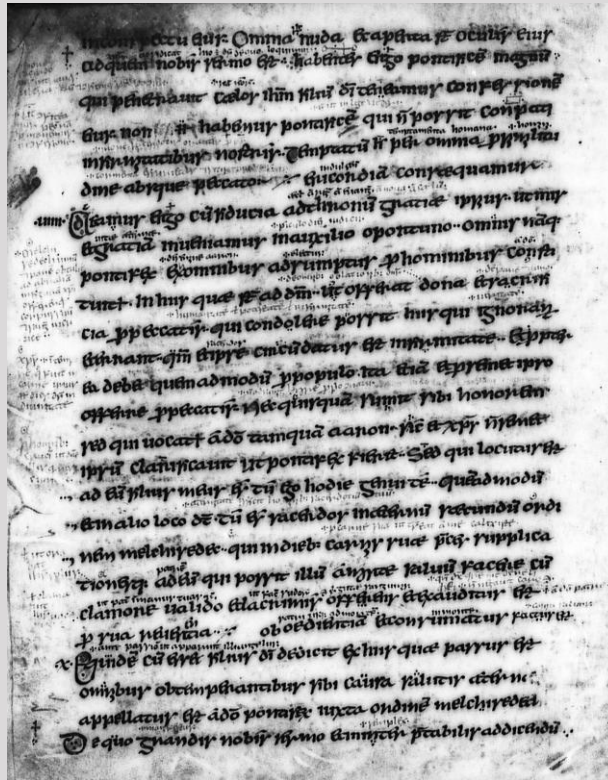


# A Poem, a Song and a Book from Ireland

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“Language and Identity in National Art”

on behalf of  
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An Togra Oideachais Gaeltachta



## Introduction

*To present one and half millennia of literary tradition through just one poem, one song, and a summary of one book is challenging at the best of times. It is even more so if that literature is so little known to the outside world as is the case with Irish Literature, literature in the Irish language<sup>1</sup>. While many English-language authors<sup>2</sup> from Ireland are quite well known all over the world, the vast corpus of literature in Irish is not only largely*

<sup>1</sup> We are avoiding here the misleading signification “Gaelic”, since “Gaelic” may refer either to a sub-branch of the Celtic branch of Indo-European languages, or to Scottish-Gaelic, a language closely related to, but distinct from, Irish.

<sup>2</sup> There is of course also a very well-known French-language author from Ireland, i.e. Samuel Beckett.

*unknown; our fellow Europeans are often even completely unaware that it exists at all.*

- 1) Irish literature started in the sixth century and very soon produced a Golden Age during the seventh and eighth centuries. It continued and developed both in quality and volume through the Middle Irish phase and the Classical Bardic periods with a highly developed professional class of poets and literati who belonged to the most esteemed members of society. This professional class declined together with all the other political and social institutions as a result of the wars of conquest and progressive occupation by England Ireland during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Eventually the Bardic order collapsed, and with it died the Classical syllabic poetry. Unexpectedly, a flowering of a completely new poetry, developing accentual ‘amhrán’- metres, followed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
- 2) Irish was the language of the vast majority of Irish people until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Only after the Great Famine in the middle of that century and the subsequent collapse of civil society was Irish eventually marginalised by English and became a minority language. Paradoxically, even while in many central and eastern European countries writers of the Romantic movement began to collect and write down oral literature and folklore, thus creating new national literatures during this period, Irish literature went underground and was re-oralised as folklore. A substantial corpus of lyrical songs dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries survived by oral transmission from one generation to the next. These are usually referred to as ‘sean-nós’ songs. Their emotional, historical and intellectual range is remarkable, and the quality of the poetry in them assured that they were held in the highest esteem. At a time when lack of education provision, poverty and persecution prevented the Irish people from access to their great literary heritage, these ‘sub-literary’ songs became something akin to (oral) literary classics and people to this day know them by heart, and lines from these songs are used as proverbs or illustrative quotes much like for example lines from Shakespeare are used in English.
- 3) At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the so-called Gaelic Revival created a new literary movement which in time became an organic part of European Modernism. The precarious socio-linguistic situation of Irish has not stopped it from developing a

substantial and very diverse body of modern literature, while also rediscovering the riches from older literary periods.  
*Our selection can of course only scratch the surface of this vast body of literature. We have tried nonetheless to present texts which not only of high literary quality, but also to some degree representative.*

