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WHEN STORYTELLING BECOMES HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT. ***When Storytelling Becomes Heritage***. Ireland is a country with an almost unique experience in storytelling. The stories represent a treasury of what for centuries used to be the oral tradition of the Celts, a people whose civilisation dawned in Europe but who found in Ireland a sheltered place where their original culture could be preserved. These tales take us to a fabulous and fascinating world, where reality blends with fantasy with unequalled lack of any restraint and where time, as we conceive it, practically does not count. Their setting is both ancient Ireland and the mythical world of the Sídhe, the enchanted Otherworld of the faeries (Gantz 1981, 2). It is the aim of this article to concentrate on a few of such stories or tales considered more representative and examine how they became the essence of the inherited Irish spirit and were transmitted from generation to generation and constituted what is now called Irishness.

Keywords*: Tuatha Dé Danaan, Ulster, Cú Chulainn, Macha, Finn MacCool, Fianna, Oisín, dinnsheanchas, imram, echtra, buile, Sweeney*

REZUMAT. ***Când arta povestirii devine patrimoniu***. Irlanda e o ţară cu o experienţă aproape unică a povestitului. Poveştile reprezintă un tezaur a ceea ce a fost vreme de secole tradiţia orală a celţilor, un popor a cărui civilizaţie îşi are originile în Europa, dar care a găsit în Irlanda un spaţiu ocrotit, în care cultura lor a putut fi păstrată. Aceste poveşti ne conduc într-o lume fabuloasă şi fascinantă, în care realitatea se îngemănează cu fantezia fără limite, şi în care timpul aşa cum îl concepem noi de fapt nu contează. Acest tărâm este în acelaşi timp Irlanda antică şi lumea mitică a aşa-numitelor Sídhe, fermecata Lume de Dincolo a zânelor (Gantz, 2). Articolului de faţă intenţionează să se concentreze

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asupra câtorva dintre aceste poveşti dintre cele considerate mai representative şi să examineze cum au devenit esenţa spiritului irlandez, transmise din generaţie în generaţie, constituind ceea ce se numeşte azi specificul irlandez.

***Cuvinte cheie**: Tuatha Dé Danaan, Ulster, Cú Chulainn, Macha, Finn MacCool, Fianna, Oisín, dinnsheanchas, imram, echtra, buile, Sweeney*

The earliest stories can be associated with Irish prehistory. To these, new ones were added while the form of the existing ones changed as they crossed from one century to another and acquired new features in accordance with the new periods in which they were processed as literary products. The initial forms of transmission of such narrative material must have been oral, as storytelling was a favourite entertainment among the Celts. Storytellers probably memorised the outline and filled in the details extemporaneously, with personal additions, and all kinds of incongruities and inconstancies that may derive from this medium (Gantz, 19).

It is astonishing that all this extremely rich lore of myths, legends, sagas and tales managed to survive. Two are the main causes for this fact according to Marie Heaney (Heaney 1994, ix.). The first is that the Romans never invaded Ireland. The result is that, unlike in other Romanised countries, Roman culture did not marginalise or replace indigenous culture. The second is that the Irish were among the first peoples outside the Roman Empire to develop the art of writing. But even before they learnt the Roman alphabet and developed their own script, they were already in possession of a rich store of native learning which had been preserved by the strong oral tradition in Irish society. Their body of knowledge had been maintained by the druidic schools and when the technique of writing came to Ireland with Christianity, the scribes in the early monastic settlements wrote down not only sacred texts in Latin, but the stories that were familiar in their Irish vernacular.

These stories are peopled with a significant number of notable characters that have imposed themselves in the Celtic world. The information about them is not accurate, as we owe everything to a strictly oral tradition kept alive only through the stories of the *file* or the bards. As is well known, they dramatised the new events and entertained the courts with their long and stylised narratives. Later on, the monks in the monasteries materialised their thirst for knowledge and culture by writing down such old poems and sagas. They had no fear or horror of the old heathen sagas, they just introduced some Christian elements, or sometimes substituted a Christian theme, but they never tried to erase what they had inherited. The only problem is that with these tales

we may never arrive at the actual facts because the sagas were aimed at the aristocrats of the day and not at the posterity – they told the kings and courts what they wanted to hear.

Traditionally and conventionally these stories were assigned to four groups or cycles based on the common material they contain, such as facts or characters, situations, adventures or settings (Gantz 2).

