

Experiments with Realism in Irish Language Short Stories by Daithí Ó Muirí

Sorcha de Brún

HJEAS

Irish language writer Daithí Ó Muirí's short story "Baile na gCoillteán" [The Town of the Eunuchs] (2002) begins with the male journalist narrator stating that "nach mbeadh sé de mhisneach ach ag duine amháin (mise) dul ar thóir an scéil dhearmadta seo" [nobody but one person (me) will be brave enough to seek out the forgotten story] (41),¹ and that this war is one which was never told before (41).² In keeping with the writer's stylistic tendency to avoid specifying places and events, Ó Muirí does not name the war; yet the battle appears to have already been lost by men in a world where women are relatively absent. The opening lines, which emphasize singularity of purpose and bravery in storytelling, serve as an appropriate vantage point for the analysis of some characteristics and narrative techniques with which Ó Muirí has engaged since the publication of his first collection *Seacht Lá na Díleann* [Seven Days of the Flood] in 1998. Although this short story ostensibly deals with the untold stories of war, these are neither stated nor geographically placed as is the case in much of Ó Muirí's fiction. The modes Ó Muirí employs infer a concept of the "forgotten" where the male protagonists of the town have been abandoned by humanity. What is striking about Ó Muirí's narrative of the forgotten is the *pathos* of the story that was once told, but has now been relegated to oblivion, consciously or unconsciously. Equally noteworthy about Ó Muirí's short story is the contradictory assertion that war is as much a facet of fiction as of fact. In "Cogadh" [War], the reality of war is represented as primarily a narrative event subject to different interpretations by unreliable narrators. Narrative is represented as a vacuum filled by the process of reporting, which changes to telling. In turn, that telling invariably returns to the oblivion of memory, whether communal or individual. Ultimately, in Ó Muirí's fiction, war is as much about make-believe and the passing of memory into the vortex of time as it is about a reported series of facts.

The strange passage of time and its propensity to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary and to turn the extraordinary back to the less than ordinary is a central motif in Ó Muirí's short fiction, as is the constant evolution which ordinary, everyday objects and characters undergo. In the world that Ó Muirí creates, the life cycle is not a biological, but a narrative one, which is governed by a concept of time which is anarchic in nature, as is nature herself. Frank O'Connor (1903-1966) describes the "difference

between the *conte* [short tale] and the *nouvelle* [short story]” as a fundamental one in the art of the short story (25). Clare Hanson elaborates on O’Connor’s understanding of *nouvelle* as follows: “The subject *is* the situation—extraordinary, bizarre, extreme in some way—which is usually referred back to the response of an ordinary, ‘typical’ human being” (6). While Ó Muirí’s fiction contains elements of both *nouvelle* and *conte*, it also borrows heavily from Irish folklore giving many short stories a twist of magical realism. However, it is in the concrete, everyday subject of his stories that the intersection between realism and experimentalism can be best appreciated in his fiction. Although his work is not limited to realism, his representation of characters and events is unusual in Irish language contemporary fiction in its portrayal of various political realities and struggles as opposed to philosophical questions and issues of identity.

Ó Muirí’s experiment with realism is a daring one in Irish language letters for several reasons. Firstly, Ó Muirí does not shy away from dealing with gender-based violence of and by the male body normally associated with the experience of women. In contrast to many other contemporary Irish language writers who write about men in Irish language fiction, Ó Muirí’s male characters have little or no loyalty to linguistic or geographical boundaries: masculinities are primarily expressed and realized through physical means, rather than through the means of language, perhaps evoking the work of French Jesuit and scholar Michel de Certeau (1925-1986) and *The Practice of Everyday Life*. (1984). Secondly, a major element of Ó Muirí’s fiction portrays a world where magic and the absurd are always a possibility, and where mundane and everyday objects become the vehicles through which characters can pass to another world and, on occasion, otherworlds. Thirdly, Ó Muirí’s portrayal of the Irish landscape is intimately connected with shifting perspectives and with the flexibility of the concept of time, but there is no romantic notion of landscape in his fiction. Finally, as Máirín Nic Eoin echoes Marshall McLuhan’s famous statement in relation to contemporary Irish language prose literature, the medium is the message (81).³

The weaving of realism and surrealism in Ó Muirí’s work is not without precedent and has a distinctive and long tradition in Irish language prose writing. While many Irish language critics of the 1990s and 2000s favored the experimental trope in Irish language fiction, and despite the many experimental and non-realist short stories and novels in Irish, the realist narrative in Irish language prose writing has not, to quote Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, gone “gentle into that good night” (148). Many Irish and English language critics held an unfavorable view of realism in the 1990s and the 2000s where it was sometimes referred to as “dirty realism” (Patten 266). An early

repost to what could be described as a critical antagonism towards realism is evident in Joseph McMinn's introductory comments on the analysis of John Banville's novels. McMinn discusses how "the relationship between the realist and the non-realist novel . . . is not a hierarchical one" (ix). If viewed in the context of Irish and English language criticism in Ireland, this statement opened a wider debate about the role of the literary critic as an objective observer as opposed to champion for either experimental or realist fiction, a theme explored by both Christopher Nash in *World Games: The Tradition of Anti-Realist Revolt* (1987) and in Raymond Tallis' *In Defence of Realism* (1988). More importantly, McMinn challenges a critical approach that adopts normative views regarding certain forms in modern fiction.

