



“This undiscovered country” in Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s *Cré na Cille* and George Saunders’s *Lincoln in the Bardo*

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Abstract. Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s *The Dirty Dust* (1949, trans. 2015) and George Saunders’s *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017) illustrate two very different uses of the literary device of conversations in a cemetery. Ó Cadhain distilled the venom of selfishness and vicious back-biting found in a small rural Irish village then refined it through comedy and satire, while Saunders created a collage of voices by employing a combination of fantastic devices together with fragments of history, newspaper articles and biography to eulogize Abraham Lincoln as grieving parent and to demonstrate that love does indeed transform the world – even the world of the dead.

Keywords: the fantastic, Irish classic, Civil War, Bardo, cemetery.

The longest strongest border dividing all human beings and impinging on all lives is that between life and death. This border effectively blocks all knowledge, all communication between the approximately 600 billion humans who have lived and the 7.6 billion who are now alive. This border also serves to motivate humans to accept their lot in life, for as Hamlet remarked, the border to this “undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns puzzles the will. And makes us rather bear those ills we have” (*Hamlet* III.1). Perhaps. Although we know nothing about “this undiscovered country,” that fact has not prevented writers from speculating endlessly about it and/or using some version of it as a means of commenting on what we do know: this human life lived here and now. Often such commentary is given by a revenant, ghost or spectral figure, such as Machado de Assis’s Blas Cubas or Gyula Krúdy’s Sindbad, who interacts with and comments on the living not from the “other side” but as a revenant who although dead wanders through this world having crossed back over that border to return to human life. A variation of this situation occurs when the revenant assumes not

that he or she is dead but rather mistakenly believes that he or she is still alive, as in the Old Irish tales of those returning from decades spent in Tír na Óg who collapse into dust once they touch the Earth or more recently the Bruce Willis character in the film *The Sixth Sense* (1999, dir. M. Night Shyamalan) who learns only a year later that twelve months ago he was shot dead. In contrast, there are imaginative explorations of “this undiscovered country” seen as a continuation albeit a fantastic continuation of this discovered one, an exploration that often takes the form of conversations in a cemetery.

Two such very different instances are the best-selling Irish language novel, *Cré na Cille* by Máirtín Ó Cadhain (1949) and the American Man Booker Prize winner, *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders (2017). Both take place in cemeteries and both are dialogue novels with Saunders also employing numerous quotations from diaries, newspapers, and history records and books.

Originally published in Irish in 1949, Ó Cadhain’s novel “heralded a new freedom of expression for Irish language writers, and it has generated more critical commentary internationally than any other single twentieth-century title in the language” (Eóin 2016). Typical of such commentary is that of Declan Kiberd, who judged *Cré na Cille* “the greatest novel in the [Irish] language” (2015, 7), and Colm Tóibín, who agreed that it was “[t]he greatest novel to be written in the Irish language, and among the best books to have come out of Ireland in the twentieth century” (2015, Jacket blurb) – though it had to wait until the twenty-first century to be translated and thus travel beyond the Gaeltacht borders. And, Éilís Ní Dhubhne not be outdone claimed Ó Cadhain as “the most significant Irish writer of the twentieth century” (2015). In a singularly extravagant and very Irish gesture, Yale University Press brought out not one but two translations from the Irish into English within twelve months of one another as if to make up for the hiatus: *The Dirty Dust* translated by Alan Titley (2015) and *Graveyard Clay* translated by Mac con Iomaire and Tim Robinson (2016).¹ Thanks to those translators, readers of English may have some notion, if only partial, of how this glimpse into the “lives” of the dead became for many years the best-selling book in Irish. Here, I will be referring to Alan Titley’s “remarkable elegant” (Brennan 2016) translation of *The Dirty Dust*.

1 The two translations could not be more unlike with Iomaire and Robinson sticking closely to the original to produce what some reviewers call “an academic” translation, whereas Titley’s is wildly exuberant in the spirit, if not in the letter of the original. To compare examples of the two translations, see the conclusion of Mauchán Magan’s review that ends with several side-by-side excerpts from the two translations and the original which clearly illustrates the distinction between the translations.