The stories assigned to The Mythological Cycle are contained mainly in the fictitious or legendary history of Ireland called *Leabhar Gabhála* (*or Lebor Gabála Érenn – The Book of Invasions*) and revolve mainly round the Tuatha Dé Danaan (or Danann), the semi-divine and legendary people of Earth-Goddess Danu, a race of pre-Christian divinities, said to have been skilled in magic. Because of their knowledge they were banished from Heaven and descended on Ireland in a cloud of mist and in a great fleet of ships. They were well accomplished in the various arts of druidry, such as magic and occult lore. Their arrival is recorded in the tale called *Caith Maige Tuaired* (*The Battle of Mag Tuired*).

Historically, we do not know if the Tuatha Dé Danann really existed, since beyond legend there is hardly any archaeological evidence of their presence in the Irish space. Their appearance in the history of Ireland is mythical, as it is signalled only in stories that belong to a culture and a tradition with a long, highly elaborated oral tradition.

Tradition has it that the Tuatha Dé Danann established themselves at Tara and brought with them the four great treasures of their tribes from the four cities of the northern islands, places which they had inhabited and where they learnt their druid skills (Heaney, 3). One of their treasures was Lia Fáil (the Stone of Destiny) placed on a hill in Tara which screamed with a human cry when a rightful king sat on it. Another one was Lug's spear. The spear could be kept at rest only if its head was stepped into a special brew made of poppy leaves; anyone who held it was invincible in battle. Nuada's irresistible sword was their third treasure. No one could escape it once it was unsheathed. Dagda's giant cauldron was the fourth of their treasures. No one ever left it hungry. The cauldron bears close resemblance with the episode in the New Testament when Jesus Christ offered to the hungry masses never-ending supplies of fish and bread.

With the Tuatha Dé Danann we have the mention of the druids. As Gantz points out (10), they were neither the blood-thirsty human-sacrificers nor the great, moral and wise people, as they appear represented in many conventional instances. Their presence in Irish stories is surrounded by a halo of magic and supernatural. Their powers were unlimited – with their help, men could take different shapes: the shape of another human being or of an animal or a bird. They had powers on the essential elements, especially on fire and they could bring about terrible thunderstorms and destructive arsons. There is no strict delimitation between good druids and evil druids – they could cast their spells,

destructive or beneficial, according to no discernible criteria. They also possessed a surgeon's skills as it becomes visible in the story of their king, Nuada (or Nuadha or Nuadu Airgetlámh – Nuadu of the Silver Arm) as found in *Caith Maige Tuaired* (*The Battle of Mag Tuired*). Nuada had lost his arm in the battle and the story tells how two famous druids, Dian Cécht and his son Miach, were able to restore his arm, first as an arm made of silver, then as a flesh-and-blood but imperfect one and, finally, as his real arm which, perfectly embalmed, was given functionality by the two skilled druids. Thus, Nuada could now become king again – one of the Tuatha's laws said that one had to be perfectly healthy in order to be king. When Miach died, on his grave, a miraculous growth of herbs had sprung up, herbs that had healing powers.

The tales of the Tuatha revolve around two major aspects. The first is the continuous fight against the Fomorians, a semi-demonic race that lived on the islands scattered around Ireland. The central mythological figure that dominates this fight is Lug of the Long Arm, grandson of the Fomorian king, Balor of the Evil Eye, and son of Cian, the Sun God. The second is the fight against the Milesians, a wandering people who used to travel from the area they originally inhabited, the Iberian Peninsula, to distant places. To Ireland they came from the North of Spain. This time the Tuatha's enemies are no longer presented as evil or destructive. On the contrary, they are much like the Tuatha themselves – they too are skilled in magic, they are good fighters and talented poets.

The Milesians finally managed to conquer Ireland. When they arrived, they were met by three goddesses – Banbha, Ériu and Fódla – each of whom asked them that the island should be named for her. They chose Ériu and gave the country its Gaelic name of today, Éire or Éirinn. The Milesians settled there forever, establishing the country's final division into four provinces: Ulster in the north, Munster in the south, Leinster in the East and Connacht in the west, with Tara at the centre. Each province had its own king, chief and champions, but the High King, who lived in Tara, ruled the country helped by the provincial kings and chiefs. During their ascendancy, the heroic age of Ireland began and a powerful aristocracy and many dynasties that survived well into the Christian age were established.

