

## **Orality in Medieval Irish Narrative: An Overview**

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Celtic scholars do not doubt that there was an active oral narrative tradition functioning in pre-Christian and medieval Christian Irish society. Until recently, tradition-bearers with amazingly large story-repertoires could be found among Gaelic-speaking peasants and fishermen in Ireland and Scotland. These creative oral artists, often neglected and no longer listened to in their own time, bore vivid testimony to a long-lived and rich Gaelic tradition of stories and narrative techniques—a tradition that is often referred to in the extant corpus of medieval Irish literature, from its earliest stages (the sixth to ninth centuries A.D.) to the beginnings of the modern literary era (the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). Although the documented contemporary *sgéalí*, “storyteller” (*scélaige* in earlier Irish spelling), is an amateur—that is, he is not paid for his performance, nor does he live by his storytelling craft—the medieval narrator usually was a professional, and in fact was often a member of the exalted sodality of professional poets known as the *filid* (singular *fili*, from a root meaning “to see”), who together with musicians and other possessors of special technical knowledge constituted the wider class of the *áes dána*, “people of art[s],” or (*áes cerda*, “people of craft[s].” While the *fili*’s main activity was the composition of verse celebrating his patrons and detailing the genealogy and lore of families and tribes, we are told in a medieval Irish tract on the training of *filid* that the oral transmission and performance of traditional prose tales—*scéla*, sing. *scél*, from a root meaning “to say” (Greene 1954:26)—was an essential aspect of *filidecht*, “the poetic profession”:<sup>1</sup>

In hí dā foglaim na hochtmaide bliadna .i. fiscomarca filed .i. duili berla 7 clethchor choem 7 reicne roscadach 7 laíde .i. tenmláda 7 immas forosnai 7 díchetal do chennaib na tuaithe 7 dínshenchus 7 primscéla Hérend olchena fria naisnéis do ríghaib 7 flaithib 7 dagdhoínib. Ar ní comlán ín fili chena, sicut dixit poeta:

Nibadúnad cenrígu.	nibafili censcéla.
níbaingen manibfial.	nímaith ciall neich natléga.

(Thurneysen 1891:49-51)

These are what are taught [to the *fili* candidate] in the eighth year [of his training]: the “wisdom-tokens” of the *fili*; that is, the elements of language, the *clethchor choem* (“fair palisade,” a type of poem and/or meter), the *reicne roscadach* (“poetic rhapsody,” another metrical genre), and *laíde* (a third type); that is, the *teinm laída* (“chewing of the pith”), *imbas forosnai* (“great wisdom that enlightens”), and *díchetal do chennaib na tuaithe* (“incantation from heads of the tribe”) [these are probably rituals]. [Also to be learned by the poet are] place-name lore [*dindshenchas*] and the prime tales (*primscéla*) of Ireland besides, which are to be related to kings, princes, and noblemen. For a poet is not complete without them [i.e., the tales], as the poet said:

A fort is no fort without kings;  
 a *fili* is no *fili* without tales;  
 a girl is no girl if she is not modest;  
 the intelligence of one who does not read is not  
 good.

Evident in the fourth line of the cited quatrain is a well-documented phenomenon of early Christian Irish culture that complicates the oral-literary issue considerably: the gradual integration of the Christian monastic *literati* with the native poetic class. The *filid* had relied on oral transmission in pre-Christian Ireland (like the druids of Gaul as described in classical sources<sup>2</sup>), but after the coming of Christianity and the Latin alphabet, more and more they came to articulate their learnedness in terms of literacy and book-learning. At least for the *filid*, the “aristocrats” of verbal performers, the notion of an illiterate poet or singer of

tales became untenable during the period reflected in the extant literature. Thus the *fili* of the Middle Ages was not only an oral performer but also, in theory if not always in practice, a *fer légind*, “man of reading [i.e., learning].”<sup>3</sup> The reverence accorded the written word by the medieval Irish poet does not, however, necessarily preclude the kind of compositional intelligence poised between the literary and the oral which is evident in other medieval European literary traditions that have been informed by traditional, pre-literary techniques of narration.

Certainly the *fili*'s storytelling function was not extrinsic to his roles as singer of praise and recorder of tribal legend. The narratives he learned and performed contained paradigms of social behavior and an ideological world-view, which together provided the essential counterpoint to his poetic compositions. These traditional tales, furthermore, were interlaced with the legendary, genealogical, toponymical, and even legal lore that it was the *fili*'s responsibility to transmit. This point was made forcefully by Seán Mac Airt in his discussion of the *fili* as both storyteller and exegete (1958:150):

Undoubtedly there are many instances, such as that in the story of Forgoll and Mongán, which indicate that the *fili* did recite tales to his patron, but this entertainment could quite well be provided by the *scélaige*, or the many others of this genre such as the *rígdruth* (royal buffoon) Ua Maiglinni, who amused the king and the army with stories on the eve of the Battle of Allen. On the contrary I suggest that the *fili*'s main business was not the mere recital of tales, but first the exposition of them, for example from the genealogical point of view, to the noble classes (*di n-aisnéis do rígaib 7 flathaib 7 degdainib*) just as he might have been required to do at an earlier date in a lawsuit. Secondly he was expected to use them for the purpose of illustration (*fri deismirecht*), as a distich from a poem attributed to Cormac enjoins. The kind of illustration meant is exactly that exemplified by the later bardic poets in their use of incidents from heroic tales.

One of the most notable of these poet-storytellers to appear in the pages of medieval Irish manuscripts is the legendary *fili* Urard mac Coisse, in the tale *Airec Menman Uraird Maic Coisse*, “The Ruse of Urard mac Coisse” (Byrne 1908; see Mac Cana

1980:33-38). His household raided by the kinsmen of the king Domnall mac Muircertaigh, the angered poet goes to the royal residence, where he is greeted by Domnall and asked to tell his news (“iarmifocht in righ scéla do-sum iar tairisiem,” Byrne 1908:42). Urard, careful not to lodge accusations directly against the relatives of his powerful host, takes advantage of the semantic ambiguity of *scél*—which can mean both “news” and “tale”—and interprets the king’s polite question as a request for information concerning Urard’s repertoire of tales and traditional lore. What Urard virtuosically then presents to Domnall is a remarkable and, for us, very valuable catalogue of traditional tales known to the author of the text: an inventory of titles that is divided into genres according to subject matter, including cattle-raids (*tána*), battles (*catha*), feasts (*fesa*), floods (*tomadmond*), visions (*físi*), loves (*serca*), campaigns (*sluaigid*), migrations (*tochomladha*), and slaughters (*orcne*). At the very end of his list of titles in the last category, the *fili* refers obliquely to the story of his own misfortune, and the king, unfamiliar with the title, asks Urard to tell the unknown story. He does so with relish, and after the telling of the thinly veiled composition, the informed monarch sees to it that justice is done.