It is noteworthy that a significant number of other contemporary fiction writers in Irish such as Pádraig Ó Cíobháin (1951-) and Micheál Ó Conghaile (1962-) write the male-world and masculinities in Irish, and place the male characters in the specific geographical space of the Irish speaking *Gaeltacht* [Irish speaking area]. In this sense, Ó Muirí's work corresponds closely with what Gearóid Denvir refers to as a predominantly male world (qtd. in Ní Dhonnchadha, *Idir Dhúchas agus Dbualgas*, 298⁴) in relation to the works of Ó Conghaile, a writer who shares characteristics with Ó Muirí. Like some of Ó Conghaile's fiction, dialogue plays a subordinate role in Ó Muirí's fiction, precisely because language is a secondary consideration in the representation of men. However, in contrast to masculinities explored by other contemporary Irish language writers, the narrators in Ó Muirí's work are frequently violent men, and position themselves as close to violence as possible.

Ó Muirí treats the subject of war in his second collection, *Cogait* [Wars](2002), many stories of which have titles that refer to war in the military sense of the word, for example, "Cogadh"[War], "Sos Cogaidh"[Ceasefire], and "Cosaint" [Defence]. Yet there are other stories in the collection that examine the topic of war in symbolic and allegorical senses, especially the idea that violent acts on the male characters are themselves acts of invasion as well as war, for both the perpetrator and the victim. As in many of the stories of this collection, "Cogadh" is striking in that Ó Muirí creates an extraordinary atmosphere out of common figures of speech and ordinary phraseology. The story is told in the first person singular, but frequently moves to first person plural, to indicate a collective or group of people who are being told that there would be a war in the country, and that this district would be attacked (7).⁵ Because of the "tairngreacht" [prophecy] of the approaching war, the community comes together and sets about constructing a monstrous wall, complete with ramparts and defenses against the onslaught of the unnamed

enemy. Yet as the people draw closer together, it transpires that the forecast of war was based on “ráflaí” [rumors] (8): an old man accuses the community of being too materialist in their interpretation of war and that what is at stake is the attack on the spirit of the people (9).⁶ The story finishes with a description of men, women, and children seated together, the women singing, the men drinking, and the children out of control (9);⁷ of the people filled with a reason for shame (9),⁸ waiting for an attack against which they do not know how to defend.

Of central importance in “Cogadh” is Ó Muiri’s juxtaposition of the reality of war and its surreal narration. While he shows that war is of the material and physical world, the unexpected and unresolved ending that the story takes underlines the idea that war is far from a singular experience or that it contains a singular ending, but is one that can wreak both pleasure and pain on those who become caught up in it. That pleasure is shown to be both of a physical and artistic nature, and the response to pleasures indirectly caused by warfare are mainly comprised of the spoken word: the narrator describes the “féilte” [festivals] (8) that are organized, the composition of new songs, the rekindling of old songs and the retelling of old stories again. Central to the ending of the story is the organization and purpose that warfare has brought to the artistic impulse. Ultimately, “Cogadh” is an example of Ó Muiri’s creative and imaginative narrative techniques: the implication in the story is that war and art are intimately connected, because both war and art are inherently creative and destructive, and contain the seeds of both.

Ó Muiri’s blending of realism and surrealism is manifest in the absence of references to place, as well as in a constantly changing narrative alternating between various accounts. These varying and diverging accounts include ones about the attackers from “ó oirthear” [the east] (7) to the “ráflaí” [rumors] (8) to the “scéalta” [stories] (7) to the “an-amhras” [great doubt] (7) that eventually besets the people about the veracity of the claims. Ó Muiri’s non-realist account of a war is heightened by the absence of place names and personal names, and by an emphasis on the communal. Nic Eoin compares reading surrealist and non-realist Irish language fiction to travelling without maps (85),⁹ echoing Nash’s discussion in *World Games: The Tradition of Anti-Realist Revolt* (1987) on the tendency of surrealist fiction to eschew geographical reference points (27). Indeed, Ó Muiri’s story can be compared to other realist and contemporary accounts of war that are based on historical events, or from imagined history, and where language is used to poeticize the experience of war, violence, and death, such as in Kevin Powers’s *The Yellow Birds* (2013).