Because the Tuatha were a divine race, they did not die when they were defeated but went underground and became the people of the *sídhe* (or *sídh*), or the People of the Underworld. The *sídhes* are those earthworks or circular enclosures surrounded by an earthen wall – called *raths* – that are scattered all over Ireland. After the final defeat by the Milesians, the Tuatha Dé Danann went underground and joined the people of the sídhe. Ever since, in folklore and legends, the Irish will remember them as the Little Folk, the Good People or the Faery. From time to time, these mysterious beings would enter the mortal

world, especially on Hallowe'en or May Day – two important days which are celebrated today, everywhere where the Irish live. They would mingle with the humans and come and go in their affairs in much the same way as they wander in and out of the other cycles of early literature. Sometimes they fall in love with human beings and at other times they hold the humans in thrall with their beauty and haunting music. But their kingdom is that happy Underworld under the earth and they always go back there.

The People of the Sídhe were extremely good-looking. They had no worry and sorrow and they stayed young forever. In their wonderful world below the ground, rivers ran full of mead and wine. As mentioned above, now and then they would interfere with the mortals, as it happens in *The Wooing of Étain*, the wonderful love story of Midir and Étain (Heaney, 22-36) contained in the trilogy *Tochmarc Étaíne*.

The presence of the people of the sídhe in everything that means Irish – existence, thinking, lifestyle – is indispensable to the minds of many, old and young. It is no wonder that even today, in some rustic parts of Ireland, people will leave on the thresholds of their houses a bowl of milk for the fairies that might visit them at night. And there are many people – not necessarily children – who believe in the existence of the *banshees*. They are females who live in this Otherworld; they have malevolent powers and inhabit the hillocks, the streams and the lakes to which they were originally consigned and often attack animals and humans.

The Ulster Cycle is the richest and, probably, the best-known collection of stories, since it contains the *Táin* (*An Táin Bó Cuailgne – The Cattle Raid of Cooley*), one of the most powerful and famous sagas of tales in the Irish lore, about the dynastic struggle between Ulaid (Ulster) and Connachta (Connacht) whose main hero is the Ulster hero Cú Chulainn. Besides him, as important figures of the stories that belong to Ulster Cycle, are Conchobar (Connor) Mac Nessa and the Red Branch Knights, who probably lived in the 1st century AD. The action is located in the north of Ireland, around the great fort of Emain Macha (Navan Fort), the capital of Ulster, whose remains can still be seen in the neighbourhood of Belfast. The name of 'Emain Macha' is linked with the name of another important character, Macha.

One of the best-known stories about her, also included in *The Táin* (*The Táin,* 6-8)[2], tells how Macha, wife of Crunniuc (or Crunnchu) came one evening to his house and offered to stay with him, cook for him and take care of him and his house. He married her and soon she got pregnant with twins. One day there was a fair in Ulster with games, contests and races. Crunniuc wanted to go there to watch the races. Macha bid him not to go as he would let everyone know she was with him. He promised to keep silent, but he could not hold his mouth and

[2] In Thomas Kinsella's version of *The Táin* it is included in the section called 'Before the Táin'.

boasted that his wife could beat a horse-drawn chariot in a foot-race. Though Macha was near her delivery and suffering from the pains of childbirth, she did not get any sympathy from the indifferent king of Ulster and the men watching the races and was made to run in that race. She won with an ultimate effort and just at the finishing line she gave birth to two baby twins, a boy and a girl. That place was called Emain Macha (or E(a)mhain Mhacha, i.e. 'the twins of Macha') afterwards. But she also put a terrible spell on the cruel Ulstermen:

> From this day on you will be afflicted by this weakness [of childbirth] because of your cruel treatment of me. At the hour of your greatest need, when you are under attack, every Ulsterman will become as defenceless and helpless as a woman giving birth to a child. For five days and four nights you will remain in that state and your descendants will be afflicted by the same weakness for nine generations. (qtd. in Heaney, 68)

Only young boys and one man, Cú Chulainn, were not affected by the spell. This story belongs to the so called *dinnshenchas* stories that make up the lore of prominent places, which tell how they came to be so or how they got their name.

The main hero of the Ulster Cycle is, undoubtedly, Cú Chulainn (or Cuchulainn, or Cú Chulaind), the only man untouched by Macha's terrible curse, and, as such, the one who could help the Ulstermen in their fight against Connacht. His heroic, extraordinary deeds, against the men of Connacht, ruled by their queen Medb (Maeve), a kind of goddess of sovereignty, and her husband, the king Alill, constitute most of the material included in *The Táin*.

Cú Chulainn is said to have been a semi-divine hero as his origins were half divine – his father was Lug of the Long Arm, the legendary leader of the Tuatha – and a half human being; his mother was Deichtine (or Deichtire, or Dechtire), the sister of Conchobar Mac Nessa, King of Ulster. One day Deichtine drank some water with which a tiny creature passed into her mouth and her body. Apparently, the creature was Lug himself, according to some versions. Sleeping that night, she dreamed that she was visited by Lug. The result was that she became pregnant and the child that she delivered was named Sétanta. But soon his name was changed into Cú Chulainn (Cullan's Hound) to record his promise to act as Culann's watchdog after having killed the man's original hound.