Urard’s catalogue is echoed and amplified in other tale-lists and references to the *fili*’s storytelling repertoire that have survived in medieval literature. We do not know whether these enumerations of genres and specific tales refer to available manuscript texts, to the range of oral tradition in general, or to both. Many of these tales have in fact survived in the literature, but only a few have left vestiges in recent oral tradition.

While there is no doubt as to the existence of an Irish oral narrative tradition of long standing, much controversy has swirled, especially during the past three decades, over the question: to what extent is this oral tradition reflected in substance and style in extant medieval Irish narrative texts? While many have already joined the fray in this debate over the nature of the relationship between the oral and the literary tradition in Irish cultural history, it has perhaps only begun. There are no easy answers in this controversy, for, as a proverb attributed to the bewildered Saint Patrick encountering the complexities of Irish narrative attests, “gablánach in rét an scéluigheacht” (Stokes 1900:lines 3666-70), “storytelling is a thorny business.” Proinsias Mac Cana has succinctly formulated the reasons why it is difficult to distinguish

the category of “literary” from that of “oral” in what has been called the Irish *Doppelkultur* (Gaechter 1970):

Before the sixth century Irish literature was, for all practical purposes, purely oral. From then on it had two modes of transmission, the oral and the written, and it is the interaction of these two modes which constitutes the great problem—and in some ways the peculiar interest—of Irish literary history. Other literate peoples have their oral traditions, but generally these are sub-literary, in the sense that they comprise the common fund of popular ideas and lore which are rejected or ignored by the *literati*. In Ireland, however, while the native men of learning, the *filii*, did not eschew the use of writing, particularly in the post-Norman period, the fact is that they inherited something of the druidic preference for the oral mode, both in their teaching and in their composition.

Consequently, the Irish oral tradition embraced the literature of greatest social prestige as well as the common lore of the mass of the people. And precisely because this literature of prestige was cultivated and conserved by an order of learned men specially trained to the task, it had its own separate existence, quite independent of writing, though not of course uninfluenced by it. (Mac Cana 1969:35).

These same issues were raised in a brilliant and polemical way by James Carney in his 1955 publication *Studies in Irish Literature and History*. Consisting of a series of essays that offered rare examples of a detailed critical approach to medieval Irish texts, Carney’s *Studies* issued a healthy challenge to those labelled by the author as “nativists”:

Scholars tend to conceive of our sagas as having had a long life in oral tradition before being (with suggestive phrase) “committed to writing.” They find it hard to reject the sentimental notion—flattering, perhaps, to national vanity—that these tales are immemorially old and were recited generation after generation in the “halls of kings.” . . . I find it impossible for many reasons to believe that the form of any of the fictions or entertainments preserved in our medieval manuscripts is in any way close to the form in

which they would be told when they existed (in so far as they actually did) on a purely oral level. It is sometimes not remembered by scholars that the written material of a literate society and the oral material of a society that has not yet been seriously affected by literacy are on different planes of existence—hence the transmission of material on each plane is governed by rules appropriate to its own special nature. There has of course been transference of material from the oral plane to the written. But the transmission was necessarily made in the first place by people whose minds had been opened to the great world of classical and Christian literature. When they wrote (or, to concede a phrase, “wrote down”) fictions with an Irish traditional background they were naturally concerned with seeing that this material was presented as literature, and that the presentation was worthy of the new degree of sophistication which their society had attained by the very fact of becoming literate. There can be no question of regarding these stories as semi-sacred compositions, transmitted for centuries in an almost unvarying form and finally “written down” by an enthusiastic antiquarian with the scientific approach and attitude of a modern student of ethnography. The fact is that the texts themselves generally show clear signs of being composed in early Christian Ireland. (Carney 1955:276-77).

Carney’s excellent reminder to scholars about the incompatibility of oral and written compositional styles does not necessarily invalidate an impression we receive, particularly from later medieval narrative literature, that what we see here are texts that were meant to be read aloud, or at least used as the basis for an oral performance (see below). What Carney disputes, and rightly, is the notion of oral tradition as a static repository for “authored” texts, and the image of the literary tradition as a museum for enclosing and preserving these static texts. The earlier advocates of this naive notion, such as the great nineteenth-century scholar Eugene O’Curry, had in fact already been corrected by the careful scholarship of Rudolf Thurneysen in his classic study *Die irische Helden- und Königsage* (1921), in which he demonstrated that behind many of the texts which more

enthusiastic scholars had attempted to use as a window onto a pre-Christian, pre-historic, and pre-literary world, lay a dense and complicated history of textual transmission that in many respects obscured the *Sitz im Leben* of the recorded stories and traditions (see especially Thurneysen 1921:72-74).

But the textual editor's awareness of the revolution of the written word in early Christian Irish culture, as evinced in the work of Thurneysen, was perhaps carried to an extreme by Carney in his *Studies*.<sup>4</sup> Virtually rejected out of hand here is any possibility that the variations and cruces so characteristic of medieval Irish narrative texts in their often widely differing extant forms were not the results of scribal invention, error, or inflation of previously existing versions, but instead a reflection of the multiformity in the tradition of oral performance existing behind *and alongside* the texts and the literary tradition which created and transmitted them.

For instance, the earliest text of the lengthy tale of the *Cattle Raid of Cúailnge* (*Táin Bó Cúailnge* = TBC), which is preserved in the eleventh-century Book of the Dun Cow (Lebor na hUidre = LU) and known as Recension I, is notorious for its inclusion of "doublets," that is, redundant episodes and details. Cecile O'Rahilly, the most recent editor of TBC, gave ear to the nuances such textual problems present:

Such repetition of themes or motifs in the development and expansion of the original tale, as represented now by LU, is merely an indication that the story had existed for a long period in tradition. As the central theme was elaborated and the tale grew by the accretion of episodes, the same theme was introduced more than once, with variation of context or with additional detail. . . . But Thurneysen's view of the origin of doublets is different. He seems to have held that a doublet of this type cannot occur within one version of a tale. To him the repetition of a motif denotes a different version. (O'Rahilly 1967:xix).