Through increasing suspense as the story unfolds, Ó Muirí creates an atmosphere where the anticipation of destruction, violent death, and war is a constant possibility rather than a resolution. War in “Cogadh” is primarily a war of the communal imagination: it is the very act of perpetual waiting which keeps the people imprisoned, and it is the “seanóirí” [senior citizens] to whom the people look who abuse their power by keeping the citizens in a state of ignorance. The real war in Ó Muirí’s story is the war that is being played out in the rumor mill, in the “ráflaí” [rumors]. Ironically, although the respected elder male of the community states that their spirits will be attacked in the war, it is the same spirit that is shown not to have been broken by the talk of war and invasion, but inexorably altered. Significantly, the talked-about invasion by the outsiders never takes place, and the circulating rumors of war have come from within rather than from without, thereby fulfilling some mysterious, unknown function within the community itself. The real invasion that takes place in the story is the invasion of peace of mind, the psychological invasion visited on the members of the community by their own members through increasing their fear, doubt, and terror. In a sense, Ó Muirí’s story mirrors the poem by C. P. Cavafy “Waiting for the Barbarians,” where the question is posed, “And now what’s to come of us without barbarians” (193).

Men are both victims and perpetrators of narrating different versions of reality in “Baile na gCoillteán” [The Town of the Eunuchs]. Although subtle, one of the underlying modes in Ó Muirí’s story is that not just of the unreliable narrator, but of the collective of narrators. As is common in other short stories such as “Sos Cogaidh” [Ceasefire] and “Cumadh” [Improvisation], the individual, usually male, narrator is joined by others as the stories progress, hence the consistent use of first person plural in both stories. The idea of certain narratives and art forms as predatory and voyeuristic is a common trope in Ó Muirí’s fiction, and appears not only in *Cogaí*, but also in stories such as “Ealaín Eadaí” [Clothes Art] from the collection *Seacht Lá na Dileann* (1998). This is a technique that is at the heart of Ó Muirí’s work: the question arises how can a story be forgotten if it was never told? In “Baile na gCoillteán” the journalist narrator (also the main character) describes how he travels to a war-torn country (which remains unnamed) to do a newspaper report on the horror of the war,¹⁰ but which primarily aims to increase newspaper sales and readership under the guise of concern for the horrors of war:

Imagine a picture, a photograph, a story, an exclusive report from the war which would be totally new, a story that would cause a stir (as is usual for this newspaper of ours), which we would defend with an editorial on the horrors of war, a barbarous brutal story that was never told before, which any other newspaper would hesitate to cover. (41)¹¹

On his way to the war-torn place, he meets other fellow journalists in a tavern and tells them he is seeking a townland, Baile na gCoillteán. A local journalist brings him there, and in doing so, relates a story about the horrors of war of the land through which they are travelling, about the devastation it has wreaked on men, women, and children. When the narrator finally reaches Baile na gCoillteán, he realizes that the drinking house where he now finds himself is full of men, except for the beautiful young woman behind the bar: “What was to be seen? Men. Every customer, without exception, was a man. The bar attendant, a woman, a beautiful young woman” (47).¹² As the story evolves, however, it transpires that all the men in Baile na gCoillteán have been castrated, and that Inés, the young woman, is the individual who will eventually castrate the main protagonist and then have a relationship with him. While the theme of castration is perhaps unsurprising given the overt reference in the story’s title to male castration and to emasculation, what is noteworthy about Baile na gCoillteán is the use of what Porter H. Abbott describes as the “framing narrative” (25), or the technique in which stories are framed within other stories, and where the search for the penultimate image of war has led not to one, defining photograph purporting to encapsulate the war, but to many different accounts and implications of war. In the final analysis, the idea that the men in the war are so violent that the women can only relate to them as castrated human beings is one of the central tenets of the story.

The physical castration of the male body is where the narrative takes us in this story and is described in some graphic detail. Ó Muiri’s narrative allows for little emotion and imitates a factual report-like account of events as it relates the men’s gruesome fate. Central to the story is the absence of physical and psychological pain, and the lack of feeling which appears to increase amongst the male journalists. Castration is represented not just as cutting off, but cutting out: we see this in the descriptions of the deserted, barely populated districts through which the journalists travel, the sense that they are cut off from the very places that are central to the war, and how the men in the town of Baile na gCoillteán have cut themselves off from women and children. This is particularly telling in the light of Nic Eoin’s comment on the tendency to avoid naming characters in surrealist Irish language literature.