Cú Chulainn became a brave and wise young man. His physical appearance was that of a short, dark, beardless man. His hair was of three colours, brown at the roots, blood-red in the middle and blond at the crown. He had seven pupils in each eye, seven toes and seven fingers, each with the grip of a hawk. In spite of these fearsome traits he is described in many tales as handsome and attractive to women. But above everything is his courage, prowess and heroic power and stature; he was the hardest man that had ever

existed in Ulster. He is thus portrayed by Fergus (Medb's servant) to her in *The Táin*, in a passage with remarkable oratorical qualities where repetitions and similes follow swiftly one another:

> You'll find no harder warrior against you – no point more sharp, more swift, more slashing; no raven more flesh-ravenous, no hand more deft, no fighter more fierce, no one of his own age one third as good, no lion more ferocious; no barrier in battle, no hard hammer, no gate of battle, no soldiers' doom, no hinderer of hosts, more fine. You will find no one there to measure against him – for youth or vigour; for apparel, horror or eloquence; for splendour fame or form; for voice or strength or sternness; for cleverness, courage or blows in battle; for fire or fury, victory, doom or turmoil; for stalking, scheming or slaughter in the hunt; for swiftness, alertness or wildness; and no one with the battle-feat 'nine men on each point' – none like Cuchuainn. (*The Táin*, 75-6)

Before going to battle, the hero is seized by his battle frenzy (*ríastrad*) – terrible, destructive spasms of excitement – which take away any sense he possesses. When this happens, he annihilates himself and becomes a fearsome, hideous and shapeless figure as his body undergoes monstrous transformations:

> His shanks and his joints, every knuckle and angle and organ from head to foot, shook like a tree in the flood or a reed in the stream. His body made a furious twist inside his skin, so that his feet and shins and knees switched to the rear, and his heels and calves switched to the front. The balled sinews of his calves switched to the front of his shins, each big knot the size of a warrior's bunched fist. On his head the temple-sinews stretched to the nape of his neck, each mighty, immense, measureless knob as big as the head of a month0old child. His face and features became a red bowl: he sucked one eye so deep into his head that a wild crane couldn't probe it onto his cheek out of the depths of his skulls; the other eye fell out along his cheek. His mouth weirdly distorted: his cheek peeled back from his jaws until the gullet appeared, his lungs and liver flapped in his mouth, his lower jaw struck the upper a lion-killing blow, and fiery flakes large as a ram's fleece reached his mouth from his throat. His heart loomed loud in his breast like the baying of a watch-dog at its feet or the sound of a lion among bears. Malignant mists and spurts of fire […] flickered red in the vaporous clouds that rose boiling above his head, so fierce was his fury. The hair of his head twisted like the tangle of a red thornbush stuck in a gap; if a royal apple tree with all its kingly fruit were shaken above him, scarce an apple would reach the ground but each would be spiked on a bristle of his hair as it stood up on his scalp with rage. The hero-halo rose out of his brow, long and broad as a

> warrior's whetstone, long as a snout, and he went mad rattling his shields, urging on his charioteer and harassing the hosts. Then, tall and thick, steady and strong, high as the mast of a noble ship, rose up from the dead centre of his skull a straight spout of black blood dark and magically smoking like the smoke from a royal hostel when a king is coming to be cared for at the close of a winter day. (*The Táin*, 150-1)

Here once more imagination is let loose, the doorstep between reality and fantasy is crossed over again in a passage obviously meant to impress the listener/reader, saturated as it is with unexpected associations and exaggerations, with extended epithets and enumerations.

The *Táin* is one of the most important medieval sagas in Irish literature, one of the oldest stories in European vernacular style. The epic dates from about the 8th century and is contained in the following manuscripts: The *Book of Dun Cow*, in a fragmentary way, the *Book of Leinster* where it appears integral and in a more polished version, itself completed in the *Yellow Book of Lecan*.

As Dooley argues (2006, 5), *The Tain Bo Cuailnge* is the work that best represents various stages of the 'epicisation' of Irish saga writing so that, from a generic point of view, it is at certain moments legitimate to invoke for it the major structural model of a purely epic work in which the accents often shift from characters to the plot appropriately structured as a succession of events.