- 1) *Our poem is taken the poem Éccáointeach atú-sa anocht from the Middle Irish epic Buile Shuibhne from the 12<sup>th</sup> century and was composed in an early form of the splendid and complex metres of Classical Bardic poetry. In our selection it represents the huge body of the older Irish literature.*
- 2) *As a song, we have chosen the sean-nós song Amhrán Rinn Mhaoile, a Conamara version of one of the ‘amhráin mhóra’, the ‘big songs’ constituting the core of the sean-nós canon.*
- 3) *The book we present is Cré na Cille, an experimental novel by Máirtín Ó Cadhain, one of the greatest Irish writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in any language. It is a brilliant example of the strength of modern Irish literature.*

## The Poem: *Eccaointeach atu-sa anocht*



The poem *Éccáointeach atú-sa anocht* is taken from the twelfth-century epic *Buile Shuibhne* (The Madness of Suibhne), which describes the descend of the titular Suibhne (anglicized: Sweeney), king of Dál nAraidi, into madness as a result of a curse by St. Rónán. It is composed in alternating prose and verse passages and represents the result of centuries of creative engagement with the character of Suibhne. The earliest surviving poems on Suibhne (though not forming part of *Buile Shuibhne*) date from the 9<sup>th</sup> century, but the historical event on which the epic is predicated, the Battle of Magh Ráth, took place in 637.

The central metaphor of the epic is the bird: On hearing the battle cry of the charging armies at the battle of Magh Ráth, and due to Rónán's curse, Suibhne "flees like a bird of the air" and thus begins his madness. He lives out his days as a madman living naked in the trees, uttering his thoughts and feelings in the form of poetry. The unique handling of the bird metaphor ensures that this old epic remains compelling even to modern readers: It is finely balanced, and while suggesting the medieval belief in shape-shifting and metamorphosis, it never becomes too literal-minded to lose its subtleness as a delicate metaphor for the fragility and vulnerability of the human psyche. The epic can in fact be read as a compelling account of debilitating melancholy, as a detailed account of a mental illness, all the more devastating because of being clad in metaphor. It is strikingly modern in its representation of existential angst. Despite of the traditional Christian framing of the story, the depth of Suibhne's despair is expressed much more eloquently than the occasional formulaic reference to Christian hope. The link between Suibhne's poetic gift and his madness also strike a modern cord, although of course such associations have been consistently made throughout Western cultural history, be it as a reflection (Aristotle<sup>3</sup>,

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<sup>3</sup> "The art of poetry belongs to the genius or the madman."

Shakespeare<sup>4</sup>, Wordsworth<sup>5</sup>, Rimbaud<sup>6</sup> et al.) or in the poets' actual biographies (Hölderlin, Sylvia Plath, Gerrit Achterberg, ...).

The language of this poem would be classified as Middle-Irish. It is not, however, altogether too hard to read by anybody familiar with literary Modern Irish.

The English translation is taken from Seamus Heaney's *Sweeney Astray*, a translation of the entire epic of *Buile Shuibhne*.

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<sup>4</sup> "The lunatic, the lover and the poet / are of imagination all compact."

<sup>5</sup> "We poets in our youth begin in gladness, / But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness."

<sup>6</sup> "The Poet makes himself a voyant by a long, immense and rational derangement of all the senses. All the forms of love, suffering, and madness."

**Éccáointeach atú-sa anocht,**  
am tuirseach truagh, am  
taobhnocht  
dá bfesdáois form na dáoine  
fil damh damhna éccáoine.

Reód, sioc, sneachta agus síon  
agum thúargain tré bhith síor,  
mo bheith gan teini, gan tech  
a mullach Shléibhe Eidhneach.

Teach mór agum is ben mhaith,  
adeireadh cách robsum flaith,  
as é as ruire 'sas rí  
antí domrad i neimhthní.

Cidh 'ma ttuc Dia mé asan ccath  
nach bfrith ann neach dom  
mharbhadh,  
suil dobheinn eing a n-eing  
agus cailleach an mhuilinn?

Cailleach an mhuilinn 'ga toigh,  
mallacht Críst ar a hanmoin,  
mairg dorad taobh risin ccrín,  
mairg dá ttaratt a choinmhír.

Robhaoi Loingseachán ar m'eing  
tré gach díthreabh a nÉirinn,  
go romchealg chuigi don chraoibh  
tan adfét é g mo macáoimh.

