Inside Out: The Short Stories of Micheál Ó Conghaile

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Inside Out: The Short Stories of Micheál Ó Conghaile

In "TRASNÚ" (Crossing), Gaeltacht poet Cathal Ó Searcaigh revels in the creative tension inherent in the comingling of traditional Irish-language culture with late modernity. He describes contemporary identity as a messy hybrid of ancient and tenacious tradition on the one hand and a freeing but fickle globalized culture on the other: "tá muid leath-réamhstairiúil / agus leath-*postmodern intertextual*" (we are half prehistoric, half postmodern intertextual).[1] Few authors exemplify this dual identity better than the Gaeltacht novelist, short-story writer, and playwright Micheál Ó Conghaile. Born in 1962, Ó Conghaile is by no means an old man, yet the upbringing that he describes is now totally unthinkable. While Ireland entered the "Lemass era" of economic change—often considered to have catalyzed radical social transformation over the following decades—Ó Conghaile spent his youth in one of the most dramatically isolated, and consequently culturally stable, parts of the country. Now an acclaimed author with a secure place in the Irish-language canon, Ó Conghaile—who went on to found one of the language's most important publishers, Cló Iar-Chonnacht—grew up reading by candlelight. His hybrid identity as a rural gay man, a native Irish-speaker, and an educated and well-traveled entrepreneur provides him with a unique and complicated perspective that seems to accommodate both the authority of one on the inside and the marginalization of one inherently different. Difference is accepted as a fact of life in his work, which ranges from realistic testimony to the wildly experimental and obscene.

It is hard to exaggerate the remoteness of Inis Treabhair, the now-abandoned island where Ó Conghaile grew up in a community of

1. James E. Doan and Frank Sewell, eds., *On the Side of Light: Critical Essays on the Poetry of Cathal Ó Searcaigh* (Galway: Arlen House, 2002), 230.

six families totaling around forty residents. This largely self-sufficient community made do without running water or electricity, and trips to the mainland were generally reserved for shopping and attending Mass.[2] On completing his elementary schooling on the island, Ó Conghaile relocated to the mainland to finish his education, as was the norm at the time. From high school he went on to complete a B.A. and M.A. at University College Galway and briefly pursued a career in academia in Dublin before founding Cló Iar-Chonnacht (CIC) in 1985 at age twenty-three. In 2021 he retired from the company to pursue writing full-time.

Ó Conghaile explains that his motivation to found CIC was partly to provide a platform for Connemara writers and musicians who were being overlooked by other publishers.[3] His continuing loyalty to his native region is borne out not just by the thirty-six years he spent as director of CIC: he has also acted variously as archivist, promoter, and patron of that culture for much of his working life, and his own work is recognizably rooted in the Galway Gaeltacht. The clear influences of *sean-nós* and folklore, the meticulous crafting of plausible contemporary speech, and indeed the importance of orality itself in his work are all part of what make him a distinctly and perhaps unusually "placeable" writer.

Trained as a historian, he has published books and convened lectures on local social history and conducted field work in gathering songs both traditional and newly composed. Yet none of this should be considered evidence that Ó Conghaile's own creative writing is motivated by "the cause"; he has explicitly stated that his choice to write only in Irish is based not on linguistic loyalty but on artistic merit.[4] Unlike the vast majority of Irish-language writers, his Irish is simply better than his English. Ó Conghaile's first creative publication, the short story collection *Mac an tSagairt* (1987; The Priest's Son), was warmly received; even the earliest criticism of his work recognized both his talent and the themes that would continue to feature

2. Pádraig Ó Siadhail, "An Fear Aniar: An Interview with Micheál Ó Conghaile," *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 31:2 (2005): 54–59. Ó Conghaile has since published a nonfiction account of Christmas on the island, *Nollaig Oileánach* (An Spidéal: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2022).