Cú Chulainn's presence becomes extremely significant in the *Táin*. He is the one who manages to withstand the Connacht forces and protect his province single-handedly in this saga. He is, undoubtedly the actor in the narrative who plays the hero, both for himself and for his own exploits, but many of his deeds, as Dooley remarks (113), are also in the register of service to the king Connor MacNessa and the nature of his exploits is also viewed from this perspective of loyal subject, guardian of the kingdom. Indeed, loyalty to the king extends from acts to gestures such as when he carries both the king and the king's son back with him as honourable burdens to Emain Macha.

In the *Táin* – just like in many other Irish stories – a rather trivial detail, in this case a bull, triggers an overblown reaction, here a call to arms and a subsequent invasion, skilfully wound around the central theme which is a cattle raid.

One evening, queen Medb (Maeve) and her husband Alill, king of Connacht, decide to compare their wealth (*The Táin*, 52-3). When doing this, she discovers that she has not got one thing that Alill had: a bull named Finnbenach, the White-Horned Bull. News come to her that in Ulster there is a chieftain who has a bull just as powerful as Alill's bull. Its name is Donn Cuailnge, the Brown Bull of Cooley. This is how this bull is presented in the saga. Here again the text displays declamatory features conferred by the succession of alliterations (expertly preserved by the translator, Thomas Kinsella), hyperboles and enumerations:

dark brown dire haughty with young health
horrific overwhelming ferocious
full of craft
furious fiery flanks narrow
brave brutal thick breasted
curly browed head cocked high
growling and eyes glaring
tough maned neck thick and strong
snorting mighty in muzzle and eye
with a true bull's brow
and a wave's change
and a royal wrath
and the rush of a bear
and a beast's rage
and a bandit's stab
and a lion's fury. (*The Táin*, 49)

Since the Ulster bull's master refuses to give him, the men of Connacht start a raid against Ulster to seize the animal by force. As his brothers-in-arms are suffering from Macha's spell and are not able to defend Ulster, Cú Chulainn, seized by his battle frenzy, fights alone for 3 months, using Gáe Bulga, the magic spear that he casts with the foot. Eventually, the Ulstermen win the war but, in the meantime, the brown bull has been safely sent to Maeb's residence. Here Donn Cuailgne starts to fight fiercely against Finnbenach, kill him and scatters his carcass and horns all across Ireland, before dropping dead himself (*The Táin*, 251-3).

Characteristic to the saga is the fabulous mixture of reality and fantasy. The background is authentic ancient Ireland – the stretch of land between Roscommon and Dundalk – and Irish aristocratic and tribal society of the time, but the characters are fantastic, and their acts are narrated with absolutely no restraint, whatsoever. The book is filled with amazing and often surprising twists of imagination and exaggerations: Cú Chulainn seized by his battle frenzy kills hundreds of the Connachtmen with his sling-shot, he splits Etarcomal to the navel with his sword, the heroes fight for days without exhaustion, Cú Chulainn's weapon is shoved inside Ferdia's rectum and it kills him as it opens inside his body, on her retreat Medb menstruates and fills three trenches with her blood, the fleshy remains of the White-Horned Bull are scattered everywhere across Ireland, etc. Gods and goddesses like Lugh and Morrígan appear and take an active part in the story – one should not forget that Medb is also a goddess herself and Cú Chulainn is a demigod. The *geis*[3] is copiously used in its function of taboo and given several shapes – such as the one made of a tree

[3] The term *geis* is synonymous with 'taboo' and is a ritual prohibition or prescription, a supernaturally sanctioned order to refrain from or perform certain actions (cf. Welch 1996, 212).

trunk split into a fork and stuck with severed heads to stop the Connacht army from advancing. The world that the *Táin* creates is a wonderfully fantastic and mythic world where the gigantesque and the monstrous are given real dimensions and are served as intellectual delight to its readers.

The name of The Fenian/Ossianic Cycle is given by its two main heroes, Fionn mac Cumhaill (Fionn/Finn Mac Cool) and his son, Oisín. Very many of the constituent stories are contained in the *Book of Leinster*. The tales are recurrent celebrations of the beauty of nature and birdsong, mountains, rivers and the seashore in frequently vivid and sensitive language. A collection of Finn tales also appears in *Acallam na Senorach* (*Colloquy of the Ancients*) in which pagan and Christian elements are reunited and where conversations are exchanged between a number of the surviving Fianna of Christian Ireland in the late 3rd century AD and St Patrick.