The Dead Speak of Hatred, Love and Loss

Samuel Beckett has a poetic passage in *Waiting for Godot* which describes precisely Ó Cadhain’s basic premise:

All the dead voices.
...
They talk about their lives.
...
To be dead is not enough for them
They have to talk about it. (1986, 57)

Both novels’ conversation in a cemetery feature voices of the dead who “have to talk about it” with Ó Cadhain emphasizing that his characters are corpses confined to their coffins unable to do anything but talk, while Saunders’s are long-dead historical and/or invented characters who appear far more mobile, more fantastical. *The Dirty Dust* features a cast of late vituperative villagers who, while acknowledging their dead state, are clearly unable and – characteristically – unwilling to let go of any jealousy, any hatred or any suspicion of their former “friends,” relatives or neighbors. While some of the dead in *Lincoln in the Bardo* rehearse their grudges, most embody a more complex relationship to the living and all describe themselves as only temporarily ill adamantly refusing to admit their death, although they are just as dead as those in Ó Cadhain’s novel. While the Bardo denizens do recall being transported to “this place” in a “sickbox” still, they wait for the moment when they will regain their health and return to resume whatever activity death so-rudely interrupted; such as consummating their marriage or simply “standing very still among the beautiful things of this world” (Saunders 2017, 27). Also, although both Ó Cadhain’s and Saunders’ novels take place in a cemetery, the two sites could not appear farther apart with *The Dirty Dust* set in a small rural turn-of-the-twentieth-century Connemara village cemetery and *Lincoln in the Bardo* in a nineteenth-century urban Georgetown (Washington, DC) cemetery.

The Dirty Dust

The Irish have a long tradition of the dead refusing to stay dead but rising up like Tim Finnegan, to complain that those attending his wake are throwing “whiskey round like blazes” and so he must indignantly challenge his mourners, “Do ya think I’m dead?” Well, yes they did which is why they held the wake. “In plays from [Dion] Bouciault to [Brendan] Behan, a dead body arises and orates”

(Kiberd 2015, 8).² And, “when the dead appear in Irish plays [...] they do so not as ethereal, other-worldly beings, but as embodied beings in this world” (Morse 1997, 10). In this novel as embodied corpses continuing to settle old scores and to insist on rights, land, and money that was theirs. History, even if local and limited to a small field, is never merely “past” for these characters but appears in their on-going quarrels very much in present. If the Irish have, as one wag commented, “more history than they can efficiently use,” that history is kept alive and on the boil through the cultivation of the memory of the dead. As W. B. Yeats so impressively wrote in “Under Ben Bulbin:”

Though grave-diggers’ toil is long,
Sharp their spades, their muscles strong,
They but thrust their buried men
Back to the human mind again. (1962, 398)

Thus, in the cheap section; that is the ten shilling as opposed to the more expensive pound or the guinea sections of the Irish village graveyard the corpses in *The Dirty Dust* ring their changes on the familiar complaint, “This is how I would have ended the matter if I ha’dn’t died” (Titley 2015, 44). An ancient lament for failing to complete a task, an act, or, even, to give a reply as Death, the Great Interrupter exercises his prerogative to cut the cord of life so that the Dance of Death may go on adding ever new dancers to its infinite procession. Ó Cadhain exploits this motif with an almost endless number and almost infinite variety of such complaints. His aim is satiric as he mocks the Irish reverence for the corpse “as if a tidied corpse achieved that which was withheld from it in life, a place among the revered middle classes” (Kiberd 2015, 8). As Kiberd testifies in his review of Titley’s translation, “[i]ts power to disturb all official codes has not abated” (2015, 8). For instance, closely allied to the whining about not having enough time is the dominant motif of revenge which echoes throughout this Irish graveyard as its occupants endlessly repeat to themselves and each other the vengeance they were planning to exact in life and now continue to plan in death for there are some slights not to be tolerated and some wrongs never to be forgotten whether alive or dead. The dominant example in *The Dirty Dust* is two sisters: “One of them was Nell Paudeen. The other was Caitriona. She’s here [in the cemetery] now. The two of them hated one another’s guts” (Titley 2015, 107) and still do. In the graveyard as in the village, there is, in Yeats’s memorable assessment, “Great hatred, little room” (1962, 137). Like all

