THE EPIDEMIC AND THE CARNIVALESQUE: Ó CADHAIN'S UNPUBLISHED PLAY *TYPHUS*

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A particularly germane perspective on Máirtín Ó Cadhain's masterpiece, the novel *Cré na Cille* (1949), is opened by the concept of encyclopaedic narrative, developed by Edward Mendelson. Accordingly, we can see *Cré na Cille* as a text that, through the use of synecdoche, irony and parody, encompasses the Gaeltacht, Ireland, and, in a sense, the world itself (Markus, *Carnabhal na Marbh*). Another possible instance of such an encyclopaedic narrative is the famous Czech novel, *The Good Soldier Švejk* (1921-1923) by Jaroslav Hašek, about which has been said: "V bibli je téměř všecko, ve Švejkovi je úplně všecko." [In the Bible, there is almost everything, but there is everything in *Švejk*.][1] (Senková) If there is really "everything" in *Cré na Cille*, we should expect that the novel refers in some way even to the current Covid-19 pandemic. And indeed, we are not disappointed in our search: in the novel, one can find multiple mentions of the so-called "drochthinneas Leitir Íochtair" [bad illness of Leitir Íochtar] (230), an epidemic that, according to the main character Caitríona Pháidín, threatens to "fatten" and "deafen" the graveyard (*Cré na Cille* 176; *Graveyard Clay* 148). This particularly contagious and severe illness is specifically mentioned as the cause of death of three of the graveyard's inhabitants, Stiofán Bán, Tom Rua, and Colm Mór's daughter (*Cré na Cille* 198, 226, 230).

Ó Cadhain interweaved much from local history and personal experience into the novel, which seems to be true in this case as well – we can plausibly assume that the fictional epidemic in *Cré na Cille* is based on a typhus outbreak that took place in the author's native area of An Spidéal, west of Galway, in November 1942. The epidemic was far less severe than what the novel implies – merely fourteen cases were recorded, out of which only one patient died (McConn 536). Yet, the authorities considered the outbreak alarming, as it threatened many casualties were it to spread beyond the area (Wills 258). Moreover, it was feared that the occurrence of such a dreaded disease in Ireland could create trade difficulties with Britain, which already suspected migrant workers from the area to have caused typhus outbreaks in England and Northern Ireland ("Typhus Epidemic Dwindling" 3). The British government even temporarily introduced medical examination for Irish passengers landing at British ports ("Typhus in Eire" 3).

To counter the spread of the illness in and around An Spidéal, strict anti-epidemic measures were adopted by Dr Charles McConn, Galway's acting county medical officer at the time. He explains the mode of combatting the epidemic in his article for

1 All translations from Irish or Czech in the essay are my own, unless stated otherwise.

the *Lancet* from 1943: “Our plan of campaign was to do a Weil-Felix test on every contact, every child suspect in the area, and the occupants of all houses in which there was a history of illness within the previous two months or in which the state of cleanliness did not conform to average standards.” (McConn 535) This applied to a substantial share of the population, 535 persons out of the overall 2 222 inhabitants of the area (535). Those suspected of carrying the disease were removed to a special hospital established in the Spiddal Irish College for “cleansing, disinfesting and disinfecting” and in the case of a positive test, for observation (536). But even if they tested negative, “their houses, clothing and goods” were “thoroughly treated during their period of detention” (536). Moreover, the whole district was isolated and nobody was allowed to enter it or leave it “except those who were certified [...] as being non-contacts [...] and whose clothing was subjected to steam disinfection” (536).

McConn’s detached, professional description does not, however, reveal what the anti-epidemic measures, necessary as they were, implied for the lives of the local population. Some information can be gleaned from newspaper reports, such as the following one from the *Irish Times*: “Next Monday’s Spiddal Fair is banned: all schools are closed, public meetings prohibited, no migratory labourers may leave the area without they first obtain a clean bill of health, no lorries are allowed to draw turf from the infected area and all buses passing through are disinfected and vacuum-cleaned.” (“Typhus Outbreak in Spiddal” 1) This mid-twentieth century version of lockdown was bound to have serious economic consequences in an area where many of the inhabitants were destitute and dependent on sources such as the income of the migratory workers.

