

Oral Life and Literary Death in Medieval Irish Tradition

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*The Milman Parry Lecture
on Oral Tradition for 1988*

This paper¹ will not tell you much about medieval or modern Irish oral tradition, although there is much to be said on the subject. Indeed, my contribution was originally planned as an accompaniment to a talk by Dr. Kevin O’Nolan of University College, Dublin, who had been invited by Professor Foley to share with you some of his groundbreaking researches into the oral compositional nature of some of our medieval Irish texts; most regrettably, Dr. O’Nolan was unable to accept the invitation owing to poor health.² My own interests center not so much on the realities of Irish oral tradition as on the conceptualizations of “oral composition” and “literary composition” that are to be found in the texts produced by the rich scribal culture of Ireland between the sixth and sixteenth centuries A.D. The Irish *literati* and *semi-literati*, like any other people faced with the prospect of writing, theorized about and agonized over the repercussions of the shift from the oral mode of verifying and perpetuating cultural “truth” to the written mode of so doing, a shift of which these elite members of their society were keenly aware. Most scholars in the tight, arcane little field of medieval Irish studies, as those of you who are so generous with your time as to have gained acquaintance with it may know, have until recently not paid much attention to this problem of transition that so racked the minds of the medieval Irish. Thanks, however, to the work of O’Nolan, Proinsias Mac Cana, Seán Ó Coileáin, Edgar Slotkin, and others,³ we have become more sensitive to the oral-versus-literary tension that provides a key subtext to so many of the medieval Irish texts Celticists have been mulling over philologically for the past hundred years. One could now even propose a radical re-evaluation of medieval Irish literature in the wake of our being made aware of this clash of communicative legitimacies, going so far as to say (at least to an audience of kindly and indulgent non-Celticists) that most of what “happens” in these literary texts, on the levels of both form and content, is directly and even self-consciously expressive of this clash. Such dialectical self-reflexivity in

the medieval Irish text is in fact what is to be expected of a “transitional” literature that is still growing out of, or even alongside, a vital oral tradition.

The tension between oral and literary that underlies the scribal understandings of the origins of the Irish literary tradition and the assertions of its authority is usually to be found interlaced with other equally disparate tensions faced by the bearers of this tradition. Perhaps the most conspicuous of these coordinated tensions, and the one with which it made the most sense historically to link the tension between oral and literary, is that between pagan and Christian. Reading and writing became important activities in Ireland with the coming of Christianity to the island in the fifth century, a process traditionally associated with the murky figure of St. Patrick. While the pagan Irish of the period did have a form of writing, which is called *ogam*, it appears to have been used for very limited inscriptional purposes and to have been a recent invention based on the Latin alphabet (see MacManus 1986). Therefore, the society converted in the fifth century was overwhelmingly “oral,” and remained so to a greater or lesser extent down to recent times. Our evidence seems to indicate that very early on in the history of the Irish Christian church, a close connection (albeit hardly a merger) was established between the native learned orders, primarily the *filid* “poets” (sing. *fili*) and the *brithemain* “jurists,” who sustained traditions of oral composition and transmission rooted in the Celtic past, and the clerical, primarily monastic proponents of the new, text-based faith, who were well versed in Latin and the literature of late classical Christianity. There is, for example, the emblematic hagiographical figure of St. Columba or Colum Cille, one of the great movers and shakers of the sixth-century Irish church, who reputedly was a trained, card-carrying *fili* (Kenney 1929:441), and who in one story told about him is said to have prevented the wholesale expulsion of all the *filid* from Ireland, a drastic move that had been proposed by the island’s leaders after the poets’ arrogance had become insufferable (Stokes 1899:38-39, 42-54, and elsewhere). One of our earliest surviving vernacular texts is a eulogy for Colum Cille (the *Amra Choluim Chille*) that, the scribal tradition claims, had been composed by the chief poet of Ireland as a gesture of gratitude toward a patron, as well as of homage toward a fellow professional possessor of traditional knowledge (*ibid*:148-83, 249-87, 400-19).

