# LINGUISTIC EDUCATION AND LITERARY CREATIVITY IN MEDIEVAL IRELAND

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**Abstract**

**Texts in medieval Irish were traditionally used as a source from which to excavate the remnants of a radically ancient language and world-view – Celtic, oral, pre-Christian, ultimately Indo-European. In the past twenty years a new perspective has become dominant, emphasising the sophisticated contemporary concerns of the monastic literati who composed the texts that have come down to us. However, the disjuncture between those two approaches remains problematic. This article attempts a new approach to the question, emphasising the educational and scholarly context of medieval Irish creativity. Many of the monuments of the early Irish language are part of an enquiry into the history of language and languages, in which Irish interacts closely with the « three sacred languages » and especially Latin; the texts' depiction of the pagan past of Ireland is oriented through a scholarly engagement with Graeco-Roman paganism; and some of the key discourses of Irish saga literature are influenced by the programmes and methodologies of the Latin-based educational system of the time, especially question-and-answer dialogues. The article applies this approach in a case study from the heroic tale *Tochmarc Emire*, « The Wooing of Emer », in which a riddling dialogue between lovers is shown to be directly related to the lore of the canonical glossaries of Old Irish.**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Conventionally, the cultural history of any European language is seen as a movement from simplicity to complexity.[1] The language begins as something radically primitive, associated with an archaic world-view;[2] it develops into the familiar genre traditions – epic, hymn, historiography, didactic, personal poetry – with its integrity disrupted along the way by the introduction of Christianity; and it eventually moves either towards decline and death or towards stable life and permanency in the world of the modern nation state. The template example has long been Greek, but a variant exists for almost any language we encounter (cf. Goldhill, 2002 : 246-93). So one expects that the earliest attestations of (say) Latin or Norse

[1] This essay has been shaped by the advice and insights of many colleagues, especially Abigail Burnyeat, Jacopo Bisagni, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, Brent Miles, and Pádraic Moran. I am grateful to Patricia Ronan and this journal's anonymous reader for their encouragement.

[2] Cf. Sweetser (1990) for a sophisticated and updated example of this approach.

or a Celtic language will take us back towards a time of primal simplicity, a time before the speakers of the language were in contact with the languages of their later neighbours, and ultimately, towards the holy grail of linguistic features or even phrasal collocations that go back to Indo-European antiquity.[3] Although we are nowadays encouraged to recognise that this kind of narrative is a myth born of nineteenth-century assumptions, the narrative itself has not gone away, if only because it reappears as a template for interrogating the concrete evidence piece by piece.

Irish studies are troubled by a particularly intense version of this problem. For the scholars who rediscovered the language and began the extraordinary adventure of publishing and interpreting its literature, the medieval texts served as a conduit for the transmission of a radically Gaelic world-view, from which in turn could be extracted phrases and motifs transmitted from even earlier ages, their antiquity and authenticity guaranteed by cognate survivals in other Indo-European languages.[4] Evidence of disorderly cross-influence or contamination from beyond that horizon, most obviously from Latin learning or the vernacular cultures of Ireland's non-Celtic neighbours, took at best a marginal place in the overall interpretation.[5] The vast majority of scholars now accept that this approach led to distortions and fantasies, and that for almost all of its knowable history the Irish language interacted closely with the Latin language and Latinate culture of contemporary Christianity (McCone, 1990, remains the classic statement). Nonetheless, the full implications of this are not always realised, and monastic intellectualism is too easily seen merely as an aspect that accompanies or competes with the transmission of more ancient realities. In this paper I will explore some of the new directions that open up when this language and its literature are treated not as the embodiment of tradition but as a reflexive commentary upon it.

Treating a similar issue in the study of ancient myth, Marcel Detienne set up a theoretical dichotomy between what he labels *exegesis* and *interpretation*:

> The exegesis is the unceasing and also immediate commentary that a culture arrogates of its symbolism, of its practices, of everything that makes up its living culture. A parasitic word, seizing everything it can evoke, exegesis proliferates

[3] Influential recent works that imply explicit or covert acceptance of this paradigm include Watkins (1995), and West (2007).

[4] For the famous example of kingship and its rituals in Ireland and ancient India, see most recently Doherty (2005).

[5] For an exuberant and still influential experiment in this mode see Rees & Rees (1961), and compare Mac Cana (2011).

> from within; it is a word that nurtures and fosters the growth of the tradition to which it attaches itself and from which it derives its own substance […] Interpretation arises when there is distance and perspective from without on tradition based on memory […] For interpretation to begin it is necessary to begin to have a discussion, to begin to criticise tradition. (Detienne, 1986 [1981] : 68)[6]

Exegesis in this sense is practised by the participant in traditional discourses; interpretation is practised by cultural outsiders who seek to understand them and export their meanings into the intellectual frameworks of their own quite different world. Pursuing this contrast, virtually all the surviving literature of Ireland deserves to be assigned to the latter category; and this is especially true when its authors treat of the origins of Irish culture itself, including language, literature and real or invented history. This is because the self-representation of the Irish *literati* was bound up with the study and interpretation of the Latin language and of Latinate literature and cosmology. This outward-looking perspective frames and conditions the representation of pre-Christian Ireland, even in texts that purport to present authentic and unmediated traditions of the past. As I will try to show, our texts are the record of sophisticated engagement with linguistics and cultural history as subjects of study in their own right, and much if not all of the literature needs to be understood in terms of that activity. Texts that we use as evidence for language may be the record of an experiment in linguistic science; texts where we seek fragments of knowledge about pre-Christian beliefs and practices may in fact be a reflection of the established practices of interpreting old stories in the light of Graeco-Roman mythology and of tracing the movement from paganism to Christianity in the grand scheme of Classical and Biblical world history.

## 2. TRANSLATION AND SEMANTICS IN THE OLD IRISH GLOSSES

My starting point is the fact that early Irish literature and learning were bound up with the world of the monastery, and that any text that we can read was shaped and transmitted in a milieu dominated by the concerns of monastic intellectualism (Charles-Edwards, 2000 : 246-81; with McCone, 1990 : 29-53, 84-106). It is now accepted that the monasteries were functionally bilingual, with Irish and Latin in

6 The terms are derived from Sperber's anthropology.

close symbiosis (see e.g. Bisagni & Warntjes, 2007; Johnston, forthcoming).[7] The implications of this for the study of the language are profound. Turning to our standard corpus of Old Irish, the assemblage of texts from pre-1100 manuscripts published as the *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* (Stokes & Strachan, 1901-1903),[8] the great bulk of materials in this work are marginal glosses from manuscripts written in Latin: they elucidate, translate and extend the main texts in the vernacular language of the scribes or students who used them. The two volumes are dominated by three sets of glosses: the Milan glosses on a commentary on the Psalms, the Würzburg glosses on St Paul's Epistles, and the St Gall glosses on a text of the Latin grammarian Priscian. The Würzburg glosses from about AD 750, those of St Gall from about 850, Milan is from somewhere in between: together the three manuscripts show us language in action among travelling scholars (*peregrini*), drawn to Francia under the stimulus of Charlemagne's intellectual and educational programme.[9] This pattern of survival is partly an accident. Within Ireland itself the combined forces of damp, destruction, and neglect ensured that no book of such early date survived unless preserved as a relic or as the inherited responsibility of a particular family, and few books written in Old Irish have been saved here by those means (Sharpe, 2010). On the Continent the declining influence of the Irish *peregrini* after the Carolingian period made it unlikely that any record of vernacular writings in the language would survive except accidentally in the margins of manuscripts written in Latin. It remains vital for any interpretative strategy that the glosses are composed in such close interaction with Latin: very many of them, especially in Würzburg and Milan, give Irish translations of Latin words and phrases, and do so with a one-to-one equivalence between Latin and Irish vocabulary items that is remarkably consistent from gloss to gloss and even between the glosses and much later monuments of Irish. Thus the earliest monuments of Old Irish are a function of constant cross-mapping with another language, the language that was itself the focus of learned enquiry into human and theological truth.