A *Connacht Sentinel* report shows us what exactly the disinfection of homes entailed:

> All their bed clothes are soaked in a disinfectant; feather mattresses and other things which sometimes cannot be dealt with otherwise have to be burned; the whole family must be kept overnight in the disinfecting station while their clothes are being dis-infected in Galway; and when they return home next day they often have no beds to sleep on that night. There has been one case where a man had to make a bed of heather after returning from the station. (“Spiddal P.P.” 1)

Clearly, little effort was made by the authorities to explain the situation to the affected or to compensate them for their discomforts and economic losses. Moreover, the illness had been affecting the area since September 1942 and the locals tended to regard it as an instance of influenza, particularly as the first cases were diagnosed as such (“Spiddal P.P.” 1; McConn 535). Therefore, they doubted the seriousness of the outbreak and the appropriateness of the anti-epidemic measures. For these reasons, McConn and his colleagues encountered considerable, and at times, violent opposition in their efforts to subdue the epidemic. On Thursday 19 November, the police forces dispersed a demonstration of about 200 people in An Spidéal (“Spiddal P.P.” 1). The following day the Gardaí, who had received reinforcements from the larger Galway area, were called to clear large boulders (“Spiddal P.P.” 4), placed by

some locals on the road near Derryloughlin to prevent the ambulance from removing cases to the special hospital (1). Even McConn himself became an object of attack:

> The doctor was superintending the disinfecting of homes in Polleena village, near Furbo, and, accompanied by two Gardai, he was about to enter a house when he was observed to fall in the doorway with blood gushing from his forehead. Garda Tierney immediately rushed past him into the house and took into custody a woman named Mrs. Annie Keane. The Gardai also took possession of an iron bar similar to a hoop of a bucket which had been straightened out. ("Spiddal P.P." 1)

The injury, however, was not very serious, as "Dr. McConn recovered from the blow almost at once, and rendering first aid to himself he carried on with his work as if nothing had happened." ("Spiddal P.P." 1) The attacker was subsequently sentenced to a £3 fine with £3 costs ("Sequel to Typhus Scenes" 1). The local opposition ceased only after the intervention of the parish priest N. Donnelly, who, in his Sunday sermon in St Enda's church, condemned the obstructive tactics as unchristian and urged the population to cooperate with the authorities ("Spiddal P.P." 4).

During these turbulent events, Máirtín Ó Cadhain was interned in the Curragh prison camp for his republican activities, but he learned about the epidemic and the accompanying incidents from the newspapers (Ó Cadhain, *As an nGéibheann* 111), as well as through the letters from his sister (Ó Néill 8). In his letter to Tomás Bairéad dated 26 November 1942 he also mentions that he saw some of the typhus patients in hospital when he visited his home area while on parole in the summer, before the doctors recognized the illness (Ó Cadhain, *As an nGéibheann* 111-12). The wording of the letter shows that the local resistance to the hygienic measures made a definite impression on him: "The locals have gone wild and this time the blame cannot be put on my shoulders. [...] This is the Gaeltacht revolution – 'barricades being put up' – Le premier Brumaire [...]" (111).[2]

The impression apparently lasted and inspired one of Ó Cadhain's rare dramatic attempts – the two-scene play *Typhus,* which he wrote around May 1943 and submitted to the Abbey Theatre shortly after (Ó Néill 8). On 16 January 1944, the Abbey director Earnán de Blaghd (Ernest Blythe) returned the play to the author with a letter of rejection, stating the following reasons: "We think that it would not suit the stage here for while it contains fine powerful speech, it often happens that one of the characters speaks for too long without other people interfering with them. Another thing, the play is too short to fill the whole evening and most of the people don't like to see two or three short plays instead of a single long one." (de Blaghd)[3] We may

2 "Tá muintir na háite sin le dúchas, is cosúil, agus ní féidir a mhilleán a bhualadh thall ormsa an iarraidh seo. [...] Sé múirthéacht na Gaeltachta é – 'na barracáidí' curtha suas – Le premier Brumaire [...]."