So far, I have presented little if anything that suggests tension, let alone disharmony, between pagan and Christian, or their respective media, oral and literary. The picture drawn so far, and the one that has caught the notice of most Celtic scholars of the past, depicts a smooth transition or even fusion of both religious and communicative authority in early Christian Ireland. But the tensions are definitely there, and they are as much a part of the picture early Irish literature presents of itself as are the icons of sweet concord, even in the traditions concerning Colum Cille, Christian patron of the pagan oral arts. For instance, in a tale about him that has been preserved in Irish of the eighth

or ninth century, or possibly even earlier (Meyer 1899; on the dating of the text, see Mac Cana 1975:37-38), the saint, in the company of his monks, meets a young man who has come from across the ocean to talk with him. The stranger's identity is uncertain; the text states that some say he was Mongán, an Ulster princeling assigned by the Irish annals roughly to Colum Cille's era, and the legendary son of the pagan god Manannán mac Lir. The mysterious traveller tells his Christian auditors that he has lived many lives, been "there and back" as it were, and speaks to the living while consorting also with the dead (Meyer 1899:315; see Mac Cana 1975:36). Colum Cille, awed by such transcendent experience and knowledge, asks the stranger to describe the transmarine lands in which he lives, realms that—we know and the original readers of the text knew—are redolent with Irish pagan concepts of the otherworld. The supernatural informant tells all to the saint, but in private. After the stranger leaves, Colum Cille's fellow clerics beg him to divulge what he has learned, but he refuses. Thus the story ends on a note of division. The young man and Colum Cille, almost like the continental Celtic druids described in classical sources, guard their shared knowledge jealously from the uninitiated⁴—who, however, in this case happen to be Colum Cille's fellow monks, readers and producers of texts! Of course, they are not the only ones left out: the text itself in which we read the story is purposely defective, and it is its reader who is most pointedly taught that there are some things that can be said to the right people, but should not be disseminated promiscuously—in this instance, meaning "written down."⁵

That this story is indeed making a fascinatingly bold point about the gap between pagan and Christian knowledge as well as about a hierarchy of media, seems to be confirmed by what happens in another version of the story, which, while it has only survived in a text written much later than the tale summarized above, may well have been a contemporaneous multiform of it (O'Kelleher and Schoepperle 1918:78-83). In this other version, which presents a diametrically opposed view of the relationships in question, the young man from across the sea is definitely identified as Mongán. Here too the traveller offers to share with Colum Cille knowledge of faraway lands, and the saint is interested. But what Mongán, a knower and oral communicator of everything un-Christian, has primarily come for is to find out from Colum Cille what heaven and hell are like. The saint generously invites Mongán to peek under the saintly cloak, where the young man is miraculously afforded a double vision of the Christian options for the afterlife. Colum Cille asks Mongán to describe what he has seen, but the instant visionary confesses that words (spoken, not written, of course) fail him. He does, however, beg Colum Cille to assure him of salvation—a request often made of, and granted by, Irish saints in their biographies. Colum Cille grants Mongán's, and so the tale ends. Here too, as in the previously discussed version of the story, the text is lacking the informational punchline: we the

readers do not find out what heaven and hell are like. But the fault lies with the inadequacy of speech, and there are no implications of the inadequacy of the written word or the unworthiness of its purveyors and surveyors. Thus, between these two different versions of the same story (or, perhaps we should say, between these two different stories), the gamut of relations between oral/pagan and literary/Christian is run from respectful coexistence to outright annexation.