A close look at a representative example will illustrate the depth of the implications. The Irish word *dásacht* and its close derivatives recur through the glosses matching words in the family of Latin *furor* and *amentia* – « frenzy », « madness » – and the correspondence is so consistent that one has to assume a

[7] I rely here especially on Bisagni's ongoing study of code-switching in the Old Irish glosses.

[8] In the notes that follow, references to items in Stokes & Strachan (1901-1903), are listed with the standard referencing system, beginning with the abbreviated location name of the source manuscript.

[9] For a survey of this phase in intellectual life, see Contreni (1995).

close loan-translation relationship between them.[10] To « hand a man over to *dásacht* » amounts to putting him under the sway of Satan.[11] Such consistency – for which countless parallel examples could be cited – suggests a two-way mapping between Latin and Irish in the bilingual culture of the monastery, albeit one that may have been more close and consistent in theological discourse than in any other domain of language. It becomes truly remarkable when we find *dásacht* and cousins used as translation-words for exactly the same group of Latin vocabulary several centuries later in the homiletic texts of the Leabhar Breac, referring to madness or frenzy as demonic possession;[12] and in the series of great prose renderings of heroic saga composed in Middle Irish between about 1000 and 1200 AD, we find the word closely keyed to Latin *furia* in the mythological sense, as a female demonic being who seizes the mind and causes or embodies self-destructive madness.[13] The continuity suggests that for much of its early history the literary variety of Irish may have been in such a close relationship with Latin that the creative lives of two languages were inseparable from each other.

## 3. THE PROBLEM OF « DRUID »

This issue becomes particularly problematic when we consider words that *sound* like remnants of Celtic antiquity. *Druí* « druid » has a venerable past – Caesar reports the cognate term from among the Gauls of his time – and in Old Irish it is plainly an inherited lexical item, belonging as it does to the non-productive declensional group of stems in *-t* and representing a direct descendant of a compound reconstructed as **dru-wid-s* « he who knows sturdy wisdom » or with a more baroque semantic reconstruction « he who has knowledge from the oak tree » (McCone, 1994 : 112; citing Uhlich, 1993 : 110-3).[14] Yet our earliest Irish attestations denote nothing of this kind. In the Würzburg glosses the glossator explains that the signs that presage the coming of Antichrist will be worked by

[10] For the correspondence between *dásacht* and *furor,* see Ml 34a21 (Stokes & Strachan, 1901-1903, vol. 1) and the Karlsruhe glosses on Augustine, Acr 4.36 (vol. 2). For *dásacht* and *amentia*, see Ml 18a13, 20b7. For *dásacht* and *insania,* see Wb 12d36 (vol. 1), Ml 60b2 and similarly for *insensati*, see Wb 19b3.

[11] For this equivalence, see the pair of linked glosses, at Wb 9b7, on 1 Corinthians 5:5.

[12] See for example Atkinson (1887 : 2160-818).

[13] See for example *Fled Dúin na nGéd* (Lehmann, 1964 : 289-91), where *dásacht ocus mire menman* is co-ordinated with the assault of the Fury Tisiphone, and *In Cath Catharda* (Stokes, 1909 : 4179), where *tri dasactaide ifirn* « the three Furies of hell » are named as an expansion of the Greek name of these beings, *Eumenides*, in Lucan's original (6.695). I collect kindred examples in my forthcoming paper (Clarke, forthcoming b). For a collection of further examples of *dásachtach* in later medieval narrative, see Poppe, (1992 : 84-7).

[14] I am grateful to Jacopo Bisagni for discussion on this.

*druid* « druids » (Wb 26a20, on II Thess. 2:9); and the Egyptian wizards who opposed Moses are *da druith aegeptacdi* – « two Egyptian druids » (Wb 30c17, glossing 2 Timothy 3:8 and referring to Exodus 7:11)? In these glosses the word clearly functions as the equivalent for a cluster of semantically overlapping Latin terms, principally *maleficus*, *magus*, labelling a pagan priest or magician. In the Middle Irish of *Saltair na Rann* these same Egyptian wizards are again *druidi* (3849; cf. 6777, 8339),[15] and the equivalence repeats itself in the sagas derived from Classical epic, where for example it names the profession of the Theban prophet Teiresias (*Togail na Tebe*, 1624; in Calder, 1922). Now the earliest accounts of the conversion of Ireland by Patrick are of course written in Latin, and there the pagan wizards who oppose the saint on behalf of the old paganism are consistently called *magus*; and in Irish texts the same individuals' name is correspondingly *druí*.[16]

Somewhere in this sequence of linguistic equivalence belongs the famous *Lorica* of St Patrick, long claimed as the saint's own composition. As he girds himself with faith to greet the morning, he calls for divine assistance against the agents of evil,

1. fri sáibrechtu heretecdae,
   fri himchellacht n-idlachtae,
   fri brichtu ban ┐ gobann ┐ druad,
   fri cech fiss ara-chuiliu corp ┐ anmain duini. (Stokes & Strachan, 1901-1903, vol. 2 : 357; lines 6-9)

   « against false laws of heretics,
   against craft [?] of idolatry,
   against spells of women and smiths and druids,
   against every knowledge that endangers man's body and soul. » (Bieler, 1953 : 71)

The word translated as « spells », *brichtu*, seems caught between a remote past and the present of its composition. A phrase precisely cognate with *brichtu ban* « spells of women » is attested in a magical text on a Gaulish lead tablet of the first century AD (see Koch, 2006, vol. 1 : 284), so that the phrasal collocation seen here apparently stretches back to the Common Celtic origins of Irish. It is paralleled

[15] For this poem, see n. 24 below.

[16] The *locus classicus* is the confrontation between Patrick and the druids of king Lóeguire: see the *Life* of Muirchú, 1.16(15)-(21)20 (Bieler, 1979 : 86-99), with the corresponding narrative in the Irish of the *Tripartite Life* (Stokes, 1887, vol. 1 : 40-60).

elsewhere within Old Irish,[17] and seems to have had the status of an archaic formula; but at the same time the word *bricht* refers to a real phenomenon of early medieval life. In the Milan glosses the word labels the incantations that snake-charming magicians (*venefici*) sing to counteract the poison of snakebites (Ml 76a21, on Psalms 57:6). The *Penitential of Vinnian*, dated as early as 600 (Bieler, 1963 : 3-4), prescribes penances for witch or wizard (*maleficus*, *malificus*) that imply the certainty that such people exist and that their craft may be powerful (Bieler, 1963 : 18-20).[18] How are we to understand the *Lorica*'s « druids »: as a cultural memory of the last defenders of primeval Irish paganism, or as figures artfully constructed to be the structural equivalent to men like Simon Magus, the first occultist to oppose the apostles with his sorcery (Acts 8:9-24, with the apocryphal *Acts of Peter*; Elliott, 1993 : 401-23)? The latter is the choice to which the literature directs us when Patrick faces his enemies in person, as the parallel with Simon Magus is explicitly alluded to in the Latin versions of his Life (Muirchú, 1.17(16).5; Bieler, 1979 : 88).[19] The circle is closed when Simon himself reappears as *Simon drui* in the Middle Irish translations from the New Testament apocrypha (see Atkinson, 1887 : 1645, 1736), and likewise when he is named as the one who taught his occult skills to Mag Ruith, the archetypal malevolent druid of the heroic narrative cycle (text in Müller-Lisowski, 1923; modern discussion in O'Leary, 2000).[20] Whether Patrick is pitted against *druí* or *magus*, the same point is being made about the constructed history of Ireland and its place in the world. The opposition between saint and enemy is parallel to that between Moses and the pagan wonderworkers of Egypt, or between Daniel and the magicians of Babylon, or between the Apostles and the agents of pagan religion against whom they strove in the conversion of the Mediterranean world to Christianity.[21]

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[17] The word occurs in the early tale *Echtrae Chonnlai* in the contexts « spells of women » and « spells of druids » (6, 11; McCone, 2000).