Domrad-sa leis 'san teach mór,  
áit a mbáoi an slúagh ac comhól,  
as romchengal thiar 'san tshéit  
aghaidh d'aghaidh rém chétsheirc.

Sluagh an toighe gan táire  
ag cluithe is ag gáire,

meisi com muintir is toigh  
ag surdlaigh, ag lémeandoigh.

Munbadh caillech in tighi  
ní rachainn ar aithmhire,  
ro-ataigh rium Críst do nimh  
ar shíst mbig do léimeandaigh.

Rolingius léim nó dhá léim  
ar an athair nemhdha féin,  
adbert an chaillech 'ga toigh  
co lingfedh féin léim amhlaidh.

*My dark night has come round  
again.*

*The world goes on but I return  
to haunt myself. I freeze and burn.  
I am the bare figure of pain.*

*Frost crystals and level ice,  
the scourging snow, the male-  
voiced storm  
assist at my requiem.  
My hearth goes cold, my fire dies.*

*Are there still some who call me  
prince?  
The King of Kings, the Lord of All  
revoked my title, worked my  
downfall,  
unhoused, unwived me for my sins.*

*Why did He spare my life at  
Moira?  
Why did He grudge me death in  
battle?  
Why ordained the hag of the mill  
His hound of heaven and my fury?*

*The mill-hag's millstone round my  
neck!  
Hell roast her soul! She dragged  
me down  
when I leaped up in agitation.  
I fell for that old witch's trick.*

*Then Lynchseachan was in full  
cry,  
a bloodhound never off my trail.  
I fell for his lies too and fell  
among captors out of the tree.*

*They made me face the love I'd  
lost.*

*They tied me up and carried me  
back to the house. The mockery!  
I overheard their victory feast*

*yet gradually grew self-possessed,  
for there were decent people there,  
and gaming and constant laughter.  
My mind was knitting up at last*

*but soon unravelled into  
nightmare.*

*I was for the high jump once more.  
The mill-hag spun her web and  
swore  
her innocence. I leaped for her*

*and leaped beyond the bounds of  
sense.*

*She challenged me a second time.  
We kept in step like words in  
rhyme.*

*I set the pace and led the dance-*



Rolinges léim oile amach  
dar fíormhullach na cathrach,  
lúaithe iná deathach tré theach  
an teathadh rug an chailleach.

Cóir cía roghéibhinn-si olc,  
mór n-oidhchi rolinges loch,  
mór do rosgaibh ban mbáidhe  
doradus fo éccaoine.

Roshirsium Éire uile  
ó Thigh Duinn co Tráigh Ruire,  
óta an Tráig co Benna mBrain,  
nír chuireis díom an chailleach.

Eitir mhagh is mhóin is leirg  
dhíom nír chuireis an  
crúaidhleidhb,  
gur lingedh leam an léim nglé  
do bheinn Dúine Sobhairce.

Ar sin rolinges fón dún  
agus nochar céim ar ccúl,  
rugus isin bfairrge amach,  
rosfágbhus thall an chailleach.

Iarsin tángadar 'san tráigh  
muintir dhiabhail 'na comhdháil  
agus roluaidhset a corp,  
mairg tír nÉirenn 'nar hadnocht.

Feacht roluighes ar Slíabh Fúaid  
i n-oidhchi duib dhorchi dhuaire,  
co bfaca cóig cinn 'san ccnoc  
arna n-oirleach inn-áonport.

Adubhairt cenn díbh 'na ruth,  
rium-sa roba garb an guth,  
'geilt Ultach, lentar libh dhe,  
co ría romhaibh i bfairrge.'

Rorethus rompa an ród  
is nír fuirmhess troig ar fód,  
eitir chenn gabhair is con,  
ann roghabhsat malloghadh.