3. Ibid., 57.

4. Brian Ó Conchubhair, "Introduction," in Micheál Ó Conghaile, *The Colours of Man* (Indreabhán: Cló lar-Chonnacht, 2012), 9.

throughout his realist writing.[5] After a gap of ten years his next collection, *An Fear a Phléasc* (1997; The Man Who Exploded), marked the beginning of a particularly productive period between 1997 and 2003 in which he published four books, including some of his most interesting titles to date.[6]

An Fear a Phléasc was a significant departure from the somewhat bleak and gritty realism of *Mac an tSagairt*, and its inclusion in university curricula made it a best seller for CIC.[7] It marks the first of Ó Conghaile's many forays into experimental writing, with much of the collection being surreal or absurd. It features his realist classic "Athair" (Father), a brilliantly wrought account of the moments immediately after a son informs his father that he is gay. Coming out is also of momentous importance in *Sna Fir* (Among Men), Ó Conghaile's coming-of-age novel published in 1999.[8] The turn of the millennium was a suitably dramatic moment for this major landmark in Irish-language publishing, considering the much-discussed and rapid transformation of *fin de siècle* Irish society from insular and Catholic to cosmopolitan and wealthy. Bearing in mind that the decriminalization of homosexuality had only finally passed in 1993, seven years before *Sna Fir*'s publication, it is unsurprising that Ó Conghaile was prepared for a more significant backlash against his candid account of cruising in Dublin than ever materialized. In fact, rather than being locally condemned as was his much-less-accomplished first book, *Sna Fir* and the English version of "Athair" both went on to win prestigious prizes.[9] Already an acclaimed author at this point, his future as a realist writer seemed so secure that his departure in favor of the highly surreal clearly perplexed some scholars: "Is máistir ar an réalachas é Micheál Ó Conghaile. . . . Cad chuige

5. Micheál Ó Conghaile, *Mac an tSagairt* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 1987); Alan Titley, "An Bobailín á Scaoileadh Amach," *Comhar* 46:12 (1987): 40; Aisling Ní Dhonnchadha, "Mac an tSagairt Le Micheál Ó Conghaile," *Comhar* 46:3 (1987): 27–28.

6. Micheál Ó Conghaile, *An Fear a Phléasc* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 1997). Hereafter cited as AFP.

7. Ó Siadhail, "An Fear Aniar," 58.

8. Micheál Ó Conghaile, *Sna Fir* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 1999). For further discussion on this theme, see Seán Mac Risteaird, "Coming Out, Queer Sex, and Heteronormativity in Two Irish-Language Novels," *Studi irlandesi: A Journal of Irish Studies* 10 (2020): 63–75.

9. Ó Conchubhair, "Introduction."

an t-athrú seo, go háirithe nuair ba léir go raibh ag éirí leis gort an réalachais a threabhadh go héifeachtach?" (Micheál Ó Conghaile is a master of realism. . . . Why has he changed, particularly since his realist writing was so clearly successful?).[10]

This was not a permanent shift, however. Ó Conghaile's stylistic restlessness—from realist to surreal, back to realist, back to surreal—is also to be found in his choice of form. To date, his creative work has included short stories, two novellas, one novel, one poetry collection, several dramas, several translations, and a book of parables. Shortly after *Sna Fir* came his 2002 novella *Seachrán Jeaic Sheáin Johnny* (The Ramblings of Jeaic Sheáin Johnny), an account of an uncomfortably beguiling romance between an old man and his ex-love's granddaughter.[11] The highly experimental short-story collection *An Fear Nach nDéanann Gáire* (The Man Who Doesn't Laugh) again quickly followed in 2003.[12] Irish-speakers might at this point remark upon not just the productivity of this era but also the thematic prevalence of the masculine in Ó Conghaile's titles thus far. Three of his first five prose works feature a variation of the word "man," while another features the word "son," and the last is composed of three consecutive male names. This is very much in keeping with the ubiquity of the masculine in the vast majority of Ó Conghaile's stories too; though his work is extraordinarily eclectic in style and form, he rarely writes from a female perspective.[13]

The emphasis on gender shifted somewhat for Ó Conghaile's next two publications, which instead contain some variation of the word "devil": 2013's parables *An Diabhal Ar An Ól* (The Devil on the Drink) and 2015's *Diabhlaíocht Dé* (God's Devilment).[14] *Diabhlaíocht Dé* was declared "seductively odd" in a relatively rare instance of *The*

10. Máirín Nic Eoin, "Ag Taisteal Gan Mhapaí: An Ficsean Neamhréalaíoch agus Gníomh Na Léitheoireachta," *Léachtaí Cholm Cille* 36 (2006): 92–93.