[18] The still earlier penitential text known as the *First Synod of St Patrick* prescribes penalties against the *accusation* of witchcraft or vampirism that suggest a movement towards uprooting public belief in their existence (16; Bieler, 1963 : 56-57).

[19] A corresponding reference in the *Tripartite Life* has been obscured in transmission (Stokes, 1887, vol. 1 : 56; on line 17); cf. also the Latin *Vita Secunda* (36.1; Bieler, 1979 : 90-1).

[20] Interestingly, the archaic tonsure worn by British and Irish monks was explained by those who condemned it as an invention of Simon Magus; see Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (5.21; Colgrave & Mynors, 1969), and see Stokes, 1887, vol. 2 : 509, for references from the *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis* and O'Mulconry's glossary. In Tírechán's *Life of Patrick* (144; Bieler, 1971), when Patrick converts Máel the latter's hair is cut « in druidic fashion »; does this refer to the same identification with Simon Magus? See further James, 1984 : 86-7.

[21] See the important analysis by O'Loughlin (2003) in relation to the Biblical model at Daniel 3:1-24.

## 4. THE CONSTRUCTED PAST OF IRELAND AND THE WORLD

In this way, the (to us) ambiguous semantics of *druí* cease to be an interpretative problem, and become instead a path into the creative logic pursued by the authors of this literature. Their overall achievement is to construct for Ireland a sequence from archaic paganism via the wars of heroic warriors to the coming of Christianity and the integration of this peripheral Atlantic island into the mainstream of a world centred on Rome and Jerusalem. Looking more widely, this may suggest a way of explaining why so much of the Middle Irish literary corpus consists of renderings of Latin texts. In the centuries after the composition of the Old Irish glosses, translation in the most creative sense was an activity of high seriousness and intellectual depth, reaching from one cultural world to another and recasting the meanings of the source text in the codes and conceptual structures of the target language.[22] This can be seen, already, in the ninth-century poems of Blathmac, where the meaning of Christian redemption is recast in Irish legal terminology;[23] and in the subsequent phase of the literature it becomes the motivating theme of the series of poems known as *Saltair na Rann*, a rendering into Irish language and metrical patterns of the entire sequence of sacred history from the Creation to the Second Coming.[24] This extraordinary *tour de force* might be seen as a didactic or even proselytising work, designed to preach the truth of the Bible to the Latinless; but in its elaborate allusive richness it goes far beyond any such aim. It deserves to be seen as a sustained act of cross-cultural mapping, re-framing Biblical expression of revealed truth in the linguistic resources available in Irish for the portrayal of ancient history and high cosmology.

What applies to cross-cultural translation applies also to chronology, and an equivalent schematisation is explicit in the Annals, which co-ordinate the events of Irish history and pseudo-history with those of the great nations of the world,[25] and above all in the origin legend in the *Leabhar Gabhála* (edited and translated by Macalister [1938-1956]), which constructs a myth of wanderings for the Goídil that

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[22] I discuss this theme in Clarke (2011).

[23] The poems are edited and translated by Carney (1964); on the vocabulary of redemption, see Lambkin (1985-1986).

[24] The complete text with full translation by David Greene is accessible at http://www.dias.ie/index.php?option=com_content&id=4742. For the opening sections see also Carey (2000 : 24-50); for other sections, Greene, Kelly & Murdoch (1976).

[25] See especially the *Annals of Tigernach* (Stokes, 1993 [1895-1896]), and for general analysis McCarthy (2008).

takes them across the early medieval map of the world from Scythia in the East via Egypt, the Mediterranean and Spain to Ireland itself.[26] This narrative enmeshes the origin story of the Goídil with the origin legends of the Hebrews, Greeks, Romans, Franks and British, placing the ancestors of the Irish in locations, scenes and story-patterns that resonate with the origin legends of the top nations of contemporary Europe: kin-slaying in the eastern world, exile at Pharaoh's court, wandering in the Maeotic marshes, sailing the Mediterranean in search of a new home, resisting the sirens' songs by stuffing their ears with wax like Ulysses' men. Such correspondences serve to set up a meaningful correlation between the human origins of this peripheral island and those of the heartlands of European identity.[27]

A complementary though structurally distinct kind of narrative is constructed for the Irish legal system in the (probably eleventh-century) Pseudo-Historical Prologue to the great legal compilation known as the *Senchas Már* (Carey, 1994; discussion in Carey, 1990). After Patrick has converted Ireland to Christianity, the men of Ireland face a problem that makes them unwilling to accept the new dispensation: the old system of reciprocal justice will become unworkable as the new doctrine of forgiveness is introduced. This problem, the disjuncture between the law of vengeance and the doctrine of turning the other cheek, is a recurring one in narratives of the Christianisation of the northern peoples (O'Brien O'Keeffe, 1991), but the solution arrived at in this text is remarkable because it leads to the validation of much of what lay at the pagan pole of the opposition. The men of Ireland put Patrick to the test, murdering one of his followers to see if he will forgive them; but a display of divine anger reduces them to submission, and Patrick himself wins the right to decide the issue. Yet he entrusts it to the chief poet of Ireland, *rígfhile insi Érenn*, whom he describes as « a vessel [*lestar*] full of the Holy Spirit » (4). In due course the men of Ireland arrange to display all their laws before Patrick, and under the chief poet's leadership the old laws are harmonised with Christianity, excising only those parts that prove irreconcilable with it. The result is the *Senchas Már* compilation itself. The text explains why this rapprochement was possible:

2. Ar in Spirut Naem ro labrastar ┐ doaircechan tria ginu na fer fíréon ceta-rabatar i n-inis Érenn amail donaircechain tria ginu inna prímfháide ┐ inna n-uasalaithre i recht petarlaice; ar rosiacht recht aicnid már nád roacht recht litre. Ina bretha fíraicnid trá didiu ro labrastar in Spirut Naem tre ginu breithemon ┐ filed fíréon

[26] For the translated text of a representative version of the *Leabhar Gabhála*, see Carey & Koch (2003 : 226-71). The standard studies remain the analytic surveys of R. Mark Scowcroft (1987, 1988).

[27] This summarises the argument that I advance in Clarke (forthcoming a).

> fer nÉrenn ó congbad in insi-seo co cretem anall, dosairfen Dubthach uili do Pátraic. (7)
>
> « For the Holy Spirit spoke and prophesied through the mouths of the righteous men who were first in the island of Ireland, as He prophesied through the mouths of the chief prophets and patriarchs in the law of the Old Testament; because the law of nature [*recht aicnid*, literally "justice of the mind"] reached many things which the law of scripture did not reach. As for the judgments of true nature [or "true mind"] which the Holy Spirit uttered through the mouths of the righteous poets and judges of the men of Ireland, from the time this island was settled till the coming of the faith: Dubthach revealed them all to Patrick. »

As John Carey has shown, the « law of nature » here is a reaching for moral truth of which even pagans could be capable through innate good sense (Carey, 1990 : 9). The effect of this extraordinary narrative is to bridge the gap between the ancient, pagan, isolated Ireland on the edge of the world and the new Christianised Ireland in which Irish-language law and poetry can stand in harmony with the globalising discourses of Latin Christianity. This effects for law the same rapprochement that the *Leabhar Gabhála* expresses in terms of historiography and geography.

## 5. THE MYTH OF THE ORIGIN OF THE IRISH LANGUAGE

Within the variant and developing versions of this origin legend, a key moment is the creation of the Irish language itself. Versions of the story are found in many sources, including the *Leabhar Gabhála* (Macalister, 1938-1956, vol. 2.; prose and verse accounts), but it finds its most complex expression in *Auraicept na n-Éces*, a quasi-scientific exposition of the nature of the Irish language. The core of this text, the so-called « canonical version » (Ahlqvist, 1983), was created as early as the seventh century, in close interaction with scholarly reworkings and commentaries on the Latin grammarians by scholars from a Hiberno-Latin milieu,[28] and it was extended and expanded in subsequent centuries by the addition of commentary and exegesis that was then progressively absorbed into the main text.[29] Already in the core text, the essentials of the legend are stated:

> 3. Cía ar· ránic a mbérla-sa ┐ cía airm an-ar· n-ícht ┐ cissi aimser ar· ícht? Ni ansae: ar-a· ránic Fénius Farrsaid ocin tur Nemruaid cinn deich mblíadnae íar

[28] Burnyeat (2007) synthesises the evidence for characterising the *Auraicept* in this way. See also Ahlqvist (1983 : 14-7).

