

# FOURFRONT

*Contemporary stories translated from the Irish*

Micheál Ó Conghaile  
Pádraic Breathnach  
Dara Ó Conaola  
Alan Titley

Introduced by  
Declan Kiberd

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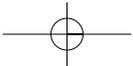
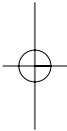
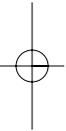
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## Introduction

The short story has flourished as a literary form in those places where a vibrant oral culture has been challenged by the onset of a tradition of written literature. The American Midwest produced Mark Twain, Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway in direct succession, just as Russia came up with a Chekhov and Normandy with a Maupassant. Many of the finest works by these otherwise disparate authors take for theme that very clash between ancient and modern standards in their peripheral communities, a clash which may indeed have made the very development of the genre possible.

Ireland has produced many great short story writers from George Moore to Mary Lavin, but also, and uncharacteristically, a set of theories with which the form might be interpreted. Two gifted exponents, Sean O'Faolain and Frank O'Connor, wrote treatises on it which are still cited by experts in schools of writing: *The Short Story* and *The Lonely Voice* respectively. Perhaps this was simply a reflection of the intensity with which the genre has been discussed and studied among the broad community. For every decade of the past century, it has been arguably the most popular of all literary forms with Irish writers and, just as important, readers.

Broadsheet newspapers (notably *The Irish Press* and *Sunday Tribune* on a weekly basis, but also *The Irish Times* in summer) have printed stories on an entire page – sometimes to announce a new talent, otherwise to publish a scoop by an established favourite. This tradition goes back a long time, to the days when George Russell published an early story of James Joyce in the *Irish Homestead*. The national radio station has broadcast stories weekly and has energised aspiring writers with well-publicised, much-contested awards. Even the other official genres pay homage to the form: the plays of a Brian Friel or Tom Murphy often can seem like dramatised collections of stories, just as the movies of a Jim Sheridan or a Neil Jordan have that same episodic quality which has led many readers of *Ulysses* to conclude that it is really a sequence of short stories in the drag of an experimental novel.

So popular, even healthily vulgar, has the form become that two decades ago one of the foremost Irish-language novelists of the younger generation protested against the fetishising of the short story as a “quintessentially Irish” form. He called his essay “The Disease of the Irish Short Story” and he urged a moratorium, while writers applied themselves to the more arduous task of constructing good novels. That uncompromising critic, Alan Titley, is none the less represented in this collection by four striking testimonials to the persistence of the shorter form.

In the earlier decades of the twentieth century, the short story was well calibrated to capture the nature of an emergent new society. If the novel chronicled a made society, the story better captured one still in the making: and it did this, as O’Faolain insisted, by concentrating on unconventional individuals who carried in their original way of looking at things the promise of a new dispensation. If the great Anglo-Irish artists like Yeats, Gregory and Synge excelled in poetry and drama, the short story seemed mainly the preserve of the “risen people”, the O’Flahertys and the MacMahons, the Os and the Macs. These were authors who in growing up read the classics of English literature but who were also still able to listen to old story-tellers who had honed their skills in oral narrative in the age-old tradition. Of its very nature, the short story as a genre was well suited to registering the upheavals of a society as it shed its ancient traditions. Frank O’Connor has observed that without the concept of a normal society, the novel is impossible: but he has added that the short story is especially appropriate to the place in which constant upheavals have shattered the very idea of community.

This may be a major reason for the persistence of the form in postmodern Ireland, a country which has to undergo in the past century the sort of changes which in other parts of western Europe have been more gradually implemented over, say, three centuries. O’Connor believed that the short story provided a “lonely voice” for members of submerged population groups, for vulnerable minorities faced with the catastrophic onset of modernity and all the possibilities and pitfalls which that implied. There could hardly be a better description of the world inhabited by the dissidents and rebels of Micheál Ó Conghaile’s stories,

protagonists who find themselves suddenly revealed as “errata” in someone else’s master-narrative. Even as the Irish nation-state took on an inexorable form, in the very desire of its leaders to impose a sense of normality after centuries of turbulence it helped to create the conditions for individual dissent and, thus, for new versions of the short story. The only difference was that where once the “submerged population group” might be a flying column of revolutionary gunmen, in later decades it was more likely to be a wounded group of homosexual persons or a lonely bunch of eccentrics.