Finn Mac Cool and his band of followers, the Fianna, are the undeniable heroes of this cycle. These men roamed all over Ireland about three hundred years after Connor Mac Nessa and Cú Chulainn had gone from Emain Macha. They were an army of fighters and hunters, the most efficient and the first standing force of the High King of Ireland. Their headquarters were located in Leinster, in Almu, or the Hill of Allen but their expeditions covered larger areas, in Scotland and in the islands around Ireland. The Fianna are not a mere legend – their presence mattered and still matters for the Irish people.

There are many arguments that sustain this statement, of which one could be that the stories – of the *dinnsheanchas* (or *dindshenchas*) type, namely the lore of famous places – about the Fianna are embedded in the very landscape of Ireland: there are passes between mountains which are believed to have been cut by their swords, there are caves and 'fingerstones' (bare vertical rocks) that are associated with them, hills and woods still resound with their legends, rivers and valleys bear their names or are linked with the memories of their extraordinary deeds. For example, Slieve Nub (the Mountain of the Pig) got its name after one of Finn's deed: he killed with a spear a huge boar that had attacked him.

The Fianna conducted themselves after a very rigorous code of rules and values. There were several conditions that a young man who wanted to join this brotherhood had to fulfil (Heaney, 167-8). The first condition was that the family of the newcomer accepted his joining the Fianna and that there would be no compensation if he was wounded or killed; they would not avenge his death as only his comrades-in-arms could do that. It is quite surprising that the second condition was that the young man must have studied the art of poetry – he had to be able to compose and appreciate poetry and be familiar with the old texts. This condition is just another argument that comes to support the opinion that the Irishmen are a strange combination of this desire to fight, to prove their

courage and their natural inclination for poetry and fantasying. Naturally, the third condition was the perfect mastery of weapons.

These conditions were sealed by solemn vows which had to be taken when entering the brotherhood: that the candidate would choose a wife, not for her dowry but for herself; that he would never dishonour any woman; that he would help the poor as best he could; that he would behave courageously to fight single-handed as many as nine enemies in one go.

Besides that, the newcomer had to take an oath of allegiance to the commanders of the Fianna and swear to remain faithful to them. After this, his skills as a hunter and proficiency as a soldier were tested.

As a child, Finn Mac Cool managed to gain divine knowledge. When he was only 7 he became an apprentice of the poet and teacher Finnegas (or Finnéces), who had been waiting for 7 years to find the salmon of knowledge. Finnegas caught the salmon from the river Boyne and was roasting it on a spit when the boy touched the hot fish; he burnt his finger and thrust it into his mouth. In this way he bestowed upon himself the divine and eternal knowledge that the salmon contained.

Finn also had to prove that he was a poet, in order to be worthy to take command of the elite band of men. He had to be seen as a commendable poet and warrior and hunter.

When Finn became the Fianna's captain only the noblest, the bravest, the swiftest and the strongest men were accepted to join the Fianna. Lead by him, they defended the state, supported the king, and protected the safety and the property of the people. From November till May they patrolled the coast looking for invaders and pirates. They collected fines and put down riots and punished public enemies. In the summer months they were not paid and had to provide for themselves by living off the land: they fished and hunted and sold the skins of animals for income.

When speaking of Finn and his warriors that were also poets, it would be impossible not to mention the Fianna's greatest poets: Finn himself, Oisín, principal son of Finn Mac Cool and a skilled warrior, and Caoilte (or Cáilte). Their lyrics celebrated

> […] the hills and the valleys of Ireland, and the life they led with their companions roaming the country. They praise the singing of the birds in summer and the bellying of the stags in winter, the excitement of the chase and the stories they told around the campfires, the companionship of their friends and the code of honour by which they all lived. (qtd. in Heaney, 169-70)

Caoilte meets St Patrick and they travel Ireland together, narrating the lore of the places that they pass, intermingling reality, myth and legend. The two

end their circuit at Tara where they find Oisín. Both narrators tell then the story of their combats.

Oisín and his poetic talents provide the opportunity for discussing an essential Irish trait: adventurousness and love for the sea and the far and away west. This feature found its materialisation in the shape of the voyage-tales – of the *imram* and *echtra* type – which involve fantastic realms where time is suspended. The best-known of such stories are *Imram Brain* (*The Voyage of Bran*), a narrative of the 7th or 8th century about a man who left Ireland in search for the Island of Women – another version of the blissful Otherworld – and *Laoi Oisín i dTír na nÓg*.

