup>26</sup>

### III.

I am going to come back to Nietzsche, but let me first of all summarize some of what I have said. I have proposed two main premises so far in this talk. Firstly, that the Irish language is a material link, a guarantor of continuity between the past and present of Irish experience, but that it is also conversely a portal to alterity, to otherness. Secondly, that a tradition of Revivalism has had an extraordinary influence on the discourse of the Irish language and its literature for at least four centuries, and that Revivalism itself is part of the history of ideas—the questions it poses are underpinned by questions which have animated philosophers throughout the ages: continuity and change, being and becoming, renewal, repetition, dialectical transition. This brings me to the third main premise of this talk, which arises from what I have said so far. This is that, in the twentieth century, Irish language Revivalism oscillates between the

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25. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. by Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin, 2003). See also Lawrence J. Hatab, *Nietzsche's Life Sentence: Coming to Terms with Eternal Recurrence* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 23–37.

26. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 175.

desire to secure continuity, the faithful transmission of cultural knowledge and memory from one generation to the next and, on the other hand, the hope that a radical renewal of that cultural knowledge and memory will secure its place in the future. These two positions are epitomized by two contrasting statements by Douglas Hyde (1860–1949), co-founder of the Gaelic League, and Máirtín Ó Cadhain, the writer, activist, and scholar. Hyde summed up the mission of the Gaelic League as being to ‘render the present a rational continuation of the past.’<sup>27</sup> Ó Cadhain, on the other hand, felt that the Gaels’ eschewal of rationality, of reason, was the very thing that guaranteed their survival: ‘Were the race of the Gael not so unreasonable as they have always been, we would have long since disappeared from history.’<sup>28</sup> Rather than reason, it is hope, remarked Ó Cadhain, that has been the ‘chain detonation’ that runs through Irish history.<sup>29</sup> The context for these contrasting remarks, Hyde’s and Ó Cadhain’s, is of course important. Hyde’s ‘rational continuation of the past’ was the purpose of the Gaelic League as he saw it in the very last year of the nineteenth century. Ó Cadhain’s eschewal of reason in favour of hope was expressed in a lecture given to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Rising, in 1966. There is also, of course, the matter of the two very different careers and characters of Hyde and Ó Cadhain, exemplified as these are in the phrases, ‘rational continuation’ on the one hand and ‘chain detonation’ on the other. Ó Cadhain was a very active member of the I.R.A. while Hyde was a scrupulously constitutional nationalist. The key to Ó Cadhain’s tradition of hope is in the title of his lecture, *An Aisling* (or ‘the vision’). The word *aisling* is synonymous with the historic *aisling* or vision poem that sustained Irish poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries particularly.<sup>30</sup> In this type of poem a dream-maiden, representing Ireland, typically gave a message of hope, promising a radical rupture of the status quo and foretelling the defeat of the English. Patrick Pearse was a devotee of this type of poem and even contributed to the tradition himself in some of his own compositions.<sup>31</sup> So the tradition of hope which had sustained the Gaelic intellectual tradition in Ireland from the seventeenth century onwards was a powerful intervention in the twentieth century, and for that reason, Ó Cadhain was well-justified in referring to hope as being the ‘chain detonation in the history of the country’.

27. Douglas Hyde, *A Literary History of Ireland from Earliest Times to the Present Day* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901 [1899]), p. vii.

28. Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *An Aisling* (Dublin: Coiste Cuimhneacháin Náisiúnta, 1966), p. 31: ‘Marach cho míréasúnach is bhí cine Gael ariamh anall is fadó gur imithe as an stair a bheadh muid’.

29. See *ibid.*, p. 1.

30. For some examples of the *aisling* tradition with English translations, see *An Duanaire: Poems of the Dispossessed*, ed. by Seán Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella (Mountrath, Co. Laois: Dolmen, 1981).

31. The influence of the *aisling* poem is evident, for example, in ‘I am Ireland’ (‘Mise Éire’) and ‘Renunciation’ (‘Fornocht do chonac thú’) in Pádraic H. Pearse, *Poems, Stories, Plays* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1963), pp. 323–25.