3 "Is dóigh linn nach n-oirfeadh sé ró-mhaith do'n stáitse annseo mar gidh go bhfuil cainnt bhreagh bhríoghmar ann is minic a bhíonn duine de na carachtair ag cainnt ró-fhada gan na daoine eile ag cur isteach air. Rud eile, tá an dráma ró-ghairid le h-oíche a líonadh agus ní maith le furmhór na ndaoine a dó nó a trí de dhrámaí gearra in ionad dráma fada amháin."

count the difficulty of language among the possible reasons of rejection as well – few members of the Dublin audience at the time would have been able to appreciate Ó Cadhain's rich Connemara Irish and the differences in language registers on which the play's effect largely hinges.

The existing script, preserved among Ó Cadhain's papers at Trinity College, Dublin, shows that the writer acted on de Blaghd's advice and made revisions that interrupted longer monologues with short sentences by other characters. Nevertheless, the play has never been staged, apart from two partial productions in the new millennium. In 2006, the opening part of the first scene was read at Féile Náisiúnta Drámaíochta [National Drama Festival] by Aisteoirí na Tíre and broadcast on Raidió na Gaeltachta, and in 2017, a shortened version of the same scene was staged by Scoil Éigse Chamais as part of the event entitled "Máirtín Ó Cadhain – Ómós ar an Stáitse" [Máirtín Ó Cadhain – A Tribute on the Stage], held in Ionad Cultúrtha an Phiarsaigh, Ros Muc.

In *Typhus*, the events of the epidemic are transposed to the fictional town Coill an Bhogáin and its vicinity. The main character is Siobhán, a handsome young woman who takes pride in her long curly hair, as well as a new dress that she has recently acquired from the local seamstress. At the same time, she is one of the strong, forceful female characters that Ó Cadhain's work abounds in, sharing some notable features with the main character of *Cré na Cille,* Caitríona Pháidín. Siobhán invests a lot of effort into making her house, which she shares with her brother, clean and spotless, and just like Caitríona, has prodigious speech capacities, especially when it comes to reviling her opponents. In general, her portrayal in the play oscillates between a humorous (and slightly stereotypical) image of an obstinate female and that of an outspoken and perceptive voice of the community.

When a doctor, accompanied by a squad of policemen, enters her home, we are provided with a dramatic example of how the hygienic measures impacted the local population: Siobhán learns that the new dress that she had just bought has to be burned as a carrier of disease, the house has to be disinfected, and her curly hair cut off in the special hospital. The burning of clothes by the authorities is an important detail, implied in the above-quoted report from the *Connacht Sentinel* and explicitly mentioned in the notes to *As an nGéibheann*, the edition of Ó Cadhain's letters from the prison camp: "Tomás Bairéad says that the most conspicuous feature of the disinfecting process was the burning of clothes. This is what made the people angry." (190)[4]

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault discusses the seventeenth-century methods of handling plague, featuring a total control of the population by the authorities, as a model for strict disciplinary projects later:

4 "Deir Tomás Bairéad gurbh é an chuid ba shuntasaí den chóras díghalraithe na héadaí a dhó. Sin a chuir olc ar na daoine."