Indeed, the named individual is the woman, Inés, thereby underlying the depersonalized nature of the men's relationships not just to Inés, but to themselves. Of principal interest in the story is the cutting off, or castration, of emotional response as well as physical responses to pain. While there is a chilling tone to "Baile na gCoillteán," which at times lacks emotional complexity, it makes up for that in its intriguing exploration of different forms of narration, and how these reflect the emotionally bereft characters. In addition, castration is portrayed as not merely an act of violence on the present generation, but on the whole community and its future: there will be no children due to the sexless relationships between Inés and the main character, and children are present by virtue of their absence.

In "Blaosc" [Skull], the same sense of castration, violence, and powerlessness evident in "Baile na gCoillteán" is also present. In this short story told in the first person, the narrator encounters dead bodies on a routine trip to the local shop and is inspired to become acquainted with the first dead body he sees by investigating the man's brain. In a dark tale of dismemberment, the narrator takes out parts of the man's brain, peers into the skull of the man, until there is nothing left but an object like a white ball (71),¹³ which is the skull. The skull in Ó Muirí's story symbolizes death and is important for the meaning of the story, which concerns the fragility of the body: it is circular in shape, similar in appearance in the main character's eye to the volcano which he looks into while investigating the workings of the skull of the man whose body he has appropriated. The skull in this case is also the same shape as the Earth, and the narrator describes how, rather than commit the body to the earth as is the usual case in death, he will stuff earth into the skull.

"Blaosc" is similar in tone to other stories by Ó Muirí that touch on issues of invasion and negotiating the reality of war. Much is made of movement and of different vehicles in the story: the image of the wheelchair figures largely when the narrator pushes the man—who by this point has been reduced to his skull—down the hill. Ó Muirí's story, while emphasizing the skull and the human brain as vehicles for the self, is a darkly satirical one. The nature and meaning of life is explored not in an existential sense, but in an absurdist way in which the human skull in the story eventually resembles a football, and the plaything of the predatory children become the focus of the narrative at the end of the story. While children are present in a significant number of Ó Muirí's fiction, their presence is rarely benign, and never romanticized. The children in "Blaosc" are presented as predatory and merciless, in a way akin to that of dystopian fiction.

Sarah E. McKibben observes how “masculine humiliation” in Irish language Bardic literature was a literary response to the process of colonization (67). The short stories of Ó Muirí’s that thematically connect war and emasculation represent a common thread in Irish language prose writing. In Ó Muirí’s stories, however, war and violence are narrated from the point of view of the perpetrator, rather than the victim and from the point of view of an uninvolved, distant narrator. Nic Eoin remarks how Ó Muirí and Micheál Ó Conghaile practice the same type of pessimistic surrealism in their work¹⁴; however, Ó Conghaile’s surrealist stories about violence such as those in *An Fear A Phléasc* (1997) are more usually told by a wholly involved and emotionally charged narrator who appeals to an imagined audience to share the narrator’s own point of view of the events of the story. In Ó Muirí’s prose there is no such emotional appeal by the narrator, and fewer instances of either dialogue or free direct speech: the monologue remains largely an interior one, and when other male characters make an appearance, as in the case of the male companions of the character Duran in “Duran,” it is generally as disinterested spectators.

Despite the violent physical nature of stories such as “Blaosc,” the main quality embedded in Ó Muirí’s work, albeit one that is not always consistently developed in individual stories, is that of black humor, which Nic Eoin notes when she describes his surrealism as comprising “duaircis” [pessimism]. In “Cosaint,” Ó Muirí playfully presents a blank page for the reader to fill in the gaps to tell an alternative version of the desecration of one community by another. The invitation in the second person is a doubtful narrative tool in this case: as Micheál Mac Craith notes, works of fiction in the second person are generally used to dissolve the gaps between the author, the character, and the reader, and to enable the reader to partake in both the creative process and in the action of the story (7).¹⁵

Ó Muirí takes the contemporary question of the political refugee as the subject matter for his story “Ceathrar” [Four People], a story that returns the character of the refugee back to his childhood. He is a manly man (47)¹⁶; a quiet man (48),¹⁷ but ultimately a man without a name, though the refugee claims in defense of telling people his name that there is knowledge beyond that of names (50).¹⁸ Seymour Chatman describes antinarratives as “narrative logic” that is called into question (57), and the multinarrative possibilities in the short story mirror Chatman’s comments. The number *four* itself is open to interpretation in the story, possibly referring to four divergent paths taken by the refugee, four different versions of his life, or four separate narrators who encounter the same man. Told in a clearly constructed and unified way, Ó Muirí uses narrative techniques such as amplification, interior monologue, and

unpunctuated sentences in the third version, which recount the loving relationship between the narrator and the man, a technique that is in marked contrast to the ordinary language and epistolary narrative used by the protagonist in his love letters in “Litreacha” [Letters]. Each version, or each life, in “Ceathrar” begins with a declamatory statement regarding what has brought the refugee to the main character’s door: He was wandering (46); he was fleeing (47); he was on holidays (49); he was astray (51).¹⁹ Each life brings with it an entirely different response from the narrator, thereby mirroring to some degree what Jorge Luis Borges has described as the “bifurcating in time” in literary fiction. What is unique about the narrative method is that it is the reader who will contribute to the composition of the story, thereby allowing the narrator to avoid responsibility for the effects of war on the community described.