*I cleared the skylight and the roof,  
I flew away beyond the fortress  
but she hung on. Through smooth  
and rough  
I raised the wind and led the chase*

*We coursed all over Ireland then.  
I was the wind and she was smoke.  
I was the prow and she the wake.  
I was the earth and she the moon.*

*But always look before you leap!  
Though she was fit for bog and  
hill,  
Dunseverick gave her the spill.  
She followed me down off the top*

*of the fort and spread-eagled  
her bitch's body in the air.  
I trod the water, watching her  
hit the rocks. And I was glad*

*to see her float in smithereens.  
A crew of devils made a corpse  
of her and buried it. Cursed  
be the ground that housed her  
bones.*

*One night I walked across the  
Fews-  
the hills were dark, the starlight  
dead-  
when suddenly five severed heads,  
five lantern ghouls, appeared and  
rose*

*like bats from hell, surrounding  
me.  
Then a head spoke – another  
shock!  
- This is the Ulster lunatic.  
Let us drive him into the sea.*

*I went like an arrow from a bow.  
My feet disdained the upland  
ground.  
Goat-head and dog-head cursed  
but found  
me impossible to follow.*

*I have deserved all this:  
night vigils, terror,  
flitting across waters,  
women's cried-out eyes.*

## The Song: *Amhrán Rinn Mhaoile*



The song tradition referred to as Sean-nós singing constitutes the oldest and most archaic layer of Irish traditional music. It is a form of unaccompanied singing characterised by intricate melismatic ornamentation and is practiced in different styles in the different Gaeltacht areas. The lyrics of the “amhráin mhóra”, the canonical “big songs” from this tradition typically date back to the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. *Amhrán Rinn Mhaoile*, which we present here, is comparatively short with just five verses; It is not unusual for songs to last for fifteen minutes or longer. These songs constituted the centrepieces of a literary tradition that was forced “underground” in the ever-deteriorating social and political situation under English rule. But at a time when lack of education provision, poverty and persecution prevented the Irish people from access to their great literary heritage, these ‘sub-literary’ songs became something akin to (oral) literary classics and people to this day know them by heart, and lines from these songs are used as proverbs or illustrative quotes much like for example lines from Shakespeare are used in English.

It is interesting to compare sean-nós songs with traditional ballads in English, be it from Ireland, Scotland or England. The latter tend to be narrative songs that tell a fairly detailed story in a linear fashion. Sean-nós songs, on the other hand, are more usually lyrical, non-narrative; they explore emotions and often only allude to the circumstances that triggered them. In other words, the “story” is not told, but only hinted at. *Amhrán Rinn Mhaoile* is a good example of that: The song (and each individual verse in turn) begins with the word “agus” (“and”), thus making it clear from the first word that it depends on something that has gone before, on an elusive “context” that would frame the “text” provided. Consequently, these songs often spawned their own story-telling tradition in which the missing context was provided by supplementary narrative traditions.

Sean-nós singing is not a stage art, although today it is sometimes practised on the stage. It is unaccompanied and often deliberately low-key. Singers might close their eyes or even turn their back on the listeners. On the other hand, the listeners might participate in the performance, shouting ritualised or spontaneous phrases of encouragement, holding and “winding” the singer’s hand or join in the singing of certain lines. Although songs are often performed privately, as opposed to concerts or shows, there are many unwritten rules for both performers and listeners, amounting almost to a kind of ceremony around the performance.

## Amhrán Rinn Mhaoile

Agus scríobhfainn agus léifinn leabhra Gaeilge cé gur milis a mblas agus dhéanfainn céachta Gaelach a réabfadh an iomaire glas. Dhéanfainn teach téagair do mo chéadsearc agus bhréagfainn í seal ach fear ar mo thréithre, níorbh fhéidir nó d'éalódh leis bean.

'S nár fhágha mé bás choíchin nó go gcaithfidh mé dhíom an mí-ádh, go mbeidh bó a'ainn is caoire 's mo mhian ar an mbaile údan thall. Tá bean óg insan tír seo ag cur eadrainn gach aon dara lá ach nár fhágha sí bás choíchin go mbeidh sí ag caoineadh agus mise ag mo ghrá.

Agus tá mé i mo shuí ó d'éirigh an ghealach aréir, ag cur na tine seo síos do mo mhian is dhá fadú liom féin. 'S a Mhuire 's a Chríost, nach cloíte le n-aithris mo scéal: Tá na coiligh ag glaoch 's Rinn Mhaoile ina gcodladh ach mé féin.

Agus tá siad dhá rá gur tú sáilín socair i mbróg. Agus tá siad dhá rágur tú béilín milis na bpóg. Tá siad dhá rá, a mhíle grá, go dtug tú dhom cúl ach nár fhágha siad na grásta má fhaigheann aon fhear eile uaim thú.