In fact, Irish speakers and writers in that language now form just one of the many minority groupings clustered within the larger national narrative. Officially esteemed by the state in theory, they have often felt marginalised in daily practice, being treated as at once a national treasure and a practical nuisance. Moreover, within the Irish-speaking movement, creative writers have tended to represent its radical, subversive side rather than its more strait-laced element. Some, like Titley, have voiced their own reservations about the po-face of official Ireland with a linguistic virtuosity that verges on the carnivalesque: proof, if proof were needed, that a loquacious wordplay is not the sole preserve of Irish writers of English, but an intrinsic part of Gaelic tradition, which always prized the phrase-maker and alliterator. Others, such as Pádraic Breathnach, have placed their central focus on isolated individuals whose struggle with inherited authority-structures may tell us more than any sociologist about the destiny of community. And all, like Dara Ó Conaola, have written on the understanding that the short story’s real generic affinities are with that other favoured form of Gaelic tradition, the lyric poem. In almost every one of the following stories, there comes a moment of revelation, when the actual surfaces of things take on a wider symbolic meaning, as in a moment of poetry. This is surely the ultimate answer to those who contend that the short story is an “easy” form: for at its best it has the intensity and lyric power of a symbolist poem. Perhaps it was something of that kind which Liam O’Flaherty had in mind when he mischievously suggested that if you could describe a chicken crossing a road, then you were a real writer.

Of necessity, something is lost in a translation to English, a language

which an earlier nationalist generation often believed to be utterly alien to the Gaelic mind (whatever that is). But much is also gained: a fairly literal translation recalls for readers that rich, rural English, still vibrant in some places but always in danger of being homogenised by television (which seems to have little space for dialect, for quiriness, for the individual genius i.e. those very forces which the short story exists to defend).

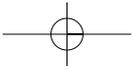
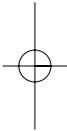
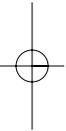
The language of these versions is often like that of the countrymen and women who impressed the poet Yeats by their capacity to think still in Irish while using English words. (This is the very reverse of the process, painfully obvious to all who have sat in Ireland's classrooms, whereby so many people have to think in English while using Irish words.) And there is a lesson here: that those who translate a tradition, including those who attack it in that very act of translation, may ultimately do more to defend and develop it than those who put the relics of a "folk past" into glass cases for the approval of antiquarians and tourists. Here, on the contrary, is a book which demonstrates that the example of Kafka has been as fully assimilated as that of *Leabhar Sheáin Í Chonail*. The mingled, gloriously impure nature of our world is well expressed in this most hybrid of literary forms.

Declan Kiberd  
Dublin: July 1998

## MICHEÁL Ó CONGHAILE

Born in 1962, a native of the Connemara Gaeltacht. One of Ireland's foremost contemporary Irish-language prose writers. Also a publisher.

Has written several books, including a social history of Connemara and the Aran Islands: *Conamara agus Árainn 1880–1980: Gnéithe den Stair Shóisialta*. Two short-story collections published, *Mac an tSagairt* and *An Fear a Phléasc*, and first novel, *Sna Fir*, to be published shortly. Has won many national literary awards, particularly for his short stories, including the Butler Literary Award in 1997. He also won the Hennessy Award for Literature in 1997 and was nominated New Irish Writer of the Year.