In a story such as “Cosaint,” Ó Muiri’s work passes from surrealist to experimental, and can no longer be said to have any relationship with realist fiction. This is one of the elements which makes Ó Muiri’s short stories amongst the best examples of Irish language short fiction, and one which keeps the narrative and the reader both teetering on the precipice of both realism and surrealism, not merely in a stylistic sense, but also as a readerly experience. However, it is the narrator’s skepticism and doubt towards the real-world reporting of journalism and its capacity to accurately report, as well as the presence of an imagined audience, that create an atmosphere of uncertainty and instability. In the case of “Baile na gCoillteán” and in “Cosaint” Ó Muiri’s exploration of mass media and mass readership respectively afford us insight into his unique approach to narrative.

Ó Muiri’s writing can be as contemplative in tone as much as it portrays violence, and the usurping of strict demarcations between different types of narrative such in *Cogaí* is also mirrored in other ways in Ó Muiri’s writing, that of the movement between the ordinary into the extraordinary, and towards transformation. Many of the short fictions in Ó Muiri’s first collection, *Seacht Lá na Dileann* (1998), stories such as “Shiúil Mé” [I Walked], “Cumadh” [Improvisation], and “Móin” [Turf], portray the act of walking and physical movement as the instrument with which the characters move through time and, in the case of “Cumadh” [Improvisation], towards stories. Unlike many of the stories that deal with the subject of war in *Cogaí*, the stories in *Seacht Lá na Dileann* (1998) are strikingly realist in subject matter. History is presented as an entity that is moved towards, rather than as something that belongs strictly to the past, hence the narrative technique employed extensively by Ó Muiri. The passing of time and the changes that time brings are amongst the dominant themes in stories such as “Seacht Lá na Dileann”

[Seven Days of the Flood], “Shiúil Mé” [I Walked], “An Ciúnas” [Silence], “Aréir” [Last Night], and “Móin” [Turf]; yet the passing of time is not something which is portrayed as lamentable, but as an element of lives which, while not reversible, can comprise a parallel universe of sorts in Ó Muirí’s fiction.

In “Shiúil Mé”, the story takes the form of a parallel universe where victims of the Great Famine (1845-1848) lie on the sides of the roads in a modern landscape side-by-side with the real world of “rothair” [bikes] (29) and other modern items. The twists and turns that the main character takes as he realizes that he has lost his way is only interrupted by meeting other travelers on the small, country roads, all of whom look at the man as if he has lost his mind, rather than his way. However, underlying the seemingly absurd tropes that litter the story is the central idea that history, while in the past, is as much moved towards as back to. The twist in Ó Muirí’s tale is that the narrator reveals that he himself is possibly one of the victims of the Famine, unbeknownst to himself. The freedom of the character to move, and the freedom of the other road travelers to make their passage down the *boithríns* [small roads], which appear to be leading to nowhere except the mountain which is ever present, is in stark contrast to the immobility of the bodies that lie on the side of the road. The same stasis is present in “An Ciúnas” [Silence] where the quietness of an old couple’s lives as they look out on an unchanging landscape is in direct contrast to their memories which appear to shift from moment to moment. The story is an exploration of movement, or lack of it, and the way in which this alters the characters’ perceptions of time. As in much of Ó Muirí’s work, the times which the couple live through are past and present concurrently, and what is forgotten is primarily the self: “But, Máire, do you not see yourself, do you not remember yourself? Look.”²⁰ (71). One of the primary ways in which Ó Muirí shows that the self can be regained is through the visual image. For that reason, Frank encourages Máire (who is both an old woman and a young girl in the story) to look at herself in the mirror, and to see herself in an old photograph.