An illustration of those two strains in Revivalism, the concern for faithful transmission of tradition on the one hand and creative renewal on the other, is presented to us in two short stories by Pádraig Ó Conaire (1882–1928), stories about which I would like to speak briefly.<sup>32</sup> The first of these, *An Sgoláire Bocht* (‘The Poor Scholar’), was written in 1905 while the second, *Bé an tSiopa Seandachta* (‘The Antique-Shop Muse’), was written shortly after the 1916 Rising.<sup>33</sup> The first story is all about the anxiety of transmission, an anxiety which is based on the need to secure the material evidence of cultural continuity. So, this first story, ‘The Poor Scholar’, is a gothic melodrama, set in pre-Famine Connacht, in which the eponymous poor scholar spends his final years wandering the countryside, seeking out someone to whom to entrust his imperiled tradition of manuscript study. He finds a worthy protégé in a young man called Colm Ua Flaithbheartaigh, who in turn discovers a forgotten manuscript book in the loft of his family home, entitled *Leabhar na bhFlaibheartach* (‘The Book of the O’Flahertys’), which was written for one of the young man’s ancestors. The poor scholar teaches the young man to read the text, and so begins to enjoy the fulfillment of having secured the faithful transmission of the endangered tradition. However, at that very point the young man is ordered by a priest to burn the manuscript book. (This was the era of the controversial nineteenth-century Protestant Bible societies, during which Catholic priests often discouraged people from reading in Irish lest they be recruited to the Protestant evangelical societies that published scriptural texts in Irish.)<sup>34</sup> So, Colm does as the priest asks: he burns the manuscript book, and the story concludes with a final pathetic scene where the blind scholar is left disconsolate, having failed to prevent the destruction of the revered manuscript.

If the tragedy of ‘The Poor Scholar’ is the failure to achieve the faithful transmission of an authentic tradition from one generation to another, a very different perspective on our relation to the past is presented in the second story, ‘The Antique-Shop Muse’. In this case, the relation with the past is one of latent possibility rather than faithful continuity or material transmission. ‘The Antique-Shop Muse’ tells the story of a beautiful young woman who languishes every day in a little-visited antique shop, the window of which is laden with

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32. See *Dictionary of Irish Biography* for biographical details.

33. Pádraig Ó Conaire, *An Sgoláire Bocht agus Sgéalta Eile* (Dublin: Clódhanna/Connradh na Gaedhige, 1913), pp. 1–35; Pádraic Ó Conaire, *Seacht mBua an Éirí Amach/Seven Virtues of the Rising*, trans. by Diarmuid de Faoite (Indreabhán, Co. Galway: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2017), pp. 233–67. Of the two stories, only ‘The Antique-Shop Muse’ has been translated into English.

34. See Irene Whelan, *The Bible War in Ireland: The ‘Second Reformation’ and the Polarization of Protestant-Catholic Relations, 1800–1840* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005); Pádraig de Brún, *Scriptural Instruction in the Vernacular: The Irish Society and Its Teachers, 1818–1827* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2009).

memorabilia from Dublin's past as second city of the British empire. From the shop window the young woman, the eponymous muse, begins to observe the preparations for the 1916 Easter Rising, which are being coordinated by a young man called Peadar Ó Dónaill in a room on the other side of the street. In observing him, the muse falls in love with Peadar, although she herself is the object of another's attentions, namely a G-Man, one of Dublin Castle's detectives, who visits the shop in order to spy on the young revolutionary across the road. The story's climax is the Easter Rising, for his part in which Peadar is executed on the evidence of the G-Man. The G-Man returns to the shop in the vain hope that the muse will accept his advances. She symbolically rises and orders him to leave, which leads him to descend into a spiral of self-loathing that culminates in his eventual suicide.