Elsewhere she states:

The episodic nature of TBC, the result of continual accretions, is precisely what we should expect in an orally preserved tale. Further the saga is uneven and lopsided, some parts having been elaborated and expanded and stylistically embellished. It has been

suggested that the native genius of the Irish writer is better suited to the short story than to a work of long and complicated structure. (*ibid.*: xxv).

The same “episodic nature” and accretional texture to which O’Rahilly points as evidence for the oral nature of the tale and/or its transmission are cited by Carney as possible proofs of the literary origins of another medieval saga, the *Cattle Raid of Fráech* (*Táin Bó Fraích* = TBF):

When, therefore, we find inconsistencies and contradictions in a fictional work that we might reasonably expect to be logical and coherent, we are justified in suspecting that the underlying cause may be the disparity between the various simples that went into the making of the compound. But there is another possibility that has not to my knowledge been reckoned with by Irish or Anglo-Saxon scholars. The failure to advert to this possibility is due, I think, to a prejudice that exists as to the nature of the material: that is, that works like TBF and *Beowulf* are considered as being necessarily *traditional*. By “traditional” an Irish scholar, thinking of a tale such as TBF, would mean that it had, before being committed to writing about say 700 A.D., an oral existence of perhaps many hundred years, being based ultimately, according to the scholar’s individual leanings, on either early historic events or on primitive mythology. The tendency to regard tales such as TBF as necessarily traditional in this sense has prevented scholars from seeing the possibility of a type of conflation other than that which has been envisaged, the type of conflation that exists in all fictional works. In short, a tale such as TBF may be a fiction composed of traditional and other elements, a new composition modelled on and borrowing from pre-existing material, whether oral or written; the author wishes only to compose a tale and it is a matter of indifference to him whether the episodes he borrows were earlier attributed to hero X or Y, whether they were Irish or foreign, traditional or non-traditional. (Carney 1955:28-29).

The aesthetic range of such literary conflation extends from shoddy patchwork to an integrated text with an individual artist’s point of

view—a feature which when present, claims Carney, militates as much as inconsistency against the argument for oral provenance:

It cannot be denied that the parts of the Táin [Bó Cúailnge] I have adverted to bear the mark of a single personality. The tricks of presentation are characteristic of a literary rather than an orally preserved tale, and the characterisation shows a degree of sophistication that is not met with in Irish oral narrative, and rarely, if ever, in early Irish literature. Had this tale been written in the seventh century, and substantially preserved in oral tradition until the ninth, the finer aspects of the epic and the individual touches would have been levelled out: the whole would have been reduced to the conventional form of the oral narrative. (*ibid.*:71).

Carney, giving precious little credit to oral tradition, leaves it barely any room in the vast complex of medieval Irish literature. If the text is a poor job, or at least is so judged according to our modern aesthetic criteria, it is probably a purely literary production. If it is consistent, sophisticated, and sustained, according to those criteria, then too it is probably a literary production. The hypothetical oral or orally based text is left somewhere in-between: it is restricted, to use Carney's term, to a "conventional form."<sup>5</sup>

This radical point of view pervades another important work on medieval Irish narrative, Alan Bruford's *Gaelic Folk-Tales and Mediaeval Romance* (1966). While it remains the best available source of information on literary narrative later than the material covered in Thurneysen's *Irische Helden- und Königsage*, Bruford's opinion that "the Romantic tales are so complex that they are hardly likely to have been preserved primarily in any other way than writing" (46) hampers his appreciation of a synergistic relationship between the literary and the oral traditions, and sets in place a tyrannical primacy of the former. In Bruford's defense, it must be said that certain contemporary storytellers have in fact memorized written texts, and that the oral tradition itself encourages the conceit of a memorizing storyteller. But narrative scholars in other fields have long ago given up complexity as a criterion for discriminating literary from oral texts, or memorized from orally composed texts, and there is no longer any compelling reason to maintain such a criterion in the field of Irish—especially

in light of the re-examination of scholarly assumptions about the Gaelic storyteller offered in Seán Ó Coileáin's article "Oral or Literary? Some Strands of the Argument" (1977), in which the author includes a most useful assessment of the different applications of the "Gaelic Storyteller" model, as canonized by James Delargy, to the study of medieval texts (see also Ó Coileáin 1978).

With the notable exceptions of a fluid body of ballads centered on the hero Finn mac Cumhaill and his band of heroes (the *fian* or *fianna*) and some *dindshenchas* poems, there are no significant genres of narrative to be found in extant medieval Irish literature in a metrical form. We should note, however, that, particularly in early narrative prose texts, poems are an integral part of the textual fabric, especially in narrative contexts of dialogue. Indeed the *prosimetrum* format as used in both medieval Irish and early Sanskrit literature, reflecting two far-flung yet closely allied Indo-European traditions, was marshalled by Myles Dillon and other comparative scholars before him as evidence for the archaic and originally oral nature of medieval Irish narrative:

The narrative form preserved in the Brāhmanas and Jātakas is the common saga-form in Ireland. The Irish sagas are prose tales with occasional passages of verse, the verse being used for direct speech. . . . In some of the sagas, many of the verse passages that survive are in a very archaic metre, stanzas with a varying number of syllables in the line, and with alliteration but no rhyme, and the language of these passages is obscure and is for the most part still untranslated. We may suppose that in the period of oral tradition to which this heroic literature belongs, the verse passages of direct speech were fixed as canonical and memorised, and the narrative was left to the creative memory of the reciter. Then when the tales came to be written down, in the ninth century and later, the archaic verse texts at first remained unchanged, and were then, as time went on, recomposed in the "new metres." (Dillon 1975:78-79).