2 For an extensive discussion of the nature of the Irish fantastic, see Morse, “‘Revolutionizing Reality’: The Irish Fantastic” (1997) and for the dead on the Irish stage as opposed to the dead on an English stage, see especially, 8–11. For a discussion of “Ghosts in Irish Drama,” see Anthony Roche (1991).

the dead in the novel, Caitriona confined to her rotting coffin unable to see or talk to those out of her line of sight or out of her hearing, interrogates every new corpse asking after Nell hoping against hope for bad news about her sister only to be continually disappointed. And, she is not alone in failing to hear bad news about those still alive that she waits eagerly to hear. For instance, the story of her own funeral remained a mystery to her until a new occupant who earlier attended her burial arrived in the graveyard and could share the news. Others hear equally “bad news” of a spouse remarrying happily or of their house being abused by its new owner or of a prize field being wrested away by a long term rival. As Michael Dirda, the book reviewer for the *Washington Post*, wrote: “The cemetery resembles a crowded pub on Saturday night with everybody rabbiting on about their former aches and pains, the local gossip, one pitiful daydream after another [...] [and titled his review] Never mind that all the characters are dead, ‘The Dirty Dust’ is full of life” (2015).

The Dead in the Bardo

The dead in the Bardo may also complain about death abruptly stopping them from completing some important act, such as consummating their marriage, but in contrast to those in *The Dirty Dust*, they adamantly maintain that death is but a momentary interruption and that they are “sick;” therefore, as soon as they get well, they will return and complete the act. Their position, they argue, is not permanent. The name, “Bardo” reflects this temporary condition as the word derives from Sanskrit meaning “transitional state” and the dead in Saunders’s novel are truly in a liminal state both according to their belief that they will shortly return to life and according to Buddhist belief that they will eventually leave this state for another.³ The novel itself is, as the novelist Colson Whitehead contends, “a collage built from a series of testimonies” (2017) or, as Leah Schelback argues, “a cacophony of voices” created through the use of “historical records, newspaper clippings, diary entries, correspondence, and pure fiction into a wall of noise” (2017). The concept of the Bardo itself as a kind of holding area after death and before whatever might come next enables Saunders to create dialogue portraits of people from all levels of society from aristocrats to servants, from free to slave, men and women, rich and poor, educated and illiterate now appropriately metamorphised into various fantastic shapes with often odd tics. Gradually readers realize that the fantastic appearance of these denizens in the Bardo mirrors their all-consuming preoccupation in life, usually one they thought they were about to realize when death struck. This may be

3 The word, *bardo* gained some popularity in the West through the translation of the *Bardo Thodol* as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

Saunders' variation on Dante's rounds and pockets in hell where the damned's bodies are distorted to reflect their sins. Saunders – less judgmental than Dante – peoples the Bardo with eccentrics, such as the suicide Roger Blevins III whose great ambition was to stand “very still [...] [looking at] the beautiful things of the world” (2017, 27). In the Bardo he “had grown so many extra eyes [...] that his body all but vanished . . . Slashes on every one of his wrists” (2017, 27), while Hans Vollman, who died as he was about to finally consummate his marriage, is encumbered with a “tremendous member” (Saunders 2017, 123). The slave owner who prided himself in exercising his “right of first night” that he modified to include any night he wished whenever he wished, every time in the Bardo that he boasts of raping a slave his body becomes “elongated, vertical [...] quite thin, pencil-thin in places, tall as the tallest of our pines” (Saunders 2017, 83). Unlike Dante's sinners in the *Inferno*, most souls in the Bardo are not forever damned since once they admit they are dead and not just sick they may then pass on to whatever the next stage may be through Saunders' invented process of the explosive “matterlightbloomingphenomenon” (2017, 275). In an interview Saunders remarks that he had been chewing on the idea for this novel for “fifteen years” (Saunders 2013, 272). And in another interview he tells of “a friend [who] told him . . . Lincoln had returned to the crypt . . . to hold his son's body. As soon as [he] . . . heard that, this image sprang to mind: a meld of the Lincoln Memorial and the Pietá” (qtd. in Mallon 2017). Those strange never-to-be-explained visits Lincoln made to the cemetery after his late son Willie was interred become the core of the novel. The death of his son was to be a defining event with terrible consequences for the Lincoln family. Mary Todd Lincoln never recovered from this loss and became less and less able to cope with the demands of her position in the White House or with those of being a parent. The President, already prone to depression, was in danger of sinking into the blackness of despair while the country desperately needed him to prosecute vigorously the Civil War.