Fionntán de Brún discusses how temporality is a consistent trope in Irish language Gothic literature, where “Gothic literature typically places characters out of sync with time” (18). The same sense of temporality could also be said to be evident in Ó Muirí’s near-dystopian stories. In addition to the primacy of time, Ó Muirí’s short fiction frequently shows how movement of time and space results in changing perspectives for the individual experience. While ostensibly a story about the futility of watching what cannot be seen, “An Ciúnas” is also a story about the passage, as well as the passing of time; and how both perspective and perception are elements of the

individual human experience which frequently contrast, if not clash, with the communal experience. Indeed, Ó Muirí takes this idea of a parallel historical universe, and applies it to the real-life topic of mental illness in “Cumadh” [Improvisation] where perspectives are again shown to be on shifting sands, especially the perspectives of adults. In this short story, the perspective of the child is of paramount importance in moving the narrative from one dominated by a view of mental illness as stigma, to that of kindness. As in many of Ó Muirí’s stories, what starts off as an ordinary trip to the local shop leads the children to a scene reminiscent of the historical accounts of the treatment of mental illness in Ireland. The two children encounter a woman surrounded by a crowd trying to pacify her:

Around her, pushing her and pulling her so as to direct her down the street, there was a mob: a man on one side of her, a woman on the other, and both of them gripping her under her armpits and by her shoulders . . . they were talking gently to her, take it easy, love, easy now, pet, easy... (32)²¹

The woman with whom the main characters are obsessively interested, the screaming woman²², is deemed by their parents to suffer from mental illness, “that the poor woman was out of her mind, as if that was an explanation for everything” (33).²³ The children, however, compose their own story about what happened to the woman and why she appears to be “as a meabhair” [out of her mind] (33), and decide that she is a victim of sexual abuse, her mother a victim of violent domestic abuse whose husband is held in high esteem by the community. When the children finally get to meet the woman, she tells them that she envies the young generation who are so able to let go of the old secrets. . . . regardless of the uproar it causes, doesn’t matter about the shame, it’s the truth they want (38).²⁴ In the final analysis, the children forget about her and return to their games, eventually forgetting about her completely. While the story is narrated in a style reminiscent of a series of factual events and from the point of view of imaginative children, poignancy in the story lies in the gradually increasing distance between the lives of the children, and their interest in the woman and her life: “We got tired of it” (40).²⁵

In the title story of the collection, told in the first person and using formal, rhetorical techniques evoking the Bible, the narrator describes how he and his family ascend to the mountainside (7)²⁶ and how the flood waters gradually enveloped them, until finally they stand naked on it (10)²⁷ amidst the threat of the rising waters. In a beautifully clear and descriptive passage Ó Muirí portrays how the man and woman turn to look at one another:

The woman looked into my eyes. I looked into hers. The yoke under which I had worked, the great pain she had borne while bringing our family into the world, these were all meaningless now. We had neither questions nor answers, curses nor prayers, memories nor dreams. (10)²⁸

The language and formal style of religious writing and biblical stories are imitated throughout, but there the comparison ends. For unlike the story in the Bible, which emphasizes Noah following the will of God and his commandments, the loss of faith in an all-powerful male God is shown to be a necessary route to survival as the story progresses in “Seacht Lá na Dileann.” Rather, the inference is that it is the ingenuity, independence, and self-sufficiency of the narrator and his family during the day, and their ability in telling their stories at night, which saves them from death. Real and concrete household items are described as the family attempts to shore up their possessions in preparation for the flood, using plastic bags²⁹ and blankets hanging on the windows (7).³⁰ While the story begins with the father telling his children the tale of the Creation of the World, including references to God’s will (10),³¹ by the end of the story, the father has dropped any references to God. When it comes to the creation of male and female, the father has given up, his mouth frozen by the cold (10).³² The loss of belief in systems, whether it be the justice system, the records of history, or religion is a recurring one in “Seacht Lá na Dileann.” Although not strictly intertextual in nature, Ó Muirí’s short story is notable for its similarity in tone to short stories by Micheál Ó Conghaile, Alan Titley (1947-), and Pádraig Ó Cíobháin: the use of religious form as parody to usurp aspects of religious belief is a common technique in all of these writers’ work. The Book of Genesis is the inspiration for the short story by Pádraig Ó Cíobháin, “Geiniseas” [Genesis] (1999), *Diabhláocht Dé* [God’s Divilment] by Ó Micheál Ó Conghaile (2015), and *Eiriceachtaí agus Scéalta Eile* [Heresies and Other Stories] (1987) by Alan Titley, which imitate and usurp formal elements of the Book of Genesis.