Furthermore, there are features of Irish narrative prose, as exemplified in the performances of recent storytellers and most faithfully realized in a written form during the Early Modern Irish period (1200-1650), that can be considered semi-metrical

constraints, such as the frequent alliteration and the parallel construction of phrases or clauses. The study of the style of medieval Irish narrative prose is still in its infancy, but some tentative explorations of the mechanics of its composition have been undertaken. Inspired by Parry and Lord's work on Homeric and South Slavic epic, the classicist Kevin O'Nolan, in his 1968 article "Homer and the Irish Hero Tale," presented a sampling of what he termed "formulae" in some late medieval Irish prose texts, functional phrases and constructions used by the scribe and/or storyteller to tell the tale within a highly stylized sonic and semantic framework:

There are particular and specific epithets applied to persons, places and things, as well as epithets of a general kind. In place of metrical fixity Irish prose has a binding force in alliteration, and this involves the use of more than one epithet with a noun.

In the story of the *Giolla Deacair* ["Difficult Lad," the supernatural character featured in this tale about Finn] we find, for example, *i nAlmain lethanmhóir Laigen* and *dá chúiced mórthalacha Muman*, characteristically accurate epithets. Other examples are *Manannán mórchomachtach mac Lir*, "Manannán greatly powerful [son of Lir]"; a hunt is described as *tromthorrtach*, "yielding a rich harvest of game"; the epithets *láidir lánchalma*, "strong and valorous," are applied in one case to an impulse or thrust, on another occasion describe the *gruagach*, an otherworld warrior . . . . The principle of alliteration is well illustrated by three different words for spear or javelin which occur in our tale. We have *craoiseacha crannremra cinnderga*, *dá mhanaois móirremra*, and *dá shleig shénta shlinnlethna*.

The mere fact of alliteration does not ensure the formulaic character of a phrase. Anyone can alliterate, and where there is a large alliterative content a composer's individual contribution might well be alliterative and go unnoticed. However it is not possible to have a large individual contribution in one tale without its being apparent, nor is it possible for a composer, even if he wanted to, to make up on a large scale epithets which match the type of epithet

confirmed by tradition. The composer suggests and invents epithets to a limited extent, but it is the tradition that chooses some and rejects others.

What does ensure the formulaic character of a phrase is repetition, even repetition within a single story, for a storyteller is more likely to repeat phrases already known to himself and his listeners than what he invents and tells for the first time. But of course when we go outside the story and find the same phrases elsewhere, we may conclude that they are beyond question formulae. (O’Nolan 1968:15-16).

O’Nolan does in fact trace some of the formulae in his base text, the *Tóraigheacht an Ghiolla Dheacair*, “Pursuit of the Troublesome Lad,” over into other texts of other tales, and even finds some of those same formulae in the texts collected from twentieth-century Gaelic storytellers. Furthermore, he discerns what he calls “themes” or “formulaic passages” in the literary as well as the folktale texts, both of which, as noted by scholars before O’Nolan, are characterized by “runs” (*cóiriú catha* in Irish): recyclable and variable descriptions of recurring scenes or situations, such as setting out to sea, fighting, feasting, and so on (O’Nolan 1968:9-10, 14; see also O’Nolan 1971-73). Citing Lord’s theory in *The Singer of Tales* that formulas originally had a pre-poetic, ritual function (Lord 1960:66-67), O’Nolan in another of his articles attempts to free the concept of formula from a strictly metrical framework, arguing that formulas can precede and give rise to meter, and that the type of narrative “formulaic” prose characteristic of Irish storytelling may have been the precursor of epic verse (1971-73:234-35; see also 1969:18-19).

The prose of earlier narrative texts, in particular those that were originally preserved in the seventh-century manuscript *Cín Droma Snechta* (including the famous *Immram Brain*, “Voyage of Bran” = IB), has also been examined for evidence of oral composition, notably by Proinsias Mac Cana. The contrasting uses of language apparent in these texts—ranging from a terse, almost synoptic style to a more ornate, elegant, and balanced prose—indicate to Mac Cana the early *literati*’s attempts to forge a literary style out of elements of the prevailing oral style. While Mac Cana does not dispute Carney’s claim that these texts are indeed literature, he has demonstrated forcefully the important role played by “traditional,” that is pre-Christian and oral, concepts

and motifs in them (Mac Cana 1972, 1975, 1976). Indeed, Carney's thesis of a massive Christian rehauling of a native oral tale in the case of IB is considerably weakened by Mac Cana's careful presentation of non-Christian, distinctly Irish and/or Indo-European analogues to the messianic and otherworldly images that permeate the text.<sup>6</sup>

The impact such careful comparative study of content can have upon our estimation of the oral component in medieval Irish literature is also to be felt in the work of Daniel Melia, who has uncovered several of the generative story patterns underlying early Irish narrative (1972; 1977-78). In his examination of the parallels between the narrative frames of TBC, the Indian epic *Mahābhārata*, and the *Iliad*, Melia concludes:

If we look at the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* in the light of these other stories with similar patterns and from cultures with cognate languages, several apparently vexing structural problems seem to be less intractable. The traditional narrative shape of each of the epic stories must have embodied the same original cultural intention, and such a structure will tend to persist so long as the narrative structure continues to embody significant meaning for the culture in question. The strange little story of the "Finding of the *Táin*" is almost identical to the first book of the *Mahābhārata*, which tells how a king found the only surviving man to have heard the story from the disciple of the man who composed it. . . .

Because form and function are so closely tied together in an oral/traditional milieu, it is legitimate to argue that the persistence of the plot structure of ancient Indo-European epic in medieval Ireland reinforces the suggestion that oral/traditional models of composition and performance persisted until quite late in medieval Ireland, probably well into the twelfth century, and, further, that the cultural intention embodied in the structure of traditional sagas continued to have validity for its audience. (Melia 1979:260-61).

Yet we are, of course, still left with the issue of the origins of the actual form and style in which these traditional tales were recorded. What for Mac Cana and Carney passes as the beginnings of a literary style was analyzed by Gerard Murphy as,

in many cases, the fruits of the difficult process of transcribing or paraphrasing an oral performance of traditional narrative. In his classic *Saga and Myth in Ancient Ireland* (1955; rpt. in Murphy 1966), he explored the problematic contrast between the earlier prose tales, which often seem fragmented and are difficult to follow in their terseness, and the later prose tales of medieval literature, which are full-blown, even superabundant narrative texts:

When we think of the well-constructed narratives which even the unlearned peasant narrator to-day can produce, and when we judge of the greater power of Old Irish storytellers by consideration of certain passages through the inartistic manuscript versions of their tales which have been preserved, we can be fairly certain that the tales, as really told to assembled kings and noblemen at an ancient *óenach* [assembly], were very different from the poorly-narrated manuscript versions noted down by monastic scribes as a contribution to learning rather than to literature. (Murphy 1966:99).