[29] The expanded version is published with translation in Calder (1917).

> scaíliud ón tur […] ┐ is and ro· an Fénius feissin ocin tur ┐ is and ad· rothreb conid and-sin con· atgetar cuici in scol bérla do thepiu dóib asna ilbérlaib, acht combad leo a n-óenur no· beth no la nech fo· glennad leo**. (**Ahlqvist, 1983 : 47; 1.2-3, 7-10)
>
> « Who has invented this language and in what place was it invented and at what time was it invented? Not hard: Fénius Farsaid invented it at Nimrod's tower at the end of ten years after the dispersion from the tower […] and it is there Fénius himself stayed, and it is there he lived, until the school asked him to extract a language out of the many languages such that they only would speak it or anyone who might learn it from them. »

The expansions of the later version clarify this audacious story (lines 148 ff.; Calder, 1917). When God punished the builders of the Tower of Babel (Nimrod's Tower), the languages of men were confounded and seventy-two mutually unintelligible languages were born; poets and learned men came from Scythia to learn these languages, one for each of the languages and one each for Latin, Greek and Hebrew, led by Fénius Farsaid, the master (*ollam*) of their school. But he did not find perfection[30] in these languages, and he sent a host of scholars to gather them all – one for each of the seventy-two, one for each of the three sacred languages Greek, Latin and Hebrew. When they met again, Fénius fashioned a new language by « cutting out » the best parts of them all, and this language was passed down for the next generation to Gaedel Glas, who became the eponymous ancestor of the Irish race.

This account claims a special status for the Irish language: a synthetic creation superior to the diversity of world languages, and on a parallel with the three sacred languages that are pre-eminent over the others. At its outset the text pins this claim specifically on the act of cutting, culling, selecting, pinned on the superior register or variety referred to as *tobaide*, 'cut out':

4. Cest, cia tugaid ara n-ebarar berla tobaide din Gaedilg? Ni ansa. Uair ro tebedh as gach berla; ┐ gach son fordorcha gach berla, fo[fh]rith ined doib isin Gaedelg ara forleithi seach gach mbescna. (9-12)

   « Query, what is the reason why "select language" [literally "cut-out language"] should be said of Gaelic? Not hard. Because it was selected ["cut"] from every language; and for every obscure sound of every language a place was found in Gaelic, for the sake of its comprehensive breadth as against every other customary language. »

[30] Or « completion »: *comhlainius* (line 166; Calder, 1917).

The text goes on to explain that of all the languages Fénius might have taken from the Tower there was none to surpass Irish, *ar a cuibdi, ar a edruma, ar a mine ┐ a forleithiu* « because of its aptness, lightness, smoothness and comprehensiveness » (32). The notion that Irish originated in this extraordinary way – free of the sinfulness of Babel, asserting itself as an essence of excellence abstracted from all the languages of the world – is so staggeringly self-assertive that it is hard not to believe that it began as a kind of joke; but nothing in the text supports that feeling. The narrative is rooted in the academic linguistics of its time, and makes sense in that context alone. Just as the Late Antique grammarians like Donatus and Priscian (and commentators upon them) lie behind the linguistic science of the main body of the *Auraicept*, so behind the story of Fénius Farsaid stands the linguistic and cultural encyclopedia of early medieval world-knowledge, the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville (translated by Barney et al. [2006]; Latin text edited by Lindsay [1909-1911]). Isidore's analysis of language diversity is framed by the Babel story: Hebrew was the sole language beforehand, but at Babel the seventy-two languages came into being, within or alongside which stand the three sacred languages (9.1). Likewise, the *Auraicept*'s division of Irish into varieties or registers is deliberately evocative of Isidore's account of the varieties of Latin, and the story of Fénius Farsaid draws on and moulds itself around this paradigmatic exposition (9.1.6-7; Calder, 1929: 197-201).[31] This is not a narrative about something tied to the land of Ireland and the special cultural identity of its people: it is is a narrative about scientific linguistics.

Seen in this way, the opening narrative of the *Auraicept* is only the most overt expression of a principle that pervades the articulation and transmission of Irish lore. The frame is metalinguistic and meta-literary: when the inheritance is preserved and transmitted it is simultaneously interpreted and glossed and made the focus of comment and reflection. This is entirely characteristic of the educational system of Carolingian and post-Carolingian Europe.[32] The central authorities for sacred and secular knowledge – the Bible on the one hand and Vergil, Boethius and Martianus Capella on the other – were written up and read and understood not in unmediated form but as the carriers of a vast and ever-growing body of commentary, exegesis and expansion, so that the usual manuscript format consists of a body of main text in the centre of the page surrounded by a body of scholastic

[31] I benefit greatly here from the observations of Pádraic Moran in a series of research papers and discussions.

[32] Useful resources on this theme are gathered on the *Marginal Scholarship* website, at http://www.huygens.knaw.nl/marginal-scholarship-vidi/.

material that threatens to merge with or engulf the words of the « original » author (cf. Love, 2012). In the secular sphere, Vergil decked out by Servius' commentary is the closest complement to Isidore's *Etymologies* as a repository of systematised knowledge about everything in the world beyond the words of Biblical revelation. For Ireland and the Irish language, a select body of canonical texts were decked out and transmitted in exactly the same way, with the difficult and archaic poetic language (*Kunstsprache*) of the main text accompanied by an ever-growing body of linguistic, literary and encyclopaedic commentary. Significantly, two groups of Irish texts were enshrined in this way: on the one hand the more venerable documents of Irish legal writings, on the other a limited and well-defined selection of poetic texts; for example the versified calendar of saints called *Félire Oengusso*, the *Amra Coluimb Cille* or *Death-Song of Columba* (Clancy & Márkus, 1995 : 96-128) and the *Lorica* hymn claimed to be by St Patrick, which were canonised among the set of religious poems in Latin and Irish collected in the *Liber Hymnorum* (edition and translation by Bernard and Atkinson [1898]). It is not accidental that these two corpora belong respectively to the judges and the poets, the two groups of authority figures who had to be yoked into the power structures of Christianity in the Prologue to the *Senchas Már* described above.

## 6. THE GLOSSARIES

Although the story of Fénius Farsaid's invention of Irish may seem merely whimsical to us as outsiders, its claims find an echo in texts that represent the practical application of linguistic theory to the Irish language: the group of glossary compilations dominated by O'Mulconry's glossary and *Sanas Cormaic*, dated respectively to the early eighth and early ninth centuries.[33] Entries in these works analyse Irish vocabulary using the accumulated techniques of Late Antique Latin etymological study, creating miniature origin-tales for words by squeezing, distorting and combining words and phrases from Irish and from other languages, especially the « three sacred languages » – Latin, Greek and Hebrew.[34] It does not matter that many of the etymologies are unbelievable or even absurd according to

[33] On the dating, see Mac Neill (1932). Pending the planned publication of a series of new editions and translations of the glossaries, transcribed texts are presented by Paul Russell, Pádraic Moran and Sharon Arbuthnot in the Early Irish Glossaries Database (http://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/irishglossaries/). For consistency's sake, examples cited in this discussion are taken wherever possible from the Yellow Book of Lecan text of *Sanas Cormaic*.