The choice of Mongán here as the possible or definite participant in the dialogue is itself interesting. As I stated before, he is a figure closely connected with the otherworlds of Irish paganism and yet a far more “historical” character (or at least one more historically treated in our sources) than most of the heroes and heroines of medieval Irish literature to whom supernatural parentage is attributed. Furthermore, he seems to have been one of the first secular (to say the least) figures about whom stories were written down by the Irish *literati*, for among our earliest extant Irish narrative texts is a cycle of tales about Mongán, detailing his divine origins and supernatural talents (Meyer and Nutt 1895:42-58; see also Knott 1916). In these accounts, he is shown challenging or rivalling the authority of *filid*, to the extent that one scholar has dubbed the character of Mongán *a frithfhile*, “anti-*fili*” (Henry 1976:86-94) who represents an alternative voice of truth within the early Irish ideological schema. Indeed, it is arguable that in his defiance of the traditional purveyors of lore and his patronage of youths engaged in the study of poetry as evinced in these early tales, Mongán served the early Irish *literati* as a kind of mascot (cf. Flower 1947:1-10). Perhaps significant in this regard is the use of the terms *cléirech* “cleric” and *cléirchín* “little cleric” in a Mongán text to designate the students who join with Mongán in a scheme to embarrass a famous poet (Knott 1916:156). Borrowed from Latin *clericus*, these Irish words admittedly take on the more general, less specifically ecclesiastical meaning of “student” early on in their linguistic life, but their appearance here is provocative (compare the designation of another student in another Mongán tale by way of the native term for “poetic pupil,” *éicsine* [Meyer and Nutt 1895:52]). Mongán’s only absolutely explicit encounter with Christianity and its text-based culture outside the strange tale of his meeting with Colum Cille comes in a rather late medieval *märchen*-like text (*ibid.*:58-84; see Nagy 1987:13-24) that gives us the stories of Mongán’s marvelous conception and youth, his violent accession to the throne of Ulster, and his rescue of his beloved queen after he loses her to a rival king, the lascivious Brandub of Leinster, through a bargain Mongán foolishly has struck with him. On a secret mission to rendezvous with his wife in the residence of his rival for her affections, yet still lacking a plan of action, Mongán and his sidekick the servant Mac an Daimh come across another pair of travellers (from Kuno Meyer’s translation of the text, slightly revised):

And they saw a holy cleric going past them, Tibraide, the priest of Cell Chamain, with his four gospels in his own hand, and the rest of his gear upon the back of a cleric by his side, and they reading their offices. And wonder seized Mac an Daimh as to what the cleric said, and he kept asking Mongán, "What did he say?" Mongán said it was reading, and he asked Mac an Daimh whether he understood a little of it. "I do not understand," said Mac an Daimh, "except that the man at his back says 'Amen, amen'." Thereupon Mongán shaped a large river through the midst of the plain in front of Tibraide, and a large bridge across it. And Tibraide marvelled at that and began to bless himself. "It is here," he said, "that my father was born and my grandfather, and never did I see a river here. But as the river has got there, it is well there is a bridge across it." They proceeded to the bridge, and when they had reached its middle, it fell under them, and Mongán snatched the gospels out of Tibraide's hand, and sent the clerics down the river. And he asked Mac an Daimh whether he should drown them. "Certainly, let them be drowned," said Mac an Daimh. "We will not do it," said Mongán. "We will let them down the river the length of a mile, till we have done our task in the royal residence." Mongán took on himself the shape of Tibraide, and gave Mac an Daimh the shape of the cleric, with a large tonsure on his head.... And they go onward before the King of Leinster, who welcomed Tibraide and gave him a kiss, and said, "'Tis long that I have not seen you, Tibraide; read the gospel to us and proceed before us to my residence.... And the queen, the wife of the king of Ulster [that is, Mongán's wife] would like to confess to you." And while Mongán was reading the gospel, Mac an Daimh would say, "Amen, amen." The hosts said they had never seen a priest who had but one word except that cleric; for he said nothing but "amen" (Meyer and Nutt 1895:77-78).