11. Micheál Ó Conghaile, *Seachrán Jeaic Sheáin Johnny* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2002).

12. Micheál Ó Conghaile, *An Fear Nach nDéanann Gáire* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2003). Hereafter cited as AFNNG.

13. For further discussion see Sorcha de Brún, "History Repeating Itself: Men, Masculinities, and 'His Story' in the Fiction of Micheál Ó Conghaile," *Éire-Ireland* 52:1–2 (2017): 17–48.

14. Micheál Ó Conghaile, *An Diabhal Ar An Ól* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2013); Micheál Ó Conghaile, *Diabhlaíocht Dé* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2015).

Guardian reviewing Irish-language books, an exception possibly due to Ó Conghaile previously winning the prestigious Hennessy New Irish Writing Award. His latest and arguably best creative work is the 2019 domestic novella *Sa Teach Seo Anocht* (In This House Tonight), which centers on a father-son relationship on the eve of a marital breakup.[15]

Regarding recognition and critical attention, Ó Conghaile has won more than forty awards, is a member of the elective artistic society *Aos Dána,* and has had his work translated into at least nine languages.[16] As Ó Conchubhair notes, translation is itself a marker of recognition for the minority-language writer as well as an act of communication with the world at large, albeit at the expense of the linguistic virtuosity of the original.[17] Around thirty-five years into his career in fiction, Ó Conghaile must be among the language's most frequently anthologized contemporary prose writers, whether in Irish or in translation. Scholarly responses to Ó Conghaile's writing began immediately; his first collection was reviewed at length by two preeminent critics that very year, and in the same publication.[18] As Irish-language writers often lament the paucity of willing reviewers, sustained critical attention by two important scholars within a year is unusual and might in itself reflect a certain excitement at the emergence of a young author of Ó Conghaile's "stíl thréan bhríomhar" (powerful, lively style).[19]

Ó Conghaile has been of central importance to recent theses that incorporate emergent approaches to literary analysis into the more "traditional" canon of Irish-language literary criticism, particularly regarding gender and sexuality. For instance, he is one of three male Gaeltacht authors who form the basis of Sorcha de Brún's 2016 doctoral thesis on masculinities in contemporary Irish-language prose.[20]

15. Micheál Ó Conghaile, *Sa Teach Seo Anocht* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2019). Hereafter cited as STSA.

16. "Micheál Ó Conghaile," Portráidí na Scríbhneoirí Gaeilge (2011), https://portraidi.ie/ga/micheal-o-conghaile, archived at https://perma.cc/V7YN-5PYR.

17. Ó Conchubhair, "Introduction," 11.

18. See note 5.

19. Ní Dhonnchadha, "Mac an tSagairt," 27.

20. Sorcha de Brún, "An Domhan agus a Athair: Staidéar Comparáideach ar an gCruinne Fhireann agus ar Fhireannachtaí i bPrós-Scribhneoireacht Triúr Scríbhneóirí Gaeltachta: Micheál Ó Conghaile, Pádraig Ó Cíobháin, Joe Steve Ó Neachtain, 1983–2013" (Ph.D. dissertation, Ulster University, 2016).

As will become clear below, he is certainly an appropriate case study for reflections on performances of masculinities, both societally sanctioned and otherwise. De Brún's meticulous retracing of the public reception of surrealism in Irish writing is particularly useful. Jonathan William Richards's doctoral dissertation uses the work of Ó Conghaile and Ó Searcaigh to establish the beginnings of a history of sexuality in Irish-language writing. He traces the emergence of queer cultural "spaces" in what amounts to a cross between social history of gay Gaels "ó phríosún go pósadh" (from prison to marriage) and an application of queer theory to the two writers' work, weaving sexuality studies into the dominant discourses of Irish-language literary criticism.[21]

Areas for critical investigation of Ó Conghaile's work that merit further study include the influence of Máirtín Ó Cadhain, the importance of orality, his discussion of religion and foundational myth, and the form and function of humor in his work. While Ó Conghaile clearly covers a very broad range of topics and forms, certain themes recur throughout his oeuvre. These include but are not limited to family, religion, violence, sexuality and the body, nonconformity, the transmission of Gaelic culture, and death. A complete survey is beyond the scope of this short essay; therefore, we will limit ourselves here to religion, death, transmission, and the family.