[34] For general studies of the glossaries, see Russell, 1998, 2008; about the use of Greek and Hebrew, see Russell (2000); Moran (2010, 2012).

the modern understanding of linguistic change, still less that others happen to be plausible or even convincing according to those standards. What is important is that the lexicon is being analysed and contextualised as if it contained elements or traces of words and phrases that exist also in other world languages, and that the project of linguistic self-discovery and self-analysis follows an international and multi-lingual perspective. Further, the etymologies are intermingled with lore and narratives about the Irish past, reaching back into pagan antiquity, with each such narrative typically centring around the headword under which it appears. Thus the glossaries act both as an analysis of the language and lore of Ireland and as a repository of knowledge about the past. A classic example is the entry in *Sanas Cormaic* for *Ana*:[35]

> 5. Ana .i. mater deorum Hibernensium. Robo maith didiu ro biathad-si deos. De cuius nomine ana dicitur .i. imed, et de cuius nomine Da Chich nAnand iar Luachair nominant[ur], ut fabula fertur .i. amail aderait na scelaide. *Vel* ana anyon graece, quod interpretatur dapes .i. biad. (Y 31)
>
> « Ana, viz. the mother of the gods of the Irish people. Well did she nourish the gods. From her name is said ana, that is "abundance," and from her name are named the Two Breasts of Ana in west Luachair, as the legend is told, viz. as the storytellers say. Or: Ana [is, corresponds to] *anyon* in Greek, which is interpreted as [Latin] *dapes*, i.e. "food." »

Amid the confluence of Latin, Greek and Irish word-histories comes the first known reference to a pair of breast-shaped hills in west Kerry, nowadays known as the Paps. Those who trawl early Irish literature for the vestiges of Celtic mythology rely heavily on *Sanas Cormaic* when they characterise the Paps as a survival from a pre-Christian conception of sacred anthropomorphism in the landscape (cf. MacLeod, 1998-1999; with e.g. Dames, 1992 : 62, 88); but to do this without caution is to ignore the learned comparative context of this entry. The wording suggests a close and deliberate parallelism with Graeco-Roman mythology. Cybele, the goddess known as *Magna Mater*, the Great Mother, is an obvious *comparandum*; and it is possible to posit a precise chain of influence from Servius' Vergilian commentary and the *Etymologies* of Isidore, two texts that we know influenced the learned compilers of the Irish glossaries. Servius notes that Cybele of Mount Ida is the same as Earth, which is « the mother of the gods », *mater deorum* (e.g. on Vergil: *Georgics*, 4.64; *Aeneid*, 10.252, cf. 7.136); Isidore identifies this divinity with many Greek and Roman goddesses, and explains the basic concept:

[35] On the Greek in this entry, see Russell (2000 : 409). So far as I know, the *anyon* of this entry has never been explained.

6. Eandem et tellurem et Matrem magnam fingunt […] Matrem vocatam, quod plurima pariat; magnam, quod cibum gignat; almam, quia universa animalia fructibus suis alit. (8.11.61)

   « They imagine the same one as both Earth and Great Mother […] She is called Mother, because she gives birth to many things; Great, because she generates food; Kindly, because she nourishes all living things through her fruits. »

The same conception is common in the Carolingian mythographic compilations,[36] where we also find her identified as *montium domina*, mistress of mountains.[37] The parallels are so close – mountain-goddess, mother of the gods, nourishment, fertility – that it is hard to avoid the suspicion that the lore in the Irish glossary may have been shaped in emulation of this Classical mythography. This is not to deny the possibility that some such image of Ana was indeed a genuine theme in pre-Christian tradition:[38] but the resonance with the Classical Cybele dominates its interpretation and transmission by the authors of the glossaries. Either way, this example shows that in the realm of myth and religion, as of language, the transmission of inherited tradition was filtered through cross-cultural and cross-linguistic comparison, constantly reflecting upon the inheritance and comparing it with the world-view prescribed by the universal learning of the Latin-dominated schoolroom.

## 7. THE GENRE OF THE COLLOQUY

A dominant mode of discourse in that schoolroom was the dialogue between teacher and pupil. Internationally, the teaching of Latin to non-native-speaker children was formalised in dialogue texts based on simple question-and-answer exchanges;[39] and many texts survive in which dialogue of this kind is built into fantastical and poetic Latin conceits (Gwara & Porter, 1997). This kind of creativity is closely parallel to the extraordinary invented Latinity of the *Hisperica Famina*, poems that seem to have originated in Ireland or among Irish-influenced circles on the Continent (Herren, 1974, 1987).[40] On a more complex and creative level, the

[36] E.g. *2 Myth. Vat.* (58, 153; Kulcsar, 1987).

[37] See *1 Myth. Vat.* (225.4).

[38] See MacLeod (1998-1999), for references to Anu in other medieval sources. The relationship between the names *Ana*/*Anu* and *Danu* is beyond the scope of this study.

[39] The most famous example is the *Colloquy* of Aelfric, whose Old English glosses are nowadays often used for teaching that language to students. It may well be an accident of survival that no such basic pedagogical texts survive from the Irish schools.

[40] On affinities between the *Hisperica Famina* and colloquy texts, see Orchard (2000).

dialogue between master and pupil is the springboard for a fully fledged literary genre, the collections known as *Joca Monachorum* or « Monks' Conundrums », in which often bizarre questions elicit recondite and paradoxical information about Biblical and theological knowledge.[41] These in turn relate to more elaborate and sophisticated dialogues in which one interlocutor represents pagan antiquity and the other Christian revelation. The standard texts are Latin, but they were emulated and redeveloped in vernacular languages including Old English (Cross & Hill, 1982) and medieval Irish. As shown in an ongoing series of studies by Abigail Burnyeat, the late medieval manuscript Egerton 1782 preserves a much earlier collection of pedagogically based texts that bear witness to the way this educational programme was adopted and « nativised » in Irish-language intellectual life (Burnyeat, 2012). Crucially for our purposes, the collection includes two parallel texts, perhaps of early eleventh-century date, in which the lore of Ireland and the lore of world history are set alongside each other: *Dúan in Choícat Cest*, or « The Poem of the Fifty Questions » on divine matters, and *Dúan in Chethrachat Cest*, « The Poem of the Forty Questions » on correspondingly abstruse questions about the Irish past, especially the national origin legend discussed earlier in this article.[42] These literary examples reflect a curriculum in which the fine grain of knowledge about the history or pseudo-history of Ireland and the world was subsumed into a single continuous system, mediated through the dialogue framework.

The texts discussed so far could be fairly characterised as academic in the narrow sense, and their affinity with classroom dialogues might suggest that they were peripheral to living literary and poetic artistry. To show that such an assessment gives them too narrow a scope, we can adduce a particularly eloquent and complex example, *Immacallam in Dá Thuarad* or « The Colloquy of the Two Sages » (Stokes, 1905).[43] The setting here is a contest for supremacy between two poets. An aged poet, Ferchertne, has been awarded the robe of chief poet (*ollam*) of Ireland; the young son of his now dead predecessor challenges him for the title, wearing a false beard of grass to disguise his immaturity, and they hold an exchange (*immacallam*) to vie with each other in subtlety of language. This dialogue was a celebrated one: for example it is referred to in the Prologue to the *Senchas Már* (discussed above), which records that the obscurity of the poets' words in their contest led to their being stripped of the right to give judgments

[41] The fundamental study of the *Joca Monachorum* is Suchier (1955). A useful survey, with an edition of an early example in the Bobbio Missal, is found in Wright & Wright (2004).

[42] Edited respectively by Thurneysen (1921a) and Tristram (1985 : 285-93).

[43] The edition is composite but substantially follows the version in the Book of Leinster.