Mongán does indeed get the chance not only to hear his wife's confession but to enjoy his conjugal rights in the guise of the priest Tibraide. The "confession," however, is overheard by a duenna:

And when that had been done, the hag who guarded the jewels, who was in the corner, began to speak; for they had not noticed her until then. And Mongán sent a swift magical breath at her, so that what she had seen was no longer clear to her. "That is sad," said the hag, "do not rob me of Heaven, o holy cleric! For the thought that I have uttered is wrong, and accept my repentance, for a lying vision has appeared to me...." "Come hither to me, hag," said Mongán, "and confess to me." The hag arose, and Mongán shaped a sharp spike in the chair, and the hag fell upon the spike, and found death. "A blessing on you, Mongán," said the queen, "it is a good thing for us to have killed the woman, for she would have told what we have done" (*ibid.*:78-79).

Mongán and Mac an Daimh escape from Brandub's lair and, although successful on this escapade, wait for another occasion to rescue the queen.

Amidst the anti-clerical and *fabliau*-esque hilarity of this account we should not lose sight of the ease with which the shapeshifting hero adapts to the role of gospel-reading priest, unlike his illiterate sidekick. But such fake

clerical text-slinging is only a hollow literary means to a genuine oral-aural end: namely, the “confession” that Mongán and his wife so terribly long for, a putatively oral act of exchange which is gravely threatened by what the inhibiting hag could say. Fortunately for Mongán, she too agrees to go to confession, though of a far less pleasant sort. (Let me, by way of a digression, state the obvious and assure you that in medieval Irish literature, as in many others, oral discourse between men and women not only can lead to but is often representative of sexual intercourse. For example, in a medieval Irish variation on the story of Potiphar’s wife [the *Fingal Rónáin*], the seductress utters half of an improvised quatrain to her victim in public; when he finishes it on the spot, she claims to her husband that the young man’s responsiveness demonstrates that he has had sex with her [Green 1955:6-7; see Ó Cathasaigh 1985].)

In this episode from the late Mongán tale summarized above, our wily friend proves capable of playing the communication game from either side, the Christian/literary or the pagan/oral. Perhaps that is the most consistent feature of the figure of Mongán as he appears in both early and later material: this ability, and the ability of the stories about him, to straddle almost effortlessly, and even manipulate, tense relationships between competing values and media. Let us recall that this is the same character who can be portrayed as either isolating the Christian saint Colum Cille from his monastic community in a triumph of oral elitism, or joining Colum Cille’s flock by denying the power of the spoken word to communicate the truth.

In this vein, we should pay attention to one of the talents with which Mongán introduces himself, according to the earlier version of the tale of his meeting with the saint which we have already discussed. The stranger, who may be Mongán, claims that he has contact (possibly “speaks”; the language of the text is difficult here) with both the living and the dead. By implication, then, he himself is both living and dead, or alive beyond the lifespan of most living beings. Such a bold claim makes native sense in the context of the stranger’s having come from lands across the sea. Among the most prominent names for these lands or otherworlds on the other side of the ocean in Irish tradition are *Tír na n-Óg* “Land of the Youthful” and *Tír na mBéo* “Land of the Living.” Both of these designations, of course, highlight the immortality and rejuvenatory powers traditionally enjoyed by the residents of Irish supernatural realms. Furthermore, the assertion of freedom from the limitations imposed by the categories of life and death rings a special bell in the context of the other early stories written about Mongán. He is the only character in medieval Irish literature to be designated a reincarnation of another, particular character within the narrative repertoire. The revelation of his dual nature, interestingly enough, comes about in a story that features contention between Mongán and his perennial opponent, the traditional poet or *fili*. According to this, one of the earliest Mongán tales (Meyer and Nutt

1895:45-52), Forgoll, a legendary poet, is regaling Mongán with a story about the heroics of the great warrior of old, Finn mac Cumail, and his equally heroic foster son Caílte, when Mongán interrupts the poet and disputes his version of the story. Forgoll is incensed at this challenge to his authority and threatens to satirize Mongán and his kingdom. To assuage the poet and protect himself and his people from the deadly effects of satire, Mongán agrees to surrender his queen in three days. (Note that Mongán's powers of communication are closely bound to his sex life here as in the tale discussed above.) On the third day, Mongán hears the approaching footsteps of one "who is coming to our help." A warrior appears and offers to adjudicate. Forgoll tells his version of the story about Finn. "'That was not good,' said the warrior, 'it shall be proved. We were with you, Finn [says the warrior, addressing Mongán].' 'Hush,' said Mongán, 'that is not fair' (*ibid.*:51). The warrior tells his version of the story and even shows the site where it happened, all of which vindicates Mongán and proves the poet wrong. The story ends with the statement: "It was Caílte, Finn's foster son, that had come to them. Mongán, however, was Finn, though he would not let it be told" (*ibid.*:52).