As the title of his fifth short-story collection *Diabhlaíocht Dé* suggests, Ó Conghaile's discussion of God and religion is frequently provocative. While one senses that any connection between this creator and a specific church is distant at best, the importance of biblical narrative remains clear in many of these stories and elsewhere in his "religious" work. *Diabhlaíocht Dé* is a protracted figuring and refiguring of the origins of life itself, ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous. The author particularly enjoys reimagining God as embodied, flawed, and capricious. He is a prankster, a flake, and a puppet master amused by his power over his creation. In the titular story evolution is recast as a punishment that condemns a previously happy ape to a life as a human outsider, clearly no better off than the animals from whom he is now alienated. God is challenged, chastised, and even

21. Jonathan William Richards, "An Spás Istigh agus an Spás Amuigh: Aitiú Spáis i Saothair Liteartha Mhichíl Uí Chonghaile agus Chathail Uí Shearcaigh" (Ph.D. dissertation, Maynooth University, 2016), 45.

attacked by his creation throughout the collection. Like the reluctant first man above, Lazarus resents being singled out in "Lá Eile Lazarus" (Another Day for Lazarus), even if it is for the miracle of resurrection. Elsewhere in the collection Adam reprimands God for first creating and then having sex with "his" woman, and God's daughter (presumably a reworking of the Gaelic sovereignty goddess) defies his malevolent wishes and sacrifices her body to feed the hungry on earth.

If, in Ó Conghaile's world, God is neither perfect nor worshipped, life itself is not automatically considered sacrosanct nor death tragic. Lazarus is one of many characters who yearn for a proper death, an entity that is described in "Gabh i leith, a Mhéit" (Come Here to Me, Mate) as "an méit is fearr atá agam" (the best friend I have).[22] It is praised both for its reliability and its air of mystery. The protagonist trusts it completely and views his own eventual death as an exciting but fleeting surprise, as in his childhood when his mother would bring him back a treat from the shop. Though Ó Conghaile's narrators are often far from reliable, there is no sense of irony here in the protagonist's calm and open invitation to death: "Tagadh sé nuair a thograíonn sé. . . . Tá mo sheoladh aige" (Let him come when he wants. . . . He has my address).[23]

In "Leabhar na bPeacaí" (The Book of Sins) a dying woman's otherwise peaceful death is interrupted by a monsignor and his assistant, who lament that she has succumbed to sins of the flesh as they seek out kinky newspaper headlines.[24] The woman uses her last breath to scold the priests and lambast their teaching:

> Agus tá sibh mícheart faoin mbás freisin[. . . .] Ag iarraidh mé a scanrú atá sibh[. . . .] Sin *bully*áil[. . . .] Tá sibh mícheart faoin mbás chomh maith le chuile rud beo. Bhí sibh mícheart faoin saol. Bhí sibh mícheart faoi liombó. Bhí sibh mícheart faoin bhfeoil. Bhí sibh mícheart faoi amárach. Bhí sibh mícheart faoin bpeaca, faoi phurgadóir, faoi ifreann . . . faoi . . . faoi . . . faoi chuile ní beo.[25]
>
> (And you're wrong about death, too[. . . .] You're trying to frighten me[. . . .] that's bullying [. . . .] You're wrong about death like you

22. AFNNG, 97–102.
23. Ibid., 100.
24. AFP, 65–73.
25. Ibid., 73.

were wrong about everything. You were wrong about life. You were wrong about Limbo. You were wrong about meat. You were wrong about tomorrow. You were wrong about sin, about purgatory, about hell . . . , about . . . about . . . absolutely everything.)

Like resurrection, conception is not necessarily met with gratitude either: as early as the titular story of Ó Conghaile's first collection, *Mac an tSagairt*, the protagonist—a soon-to-be-ordained priest—imagines his parents' likely disappointment upon finding out that they had conceived an "illegitimate" son. "Mo Rogha Rud a Dhéanamh" (Doing What I Want) is based on a son who kills his parents so that they cannot once again conceive a child whom they do not particularly want simply because they cannot abstain from "faoiseamh simplí sealadach" (fleeting simple relief).[26]