It is certain that, from the fifteenth century on, lay men of learning, in close touch with storytellers of the aristocratic tradition, both wrote and used manuscripts. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that Early Modern Irish tales recorded by such scribes seem to be closer in form to what was really told than are the manuscript forms of tales of the Old and Middle Irish period, when manuscripts were mainly monastic and scribes were interested in the historic rather than the aesthetic value of the matter they recorded. It is significant in this respect that in describing Early Modern Irish tales in this section it was nowhere necessary to surmise how certain passages used to be really told or how lacunae were to be filled. . . . (*ibid.*:192).

Mac Cana's appreciation of early literary style and Murphy's characterization of it as a scribal exigency deriving from an oral style are, of course, compatible points of view, which, when placed side by side, alert us to the impossibility of distinguishing the functional from the aesthetic traits of medieval Irish literature. But one suspects that where Murphy would have seen a "good" passage—that is, one in which, according to Murphy, the style of the original oral telling is for once faithfully recorded, as opposed

to mangled and inaccurately relayed—Mac Cana might well see evidence of the young literary tradition's coming into its own. The latter scholar's point of view is well demonstrated in his comparison of two of the short surviving texts from the *Cín Droma Snechta* manuscript, the *Compert Con Culainn*, "Conception of Cú Chulainn," and the *Echtra Machae*, "Adventure of Macha," both tales from the Ulster heroic cycle:

Here the tale of Cú Chulainn's birth is told in a spare and uncomplicated style which sets the pattern for classical Old Irish narrative in general, but which at the same time offers certain indications that the *Compert* is not very far removed from the first emergence of this kind of prose. To begin with, the spareness of the writing is one which suggests economy rather than abridgement: the sequence of events is clearly marked and at no point does it give an impression of serious hiatus. On the other hand, the narrative is concise to the point of abruptness and lacks those stylistic features which are most typical of traditional oral narration: alliteration, repetition, description and dialogue. . . . There is yet another feature of *Compert Con Culainn* which seems to mark a divergence from the oral mode, namely its relative lack of the sentence connectives which are virtually indispensable to spoken narrative .... (Mac Cana 1972:109-10).

By way of contrast *Echtra Machae*, while it has one brief series of short sentences with the verb in initial position, otherwise exploits a greater variety of word-order and sentence-length, not to mention its snippets of dialogue. . . . The disparity between the texts is unmistakable: one appears to have for its primary purpose to provide a clear statement, precise and unembellished, of the incidents which constitute the saga, whereas the other shows the author/redactor consciously moulding this functional medium into the semblance of a literary style. (*ibid.*:110).

The stylistic features distinguishing Irish oral from literary prose style are still in the process of being explored and formulated by Celticists, particularly Mac Cana (see also 1977) and Edgar Slotkin (1973, 1983). Before we arrive at an adequate set of textually based criteria, however, scholars will continue to a greater

or lesser extent to base the distinction between oral and literary upon aesthetic factors (is the prose “good” or “bad”?), which in turn are charged with the scholar’s attitude toward the oral tradition. Especially to those who have had personal experience with traditional Gaelic storytelling, oral tradition may seem to offer the best of narrative styles. On the other hand, the scholar who views oral tradition hypothetically is tempted to allow it at best a “conventional” narrative style, implicitly deemed inferior to the literary style (cf. Jackson, 1961:6). Whatever one’s point of view, Seán de Búrca’s insightful analysis of the style of a folktale text collected from a Galway storyteller should be taken into account, as a lesson on the dangers of making generalizations about the style of narrative in oral and literary traditions, or early and recent traditions:

A severe simplicity of style characterizes the recital of *An Giolla Géaglonnach*. In many cases a sentence consists of a single clause, varying in length between three and seven syllables. . . . Longer sentences may comprise a few clauses of the foregoing type, in paratactical construction. . . . Along with simplicity there is pervasive brevity. . . . However, it must be remembered that brevity and conciseness need not coincide in a text. In *An Giolla Géaglonnach* there are various expressions which occur repeatedly while adding virtually nothing to the tale itself. . . . Whole clauses may be repeated. . . . From this duplication and redundancy, it is obvious that the brevity which exists in the tale has not been sought systematically. The impression given is one of composition during performance: of the transmitter fashioning his story (largely in his own words) from its basic elements as he goes along; and this improvization is further indicated by personal comments or asides that he makes in the course of his recital. . . . In the light of the foregoing considerations, and bearing in mind the typical form and content of early examples in the extant tradition, it seems to me that the genuine Irish tale deriving from the preliterate period was relatively short. (Búrca 1973-74:58-60).

In *Saga and Myth* Murphy noted yet another possible sign of the influence of the oral heritage on medieval Irish literature: the

multiformity of narrative patterns, already mentioned in Cecile O’Rahilly’s discussion of the TBC doublets cited above. Of the literary inconsistency surrounding the old tale of Mac Dathó’s pig (best known in the Old Irish redaction entitled *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*, “Tidings of Mac Dathó’s Pig”), Murphy said:

That the living tradition of the story was an oral one is suggested not alone by differences between details in the version preserved for us today and similar details referred to in two old poems appended by Thurneysen to his edition of the ninth-century tale, but also by the apparent inclusion of the tale, under the title *Argain Meic Dá Thó* (Mac Dá Thó’s Slaughter), in the two main lists of tales which *filid* should be able “to tell to kings and noblemen.” (1966:126).