Mongán, then, knows whereof he speaks; he has actually lived it. He *is* the narrative tradition, in this case. And as such, he is not just Mongán, a sixth-century Ulsterman, nor is his conversational circle limited to his living contemporaries. He shares secrets with the revenant Caílte of the mythical pagan past as well as with the living Colum Cille of the Christian present. He reveals his timelessness, just as he reveals his powers and knowledge, through the spoken word, either his own or that of others. In so doing, Mongán is equally the conscience and the saboteur both of the oral traditional establishment and by extension also of the literary. For while the cat is let out of the bag somewhat in this text (we the readers do end up knowing, although we shouldn't, that Mongán is in fact Finn), because Mongán tells Caílte to hold his tongue, we are mostly left in the dark about what we most eagerly want to know (as in the tale of Mongán and Colum Cille), and made aware of the limitations of the reliability of conventional poets and scribes.

In this tale of the contest between Mongán and Forgoll, the oral tradition asserts itself and corrects the version of itself being promulgated by its official bearers, in the form of a revived hero who should be dead: Caílte, the foster son of Finn. This scenario constitutes a virtual *topos*, which we see operating in several medieval Irish texts that attempt to explain and justify the victory of Christianity over paganism, coupled with the transition from the spoken to the written word as the authoritative "voice" of tradition, both sacred and secular. There is, for example, the story of how the so-called epic of the *Cattle-Raid of Cooley* (*Táin Bó Cúailnge*) was recovered by the poets of Ireland (Carney 1955:166-70). Having been asked to recite this lengthy tale by a Connaught king of the Christian era, the assembled poets

shamefacedly are forced to admit that they have lost it. The *Cattle-Raid* was once committed to writing and then exchanged, they confess, for a copy of Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, and since that time it has not been heard from. Honor-bound to retrieve it, the poets, aided by the saints of Ireland, launch a massive search for the story of the Cattle-Raid but have no luck in finding it. One of the poets, resting on the grave of a hero featured in the epic, Fergus mac Róig, whimsically addresses a praise poem to Fergus's memorial stone. At this oral salutation the ancient hero arises from his resting place and offers to dictate the story to the surprised poet, who has enough presence of mind to fetch the hide of St. Ciaran's cow and take dictation on it. And so the heroic doings of Fergus, Cú Chulainn, and the other warriors involved in the Cattle-Raid are preserved for posterity, in a written, ecclesiastically sanctioned form. (Fergus, I should add, returns to his grave and disturbs our Judaeo-Christian sensibilities concerning life and death no more.) The process of recovery, literary transcription, and transmission seems to work quite smoothly here, and the text of the *Cattle-Raid*, as it was to be had at the time this story of its rescue was current, is spectacularly legitimated, but there is always the danger that the text could be lost again. The pagan dead of the past are apparently the only absolutely safe repository for what the perishable text contains, and for this reason they win in this story the authority that the present Christianized generation of poets loses.