Conception, life, and humanity itself are all thus targets for ridicule or disgust, but it would nevertheless be a mistake to consider Ó Conghaile's oeuvre as simply nihilistic in attitude. If the existential and authoritative are held up for ridicule in his most unconventional stories, human needs and relationships are compassionately drawn in his more realist work. Ó Conghaile is particularly adept at describing male and especially familial male relationships: father and son in his coming-out classic "Athair" and in *Sa Teach Seo Anocht*; brotherly and grandfatherly love in *Sna Fir*; and taboo and bizarre family units in *Diabhlaíocht Dé*. Formative or otherwise profound romantic love is drawn sensitively and respectfully in "Caillte in Conamara" (Lost in Connemara) and *Sna Fir*, whose characters must cope with grief and heartbreak while simultaneously having to choose between suffering in silence or risking outright social rejection.[27]

Intergenerational relationships are especially common in Ó Conghaile's work. As well as the familial relationships discussed above, older gay men are an important source of comfort and advice to the young protagonist in *Sna Fir*, while those who never felt able to come out haunt the margins of several stories. "An Mercyfucker" (The Mercyfucker) is a humorous story about young men who deliberately seek out their "deartháireacha mí-ádhmharacha" (unlucky brothers) to have sex with, in something between pity and solidarity:

26. AFNNG, 85–94, 93.
27. Ibid., 9–24.

> Tá go leor créatúr aerach ann nach bhfuair seans nuair a bhí siad óg is nach bhfuil an-dathúil anois. . . . Rinne sé tagairt d'fhear amháin . . . dhá bhliain agus leathchéad, a bhéimnigh sé, agus é fós ina mhaighdean. . . . Samhlaigh an sórt saoil a bhí aige. É sáinnithe sa mbaile ar fheirm ag tabhairt aire dá thuismitheoirí nó go raibh sé breis agus leathchéad bliain d'aois. San aois sin sul má leagadh lámh chinnte chineálta air, sul má baineadh fáisceadh cairdiúil as. Nach uafásach an saol a bhí agus atá ag cuid de na daoine aeracha, a dúirt sé.[28]
>
> (There are plenty of poor gay souls out there who never got a chance when they were young and aren't very good looking now. . . . He mentioned one guy, . . . fifty-two years old, he stressed, and still a virgin. . . . Imagine what sort of life he had lived. Stuck at home on a farm, looking after his parents until he was over half a century. That old before someone offered him a gentle caress or a friendly squeeze. Isn't it terrible, the sort of lives some gay people had and have, he said.)

Here the "mercyfuck" is considered an act of charity or, in the story's words, "mar ghrá Dia" (out of Godly love).[29]

Ó Conghaile's most narratively challenging work, the novella *Seachrán Jeaic Sheáin Johnny,* centers around a strangely beautiful but nonetheless taboo romance between a dying man and his much younger singing student, the granddaughter of his one-time fiancée. Their May-December relationship is based on the transmission of traditional songs and dances *ó ghlúin go glúin* (from generation to generation). The narrator refuses to learn his student's name, instead calling her names from the oral tradition, blurring the boundary between their romance and the songs that brought them together.

This theme of transmission also features in *Sna Fir*, in which John Paul plies a cantankerous old *sean-nós* singer with whiskey and flattery as they negotiate terms to record his versions of local songs—an account possibly informed by Ó Conghaile's own experience archiving and publishing just such material since the very beginning of Cló Iar-Chonnacht. The continuity of landownership is also important in his work, as when the youngest son feels obliged to stay in his native area to help with the farm in "Athair," while Seosamh in *Sa Teach Seo Anocht* knows that he must leave the house that his

28. AFNNG, 59–60, 61.
29. Ibid., 59.

father built and died in so that his own son Shane can remain there after his parents' separation.