## DEATH AT A FUNERAL

It would have been ridiculous for Eamon Bartley to stay ensconced in his coffin any longer. He couldn't anyway. He was far too good to have died. Every one of the merry mourners at the funeral was praising him – praising him up and down and back to front and top to bottom and arse to elbow – even those who hated his guts once upon a time; those who had it in for him due to some old dispute; those who cursed him roundly and fucked him from a height; those who didn't talk to him for yonks; those who crossed the road to avoid him, or looked right when he was on the left, or who stared at the ground if he was all around them. Every man jack of them praising him with gusto now. They were mourning him and mourning him and mourning him, they sure were.

"Eamon was all right you know, the poor fucker."

"The whole town will miss him."

"You could depend on Eamon, a sound man."

"The poor soul, God love him."

"He was kind and helpful to everybody."

"He was all of that and more, even if he wasn't the full shilling."

"Too true."

"You never said a more honest word."

"Absolutely."

Eamon suddenly began to think that he'd be a proper fool to remain dead in his coffin any longer. Not one minute longer. Neither right nor proper nor appropriate. Besides it would be wrong to these good heart-broken people gathered around him. Maybe I'm confused, he thought to himself, or maybe I'm not the same person I was . . . in which case it wasn't me who knocked up Micil Bawn's young one at all; or broke into Mary Andy's shop and made off with two thousand pounds, or nicked the sugar lumps from the priest's tea the day he was around for the stations, or who crashed into Martin More's nice new car without tax or insurance, or who firebombed the co-op's offices when they sacked me, or who broke into the police station looking for my hooch which the bastards swiped . . .

With one vicious smash he crashed up through the brown coffin lid. Sat up. Straightened himself. As straight as a bamboo cane in a teacher's hand.

The mourners woke up in consternation from muttering their prayers. Some of them jumped out of their skins – and into others. A few of them gawped. Others seemed to run off in four directions at once as if they were doing a set dance mixed up with a waltz. The rest of them froze like icicles on a cold March day.

Eamon Bartley Coolan looked around him. And then looked slowly around him again in silence from person to person. His head and shoulders were barely up over the edge of the grave. He was grinning all over. A grin that grew until it went from ear to ear. A big, broad, stupid, crescent grin.

“Aren't you all happy that I'm alive and kicking again?” he said, buddy-like and upbeat. Then he stopped, expecting someone to say something, anything, even a stutter. But there was no answer, not a word. He broke the silence again. “Look, even though I liked the other life better than this miserable vale of tears, I just couldn't not come back, you missed me so much. You are all so nice, so straight. Too straight and honest really. I was really touched the way you guys all said nice things about me, praising me to the skies. Every single one of you. And I felt such pity for you. Your wailing and weeping would make the stones themselves burst into tears . . . and that's why I, that's why . . . hold on a minute . . . something wrong? . . . why are you all so quiet and gawking at me with your big wide eyes . . . do I detect some misgivings or what, now that I've thrown away the shroud . . . I mean, come on, it's a bit early for me to die again, isn't it . . . but on the other hand, of course, I wouldn't like to create difficulties for any of you lot. Begging your pardon then, my friends and companions and brothers in Christ, but am I allowed to stay just a little bit longer, to live just a little bit more? Am I?”

Nobody answered him at first. Nobody spoke. They stood around like statues, like telephone poles, like stiffened stalagmites. The priest. The undertaker. The doctor. The workers. His widow. The local petty politician who turned up at every funeral with his wet handshake.

Relations of all kinds. Some who had never been heard of, others who denied having anything to do with him. Toddlers and ragged urchins. Teenagers. Neighbours. People from the town. From the hills. The odd person that nobody knew . . .

– I drank fifteen pints at his wake. I’m tellin’ ya. Fifteen bloody pints. I never sank my moustache into so many creamy pints, the very best of pints, for the sake of a scrounger who never spent one penny on a drink in his life, nor on anything else either until he died. Don’t let him spoil our day’s boozing now . . . Believe me, he doesn’t deserve to live.