Rather than a manuscript, the past in this second story is the antique shop, into which all of the city's relics appear to have been consigned: old guns, rusty swords, books that were written, printed, and never read, all manner of pictures, ornaments, vessels, big-bellied Oriental idols, and finally, in the front window, a statue of the Buddha under which the name of Queen Victoria had been written. Both the foregrounding of this ironically-named trophy from the Orient and the overburdened display of obsolete items allow Ó Conaire to designate the antique shop as the site of the decaying British empire in Ireland. The antique-shop muse is its prisoner, or as she herself despairs, 'A living flower such as her stuck in a small, dead world!'<sup>35</sup> But apart from the comment on the imminent demise of imperial rule in Dublin, the description of the antique shop is also a more general comment on how we engage with the past. The British empire of the antique shop is a static past with which there is no immediate sign of engagement. It is a liminal space within the city but, far from being a threshold of possibility, it represents all that is moribund and redundant—it is the empire rather than the colonized that appears, on this occasion, to be outside of time. Nevertheless, where 'The Poor Scholar' speaks to the failure of a revival based on faithful continuity, 'The Antique-Shop Muse' is all about latent potential as represented by the figure of the young woman. In a reversal of the traditional role of the muse, and indeed the dream-maiden of *aisling* poetry, it is the muse herself who becomes inspired. Of course, this is part of the story's propagandistic content, being one of a collection of stories entitled *Seacht mBua an Éirí Amach* ('The Seven Virtues of the Rising'), in which awakening or release from blindness is a recurring trope and the young woman, in this instance, represents the Irish people, whose potential has been revealed by the martyrdom of Peadar Ó Dónaill. If we look beyond the overtly political, however, 'The Antique-Shop Muse' evinces a resolution to the impasse encountered by the path of revival in 'The Poor Scholar'. The past cannot be restored miraculously or seamlessly reintegrated into the present. It can, however, re-emerge through a creative renewal in which the past ceases to be a static burden and becomes instead part of

35. Ó Conaire, *Seacht mBua an Éirí Amach/Seven Virtues of the Rising*, p. 257.

a dynamic dialogue with the present. The past, like Peadar Ó Dónaill, is beyond us but its residue represents a site of latent possibility. What is required to bring it into play is a radical becoming which will allow the past to refigure within a dynamic present. If the muse at the beginning of the story is being, simply existing amidst the remnants of the past, the end of the story witnesses a radical becoming in which she realises her own agency, exemplified when she rises from her chair to order the G-Man to leave.<sup>36</sup>

#### IV.

So, moving from the first decades of the twentieth century to the first decades of the twenty-first, how relevant to the present time is this oscillation between rational continuation/material continuity, on the one hand, and a tradition of hope, of radical renewal, on the other? How can this question be answered in the space we share this evening in Maynooth University? There is here a very proud tradition of over two hundred years of teaching and scholarship in the Irish language which bespeaks a very powerful sense of continuity. Yet, clearly, the Irish language faces many obvious practical challenges in terms of the extent to which Irish is used. The *material* reasons for speaking and using Irish are perhaps less evident than, say, the material reasons for becoming proficient in the language of computer programming. Yet we are still here; *Gaeltacht* communities like Ráth Chairn, less than twenty-five miles up the road, are still here. The reason for that has to be located beyond the strictly material, instrumental function of language. It has to be accounted for by something else, and I think that it has more to do with the reasons why revivals and Revivalism are so persistent. We are simply not prepared to relinquish our link with the past and present of Irish experience but also, we are aware that the Irish language is an alternative to enforced homogeneity and to the banality of the generic—the type of fate to which the thirty apocryphal philosophers consigned themselves. The fact that Revivalism brings us back, beyond the specific circumstances of a particular revival, to the broader history of ideas is also evidence that the revival of Irish is quite properly the business of any university or institution which values ideas as part of its very core mission, its *raison d'être*.

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36. In 'The Poor Scholar' the past of the 'Book of the O'Flahertys'—the classic Gothic 'found document'—returns like a ghost to the present but only through the intervention of the mysterious poor scholar, a wandering, spectral figure whose name and origin remain obscure. When Colm burns the book, he effectively drives a stake through the heart of its ghostly intermediary and delivers both back to the past. In 'The Antique-Shop Muse', however, the boundaries between past and present remain fluid, the reiterative legacy of martyrdom being asserted in the phrase 'Poor Peadar', which, at the end of the story, is repeated like a chorus by the muse, by men and women on the street, and even the seagulls above the Liffey.