The bewildering proliferation of variants which often characterizes the medieval literary transmission of Irish narratives takes on new meaning when viewed as the imprint of an ongoing oral tradition. Daniel Melia, in his article on the “boyhood deeds” (*macgnímrada*) section of the TBC (1975), draws important conclusions from the fact that at least two compatible versions of this “flashback” text, centered on the youth of the hero Cú Chulainn, were circulating in medieval literary tradition:

There is strong evidence that the “Boyhood Deeds” must be in origin one of the most archaic parts of the *Cattle Raid of Cooley*, that Versions A and B are parallel narrative equivalents of each other, that this parallelism is an example of the kind of multiformity more characteristic of oral than of written tradition, and that the evidence here for an updated multiform text of a single archaic incident group is a further indication that one of the strongest forces operating on the tradition of this important saga was the introduction of variants.

If Versions A and B of the “Boyhood Deeds” did in fact exist in multiform close to the time of compilation of the earlier version of the *Cattle Raid of Cooley*, this fact may help to account for the “modernity” noted by Carney and others, for if conflation of an existing multiform tradition of the story was a recent event, there is no reason why some “improvement” might not have been attempted. In

addition to the above conclusions, these tales illustrate the ways in which story patterning exists on levels beyond the semantic ones of “formula” and the narrative ones of “theme”; the process of building and manipulating concrete metaphors pervades early literature to an extent we find hard to comprehend in the milieu of modern psychological fiction. (1975:37).

The possibility of such textual “improvements” under the influence of an ongoing oral tradition affects our concept of the scribal transmitters: monks and, later, members of scribal families, none of whom were by any means isolated from the oral tradition thriving in the society around them.

In his study of the myth of Cenn Faelad, supposedly the first amanuensis of the secular oral tradition in Ireland, Edgar Slotkin takes the issue of multiformity beyond the hypothetical primal stage of the redactor taking down an oral performance, or the oral performer creating an autograph text (see Ó Coileáin 1977:30-31). The medieval transmitter of literature may not always have treated the text as fixed, partly because he wanted to incorporate multiform oral material, and partly because he viewed or mentally “heard” certain types of passages in the written text in terms of oral performance:

Given the attitude of scribes towards their work, we can think of each one of their productions as a kind of multiform of their original. In this sense, the entire nature of a critical edition of a saga is a false concept. Surely, the “interpolation” of a late scribe may be traditional, meaningful, and necessary to the tale or that particular scribal performance of the tale. Every saga must be evaluated, and each manuscript of each saga, separately. If our evaluation leads us to suspect that scribes regarded their texts as multiforms, we may treat such a manuscript as if it were a somewhat specialized separate performance. The motivations that produced the differences were the motivations of the oral teller of tales. (Slotkin 1977-79:450).

Still taking its first faltering steps is the study of how the medieval Irish scribes and storytellers themselves viewed their own traditions—both literary and oral—and how they conceptualized the acts of memorization and composition. Knowledge of this ideological background would form a valuable complement and aid

to our slowly evolving understanding of the actual mechanics of composition that lie behind the texts. There is extensive material upon which to base such knowledge, including a rich vocabulary of relevant terms, the use and semantic range of which await scholarly examination. Urard Mac Coisse, the *fili* storyteller discussed in the first part of this piece, is said in a sixteenth-century poem to have retained his repertoire of stories *do ghloin mheabhra* (Knott 1926, 1:23), “with pure memory/completely preserved.” The word for “memory” here, *meabhar* or *mebair*, is a borrowing from Latin *memoria* (Vendryes 1960:s.v. *mebair*), and it is attested as early as the Old Irish glosses. *Mebair* can refer both to the capacity of memorizing and to the thing(s) memorized; in the prose text of the *Airec* it occurs three times in plural form with the latter meaning, to indicate Urard’s mental control over his repertoire (e.g., *ar batar mebra laisium coimgneda ocus sceoil* . . . [Byrne 1908:42], “for he knew the accounts and tales . . .”). The phrase featuring *mebair* in the poem cited above, *do glain mebra/mebair*, “in memory, memorized,” is an idiom often found in other texts as well. In the late medieval compilation *Feis Tighe Chonáin*, “Feast of Conan’s House,” it takes on a distinctly mystical connotation. The hunter-chief Finn is describing one of the wonders of his heroic band: *Óglāch bodhbhur atā ‘san bfēin, 7 nī dearnadh duan nō duathchann nach biadh do dirm degh-foghluma 7 do glan meaba[i]r aige* (Joynt 1936:lines 449-51), “a deaf warrior who is in the band: the poem or song has not been composed that he has not learned swiftly and committed to memory completely.” In another medieval text, the *Acallam na Senórach*, “Colloquy of the Ancients,” Finn’s musician (*airfitech*)—a dwarf (*abhuc*) from the otherworld named Cnú Deróil, “Trifling Nut” —is described in similar terms: *Gacha cluinedh tiar is tair/ do bhídh aigi do meabair* (Stokes 1900:line 681), “everything he heard west and east, he kept in his memory.” That Cnú Deróil heard and retained more than just musical compositions can be assumed, given the fact that musicians are often credited in medieval Irish literature with the talents of storytellers (Murphy 1953:191). Our musical dwarf in his versatility reminds us of his father, who, according to a Fenian ballad (Murphy 1933:118), is the god Lug. In the text of the *Cath Maige Tuired*, “[Second] Battle of Mag Tuired,” this divinity claims to be a harper (*cruitire*), a *fili*, and a shanachie (*senchaid*); he is appropriately called *Samildánach* “Possessor of All Arts” (Stokes

1891:76).

There is another otherworldly musician in the *Acallam* noted for his retention: the harper Cas Corach, who accompanies the old hero Cailte in order to collect the many stories the aged informant has to tell (*d'fhoglaím fhessa 7 fhireolais 7 scelaigeachta 7 morgnim gaiscid na Féinne* [Stokes 1900:lines 3354-55], “to learn the wisdom, the true knowledge, the stories, and the great deeds of valor of the *fián*”). Here again, as in the above description of the deaf singer, we see the word *foglaím*, “learning,” which is the verbal noun of *fo-gleinn* “collects” (RIA Dict.:s.v.). The otherworldly Cas Corach’s mnemonic mode of “collecting” stands in contrast to the technique utilized by the sacred and secular mortals in Cailte’s company, who record his stories in writing. After Cailte recites a poem about the history of the *fián* (war-band), a composition containing information that Cailte says was in his *mebair* (*mebair lem*, Stokes 1900:line 2491), his royal auditor, Diarmaid mac Cerbaill, demands to know:

Caid a filet sin 7 senchaide Eirenn? Scribthar i tamlorgaib filed 7 a slechtaib suad 7 a mbriathraib ollaman co mbere cach a chuid lais da crích 7 da ferann bodein da each ní dar’ indis Cailti 7 Oissin da morgnimarthaib gaile 7 gaiscid, 7 do dindshenchus Eirenn (Stokes 1900:lines 2588-94).