Saunders paints a portrait of President Lincoln as grieving father as hours after his son Willie's funeral he returns to the cemetery, opens his son's coffin, takes the body out and lovingly holds it. For both Lincoln and the Bardo's inhabitants this scene is transformative. The dead's anguished plight over what was left unfinished gives way to a larger vision of human loss and love. As one of the dead observes, “no one had ever come [...] to hold one of us, while speaking so tenderly” (Saunders 2017, 72). Lincoln's grief additionally reverberates beyond the boundary of this cemetery to the common pit outside the cemetery proper where black dead slaves were given a cursory burial. Prefiguring Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation these dead slaves ignore the fence dividing their common pit from the white cemetery and invade crowding round the vestibule of the mausoleum in order to also catch a glimpse of Lincoln with the body of his son, this new Pietá.

Moreover, Saunders daringly gives us Lincoln’s “stream of consciousness” (Schelback 2017) as on his second visit he holds his dead son while acknowledging the finality of Willie’s death. Having himself experienced the death of his son Lincoln’s decision to go on with the Civil War becomes thus grounded in the stark reality of the price to be paid balanced against the good to be achieved. When he leaves the cemetery determined to prosecute the war, he leaves knowing full well that this war will entail the loss of other parents’ sons numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Jon Baskin points to the importance of this scene: “Saunders’s endeavors to trace the line of Lincoln’s thoughts from his sorrow over his son’s death to his consideration of how men should live and fight for their commitments, is one of the high points of the novel” (2017). “The consequences [of this scene in the Bardo] are world-shaping” (Mallon 2017). Moreover, they dramatically change the Bardo itself. Without his father to protect him, Willie Lincoln is in great danger as a recently dead child for the Bardo itself may easily become a prison, a final resting place, rather than a way station for such vulnerable children. Saunders creates a fantastic evil agent that attacks and attempts to imprison Willie: a carapace fashioned out of hundreds of tiny tormented souls of people who attacked others violently or who trampled on others in various ways but all of whom embodied hatred. This carapace assails Willie by sending out vine-like tendrils that trap, envelop and then begin to smother him. Those in the Bardo rise to the occasion fighting back as they work together to dramatically rescue him ignoring any danger to themselves. Once freed Willie repays them by shouting, “You are dead!” (Saunders 2017, 296).

“The Gift of Death”

In proclaiming to the cemetery’s occupants the truth about their mortality Willie offers them what Jacques Derrida calls “the gift of death” (1995, 3) which does indeed “set them free” – free at last to leave the Bardo for whatever might come next. As the sign of their acceptance of their mortality they metamorphose back to their former human form losing all grotesque and/or distorted aspects of their appearance. This transformation becomes, in turn, an outward and visible sign of their abandoning all pretense of being ill, of their denying their death. Rather, their life is now defined not by what they will do once they are well but by all those events that preceded their death. The acceptance of the truth in Willie’s shout, “You are dead!” “We are all dead” (Saunders 2017, 296) occurs in large part because preceded by President Lincoln’s demonstration of a love that continues even after the death of the loved one. Colson Whitehead caught this aspect of *Lincoln in the Bardo* succinctly when he rightly called the novel “a luminous feat of generosity and humanism” (2018).

The Dirty Dust and *Lincoln in the Bardo* thus illustrate two very different uses of the literary device of conversations in a cemetery. Máirtín Ó Cadhain distilled the venom of selfishness and vicious back-biting found in a small rural Irish village then refined it through comedy and satire, while George Saunders created a collage of voices by employing a combination of fantastic devices together with fragments of history, newspaper articles and biography to eulogize America's greatest president and to demonstrate that love does indeed transform the world – even the world of the dead.

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