Agus gheobhaidh mé bás le grá do leagan do shúl. Agus gheobhaidh mé bás le grá don chois atá fút. Gheobhad an tríú bhás má fhaigheann aon fhear eile uaim thú. A chúl taitheamhach gan smál, mo chrá má cheilimse thú.

## Rinn Mhaoile

*I would write and I would read Irish books though their taste is sweet  
And I would make an old-style plough that would cut through the green  
ridge*

*I would make a well-built house for my first love and I'd seduce her for a  
while*

*A man of my qualities surely shouldn't have a problem to find a woman who  
would elope with him*

*May I not die ever, but throw off my bad luck,  
own a cow and sheep and be with the one I am longing for from that remote  
village.*

*There is a young woman in this country that is interfering between us every  
other day*

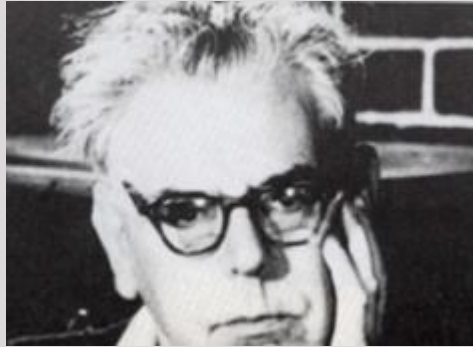
*May she not die, but cry while I am with my love*

*I am awake since the moon rose last night  
putting down a fire for the one I am longing for but kindling it by myself  
O Mary and Jesus, isn't my story a wretched story to tell  
the cocks are crowing and the whole village of Rinn Mhaoile is asleep,  
except me*

*They say you are steady-footed and adorned with beautiful shoes  
They call you "Sweet Mouth of the Kisses"  
And, my thousand-fold love, they say you turned your back on me  
May they not receive grace if another man takes you from me*

*I will die for the love of the look of your eyes  
I will die twice for the love of the foot underneath you  
I will die a third death if another man takes you from me  
Your beautiful, faultless head – I'll be damned if I deny you*

**The Book: Cre na Cille by Mairtin O Cadhain**



Máirtín Ó Cadhain was born in An Cnocán Glas in An Spidéal in Co. Galway in 1906. His best known work, *Cré na Cille*, first published in 1949, is probably the most famous book published in Irish in modern times. It is customarily referred to as a novel, although the author called it “a recitation in ten interludes”. Indeed literary critics have found it difficult to describe the book within the traditional framework of the novel. Many of them have pointed out that the characters show no growth or development, that their inner life, such as it is, remains unchanged. That is easily explained, however, by the fact that all the characters in the book are dead! They are interred in a fictional graveyard in Conamara (*Cré na Cille* means “graveyard clay”). There is no narrator, and arguably no story to tell. The entire book consists of the voices of the dead people. There are passages of monologue, of dialogue, and also of a wild cacophony of all kinds of different voices. There is also the pompous “Stoc na Cille” (the graveyard loudspeaker) – whom some critics have interpreted as the authorial or editorial voice, but which really is nothing more than just another voice in the mix. Speakers are not externally identified, and the reader has to become familiar with the different characters’ idiosyncratic way with words to be able to tell them apart after a while. Neighbours in their lifetime, the graveyard’s denizens continue their gossiping and chit-chat in death. They talk about everything and nothing, but all of them have taken their obsessions, petty hatreds, bitterness and fears to the grave with them, only to mull over them now for all eternity. The emotional and spiritual growth they failed to accomplish during their lifetime, when they had the chance, is beyond them now because they are dead.

Despite of the morbidity of its subject matter and its unflattering perspective of human nature, *Cré na Cille* is an amazingly funny book. And Máirtín Ó Cadhain has achieved what, on the face of it, seems almost impossible: He has created an experimental modernist work that became a popular success

among a rural working class not otherwise credited with much interest in literature; a bestseller in a minority language; a book about dead people that has revitalised the language. *Cré na Cille* has been successfully adapted as a radio play, a stage drama and a movie, despite the fact that any stage or screen adaptation of a book in which all the characters are dead poses obvious challenges. No English translation has ever been published, but there are translations available in some other European languages, including Norwegian and Danish.

Máirtín Ó Cadhain also was a prolific short story writer. Two more novels by him were only published posthumously. He also was a passionate and controversial left-wing political and language-rights activist and was held as a political prisoner by the Irish government during the Second World War. He died in Dublin in 1970.