Sa Teach Seo Anocht can be considered a compassionate and insightful queer critique of heterosexual monogamy and especially marriage. Richards's work on queer Irish-language writing discusses the importance of the nuclear family as a tool of social control in twentieth-century Ireland, showing that its evolution was a necessary step in the liberalization of Irish society and the eventual acceptance or even just possibility of queer alternatives.[30] Speaking from outside of heteronormative convention, Ó Conghaile presents the suburban family as well-intended and loving but monotonous and unfulfilling, based more on possession and convenience than desire or loyalty. The married couple are good but damaged people who seem to have sleepwalked into a conventional and hurried middle-class lifestyle of "an tsábháilt is an caitheamh, an dá jab is an dá charr" (the spending and saving, the two jobs, and the two cars).[31] Their relationship has grown platonic and suffocating, and Ó Conghaile's description of their routine is piercingly perceptive:

> Is leanann na seafóideacha leadránacha laethúla ar aghaidh is ar aghaidh lá i ndiaidh lae[, . . .] Níochán soithí agus éadach, is a dtriomú. Glanadh an tí [. . .] nó go gcreidtear sa mbréag, go gcreidtear sa gcur i gcéill, go gcreidtear sa *routine*, go gcreidtear sa leadrán laethúil ionas gurb ionann iad agus an saol. Gurb iad sin an saol.[32]
>
> (And the daily, stultifying nonsense continues over and over, day after day[, . . .] washing and drying dishes and clothes. Cleaning the house [. . .] until you believe the lie, you believe the pretense, you believe the routine, you believe in the daily boredom as if that was life. As if that was life.)

The cruising lifestyle is briefly presented as a panacea by the sole gay character of the book, who argues passionately that monogamy is against human nature and that most marriages are ultimately a sham. The protagonist Seosamh merely gives an account of this conversation, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with his friend, but it is clear that he remains committed to heterosexual monogamy. (When this is

30. Richards, "An Spás Istigh," 52.
31. STSA, 34.
32. Ibid., 20.

directly experienced by the protagonist in *Sna Fir*, Ó Conghaile presents a more complicated picture of the gay underground.)

The tension between continuity and nonconformity touched on above also brings us to those traditions and authors that can be said to have influenced Ó Conghaile's work. His fiction is surely an example of what has been termed "pseudo-oral discourse," in which the written word "sounds" like conversational speech. As Ó Conchubhair notes, the importance of conversation in his work cannot be overestimated: it functions, sometimes exclusively, as a vehicle for plot, it imbues his work with a recognizable and geographically locatable voice, and it is frequently mined for comedic potential, including puns, repetition, contradiction, absurdity, and vulgarity.[33] The writer and critic Alan Titley describes Ó Conghaile's heavy use of direct speech as authentic and somewhat uncomplicated, put to mostly humorous or stylistic ends: "An tsíorchaint, an comhrá buan, an guairdeall, an t-athrá . . . caint ar son na cainte . . . spraoi na cainte" (Constant talk, eternal chatter, circular talk, repetition . . . talk for talk's sake . . . the fun of talk).[34]

To those conversant with Irish-language literature, such linguistic exuberance would surely bring the work of Máirtín Ó Cadhain to mind, and his influence is unquestionable to this reader. Nor is it surprising, considering that the single most important literary figure to have written in Irish since the revival was born in the same coastal region as Ó Conghaile and continues to be revered as an exemplary republican, Gael, and author. Though this influence could be considered somewhat suffocating in Ó Conghaile's early work, the abiding similarity between Ó Cadhain and Ó Conghaile is their expertly tuned ear for speech and their willingness to push that mastery to absurd and comedic lengths.

Scholars Máirín Nic Eoin and Máirtín Coilféir have discussed the surrealist and Rabelaisian traditions in Irish-language writing, and Ó Conghaile is a persuasive case study for both.[35] These two critics

33. Ó Conchubhair, "Introduction," 9.

34. Alan Titley, *Scríbhneoirí faoi Chaibidil* (Dublin: Cois Life Teoranta, 2010), 65–66.

35. Nic Eoin, "Ag Taisteal"; Máirtín Coilféir, "'Fuarchúiseach, Magúil, Míthrócaireach'? An Raibiléiseachas i Litríocht na Gaeilge," *American Journal of Irish Studies* 13 (2016): 179–96.

discuss the consequences of transcending boundaries—those of realism and propriety respectively—and question whether such rejections are in essence expressions of despair or of defiance. Coilféir is hesitant to attach a particular mentality to Rabelaisian humor, which he considers to be "ag croílár aeistéitic na Gaeilge" (at the heart of Irish-language aesthetics), positing that it can be liberatory as well as bleak.[36] Speaking specifically about Ó Conghaile's surreal stories, Nic Eoin is "cinnte . . . nach í an spraíúlacht atá á dtiomáint" (certain . . . that they aren't motivated by fun): "Is scéalta uafara dorcha duairce formhór mór na scéalta seo" (The vast majority of these stories are dreadful, dark, and bleak).[37]