The Irish have their specific restless heroes who depart from Ireland in search of miraculous, new territories. The Celtic imagination developed the voyage-tale in its own, particular way. It seems that the Ocean, with its extraordinary sunrise and infinity had always excited this overwhelming imagination. The idea of an earthly paradise to the West was well-accepted in Christian times. One could notice that for the Irish, neither armies, nor immigrants ever arrived from the West, as they did from other directions. The Celtic hero leaps into the Western sea and travels across it to the Land of the Young, where everything is young and beautiful, rich and happy. As a rule, this wonderful world is located on an island, where humans and animals are endowed with amazing talents. The young man is driven away by passion and restlessness. Sometimes he is carried away by a lovely maiden on the back of the winged horse, sometimes in the swift boats of skin and wood, the *curraghs*, which fishermen still use in the West. Usually the hero returns to Ireland, forced either by objective circumstances or by devastating homesickness since residence in the Promised Land can only be temporary for a human.

Oisín in the Land of Youth is one of the most representative Irish voyage-tales. It is widespread in the oral tradition but was also covered in literary version in Micheál Coimín's *Laoi Oisín i dTír na nÓg* of about 1750.

One day the beautiful Niamh of the Golden Hair, the daughter of the king of the Land of the Young, comes to Oisín to lure him and persuade him thus to leave with her for the Land of the Young. Here pleasure, wealth, love and youth are eternal.

Oisín cannot resist the temptation so beautifully presented by Niamh. Sadly, he leaves Finn, his father, and plunges into the sea, directing his curragh to the West. But his trip proves to be difficult and full of adventures. Terrifying monsters, such as the giant Formor, endanger his life more than once but he manages to kill him in a fight. Eventually he reaches the Promised Land and spends some three hundred years there. All of Niamh's promises are entirely fulfilled. But this terrestrial paradise can be no mortal's abode save for a limited period of time. Therefore, Oisín, troubled by memories of the Fianna, becomes

homesick one day and wants to return to Ireland. The maiden warns him that if he goes there, he will never return. As he persists in his longing, she advises him at least not to dismount from his horse or he will become old, withered and blind and he will never be able return to her again, lost forever to the Land of Young.

Once he is back home, Oisín finds a totally different Ireland, people and places that he cannot recognise. Finn and his followers disappeared a long time long before and their names are mentioned just in old men's stories. The places where they used to live are now in ruins. He realises that the time he spent in the Tír na nÓg meant three centuries for those he left. And one day the inevitable happens: answering the call of some men who are trying to lift a stone into a wagon, he dismounts from the horse and grows old in a short time.

His horse will return to the Otherworld, but Oisín will spend the rest of what is left of his life travelling from one place to another, telling people about the extraordinary deeds of the Fianna.

In some oral versions, probably made to merge the events in the story with Christianity, Oisín meets Patrick and talks to him and tells him about himself and the Fianna. The idea was to show that the past and the Celtic ways were connected to the realities of a new period brought to Ireland by the Christians.

The tales that make up the Historical / King Cycle were composed between the 9th and the 12th centuries but refer to persons and events between the 6th to 8th centuries. They tell about rulers, dynastic conflicts and battles, and also events of historical records. The most famous story is *Buile Shuibhne* which developed from materials included in this cycle and included historical events placed in mythical and religious contexts.

The story of Sweeney, very widespread in Irish literature and associated with the Historical Cycle, is connected with the term *buile¸* which is Irish for 'madness' and 'frenzy'. This buile, or frenzy is a motif that recurs in Irish literature and has in common with other cultures the reserved place that is set aside for the knowledge and wisdom of the madman, and of the outlaw. These figures reflect the perennial concern in Irish literature with the age-old polarities between culture and art, nature and technology.

There are two main aspects of the *buile* motif. The first of these encompasses the storytelling cluster that has to do with transcendental vision, and the effects that *buile* has upon it. It is very important that significant personages in early Irish society are often depicted in its literature as having transcendental or otherworldly experiences at crucial moments of transformation or initiation.

The second aspect of the *buile* motif is related more immediately to the material world of objects than it is to vision, that is, to the objective concrete world of phenomena rather than the transcendental world of vision that is affected in the aforementioned aspect of the frenzy. This second feature involves a broad panorama of perception in which the actual physical terrain of Ireland is perceived in relation to the frenzied person's state of mind, i.e. trees,

plants, animals, rocks, seascapes, harbours are named and recollected in a fluid panorama of vision of the *dinnsheanchas* type.

The key text is the twelfth century *Buile Shuibhne* (*The Madness of Sweeney*). This story, probably composed at Armagh (Northern Ireland), relates the aftermath of a battle which took place at Moira, an early 7th century event of great historical importance. The story's main protagonist is Suibhne (or Sweeney) who – as Seamus Heaney sees him in his modern rendering of the tale – is no longer a mythical figure but, conceivably, a real character, probably based on an historical king also called Sweeney.