(Carey, 1994 : 10).[44] The dialogue between the rival poets is based on the simple and familiar question formulae of the pedagogical dialogues – What is your name? Where have you come from? – but its agonistic centre is in the exchange of riddling answers in the high and difficult language of their art, *bérla na bhfiled*, the « language of the poets » that originated according to the *Auraicept* with Fénius Farsaid himself. In practice much of what they throw back and forth is not difficult individual words but allusive and metaphorical images, kennings that can only be understood with deep knowledge of history and cosmology as well as language. I give one fine example to illustrate the character of the whole text:

7. – Os tussu, a mmo sruith, can dollod?
– Ni ansa:
iar colomnaib áise,
iar srothaib Galion,
iar síd mnā Nechtáin,
iar rig mnā Nuadat,
iar futhiur gréne,
iar n-adbai ēscai,
iar srinci ōic. (32)

« [*Néde*] And you, my elder one, from where have you come?
[*Ferchertne*] Not hard [to say]:
along the columns of age,
along the streams of Galion,
along the otherworld mound [*síd*] of Nechtán's wife,
along the forearm of Núada's wife,
along the grove of the sun,
along the dwelling of the moon,
along the young one's umbilical cord. » (adapted from Stokes)

Embedded glosses unravel these lines as a statement that the poet has passed through the east midlands of Ireland by day and night. The *columns of age* are the six ages of human life; *Galion* refers to the province of Leinster; the *otherworld mound* is at the source of the Boyne; the *umbilical cord* is « the foundation of knowledge »; to know the locations of moon by day and sun by night is the boast of

[44] The connection is noted by Stokes in the introductory remarks to his edition of the *Colloquy*, where Stokes also notes the overlaps with *Sanas Cormaic* (Stokes, 1905 : 6). It is of course possible that the text referred to here was a variant or forerunner of the surviving *Immacallam*, not the surviving version itself.

the visionary poet.[45] Many such images have the ring of great poetic antiquity, but others betray the close affinities of such discourse with the Latinate learning of the time. The young poet challenges the elder to reveal his name, and he replies

8. Ni handsa.
Macsa fir ro buí nad ro genair,
aradnacht i mbrú a mathar,
ro basted iarna écaib,
arnaisc a chētgnúis,
cétlabrad cech bí,
iachtad cech mairb,
Ailm irard a ainm. (141-7)

« Not hard:
I am the son of the man who lived but was not born,
who was buried in his mother's womb,
who was baptised after death;
his first presence bound him;[46]
[he is] the first utterance of every living one,
the cry of every dead one:
the lofty [ogham letter] a is his name. »

The answer is *Adam*, as the glosses explain: no woman bore him; he was buried in the earth from which he was produced; he was baptised in Christ's passion;[47] he died figuratively through sin, and the agony of birth or death is expressed by a wordless cry that sounds the first letter of his name. This is a fine demonstration of the vast resources of metaphor and allusion characteristic of *bérla na bhfiled*,[48] but it is rooted in the scholastic dialogues. The conundrum is derived from the *Joca Monachorum*:[49] a version of it is found, for example, in the early *Joca* text in the Bobbio Missal (Wright & Wright, 2004 : 111-12), and it recurs in the Old English colloquies *Solomon and Saturn* and *Adrian and Ritheus* (Cross & Hill, 1982 : 75-

[45] The same species of knowledge is attributed to St Colum Cille in *Amra Choluimb Cille* (5.12-13); see Clancy & Markus (1997 : 108-9). In the *Leabhar Gabhála* Amairgen the arch-poet claims it for himself in the lines he speaks as he sets foot in Ireland; see Macalister (1938-1956, vol. 5 : 112; on lines 2687-90).

[46] The Irish of this line remains obscure, but a gloss explains it as a reference to his (figurative) death through sin.

[47] The glosses do not make explicit the idea, well attested elsewhere, that the blood and water that came from Christ's side served to baptise his corpse, which lay under the hill of Golgotha (see Cross & Hill, 1982, below).

[48] For the affinities between poetic inspiration and linguistic learning, see especially the text known as *The Caldron of Poesy* (Breatnach, 1981).

[49] Genre affinities between *Immacallam in Dá Thuarad* and the *Joca Monachorum* will be studied in Wright (forthcoming; *non vidi*); in the interim, see Wright & Wright (2004 : 110; n. 72).

9).[50] There are signs that Insular scholars played a major role in the reception and dissemination of the mainstream *Joca* texts (see Bayless in Bayless & Lapidge, 1998 : 13-24); and it is no accident that a very close parallel for the version cited above is found in the Hiberno-Latin collection known as the *Collectanea Pseudo-Bedae*:

9. Dic mihi quis homo, qui non natus est, et mortuus est, atque in utero matris suae post mortem baptizatus? Est Adam. (123; Bayless & Lapidge, 1998 : 136-7)

   « Tell me, what man was not born, and who died, and was baptized in the womb of his mother after death? It is Adam. »

These fictive contests of wit and knowledge associate educational exchange with the formation of the vernacular literary tradition. By the same token the « native » poetic tradition itself becomes inseparable from academic engagement with language. To be a poet, in short, is to be a reflective student of linguistics, and these two roles in combination refract Latin learning through a vernacular lens as well as *vice versa*.

In Irish, as also in Old English,[51] the same quasi-dramatic structure informs a more complex genre centring around a figure from the remote past who is questioned by a Christian (Nic Carthaigh, 2007). A case in point is *The Colloquy of Colum Cille and the Youth*, perhaps originally composed in the early ninth century (edition by Carey [2002]; on the dating see 56-57). Colum Cille encounters a mysterious youth, describing himself as a shape-shifter who has lived under many animal forms, who teaches him first the otherworldly wonders that lie beneath the lake that he sees before him, Lough Neagh in eastern Ulster, and then describes the corresponding wonders that lie under the ocean beyond:

10. As-bert Colum Cille aitherruch frisin n-óclaig .i. « Os a mmuir-se frinn anair, cid fo-thá? » « Ní [ansa], » fris-gart ind óclach. « Fil firu fonnmaru foltlibru fóo. Fil búu uathmara alachtmara fóo asa mbind ngéim. Fil damu damdai. Fil echu echdai. Fil déichendai, fil trechendai, i nEoraip, i nAisia, i tírib ingnath, i ferunn glas, asa imbel imbel coa inber. » (18-21; Carey, 2002 : 60)

[50] Further parallel examples are collected by the editors *ad locum* and in Bayless & Lapidge (1998 : 228).

[51] The most elaborate example of the Old English development is the group of Solomon and Saturn dialogues using alliterative verse, edited by Anlezark (2009). Although the names of the interlocutors are shared with the prose dialogues mentioned above, the literary form is far more ambitious and there appears to be no close linkage between the these texts.

> « Colum Cille said again to the youth, "And this sea to the east of us,[52] what is under it?" "Not hard to answer," said the youth, "there are long-haired men with broad territories beneath it; there are fearsome greatly-pregnant cows beneath it, whose lowing is musical; there are bovine oxen; there are equine horses; there are two-headed ones; there are three-headed ones in Europe, in Asia, in lands of strange things, in a green land, whose border is a border as far as its river-mouth [?]." » (adapted from Carey)

The last group of images, though obscure in detail, derives unmistakeably from the international mythical cosmography and « the wonders of the East », the accounts of fantastic beings on the edges of the world that were associated in our period with the discoveries made by Alexander the Great.[53] This text illustrates how the fictive conversation between sage and learner can serve as background for geography and even cosmology concerned with the relationship between Ireland and the wider world.

Generically similar colloquy texts use the dialogue as a frame for imparting venerable information about the remote past. In *Scél Tuáin Meic Chairill*, « The Tale of Tuán Mac Cairill » (edited and translated by Carey [1984]), Finnia, a saint journeying through Ulster and converting its people to Christianity, encounters an aged cleric who explains that he is the sole survivor of the first group of humans to reach Ireland after the Flood, and that he has continued down the ages by assuming the forms of different birds, animals, fish and humans until at last converted by Patrick. From him Finnia learns the history of the successive invasions or settlements of Ireland, with the implication that the saint's participation sanctions their inclusion within the ambit of Christian world-knowledge. The theme is parallel, but the verbal artistry is more elevated, in a group of dialogues featuring Fintan Mac Bóchra, another shape-changing revenant and « custodian of the histories of the western world ».[54] In *Fintan and the Hawk of Achill*, Fintan and an ancient carrion bird discourse about the history of Ireland and the invasions grouped around the Biblical Flood (Meyer, 1907);[55] in *The Settling of the Manor of Tara*, he is summoned to settle a dispute over the distribution of powers in the land, and uses his ancient knowledge of Ireland and of divine revelation to do so (edition

[52] The transmitted text is obscure, and the translation « to the west of us » is also possible. See Carey's note ad loc.