The visual nature of Ó Muirí’s work has been already remarked on here, with several references to television, cinema, painting, and the gaze of onlookers. Amongst the more interesting and original techniques Ó Muirí uses to explore time and perspective are flora and fauna of Ireland, particularly those elements that are strongly present in Irish folklore. One of the most recurrent elements in Ó Muirí’s fiction is the motif of the mountain: the craggy, peaked landscape often appears in his work, and not merely as ever-present backdrop to events and characters. While Ó Muirí does not explicitly reference the landscape of Connemara, much of the descriptions are reminiscent of the landscape of the West of Ireland, a landscape described by

Tim Robinson as a “silence set in a velvet background like a jewel in a display case” (1). The mountain in Ó Muirí’s fiction does not represent history, but is an inanimate onlooker, and is primarily used as a compass point by which characters explore their shifting perspectives. Robert McFarlane discusses the power of the mountain in the non-fiction writings of Nan Shepherd and, as in the case of Shepherd, Ó Muirí does not slip into what Robert McFarlane terms animism (xxxii). Rather, the physical movement up and towards the mountain is what leads to new thoughts and perspectives. The power of the mountain and its surrounding boggy landscapes are vividly present in what could be arguably one of Ó Muirí’s most stunning short stories, “Móin” [Turf]. The story is imbued with both the realism of turf cutting and the magic realism of the transformation of the bog into a path towards the mountain top in pursuit of a prime sod of turf: “Up and Up. It was dark now, but there were lights above me” (124).³³ On arriving at the top of the mountain, the narrator encounters a city of sorts, tall buildings having replaced the mountains, and Ó Muirí describes the cityscape with lyrical beauty as “a silence beyond anything I had ever experienced before” (125).³⁴ In the chilling encounter the main character has with the woman with the face of a hare (129),³⁵ Ó Muirí employs one of Irish folklore’s central animal motifs in fairy stories, that hares were thought to be “in special contact with otherworld dwellings” (Ó hÓgáin, 496). In a similar vein, the short story “Aréir” [Last Night] draws on elements of Irish folklore to create a story of magical realism in which the otherworld features prominently. Beginning with a forgotten dream, the main character Frank dreams of a buried door on a deserted beach which he opens and which contains all the people he knows, including an unknown woman wearing a beautiful jewel: at a later stage in the story, he opens the door and it contains night itself. Leaping into the night, as if enduring a “bá” [drowning] (79), Frank’s story ends and becomes that of the seagulls and the other sea birds, who then set sail in a boat for the land of the birds (79).³⁶ This is a land which Frank was supposed to travel to but which the birds now travel to alone, and which evokes *Tír na nÓg*, the land of eternal youth in Irish language mythology. The story ends not just with the forgotten dream, but with Frank’s oblivion to the ship that was to take him to this otherworld. As in the case of mountains, birds appear frequently in Ó Muirí’s work, a motif that Dáithí Ó hÓgáin remarks is representative of the “intermediaries between this world and the otherworld” in Irish folklore (36). In “Deich Chun a Deich” [Ten Minutes to Ten] the physical love that will not be realized between the characters in the story must transform into something else: birds fly unbidden from the mouth of would-be lovers in a magical realist tale of great ingenuity.

Relatively few short stories in Ó Muirí's corpus deal with romantic relationships between men and women, yet unlike "Deich Chun a Deich" these are generally rooted in everyday occurrences, while the narrative techniques are far from conventional. The most notable of this type of story is "Litreacha" [Letters] from the collection *Uaigheanna agus Scéalta Eile* [Graves and Other Stories] (2002). Ó Muirí uses several techniques to tell the story of a man who writes letters to married women while pining for the absence of his wife Síle. Chatman discusses how the epistolary method can narrate, announce, and describe (170), and the letters to these women do just that. Each letter is preceded by an account of the man's trip to the post box and is followed up by a conversation in free direct style with members of Síle's family, concerning Síle. It eventually transpires that Síle herself is both recipient and subject of the letters, an attempt by her husband to retrieve their failing marriage. Central to Ó Muirí's story is the redeeming power of art itself, and especially the bond that the pair have in relation to other narratives: the letters comprise references to a film by Jim Jarmusch, a painting by Van Eyck, and a piece of literature by Baudelaire.

Eschewing literary themes current in Irish language prose writing such as the role of the artist, the historic novel, and questions of identity, the critical neglect of Ó Muirí's work is perhaps due partly to the realism that his stories contain, albeit within narrative cloaks of magic realism and non-realist modes. Ironically, the status of Irish as a threatened minority language is one of the main driving forces behind the steady provision of Irish language literary texts for electronic platforms, as well as the adaption of works for film and television. Since 2015, Ó Muirí's works have been consistently present both online and in multimedia adaptations of literature. One such electronic platform for prose literature in Irish is that of *Focal is Fuaim* [Word and Sound]. In 2015, in conjunction with his publisher Cló Iar Chonnacht and Irish language online newspaper *Tuairisc*, Ó Muirí read his short story "Duran" from the collection *Cogaí* and joined a new generation of Irish language poets, novelists, and short story writers whose work can be accessed digitally, aurally, and in text form, while allowing for increased reader engagement. In 2017, Ó Muirí's interpretation and re-imaginings of the work of Franz Kafka resulted in the multimedia stage production of *Kafka as Gaeilge* [Kafka in Irish].