This is where I return to Nietzsche. One of the previous professors of Modern Irish at Maynooth was Fr Gearóid Ó Nualláin (1874–1942), uncle of the famous Brian O’Nolan aka Myles na gCopaleen or Flann O’Brien (1911–1966). Fr Ó Nualláin was a doctoral student of Rudolf Thurneysen (1857–1940) at Freiburg in Germany, who was in turn a student of Friedrich Nietzsche’s at the University of Basel in Switzerland.<sup>37</sup> Thurneysen was a famous philologist and scholar of Old Irish whose *Handbuch des Altirischen* (1909) is a landmark in the study of Irish.<sup>38</sup> In his autobiography, Fr Ó Nualláin pays great tribute to the influence of Thurneysen and, in particular, to the German tradition of philology, to which he was introduced in Freiburg.<sup>39</sup> It is certainly interesting to note that there is a link, however tenuous, between Fr Ó Nualláin and Friedrich Nietzsche. But more importantly, Nietzsche’s attitude to philology sheds important light on the duality of which I have been speaking, the desire for faithful, rational continuity on the one hand and radical renewal on the other. Nietzsche was harshly criticized for having broken away from classical philology when he wrote *The Birth of Tragedy*—the type of book he wrote was not at all in keeping with the norms of his discipline. Rather than being a meticulous philological study grounded in Greek or Latin syntax and grammar, *The Birth of Tragedy* is really about reviving something which its author considered to have been lost in Western culture—what he calls the Dionysian strain. In keeping with this departure, Nietzsche finished his inaugural lecture in Basel with the announcement that ‘what was once Philology has now been made into Philosophy.’<sup>40</sup> That was certainly a prophetic statement of intent because the world knows Nietzsche as a philosopher rather than as a philologist. But it was not the case that he was turning his back on philology. He returned to that discipline occasionally, invoking the rigour of philology to chide thinkers for their shortcomings. Thus, in *Beyond Good and Evil* he says, ‘Forgive me, as an old philologist who cannot desist from the malice of pointing his finger at bad modes of interpretation.’<sup>41</sup>

That sense of being between philology and philosophy, between faithful transmission on one hand and the creative interpretation of ideas on the other,

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37. See *Dictionary of Irish Biography* for biographical details for Gearóid Ó Nualláin, Brian O’Nolan, and Rudolf Thurneysen.

38. This was published in English in 1946 by Osborn Bergin and Daniel Binchy with many additions by the author to the first edition: Rudolf Thurneysen, *A Grammar of Old Irish*, revised and enlarged edition, trans. by Osborn Bergin and Daniel Binchy (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1946).

39. See Gearóid Ó Nualláin, *Beatha Dhuine a Thoil* (Dublin: An Gúm, 1950), pp. 93–102.

40. See Jessica N. Berry, ‘Nietzsche and the Greeks’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, ed. by Ken Gemes and John Richardson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 83–107 (p. 85). This was a reversal of a quote from Seneca’s *Epistles: quae philosophia fuit facta philologia est*.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 85. The application of comparative philology led Nietzsche to include a dubious interpretation of the Gaelic etymology of the name of the mythological

is particularly apposite to the contemporary discourse of the Irish language. By this I mean the sense, alluded to earlier, in which the Irish language represents a material, forensic link between past and present, but also a way to alterity and radical possibility. In Maynooth, there is a very strong tradition of both the essential, forensic piecing together of often fragmentary textual evidence—an act of both retrieval and interpretation—and the broader creative interpretation which is the staple of criticism. Those activities again point back to the central ideas of this talk, which are Revivalism and renewal, the ways in which we relate to the past and the type of synthesis that this brings about. I started with the story of the shower of folly and the choice presented to the thirty philosophers to be the same as they were before and thus different to everyone else, to preserve a continuity with their past and thus to be radically different. It is important to note that the poem in which this story is invoked as an injunction to cultural and linguistic revival was composed by a philosopher and theologian of the seventeenth century, Froinsias Ó Maolmhuaidh. Here was someone who was immersed in the intellectual traditions of the Europe of his time and in the history of ideas, but who recognised that the Gaelic traditions in which he had been raised could no longer be taken for granted: a choice had to be made whether to renew and reimagine these traditions or to endorse their abandonment. Ó Maolmhuaidh was well aware of his own deficiencies in the Irish language and in Irish poetry, having spent most of his life in mainland Europe among the Catholic intelligentsia. As an exile he was used to imagining the type of Ireland that he might return to, and it is no small irony that his death took place in 1677, the same year that the poem and grammar were published, as he made his way across Europe on a journey home to Ireland. And so Ó Maolmhuaidh's grammar, his contribution to the philology of Irish, is a material link and a handbook for continuity. The poem, with which the book concludes, is its author's philosophy—the call to renewal, the enjoinder to reimagine and reconfigure our future by not denying our past: in other words, *being the same as before and thus different*. Keeping those two things firmly in sight is what allows us to keep faith with ourselves and to escape the shower of folly.

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hero Finn (mac Cumhaill), which he understood as originally meaning, 'the good, the noble, the pure, but originally blonds in contrast to the swarthy, black-haired aboriginals' (Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. by Michael A. Scarpitti [London: Penguin, 2013], pp. 18–19).