[53] For the background, cf. Clarke (2012).

[54] See Nic Carthaigh (2007 : 44), citing the text *Cethri Arda in Domain* (text in Lebor na hUidre; Best & Bergin, 1929 : 10066 ff.).

[55] Translation and (outdated but thought-provoking) discussion in Hull (1932); further discussion in Nic Charthaigh (2007).

and translation by Best [1910]). In these texts the dramatic enactment of knowledge is inseparable from its transmission from learned elder to novice, and thus matches the enactment of tradition in the schools.

## 8. THE LEARNED COLLOQUY IN *TOCHMARC EMIRE*

Up to now I have not discussed heroic narrative, the strand of literature dominated by the so-called Ulster Cycle with its cast of warriors grouped around king and druid and dominated by Cú Chulainn, the hero who seems so easily to fit the model of « the Irish Achilles ». The Ulster Cycle, especially *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, seems to invite characterisation as a « primary epic » tradition, radically archaic and analogous to the Homeric depiction of the Greek « heroic age » (Clarke, 2006), but recent scholarship has shown that the cycle is full of cross-linguistic echoes, and that the narratives owe much of their form and substance to Roman epic and Carolingian scholarly commentary (Miles, 2012). This means that their origins are much closer to the world of the monastic library than once realised. In relation to the theme of the present study, I will restrict myself to a single example to illustrate the close dependence of this literature on the authors' scholarly engagement with language study.

Ever since the Ulster Cycle narratives were defined as heroic literature, it has been difficult for scholars (and still more for translators) to make sense of their characteristic internal changes in pace and register. In particular, there are long passages in which action is suspended and the text proceeds through verbal communication between the characters, the so-called « watchman device » (Miles, 2012 : 175-93). A classic example is the text called *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, « The Sack of Da Derga's Hostel », in which over half the text involves no directly narrated action at all: the main characters are on a headland many miles from the scene of the action, and the unfolding drama is conveyed through the giant Ingcél's richly decorated descriptions of what he sees happening on the plain beyond, each description interpreted in another speech by his companion Fer Rogain.[56] In *Táin Bó Cuailnge* this strategy is pervasive. The approach of each of Cú Chulainn's challengers is crystallised in a description from sight by his charioteer Láeg while Cú Chulainn himself looks away; and the climactic moment when the enemy encounters the sign of his hostile challenge – four severed heads stuck on a branch

[56] Ralph O'Connor's analysis of focalisation patterns in this text will be published in his forthcoming monograph (2013).

in the middle of a river – is the cue for three warriors to evoke his presence and his significance by recounting tales of his prowess and strength (O'Rahilly, 1976 : 374-824; 1968 : 718-1216). The technique is used to brilliant effect in the climactic scene where a messenger comes to tell the king of the approach of the enemy army: each element of the messenger's speech is a riddling allusive image of part of the scene he has witnessed, and his listeners solve each riddle in turn to translate them into plain description (O'Rahilly, 1976: 3545-870, O'Rahilly, 1968: 4284-599). In all these examples the underlying principle is the same: the discourse moves from the realm of action and is focalised through artful speech, its images crafted by the character's own linguistic dexterity.

This aesthetic combines with the dialogue format in *Tochmarc Emire*, « The Wooing of Emer », one of the most complex and elegantly conceived of the Ulster Cycle tales.[57] The thematic starting point is the extreme sexual energy of Cú Chulainn. Sent from the court to divert him from other men's women, he pledges his love and fidelity to Emer but is forced by her scheming father to go abroad for training in the magical arts of war, undergoing several exotic sexual encounters on his travels before he returns to marry Emer at last. The tale looks ultimately to Cú Chulainn's encounter with the son born to one of his otherworldly lovers, whom he will kill unrecognised because neither of them can refuse the challenge to single combat. So summarised, it is the stuff of heroic myth. However, the developed version of the text, represented by a series of manuscripts from the early twelfth century onward, devotes over a quarter of its entire length to the narration and interpretation of an episode in which there is no action at all. Cú Chulainn and his charioteer ride up to find Emer on the open plain among her companions, who are learning embroidery and handicraft from her. The episode picks up on and develops the convention that wooing is an occasion for the exchange of riddles and subtle language between man and woman.[58] Cú Chulainn and Emer speak to each other throughout in learned and figured language, so that her companions will not understand that they are talking about marrying each other in defiance of her father.[59] The basic substance of the conversation is rooted in the simple themes of

[57] In the absence of a modern critical text, in what follows I cite from the edition by Van Hamel (1933 : 16-68). On the textual history, see Toner, 1998; on themes and language arts in the text, see Sayers (1991-1992); see Edel (1980, especially pages 212-42) on the kennings discussed in this paper; and for an application of the discipline of discourse analysis to the dialogue, see Findon (1998 : 45-53).

[58] For the question-and-answer dialogue in wooing, see also *Tochmarc Ailbe* and *Tochmarc Cruinn ┐ Macha* (Thurneysen, 1918, 1921b).

[59] Explained (28).

the scholastic colloquies – Where have you come from? What is your name?[60] – but it is expanded and elaborated into a display of rich verbal art. Much of what they say in these exchanges has the character of metaphors and kennings, and its affinities in detail are with the learned colloquies and glossary material that we have been studying throughout this article. This becomes especially clear afterwards when Cú Chulainn interprets the conversation item by item to his charioteer, and we see the established curriculum of allusive poetic figures, legends embedded in place-names, fragments of myth and pseudo-history. A particularly revealing example comes in the passage – familiar from modern retellings where, predictably, the learned and opaque elements are trimmed away – in which Cú Chulainn's riddles turn to Emer's own body:

11. Atchí Cú Chulainn bruinne na hingine dar sedlachaib a léned. Conid and asbertsom: « Caín in mag so mag alchuing. » (27)

    « Cú Chulainn saw the girl's bosom through the upper part of her smock. So that then he said, "Fair is that plain, the plain beyond the yoke." ».[61]

She grasps the erotic metaphor,[62] which he repeats three times, and each time she replies in similarly allusive language, listing the feats and skills that she demands of the man who will win her. The last of her three demands is the strangest:

12. « Ní rúalae a mag sa, » ol sí, « nad écmonga benn Súain meic Roiscmilc ó samsúan co hoímelc, ó oímelc co beltine, co brón trogain ó beltine. »

    « Asberthar, dogéntar, » ol Cú Chulainn. (27)

    « "No-one comes to this plain," she said, "who does not strike the point of Sleep son of Roiscmilc from *samsúan* to *oímelc*, from *oímelc* to *beltine*, to the sorrow of *trogan* from *beltine*."

    "It is said, it will be done," said Cú Chulainn. »

His acceptance of the challenge seals their union. On their return journey Cú Chulainn gives scholarly explanations of the riddles to his charioteer, « to shorten

[60] For these formulaic questions and answers as the basic wooing dialogue, cf. *Tochmarc Cruinn ┐ Macha* (252; Thurneysen, 1918).

[61] I read this as *mag al chuing* « the plain beyond the yoke ». Van Hamel here reads the one word *alchuing* « weapon-rack » (1933 : glossary, s.v.), but Cú Chulainn himself inteprets the phrase to Lóeg (52) as if the noun were simply *cuing* « yoke ». Note that the uncommon preposition *al* « beyond » is elsewhere used in etymological explanations (see *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, s.v. 1 *al*), so it is appropriate in the riddling context here. Following Sayers (1991-1992 : 134-5), *mag al chuing* as « the plain beyond the yoke » is her abdomen beyond the double-yoke shape of her breasts, the sight that Cú Chulainn has just seen. The landscape metaphor is peculiarly appropriate when Emer herself has headed the kennings describing herself with the name of a hill above a great plain: *Temair ban* « Tara of women » (18). See further Findon (1998 : 47-8).