Scholar and writer Alan Titley posits that the short story is a form ideally suited to life in the *Gaeltacht* [Irish speaking district] (43). As Titley writes, Irish language literature has always been about a marriage of both the rural and urban, the experimental and the traditional (15), and a significant number of contemporary Irish language writers do indeed marry the two styles of writing. In the light of those comments, Ó Muirí's short fiction is a

consummate example of the vibrancy of realism in all its forms in Irish language fiction. The wonder of Ó Muiri's short stories lies predominantly in the imaginative heights that some of his stories reach, and the strange, dark paths down through which other stories lead the reader. Invasion, violence, and a bleak outlook figure largely, and his stories are not for the fainthearted. There is an undeniable, yet subtle absurdity to many of those representations of life in all its ugly manifestations. Ultimately, it is that strange experiment with pessimism together with a lack of romanticism which makes the magic in Ó Muiri's fiction come alive, breathing new life into Irish language short fiction.

University of Limerick

Notes

¹ All further quotations in Irish will be found in the endnotes. The English translations of the Irish originals are the author's, Sorcha de Brún's own.

² "nár insíodh riamh cheana"

³ "Is é an meán an teachtaireacht"

⁴ "cruinne fhireann"

⁵ "go mbeadh cogadh sa tír agus go ndéanfaí ionsaí ar an gceantar seo"

⁶ "go ndéanfaí ionsaí ar ár spiorad"

⁷ "imithe ó smacht"

⁸ "cúis náire"

⁹ "gan mhapaí"

¹⁰ "uafás na cogáíochta"

¹¹ Samhlaigh pictiúr, grianghraf, scéal, tuairisc eisiach ón gcogadh a bheadh úrnua, grianghraf mór daite ar an gcéad leathanach, scéal a tharraingeodh raic (mar ba dhual don nuachtán seo againne) a gcosnódh muid muid féin air le heagarfhocal faoi uafás na cogáíochta, scéal barbartha brúidiúil nár insíodh riamh cheana, ar leas le haon nuachtán eile tabhairt faoi.

¹² "Céard a bhí le feiceáil? Fir. Gach custaiméir, gan eisceacht, b'fhear é. An freastalaí, bean, bean óg álainn."

¹³ "ar nós liathróide báine"

¹⁴ "duaircis osréalaíoch"

¹⁵ "chun na bearnaí idir an t-údar, an carachtar agus an léitheoir a leá, agus an léitheoir a dhéanamh rannpháirteach i bpróiseas na cumadóireachta agus i ngíomhaíocht an scéil araon"

¹⁶ "fear fearúil"

¹⁷ "fear ciúin"

¹⁸ "aithne thar ainmneacha"

¹⁹ "Ar deoraíocht a bhí sé," "Ar theitheamh a bhí sé," "Ar saoire a bhí sé," and "Ar strae a bhí sé."

²⁰ "Ach a Mháire, nach bhfeiceann tú thú féin, nach cuimhin leat thú féin? Breathnaigh."

²¹ "Timpall uirthi, á brú agus á tarraingt chun í a threorú síos an tsráid, bhí scata daoine: fear ar thaobh amháin di, bean ar an taobh eile, agus greim ascaillí agus guaillí acu uirthi... ag caint go séimh lei, tóg go réidh é, a stór, go réidh a chuid, go réidh anois..."

²² "an bhean scréachach"

²³ "gur as a meabhair a bhí an bhean bhocht, ar nós gur mhíniú ann féin é sin"

²⁴ “na seanrúin a scaoileadh...cuma faoin raic, faoin náire, an fhírinne a bhí uathu”

²⁵ “D’éirigh muid tuirseach de”

²⁶ “ceathrú an tsléibhe”

²⁷ “lomnacht ann”

²⁸ Bhreathnaigh an bhean isteach i mo shúile. Bhreathnaigh mise isteach ina súile féin.

Bhí an doilíos faoinar shaothraigh mé mo chuid, an méadú mór tinnis faoinar rug sí clann, bhí siad gan bhrí anois. Ní raibh ceist ná freagra againn, mallacht ná guí, cuimhne ná aisling.

²⁹ “málaí plaisteacha”

³⁰ “pluideanna crochta ar na fuinneoga”

³¹ “toil Dé”

³² “Bhí mo bhéal síochta”

³³ “Suas agus suas. Bhí sé dorcha anois ach bhí soilse os mo chionn.”

³⁴ “Ciúnas thar mar a chleacht mé riamh.”

³⁵ “éadan giorria”

³⁶ “tír na n-éan”

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