> This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all the events are recorded, [...] in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead – all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. (197)

And indeed, the reason for the locals' resentment, according to the play, is exactly the fact that the typhus epidemic was dealt with in a purely authoritarian manner without taking the people's concerns into account or compensating them for their losses. Siobhán vehemently protests against the fact that the locals, by virtue of being poor, are automatically regarded as dirty and unhygienic – this is actually acted out in the play when the doctor enters her spotless house covering his nose (*Typhus* 8). She also points out the economic problems caused by the quarantine measures. Her following remark could be easily uttered by someone in a disadvantaged area affected by a Covid-19-induced lockdown: "This is some trickery devised in order to deprive the people of the only way of making a living: to stop them going to England and to snatch from their hands the few miserable pounds that they make on strangers and Irish learners." (10)[5] In reprimanding the doctor, Siobhán also mentions that the illness being dealt with by the doctor is merely one of many dangerous diseases that affect the area and that if poverty was reduced, the people's health would improve as well. She specifically criticizes dishonest practices of shopkeepers during the Emergency:

> You know in your hearts that it was and it is only an outbreak of cold that spreads because of bad food, bad flour and bad coffee that people get if they manage to buy it at all. Don't you belong yourself to those that make knights out of themselves on tea, flour, sugar and all sorts of other things: selling it for ten times its value to those who can afford to buy it and leaving the poor with nothing? Stop that lot and you'll see how little illness there will be. Stop them. (10-11)[6]

Very provocatively, Siobhán accuses the Irish Free State establishment of acting in a similar way to the English at the time of the Great Famine, during which typhus was, along with starvation, a major cause of death: "The English permitted them to die in the ditch. The likes of you will permit them to die on a bare floor without leaving them even a shroud or a winding sheet." (10)[7] This comment subtly connects with Clair

5 "Seo aisiléaracht eicínt leis an t-aon-slighe bheatha amháin atá ag na daoine a bhaint dhíob: a mbacadh ón a dhul go Sasana agus na cupla puintín gágach a dhéanas siad ar strainséaraí a's ar 'lucht na Gaedhilge' a sciobadh as a láimh."

6 "Tá fhios ag 'ur gcroidhe isitigh, nach raibh ann agus nach bhfuil ann ach ruaig shlaghdáin atá aithmhéalach ingeall ar an droch-chothughadh, ar an droch-phlúr, ar an droch-chaifí agus eile atá na daoine a fhaghail, an uair a eirigheas leob a bhfaghail ar an gcaoi sin féin. Nach tusa an dream atá ag déanamh ridirí díobh féin ar tae, ar phlúr, ar shiúcra agus ar chuile shórt eile: dhá ndíol ar a ndeich luach leis an té atá in acmhuinn a gceannacht agus ag fágáil daoine bochta gan Murrchadha gan Maghnus. Bac an dream sin agus feicfidh tú féin air gur beag an galra a bhéas annseo. Bac iad."

7 "Thug na Sasanaigh cead báis dóibh chois an chlaidhe. Tiubharfaidh tusa a's do leithide cead báis dóibh ar an urlár lom gan oiread a's an scaoilteog ná'n taiséadach a fhágáil acab."

Wills's account of the year 1942 in Ireland: "[...] the ghosts of the famine of the 1840s were also raised by the sudden return of diseases associated with poverty and malnutrition" (257). The link that Ó Cadhain made between the authoritarian attitude of the Irish Free State towards the epidemic and the previous English regime is reinforced by the fact that in the play, an old Royal Irish Constabulary barracks (*Typhus* 4), instead of the Spiddal Irish College used in the real epidemic ("Spiddal Typhus Cases" 1), is converted into a provisional hospital and a disinfecting station.