– I was certain he was dead. Absolutely sure. Didn’t I feel his pulse? I put my hand on his pulse three or four times, and I felt his heart, his . . . No sign of life whatsoever. One hundred per cent sure. I’d be able to recognize a dead man rather than a live one any day before anyone else . . . I have years of practice . . . Think of my reputation, my good name, my professional record . . . I’m telling you, he doesn’t deserve to live . . .

– The coffin is ruined anyway. Whoever heard of a second-hand coffin? And it smells. His name and date of death finely and clearly engraved on its brass plate, all arrangements on the news and in the papers. It’s not as if it could be used again. You couldn’t flog a pine overcoat that somebody had already worn. It would be unlucky, unhealthy. Think of the risk. Even a live person wouldn’t be happy to sit into a second-hand coffin, never mind a second-corpse coffin, never mind a dead person . . . For God’s sake, he doesn’t deserve to live . . .

– He never voted for me. Never. Not once. The Bartleys always stuck with the other crowd, they didn’t change over when some did the time of that bother about the pot-holes and the water. When I think of all the cars we sent to bring him to the polling booth on election day. Total waste of time. Election after election. And he never once voted for me after all I did for him. And I don’t suppose he’s going to change his mind now with another election coming . . . On mature reflection, he doesn’t deserve to live . . .

– He was a nasty bastard anyway. Frightening the shite out of me on the road coming home from school. Trying to scare me. Acting the eejit. Talking about ghosts, and hobgoblins, and fairies, all those silly

things that aren't there any more. Telling stupid stories. Acting the real prick. He bullied me often enough . . . I used to dirty the bed, not sleep at night, and have nightmares because of him . . . When you think about it he doesn't deserve to live . . .

– I put ten pounds offering on his altar. Ten pounds, boy. I did, I'm telling you. I sweated blood and tears for those ten pounds, and yet I gladly offered them up to the Divine Lord because he answered my prayers . . . that I wouldn't see him sneaking past my door again . . . he was a right one . . . and may God grant that he never comes snooping around again. If I had to offer another ten pounds on his altar I'd be completely bust. No way . . . If you ask me, he doesn't deserve to live.

– He was a liar. A consummate irredeemable liar. Pretending he had snuffed it. Making fools of people. Drawing attention to himself. Throwing shapes. Acting the big cheese. Trying to show the world that we in this town are only stupid pig-ignorant blubberbrains. Well, he has another think coming, he doesn't deserve to live . . .

– I came all of seventy miles to be here at his funeral. Seventy long Irish miles neither give nor take an inch or a half-inch. My health isn't good, you know. I'm ailing myself. I've put my life in danger by coming all the way here just to see him laid out. So I could see him stone-dead before my very own eyes. I just had to. OK, so I had a face on me and we weren't talking for a long time, but I wouldn't give the satisfaction of not coming to his funeral. Seventy miles, despite my bad health . . . my rheumatism, varicose veins, blood-pressure, weak heart . . . despite my . . . ah, what the hell, he doesn't deserve to live . . .

– I'd put a bet on with the bookie. Quite simple really. Five thousand pounds. Five thousand pounds that he wouldn't make it to the end of the week. Jaysus, I'd lose everything. My house, my car, my ex-wife, the whole bleedin lot . . . Keep the final curtain down until next week and I'll have claimed my money, and I'll have made it sing . . . No doubt about it, he doesn't deserve to live . . .

– It's not him at all. Some kind of evil spirit. Some kind of malevolent changeling that causes havoc if he doesn't get his own way. He's not of this world at all, I'm more than certain of that. How do we know that

he's not the devil incarnate in some kind of disguise? The spawn of Satan. He was always an Antichrist. He hasn't come back for our good, I'll tell you that . . . he doesn't deserve to live.

– Pretending all the time that he was a bit simple. A bit gaga. Nobody at home, like. I suppose he thinks now that we believe that he was that simple that he couldn't tell he should stay pegged out the way he was like any decent corpse with a wisp of sense. Like any decent corpse with any respect for the unfortunate creatures he had left behind. Himself and his stupid, inane, asshole simplicity. A bad bastardy ball-brained bollux . . . Let's be fair, he doesn't deserve to live . . .