Caílte, Mongán's returned-from-the-dead savior in the story discussed previously, comes back in yet another text that much more explicitly addresses the issue of the relationship between written and oral, and Christian and pagan. This is the enormous and, in its time, very popular miscellany of Finn-lore composed in the twelfth or thirteenth century, the *Acallam na Senórach*, "Colloquy of the Ancients" (Stokes 1900). The *Colloquy* is really a frame tale, the frame being as follows. Saint Patrick, in the course of his missionary travels around Ireland, happens upon the survivors of Finn's warrior band, led by Caílte. They have stayed alive since their mythical epoch by dwelling in the *side*, the localized otherworlds hiding in the hills and ancient man-made mounds of the island. Caílte, the leader of these heroes who should be dead but, like Rip van Winkle, are not, strikes up a friendship with Patrick, who asks him questions about the old heroes and their adventures. Caílte proves to be a more than willing source of information, but the experience bothers the saint, who is worried that his enjoyment of what Caílte has to say will distract him from the holy mission at hand. So Patrick seeks outside help:

Patrick's two guardian angels came to him there, and he asked them whether it was alright with the King of Heaven and Earth that he, Patrick, was listening to stories of the *fian* [Finn's warrior band]. The angels responded with equal vehemence: "Dear holy cleric! No more than a third

of their stories are these old warriors able to tell you, because of their forgetfulness and senility. Record them on the tablets of poets and in the words of arch-poets, for listening to these stories will gladden throngs and nobles for the rest of time” (Stokes 1900:9).

Thus the tales told by Caílte are recorded by Patrick’s scribes (though clearly they are not so much to be read as listened to), and the text known as the *Colloquy*, supposedly an attempt to document what the old heroes said, comes into being with blessing and approval from on high. Yet here as elsewhere in the text, the justification for writing down the orally delivered tradition is coupled with the warning that the text is by no means the same thing as the performance—particularly the performance as it *would* have been performed in “the good old days,” before Christianity, when memories were still intact, and the oral tradition functioned unencumbered by competition from the literary. There is here once again a mixed message about the efficiency of the oral-to-literary shift: a sense of loss, and of the text as almost by definition shutting out the reader (or the second-hand listener) from a treasure trove of oral communication which is as good as gone with the pagan past.

This conceit of oral tradition’s emanating from the dead or the should-be-dead poses a paradox. After all, the dead are not at all behaving like the dead here: they, like Mongán, seem to exist apart from the rules of life and death that dictate termination dates to their latter-day audiences. Patrick, Colum Cille, the many other saintly amanuenses, and the readership of this body of literature ultimately win their eternal rewards, but they do experience death and do not come back to life on this earth, unlike these oral traditional revenants and immortals. So who is really living, and who is really dead? The bearers of the oral tradition or the writers and readers of the written word? Utterance or text? In an article originally published in 1940 (see now 1981), the great Indo-Europeanist Georges Dumézil discussed this very question in regard to Celtic conceptualizations of oral and literary tradition, and brought attention to a remarkably “Ongian” statement in an eleventh- or twelfth-century text, indisputably literary in origin and even fussily pedantic (Stokes 1891). It describes in a series of episodes the wondrous objects used to determine the truth or falsehood of statements made during the reign of the “ideal” mythical king of Ireland, Cormac mac Airt. The final object discussed, Cormac’s sword, is not so much a device for determining the truth as a treasure that was subjected to a particularly tortuous process of determination. At the beginning of the episode, we are told that the sword was owned by Socht (“Silence”—an ironic name, as we shall see), the son of the poet Fithel, who had helped Cormac write down the legendary lore of Ireland in the fictitious *Saltair Cormaic* “Psalter of Cormac.” (Cormac’s reign supposedly occurred well before the coming of Christianity and the development of a literature, so this is grossly anachronistic, even by medieval

Irish scribal standards; but then this text represents an almost outrageous attempt to project the current *status quo* back into the past!) Socht's sword, which once belonged to the ancient hero Cú Chulainn of *Cattle-Raid* fame, is coveted by Cormac's steward, Dubdrenn. He makes Socht many offers for the sword, but Socht refuses, saying that it is really Fíthel his father's possession, and that he cannot give away his father's property while he is still alive. Dubdrenn finally resorts to subterfuge. He plies Socht with drink until he falls asleep, takes the sword to Cormac's smith, has the smith inscribe his, Dubdrenn's, name inside the hilt, and then returns the sword to the still-sleeping Socht. The two disputants then go before Cormac. Socht pleads his case, but Dubdrenn succeeds in winning the sword from Socht by pointing out that his name is written inside the hilt. At this point a remarkable statement is made, which is what caught Dumézil's attention: "Thus a dead thing testified successfully against a living thing, in that the dead was deemed correct" (*ibid.*:201). In other words, the (false) written inscription is a "dead thing," but it has the power to overcome the "living" phenomenon of the (truthfully) spoken word, that is, Socht's verbal plea.⁶ Here, the categories living/dead have seemingly switched sides in the conflict between oral and literary—and, curiously enough, in a text that, perhaps more than any other we have examined, seems to ignore this tension in most respects.