Equally provocative is Siobhán's attack on the Catholic Church, which she undoubtedly sees as a participant in the conspiracy of the powerful to harass her community. When her brother doubts her resolution not to give up the dress, "wait until the doctor and the priest come" (*Typhus* 5),[8] she reminds him that she has stood up to the priest in the past: "The priest already came when we had the little céilí here and which of us faced him –" (5).[9] In her argument with the police sergeant, she makes use of a subversive Irish proverb, conflating the institutions of police and church: "'Let the priest first baptise his own child.' Burn the clothes that are in your own house, sergeant [...]." (10)[10]

Apart from the authoritarian methods of dealing with the plague, Foucault also points out the festival, carnivalesque mood that the disease engendered in the past:

> A whole literary fiction of the festival grew up around the plague: suspended laws, lifted prohibitions, the frenzy of passing time, bodies mingling together without respect, individuals unmasked, abandoning their statutory identity and the figure under which they had been recognized, allowing a quite different truth to appear. (197)

While in Foucault's model, the carnivalesque aspect of the plague is subdued by order and discipline, in Ó Cadhain's play an opposite process takes place in which the government's approach is ridiculed and proved ineffective. This can be related to other works by Ó Cadhain in which the carnivalesque is used to undermine authority, entirely in keeping with Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the principle in *Rabelais and His World*.[11] It is likely that the figure of Siobhán was inspired by Annie Keane, the woman who struck Dr McCann with an iron bar in the above-quoted report. In the play, Siobhán acts similarly, but her behaviour is exaggerated in a slapstick comedy manner. When threatened with force to give up her dress, she steals a baton from the police sergeant and strikes him and two other guards unconscious, while pushing the doctor into the wardrobe (*Typhus* 15). She is finally overpowered by Garda Jim Lavelle, who also happens to be her fiancé (16). In the trial that follows in the second and final scene, the pomposity of the sergeant is revealed, and Siobhán is sentenced

8 "fan go dteagaidh an dochtúr a's an sagart".

9 "Tháinig an sagart cheana an t-am a raibh an céilidhe beag annseo agus cé againn a thug aghaidh air –".

10 "''Sé a leanbh féin a bhaisteas an sagart ar dtús.' Dóigh an t-éadach atá i do theach féin i dtosach a sháirsint [...]."

11 See Markus, "The Carnivalesque against Entropy".

to three months of imprisonment (24). However, the ensuing entreaties of Jim Lavelle to be allowed to serve the punishment instead of her (25, 28) gradually bring about a total breakdown of the court proceedings, with the judge frantically searching through lawbooks and eventually throwing them at the sergeant in desperation (29). The whole play then ends in a kind of carnival with the judge, and eventually most of the actors, dancing and singing a nonsensical song (29).

The movement in the play from the authoritarian to the carnivalesque is reflected in the language as well. The official use of Irish is mocked throughout, starting with the initial conversation between Siobhán and her brother, who struggles with the official Irish term for disinfecting ("dísbithughadh") and mispronounces it in various ways while evidently being more comfortable with the more natural hybrid coinage "disinfectáil" (3). The frequent speeches of the pompous sergeant are full of exaggerated legalese:

> Well, Miss Ó Tuathaláin [...] within the powers of the Act and as I represent the law, I am supplied with all the power to enforce the Act, that is to take possession of the item of clothing entitled "dress" in this case, and in order to achieve this aim I am permitted to use all the methods in the Act including as much force as is needed to gain the aforesaid possession. (14)[12]

The officialese is opposed by informal speech used by Siobhán in her altercation with the police and the judge, as well as her mockery of the language of her opponents – she announces to the court, for example, that she made "a temporary corpse of the law" when the police entered her house (23).[13] Indicative of the carnivalesque turn of the play is the shift that occurs in the judge's language when he is flabbergasted by Jim Lavelle's requests. This is one of the play's most hilarious moments, just before the total breakdown of the court proceedings and the final dance and song. After reacting to a pompous speech of the sergeant by the curse, "may the true son of God throw you to the bottom of hell, you flat-footed person" (28),[14] the judge threatens his own clerk by shoving his law books down his throat: "Shut your gob or I'll give you mashed Halsbury as an hors d'oeuvre. I'll make a temporary library of your mouth." (29)[15]

Despite never being published or fully staged, *Typhus* holds a remarkable position in Ó Cadhain's oeuvre, with multiple links to his more famous works. It shares some