Where are the *filid* and the shanachies of Ireland? Let this be written in the stone-tablets of *filid*, the recensions of scholars, and the words of prime poets, so that each may take his share back to his own land—of all that Cailte and Oisín have narrated of the great deeds of valor and warfare, and of the place-name lore of Ireland (cf. *ibid.*:lines 299-303, 3104-6).

Supernatural storytellers such as Cas Corach may not need scribes or manuscripts, but, in the world-view dominating not just the *Acallam* text but most of Old/Middle Irish literature, writing is—at least for mankind—a wonderful invention. It is, among other things, a device for preserving the *mebair* of oral tradition, and learned men such as *filid* naturally come to depend upon the written word. A paradigm of scribal behavior as well as a rationale for a written tradition are presented in a popular medieval tale alluded to in various texts (e.g., Binchy 1978:250), about the poet-warrior Cenn Faelad, the “patron saint” of scribes.

The very name of this legendary character, “Head (of) Instruction,” seems to refer to the process of transmission. *Faelad* or *fáelad* is the verbal noun of *fáelaid*, “teaches,” a verb that is possibly derived from the reduplicated stem of *fo-gleinn*, “collects” (RIA Dict. : s.v. *fáelaid*)—the verbal noun of which (*foglainm*) we encountered above in the descriptions of Finn’s deaf transmitter of songs and the musician Cas Corach. The story of Cenn Faelad rests on the odd premise that he developed an amazing memory only after he lost his *inchind dermait*, “brain of forgetting,” as the result of a battle wound. While convalescing, Cenn Faelad heard the lessons emanating from nearby schools of learning (including a school for poets), and whatever he heard uttered during the day, by night he had captured completely in his *mebair* (*cach ni docluined-sum [ ] na tri scot each lae dobid do glain mebru aice each naidche*). This lore he proceeded to put in poetic form and then write down. Thus, the story goes, began the Irish literary tradition. There is something puzzling in the logic of this etiological legend, and we may speculate that, as suggested by Slotkin (1977-79:437-40), the brain of forgetting did not disappear with the wound in the original form of the story but instead was caused by it, so that Cenn Faelad wrote down what he heard because he could no longer preserve it in his *mebair*.

In the tale about the rediscovery of the *Cattle Raid of Cúailnge* (see above)—known as the *Do Foillsigud na Tána Bó Cúailnge*, “Concerning the Revelation of the *Táin*” —we find the implicit message that the availability of written texts can corrupt *flidecht* and the storyteller’s *mebair* (the tale has survived in several different versions: Best and O’Brien 1967:1119; Meyer 1907:2-6; Joynt 1931:lines 1004-1303; see Carney 1955:166-79 for summaries). The chief poet (*ardfhili*) of Ireland, Senchán Torpéist, and a delegation of his fellow *áes dána* (craftsmen) force themselves upon the Connaught king Gúaire Aidne in an attempt to test his well-known generosity. After the “heavy hosting” of the artisans has become intolerable, Gúaire or his brother Marbán devises a ruse for getting rid of them: Senchán and his company are asked to tell the story of the Cattle Raid of Cúailnge. The professional tradition-bearers are forced to admit that it is not in their memory (*mebair*, Meyer 1907:4), and that the written text of the *Táin* had been given away in exchange for a copy of Isidore’s *Etymologiae*! Senchán and his companions thus lose the right to impose upon Gúaire any longer, but in order to preserve his honor

as a *fili* and fulfill the request of his audience, Senchán goes in search of the story of the Cattle Raid. The chief poet, or his son Muirgen, finally obtains it when he goes to the grave of Fergus mac Róich, one of the heroes of the story, and brings him back to life with a poetic composition, in which this hero of long ago is addressed as if he were alive. In the company of his bardic audience, the resurrected Fergus, who is noted for his storytelling within the story of the *Táin* itself (it is he who narrates the boyhood deeds of Cú Chulainn referred to above), chants the account of the Cattle Raid (*rochachuin Tain*, Meyer 1907:4) from beginning to end. The gigantic Fergus cannot be heard when he is standing, so he sits or lies down as he tells the tale. This live oral performance lasts three days and three nights, during which time the mortal auditor(s) remains shrouded in a magical mist. Afterwards, Senchán has the tale written down, and so it is captured once again for posterity.

Certain aspects of this description of Fergus' performance, and the storyteller's simultaneous imbibing of the previously lost text, bring to mind details contained in surviving accounts of how Gaelic poets composed their poems. In an eighteenth-century source detailing the homework of Irish bardic pupils, we read:

The Professors (one or more as there was occasion) gave a Subject suitable to the Capacity of each Class, determining the number of Rhimes, and clearing what was to be chiefly observed therein as to Syllables, Quartans, Concord, Correspondence, Termination and Union, each of which were restrain'd by peculiar Rules. The said Subject (either one or more as aforesaid) having been given over Night, they work'd it apart each by himself upon his own Bed, the whole next day in the Dark, till at a certain Hour in the Night, Lights being brought in, they committed it to writing. . . . The reason of laying the Study aforesaid in the Dark was doubtless to avoid the Distraction which Light and the variety of Objects represented therein commonly occasions. (Thomas O'Sulleavane in the *Memoirs of the Marquis of Clanricarde*, 1722; quoted in Bergin 1970:6).

A roughly contemporary Scottish observer of Gaelic customs, Martin Martin, gives a similar description of the process of poetic composition utilized by the professional poets of Scotland: "They shut their Doors and Windows for a Days time, and lie on their

backs with a Stone upon their Belly, and Plads about their Heads, and their Eyes being cover'd they pump their Brains for Rhetorical Encomium or Panegyrick; and indeed they furnish such a Stile from this Dark Cell as is understood by very few" (*Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, 1703; quoted in Bergin 1970:8). The composing bard's need for darkness, enclosure, and at least the semblance of sleep, echoes a recipe for mantic trance preserved in the tenth-century *Cormac's Glossary*. After offering to the pagan gods a sacrifice of raw meat, the *fili* in search of knowledge, we are told in this text, lies down to sleep, his face covered with his hands, and awaits enlightenment (Meyer 1912:64). The term used in *Cormac's Glossary* to describe the transmission of knowledge to the sleeping *fili* is *foillsigud*, "revelation" — the same word used in the previously discussed texts to describe the remarkable procedure whereby Senchán recovers the *Táin*.