Yet, as Françoise Le Roux and Jean Guyonvarc'h have pointed out (1986:263-69), the dishonest steward does not get away with his "conceit," and literary death does not gain the upper hand on oral life. As soon as Dubdrenn obtains the sword, Socht, having a trick or two up his sleeve as well, declares that his grandfather had been killed with the sword, and sues for damages from the current owner, which amount to more than the worth of the sword. Hence Dubdrenn hands the sword back. But the musical sword-game does not end here. Cormac recalls that *his* grandfather was also slain with the same sword, and demands the sword from Socht as recompense. Socht relents, and Cormac becomes the owner of the much-desired heirloom with the checkered past. I would suggest that in this surprisingly shifting conclusion to the story we see the re-emergence of oral liveliness, which cancels out the authority of the written word and paradoxically works through the dead and/or the recollection of the dead. The sword, originally represented as a token of a very much alive ancestor (Socht's father), suddenly becomes the bringer of death to dead ancestors. He who can recall and proclaim the deadly side to this truly two-edged sword owns it. That this object connotes the oral tradition is further indicated by the highly unusual description of it, at the point it is introduced, as an "*audacht* of the family, fathers, and grandfathers" (Stokes 1891:199) of Socht. The word *audacht*, usually translated "testament," almost always refers to some kind of utterance. Its most famous appearance is in the title of the text *Audacht Morainn*, "Testament of Morann" (Kelly 1976:2), in which the mythical sage Morann

on his deathbed addresses a series of proverbs to his student, the future king of Ireland— words that the dying Morann declares will be *búana* “everlasting” (*ibid.*). The most plausible etymology proposed for *audacht* is that it is from the same Indo-European root as Latin *vox* “voice” and means “that which has been said” (*ibid.*:22). Just as Morann’s *audacht* survives beyond death, gathering force and power from the dead or dying, so the *audacht* of the sword, which originally belonged to the hero Cú Chulainn, lives on from epoch to epoch, inducing profitable reminiscences of the dead (see Nagy 1989).

And so with this remarkable sword I cut off this paper, hoping that I have presented sufficient evidence to indicate that medieval Irish literature has much to offer those of us seeking to understand the nature of transitional traditions, caught between literary and oral worlds, in terms devised and used by the traditions themselves.

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Notes

¹ This paper was given as the Milman Parry Lecture at the University of Missouri, Columbia, in April of 1988. I thank Professor John Miles Foley of the University of Missouri, his colleagues, and his students for their insightful comments on its contents.

² I dedicate this paper to the late Dr. O’Nolan, in memory of his numerous contributions to the study of Irish narrative tradition.

³ A survey of scholarly opinions concerning the relationship between oral and literary elements in medieval Irish literature can be found in Nagy 1986.

⁴ In his *De Bello Gallico* (VI.14), Caesar reports on how the druids of the Gaulish Celts refused to put their knowledge into a written form, for fear of its becoming available to common folk. Interestingly, within this druidic ideology, to write is to make available, possibly to the wrong sort of reader.

⁵ In the seventh-century *Vita Columbae* by Adomnán, the saint is perennially withholding sacred information from his fellow monks, or forbidding them to reveal what he has told them until after his death (e.g., Anderson and Anderson 1961:322, 478-80).

⁶ On the concept of the text as dead and inert, see Ong 1977:230-71.

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