12 "Bhuel, a Inghean Uí Thuathaláin [...] taobh istigh de bhrigh na h-Achta is arna de'n dlighe mé, agus tá mé soláthruighthe le iomlán cumhachta leis an Acht a chur i bhfeidhm eadhón seilbh a ghlacadh ar bhall éadaigh dar tiodal 'feisteas' sa gcás seo, agus chun an aidhm sin a chur i gcrích is ceaduighthe dom úsáid a bhaint as slig-heanna iomlána na h-Achta go fuí's an oiread fórsa agus a mbeidh gábhadh leis chun na seilbhe réamhráidhte a bhaint amach."

13 "marbhthán sealadach de'n dlighe".

14 "go gcartaidh Mac dílis Dé síos go tóin Ifrinn thú a bhas – a bhasacháin".

15 "Dún do chlab nó tiubharfaidh mé brúightín à la Halsbury mar hors d'oeuvre duit. Déan-faidh mé leabharlann sealadach de do bhéal."

specific motifs with *Cré na Cille* – apart from the epidemic itself, these include the attack on dishonest shopkeepers and the reference to the American actor Mae West, who plays a role in the carnivalesque dénouement of the play (*Typhus* 26, 30; *Cré na Cille* 166-67). *Typhus* is also one of the first examples of Ó Cadhain shifting between various registers of Irish, a skill that he applied with considerable mastery in *Cré na Cille* and his later urban stories, especially "An Eochair" (1967) (*An tSraith ar Lár* 205-60). A link between *Typhus* and "An Eochair" may also be established through the satirical portrayal of the state as a quasi-religious institution. In "An Eochair", the civil service is shown as a mock version of the Catholic Church with its scriptures, commandments, tradition and catechism, and the same idea, in essence, is presented by the judge in the play: "the legitimate will of the state is the will of God" (24).[16] *Typhus* therefore puts into question the established chronology of Ó Cadhain's themes and settings – it is clear that the seeds of his later stories, which take place in the city among civil servants, were already sown in his early period, when he focused more on female characters in a rural environment.[17]

The play also deserves attention in relation to other works of the author which take illness as their theme. Illness is treated as an innate condition of man in "An Seanfhear" (1953) (*Cois Caoláire* 64-72), and presented as a sign of entropy, of the slow decline of the world, in the novels *Cré na Cille* and *Athnuachan* (1995). In the latter two texts, it also becomes the target of carnivalesque mockery. *Typhus* foregrounds another aspect of the theme: the institutional response to illness. This is later picked up in a passage in *Cré na Cille* where various characters relate absurd stories about doctors (307-12), and the late story "Ag Déanamh Marmair" (1977) (*An tSraith Tógtha* 22-26), in which the main character imagines that the depersonalizing environment of the hospital turns patients into marble.

Typhus ultimately criticizes authoritative methods of protecting public health, the arrogance of knowledge, as well as the inherent class prejudices contained in anti-epidemic policies. It does not put in question the need to counter dangerous diseases, but implies that the cooperation of the local community and the improvement of their material conditions is key to any such effort. In this respect, it retains its relevance in relation to more recent instances of epidemics. This is apparent already in the introduction to the 2006 radio production of the play's opening, which mentions avian flu as a possible parallel, and the recent effort to subdue the Covid-19 pandemic presents, of course, a number of obvious resonances. After some adjustment by a skilful director, the play would certainly merit a new, full production – apart from its topicality, it features much vivid language and ample possibilities for action on the stage.[18]

16 "'sé toil Dé toil dlisteanach an stáit".

17 For the discussion of the periodization of Ó Cadhain's work, see Nic Eoin 635-42.

18 I am indebted to Seán Ó Morónaigh of An Comhlachas Náisiúnta Drámaíochta, to Caoimhe Ní Ghormáin of Trinity College Library, and to Václav Hampl and Vít Jakoubek

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