There is no doubt that some of Ó Conghaile's most challenging stories will leave a *domlas* (bad taste) in his readers' mouths, but his surrealism can also be charming and even romantic, as when chairs fall in love or silk sheets part to coax lovers to bed. Perhaps the folkloric influence on his work is informative here. As discussed above, Ó Conghaile himself has conducted fieldwork in gathering and publishing songs, which alongside *seanchas, lúibíní,* and *agallamh beirte* form a major part of local oral culture in Connemara. These art forms are all, roughly speaking, episodic in nature. According to the Jungian psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés, their fleeting nature allows episodic forms like folk and fairy tales to contain violence in a manner less decisive than, for example, the death of a character in a realist short story.[38] Instead a character can lose a leg when expedient to the current tale and regrow it by the time that we meet them again. It is tempting to view the casual violence of Ó Conghaile's surrealist stories as functioning at least partly within the rules of the fairy tale or parable, a form at which he tried his hand in *An Diabhal Ar An Ól.* It is perhaps no coincidence that Alan Titley, another author famed for his grotesque and transgressive humor, has also experimented with this form of story.

Perhaps it is more productive to see Ó Conghaile's experimentalism as simply another iteration of his nonconformity, an attitude to the norm that features almost everywhere in his work, whether

36. Coilféir, "Fuarchúiseach," 187.

37. Nic Eoin, "Ag Taisteal," 93.

38. Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (London: Rider, 1992), 218–20.

writ large or small. If simply being one's authentic self automatically marks one out as nonconformist, why stop there? Queer theory reminds us of the creative potential of nonconformity and of the right to deconstruct or challenge the normative, as through defining it, we are equipped to defy it.[39] Just as Ó Conghaile's characters are then free to experiment with both norm and taboo—as when John Paul explores the pleasures both of anonymous sex and monogamy as he finds his place in *Sna Fir*, or when in *Diabhlaíocht Dé* the otherwise conventional family unit is complicated by the fact that the patriarch is a dog—so too might the author's unique identity living a still "nontraditional" life in a traditional community enable him to risk things that others would not. Until such a time as total acceptance is a possibility, either as a rural Irish speaker in urban gay subculture or as a gay man in the Gaeltacht, what has Ó Conghaile got to lose by weaving his nonconformity into his fiction?

To return briefly to Ó Searcaigh's combination of the prehistoric and the postmodern, the scholar Máire Ní Annracháin has posed an intriguing question about whether the seemingly postmodern bent to modern Irish writing is instead simply the current reiteration of what survives of the Gaelic mindset.[40] Though any definition will inevitably be highly contestable, this mindset might be summed up as bawdy and spiritual, tamed neither by the Cartesian split between mind and body or by Christian morality. Many would object to any such essentializing, yet it is notable that Ó Conghaile, coming from such an uncontestably Gaelic background, seems to exemplify just those qualities.

Perhaps the unifying feature of Ó Conghaile's highly eclectic work is just this curious attitude which seems at once ultramodern and entirely traditional. His writing accommodates both the native and the transnational, using as its source material, variously, the Far East and Abrahamic religions on the one hand and gay subculture and Connemara oral culture on the other. Evolving often throughout his long career, he has shown variously a mastery of realism and of surrealism, of sincerity and pastiche. He seems as adept at middle-class

39. See Tom Boellstorff, "When Marriage Falls: Queer Coincidences in Straight Time," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 13:2/3 (2007).

40. Máire Ní Annracháin, "Litríocht na Gaeilge i dtreo na Mílaoise," in *An Aimsir Óg*, ed. Micheál Ó Cearúil (Dublin: Coiscéim, 1999), 14–25.

kitchen-sink drama as he is at reimagining the origins of man himself. He has the authority and credentials of a native Irish speaker, the eloquence and independence of a writer, and the liminal insight borne from lived experience discussed above. If growing up gay and Gaelic in Catholic, post-language-shift Ireland meant that Ó Conghaile was doubly marginalized and inherently Other, his creative work has embraced the freedom that comes with nonconformity like no other writing in the Irish language today.