The revenant Fergus, who is asked by the poet in search of an old story to lie or sit down so that his tale may be heard, reclines like the composing poets described by O'Sullevane and Martin. But for Fergus, this passive position facilitates the transmission of his memory of a traditional tale to his audience, while for the poet, the passive position is conducive to supernatural inspiration and the creation of a new poem. Concomitant with prostration in both cases are containment and concealment in darkness, conditions antithetical to the secular acts of reading and writing; yet it is these uncomfortable circumstances that enable the poet to function as divinely inspired singer of praise as well as storyteller equipped with a complete and accurate *mebair*. The composing *fili* emerges from his room or hut with a fresh composition ready to be performed; Senchán or Muirgen emerges from the magical mist with an old story restored to his memory. Whether it is a praise-poem or a *scél*, the next and essential step is to commit it to writing. But, as the story of Senchán's embarrassment over the *Táin* shows, the written word is no substitute for the poet's *mebair glan*, "pure memory," or the numinous oral tradition behind it.

Senchán, locked with a king in a muted struggle concerning poets' rights, is tricked by his audience when he is asked to perform the one story he does not know. Since he does not know it, Senchán loses to Gúaire and must leave the court; hence, the relationship between poet and patron, which was threatened by Senchán's excesses, maintains its equilibrium. Urard, on the other

hand, is also involved in a discreet battle with a monarch over rights, but the poet in this case has both a legitimate grievance and a comprehensive narrative memory. So the trick is played on the audience, for the *airec menman*, “trick of the mind,” referred to in the title of the tale is an extension of Urard’s professional *mebair*. He names a story that no one else has ever heard—a new tale, based on the old ones, that he has composed. With this invented *scél* the *fili* wins his case and obtains restitution from the king; thereby, the rights of poets are preserved. Lesser *fili* struggle to preserve intact the old tales of heroes who lived long ago, and they must rely on the written text. But Urard with his remarkable control over the repertoire can become another Fergus: a subject of narrative who narrates his own experiences in a form that enriches, sustains, and even protects the tradition and profession of poets and storytellers. Thus, for this supreme *fili*-storyteller of pure and creative memory, as for Fergus and the many other figures of traditional narrative who are said to have been brought back to life by saints and scholars seeking to revive the narrative tradition (Nagy 1983), orally transmitted personal memorates become the traditional *scéla* that form the backbone of both oral and literary tradition.

Underlying the tales and texts sampled above is a distinction being made between oral and literary transmission, and there are many further nuances of theme and vocabulary to be decoded here. The clues to understanding the mysterious process of composition behind the tales of our medieval manuscripts are still where they always have been: within the texts themselves. For the student of oral tradition, one of the outstanding *desiderata* in the field of medieval Irish literature is an inventory of the words relating to the concepts of composition, memory, and narration, accompanied by analyses of their etymologies and various uses. We have barely explored the connotations of *mebair*, and there are other words for memory, such as the native Irish word *cuman*, which deserve similar exploration. Further analysis of vocabulary pertaining to transmission, performance, and memorization would complement the existing scholarship on the Celtic lexicon of poetry, poets, and their craft (Hamp 1977; Watkins 1963:213-17 and 1976; Williams 1971 *passim*). With the accumulation and integration of such studies we would arrive at a deeper understanding of medieval Irish narrative,

even without the actual context of composition and performance before us—just as the wondrous Fenian singer mentioned above could “hear” all the songs ever composed, even though he was deaf.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Similarly, the medieval Welsh poet is credited with the talents of *cyfarwydd*, “storyteller” (Ford 1975-76). The emergence of a Welsh literary style out of oral traditional narrative is the subject of Roberts 1984.

<sup>2</sup>Tierney 1980:243 (Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, V1.14). The close relationship between the functions and traditions of the Celtic druid and the Irish *fili* has most recently been described in Mac Cana 1979.

<sup>3</sup>Concerning the connotations of *légend* as in the term *fer légind*, by which the Irish *literati* sometimes designated one another, Edgar Slotkin says: “*Légend* (from Lat. *legendum*) has a number of meanings which may be applicable: ‘reading’, . . . ‘monastic learning’, . . . ‘studying’, ‘text’. The range of semantics here is instructive: literacy is connected with Latin learning, not native scholarship. *Légend* is used in the earlier texts to refer only to ecclesiastical studies.” (1977-79:439, n. 13).

<sup>4</sup>In his address delivered to the Sixth International Celtic Congress, Carney said of this work: “When it was written Irish scholarship was dominated by two frustrating, oppressive, and powerful orthodoxies, one concerning the nature of early Irish saga, the other concerning the date, career and personality of St. Patrick. This book was a perhaps overstrong rebellion against both of these deeply entrenched orthodoxies. I can say quite briefly that if I were to write in the calmer atmosphere of today I would make many modifications, and not merely in tone.” (1983:127-28).

<sup>5</sup>The validity of treating the organization or disorganization of episodes in a literary narrative as a criterion for oral provenance is an issue also touched upon in Slotkin 1978 and O’Nolan 1969-70. Of the sequence of events in a medieval Irish prose version of the *Aeneid*, O’Nolan says: “In the case of the Irish *Aeneid*, the translator has attempted a structural re-casting of the story so as to relate the events in the order of their occurrence. This involved prior reading and close examination of at least the first four books. The only feasible explanation of the procedure adopted by the translator is that he found the ‘in medias res’ method strange and unacceptable, out of accord with Irish narratives which, however much they may have found refuge in manuscripts, are nonetheless oral in character” (129).

<sup>6</sup>Carney himself, in an article written several years after the publication of his first controversial piece on IB, speculated that the author of the text was a *fili* “personally involved in the problem of being a Christian, while at the same time retaining as much as possible of his traditional heritage” (1976:193).

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