– I'll never get the widow's pension. Fat chance as long as that fat turd is around. I'll be disgraced and mortified again like the last time when he shagged off and they called me the "live man's widow". We can't let him get away with it again. It would be appalling, unjust. He's a cheating lying deceiver anyway – letting on he was dead, the little shite. That was below the belt. The lying scumbag. He got his just desserts. If he crapped out as cold meat, let him stay crapped out to push up daisies like any half-decent man. It's bad enough when someone is a sly chancer in this life, but when they come back from the dead to be a sly chancer again it's ten times worse. We've yapped on long enough about him . . . he doesn't deserve to live . . .

– I got to him just in time. Just in time to anoint him. I wouldn't have, of course, if I hadn't left my fine dinner to go cold on me. I certainly wouldn't. And he wouldn't have made his last sincere confession if it hadn't been for me. A true and genuine confession from the bottom of his heart . . . real soul-searching stuff. When he was fading away and his breath coming in short wheezy gasps, I said the Act of Contrition right into his ear. I did, I did that. And before my prayer could go through his thick head and out through the other ear – puff! – he popped off. Croaked. Out for the last count. But it didn't matter, I had forgiven him all his sins, even the very worst of them, every single one of them – and I can tell you they were many and varied . . . robbery, calumny, lies, cursing and swearing, blasphemy, lechery and whoring and whoring and lechering . . . Not to mention all the newfangled sins he had deliberately learned from the New Catechism. I'd be here until morning

... or beyond. By the time I was finished with him he was ready to go; as ready and as steady as a strong stone bridge, and maybe he was half-way across it on his journey to Paradise if the fool had only kept going ... The next time, yes the next time, the unfortunate man may not be half as prepared. Maybe he'd be caught off guard, on the hop. And as regards the altar offerings, they were the biggest that I have ever seen for a deceased man in this diocese. He must have been held in the greatest respect, or the greatest disrespect as the case may be and people were relieved to see him gone. All those fivers, and tenners, and even a few twenties ... and all the Mass cards ... hundreds of them with a fiver stuck in them all. Enough money for half the devils in hell to buy their ticket to Heaven. I'd never be able to give them all back, never – I've already booked two fortnights in Bangkok, put a fat deposit on a new car ... and why not? An extension wouldn't be good for him anyway. More time would be bad news. I'm only for his own good. His soul was as pure and as scrubbed-clean as the new marble on a memorial monument. He wouldn't be half as ready the next time – that is, if there is to be a next time. He couldn't possibly be as prepared as he was, or his soul as ready to meet his Maker. I mean, if I was to be called out again to anoint him, I couldn't really be expected to ... I mean, how could I believe that kind of a call. Once bitten twice shy and all that. He'd be the worst for it, he'd be the one to suffer. Another sackload of sins accumulated, one blacker than the other. God's will be done. We're only for his own good. In the name of God and of His Blessed Mother, and for all our sakes and the sake of all the saints and the suffering holy souls in Purgatory who are in torment, but most of all for his own sake, I have to say to you ... that ... he doesn't deserve to live ...

- He doesn't deserve to live ...
- Do away with him ...
- Send him back to where he came from ...
- Finish the job ...
- Good riddance ...
- For once and for all ...
- For ever and ever ...
- Amen.

*Micheál Ó Conghaile*

19

They beat his legs. Broke his bones. Twisted his arms. Tortured his limbs. Split his skull in two places. They smeared blood on his face, on every part of him. Tore out his hair. Ripped out one of his balls. Bruised him black and blue with their boots and kicking. Stabbed him with knives, stabbed him anywhere they could find unstabbed flesh. Children spat and snotted at him . . .

After that they blessed the body.

*translated by Alan Titley*