[62] Interpreted later for Lóeg (52).

the road »; [63] and the effect is to project the exegetical techniques of the glosses and glossaries back into the text, erecting a new level in what is already a complex narratological structure (cf. Sayers, 1991-1992 : 141). He explains that « to strike the point of Sleep son of Roiscmilc » is a kenning meaning to go without sleep, and that he is to do so for an entire year, because *samsúan*, *oímelc*, *beltine* and « the sorrow of *trogan* » indicate the four quarter-days of the solar cycle. Cú Chulainn explains these names through a characteristic combination of learned or invented etymology, ancient Irish lore, and *bérla na bhfiled*. *Trogan*, he says, is a name for the earth: in autumn the earth groans or grieves under her fruits, so this is Lugnasad, in modern terms the last day of August. *Trogan* itself is etymologised as such in *Sanas Cormaic*, and the kenning *Brón Trogain* occurs in later poetry with the same meaning.[64] The other names are versions of the normal names of the quarter-days, distorted to support the supposed etymologies. Each of the three includes materials that are closely paralleled in the Old Irish glossaries.[65] *Bel-tine* is of course Bealtaine or May-Day, and Cú Chulainn gives it two analyses. First he renders it *bil-tine*, glossed as « fortunate fire », and says that the druids used to light a pair of great fires on this day and set the cattle between them, to bring about magical protection for the year. Then alternatively he makes it *Bel-dine*: *díne* names the young of cattle, which he says were placed under the protection of the pagan deity Bel, familiar from the Old Testament. Both these etymologies occur in the same form in *Sanas Cormaic* (Y 122, Y 153). Oímelc, from *Imbolc* « the first day of spring », is similarly given two etymologies of which one, from *oí* « sheep » and *melc* « milking », appears in *Sanas Cormaic* (Y 1000), while the other is unique to our text: from *imbe a folc*, roughly « its rain around it », distinguishing the rain of spring from that of winter.

So far, the impression is that these puzzles were framed and interpreted by a glossary virtually identical with our *Sanas Cormaic*. This is confirmed by the most difficult of the four explanations, that for *samsúan*. This is clearly a distortion of *Samhain*, the quarter-day that we know as Hallowe'en. Here is the text of Cú Chulainn's explanation:

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[63] *Do irgairdiugud in seta* (29).

[64] See the poem *Lige Guill* « The Grave of Goll », edited by Ó Murchadha (2009), where the phrase occurs as *lathi brón trogain* « on the day of earth's sorrow » (70.4), referring again to Lughnasa. The fact that the context is identical strongly suggests that the author of the poem has learnt this term for « earth » from *Sanas Cormaic* or a source directly linked to it.

[65] I cite from *Sanas Cormaic*, from the Yellow Book of Lecan text (Meyer), using the transcriptions in the Irish Glossaries Database (http://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/irishglossaries, last accessed 20 January 2013).

13. […] ó samuin .i. sam-fuin .i. fuin in tsamraidh and. Ar is de roind no bíd forsin mblíadain anall, .i. in samrad ó beltine co samain ┐ in gemred ó samain co beltine. Nó samfuin .i. sam súain .i. is and sin feraid sam súana .i. samsōn. (55)

    « […] from Samuin, viz. *sam-fuin*, i.e. that is the concealment [*fuin*] of the summer. For it is from this that the division was upon the year long ago, viz. the summer from Beltaine to Samhain and the winter from Samhain to Beltaine. Or, *sam-fuin*, viz. *sam* of sleep, viz. it is then that *sam* pours out sleeps, viz. samson. »

The structure is the same as with the other explanations: first a purely lexical explanation, taking the word as a compound, then a fragment of cultural history, then a difficult alternative etymology. Here again *Sanas Cormaic* is the key *comparandum*, but the relationship is more complex than in the other cases. The parallel is in the entry for *samrad* « summer »:

14. Samrad .i. *sam* ebraice, *sol* latine, unde dicitur *Samson* .i. sol eorum. Samrad didiu riad reites grian ┐ is and is mo doatne. (Y 1155)

    « *Samrad*, viz. *sam* in Hebrew, *sol* in Latin, from which is said *Samson*, viz. "their sun." Summer indeed is the course that the sun rides, and it is then that it shines most. »

The Hebrew lore here is derived ultimately from Jerome's *On Hebrew Names*,[66] where the name of the Biblical hero Samson is explained as meaning in Hebrew *sol eorum* « their sun » or *sol fortitudinis* « sun of strength » (Antin, 1959 : 101, 157). This etymology is found in several early Latin works with Irish associations, and the techniques by which the Hebrew word has been deployed is peculiar to Irish linguistic scholarship, stripping off affixes to produce a simple syllable that can purportedly be found in the lexicon of Old Irish.[67] Clearly the last element of the *Tochmarc Emire* passage, *.i. samson*, was included by the scholar who borrowed this information from the *Sanas Cormaic* entry for *samrad*, even though the etymology of Samson is a digression in the context of the analysis of *samsúan*.[68]

The above might, of course, be seen as mere learning for learning's sake – lofty explications imposed on a text whose dramatic life is independent of them. Such an interpretation would not do justice to the complex affiliations of the dialogue. Although the explications may have begun as intrusive glosses added to an early

[66] Note that this work is named as a source in the Latin preface to O'Mulconry's glossary (Russell, 1988 : 5-6).

[67] I am grateful to Jacopo Bisagni and Pádraic Moran for their observations on this matter.

[68] The explanation of *oímelc* digresses in the same way, listing further parallel examples of the pattern of compounding with *oí-* as the first element.

version of the tale, in the text as we have it they are an integral part of the whole. The parallels mentioned above show that the complexity of the structure – riddling dialogue followed by extended explanations – is characteristic of the art of medieval Irish narrative, and should not be marginalised. Within *Tochmarc Emire* there is another neat confirmation of the affinity between this exchange and those of the learned schoolroom dialogues discussed above. After Emer has successfully parried the thrusts of the hero's riddling language, he praises her:

15. « Cindus dano, » ol Cú Chulainn, « nachar chomtig dún dib línaib comríachtain? Ar ní fúarus-sa cosse ben follongad ind airis dála imacallaim fon samail seo frim. » (26)

    « "How then," said Cú Chulainn, "would it not be fitting for the two of us to come together? For never before have I found a woman who could hold out in this way against me in a tryst-meeting of *imacallam*." »[69]

Their equal skill in *imaccallam,* « dialogue », is what impresses him (cf. Findon, 1998 : 49); and it may not be coincidental that this word, effectively a loan-translation from Latin *colloquium*, is the technical name for the learned colloquy texts that we surveyed earlier in this article. In *Tochmarc Emire*, then, the discourses associated with the historical, theological and poetic study of language itself are embedded in the genre of literature that transmits the tradition of the heroic past of Ireland.

## 9. CONCLUSION

I have tried to show something of the creativity and sophistication of the engagement with language and poetics that can be found in early Irish literature, and to suggest that its essential orientation came from the contemporary educational system, grounded in Latin learning and constantly looking outward to the world beyond Ireland – above all, to the heartlands of Christendom in the eastern Mediterranean. The scholars responded to the stimulus of cultural bilingualism and philological awareness by reflecting upon the nature of language itself, so that verbal creativity was enmeshed with metalinguistic reflection and interpretation. Our texts are not a portal to a lost primeval world; they are a monument to an extraordinary and arguably unique culture of collective self-awareness and self-presentation, where a national language came into being with linguistic science as its midwife. To those who come to early Irish literature in search of primeval Celtic

[69] Reading *i n-airius dala*, with the Lebor na hUidre text (Best & Bergin, 1929 : 10316-7).

simplicities, this is a disappointment. It does not need to be so for a generation reared on Joyce and Woody Allen and *No Logo*, a generation for whom identities, including linguistic and cultural identities, are accepted and respected as elective constructs rather than as fixed sources of stability. Perhaps at this time more than at any other since this literature was first brought back from obscurity, the medieval project of self-discovery, self-representation and self-invention deserves respect in its own right.

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