According to the story, he is driven mad by the noise of the battle and flees the scene of the combat. He arrives at a place where a cleric called Rónán is erecting a church. Sweeney finds the cleric at the time glorifying the King of Heaven and Earth by merrily chanting his psalms with his lined, beautiful Psalter in front of him. Sweeney takes up the Psalter and casts it into the depths of the cold-water lake which was near him. Then he seizes Rónan's hand and drags him out through the church after him, and he does not let go the cleric's hand until he hears a cry of alarm. The Psalter is recovered intact from the water by an otter, but the consequence is that Rónan puts a curse put upon Sweeney, the result of which is that Sweeney has to undergo a series of purgatorial adventures and spend many years is a state of nakedness, or very sparsely clothed, levitating "in a frantic cumbersome motion/like a bird of the air" (qtd. in Heaney 1994, 9), living in tree tops and lamenting his situation:

> Without bed or board
> I face the dark days
> in frozen lairs
> and wind-driven snow.
> Ice scoured by winds.
> Watery shadows from weak sun.
> Shelter from the one tree
> on a plateau.
> Haunting deer-paths,
> enduring rain,
> first-footing the grey
> frosted-grass.
> I climb towards the pass
> and the stag's belling
> rings off the wood,
> surf-noise rises
> where I go, heartbroken
> and worn out,
> sharp-haunched Sweeney,
> raving and moaning. (Heaney, 51-4)

Sweeney's *buile* or frenzy is inherent in his celebrations of nature which he makes in lyrical verse as in the following lines charged with pictorial ethos where he praises the trees of Ireland:

> The bushy leafy oak tree
> is highest in the wood,
> the forking shoots of hazel
> hide sweet hazel-nuts.
> The alder is my darling,
> all thornless in the gap,
> some milk of human kindness
> coursing in its sap.
> The blackthorn is a jaggy creel
> stippled with dark sloes;
> green watercress in thatch on wells
> where the drinking blackbird goes.
> […]
> But what disturbs me most
> in the leafy wood
> is the to and fro and to and fro
> of an oak rod. (Heaney, 36-8)

In his wanderings Sweeney meets a fellow madman from Scotland with whom he converses on their situation, and intermittently recovers his sanity. Finally, his wanderings bring him into the house of Saint Moling (Mullins) where he is welcomed by the saint and his church and dies there. Sweeney's penitence is now over, and he can find absolution and peace of mind now when the curse put on him by a member of the church is repealed by another member of the same church.

Buile Shuibhne unites the material of Celtic wisdom (in relation to the distortion of the visual and the material world) with the penitential and the eremitical strain in early Irish Christianity. In addition, Sweeney's story is the Irish version of the Wild Man in which a lot of motifs are inserted, many of them associated with rites of passage and the transition from one state into another (Welch, 69). According to Seamus Heaney, the tale can also be read "as an aspect of the quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of the religious, political and domestic obligation."

Underlying this amalgam of Celtic native wisdom and Christian penance is a tension that was to prove dominant in Irish literature and thought. A distrust of the world, a doubt about the effectiveness of institutions and a denial of the possibility of human comfort were inherent in the sentiment.

The present article briefly examined a scant number of stories of the old lore and they all reveal the fact that storytelling is a hugely important part of Irish culture and heritage. For many Irish novelists and poets, musicians, playwrights and film-makers, storytelling is paramount. Irish people are a naturally sociable race, so storytelling is an inherent part of interactions between the natives, whether in the form of a joke or a longer account of an event or situation. In this context, tradition becomes important as recounting stories may be a way of teaching children important life lessons; this is how family histories were passed down to new generations, and how the various myths and folklore of the country stayed alive and became part of everyday life and gave definition and substance to the concept of Irishness. Very much of what social, cultural and heritage Ireland is today is the result of storytelling: people visit Tara and try to sit on Lia Fáil, Cú Chulainn is seen as the supreme embodiment of patriotism, Macha has a whole city to herself (Armagh), many place-names record in their Irish names the exploits of Finn MacCool and his Fianna, the people of the sídhe are yearly invoked during Hallowe'en, the best part of Ireland or of an Irish home is the west where Oisín's Otherworld was situated, many political organisations in Ireland reuse the rules and structure of the Fianna. Very much of the Irish psyche or collective consciousness of today is the result of century-old periods of accumulation and experience that storytelling only could record and transmit.

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