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Between God and Man: The Hero of Irish Tradition

Tomás Ó Cathasaigh

Giambattista Vico claimed, as long ago as 1725, that 'the first science to be learned should be mythology or the interpretation of fables.'¹ Vico's words, and the work of modern mythologists in many fields — anthropology, depth psychology, the history of religions and literary criticism — have left little impression on the intellectual life of Ireland. Yet our manuscripts contain mythological texts whose abundance and archaic character make them unique in Western Europe. Insofar as our mythology has been at all rediscovered, credit must rest largely with our creative writers, and notably with Yeats whose use of myth in the creation of literature was hailed as 'a step toward making the world possible in art.'² The use of myth by Anglo-Irish writers stands in marked contrast to the practice of modern writers in the Irish language. There is a chiasmic pattern here: Anglo-Irish writers trying to create a national literature in English have drawn upon the resources of the indigenous tradition, whereas those writers whose aim has been to create a modern European literature in Irish have for the most part turned away from traditional themes. Perhaps in their case the burden of the past was too strong in the language itself to allow them to exploit Irish myth for their own purposes.

But it is not primarily as a quarry for modern creative writers that Irish mythology lays claim upon our attention, but rather as a rich and complex body of material which is there and which calls for elucidation and interpretation. It is in that mythology that we can discover the native ideology of Ireland, for although the early Irish material includes a valuable Wisdom Literature the abstract formulation of philosophical and theological theories was not the Irish way. It was in their myths that they explored the nature of men and the gods and a central task of criticism must be to uncover and to re-state in abstract terms the configuration of the ideological patterns which underlie the myths. As the great French mythologist Georges Dumézil has put it: 'A literary work does not have to set forth a theory: it is the hearer's or the reader's task to perceive the providential design which has arranged the events in the order in which the work presents them and with the results which it describes. Yet it is the design that justifies these events and results, and gives them a meaning.'³

This 'providential design' must be established by close study of the texts, but the general observation may safely be made that Irish myth is concerned above all with

the relationship between man and the gods, and that the myth of the hero is used as a vehicle for exploring this relationship. In this respect, Irish myth is no different from other mythological systems. The situation can be stated in structuralist terms: a basic opposition in Irish myth is between man and god, and this opposition is mediated in the person of the hero. 'Opposition' is used here in the sense of the discrimination of paired categories, and it is the structuralist view that every mythical system is built upon a sequence of such oppositions which are mediated by a third category which is abnormal or anomalous.⁴ The hero belongs to this third category: he is at once the son of a god and of a human father; he is mortal and lives out his life among men, but Otherworld personages intervene at crucial moments of his life. This myth is exceptionally well represented in Irish sources, but in the limited space at my disposal here I confine my remarks to two heroes, the martial hero Cú Chulainn and the king-hero Conaire Mór.⁵ And for Cú Chulainn I restrict myself in the main to the early version of Conception and Birth, for Conaire Mór to 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel'. Even the brief account of these two texts may perhaps give some indication of the thematic content of the Irish versions of the myth of the hero, while the commentary is intended to elucidate the ideological framework within which they may be interpreted.

The early version of *Compert Con Culainn*, 'The Conception of Cú Chulainn', tells how a flock of birds repeatedly grazed to the roots the plain of Emain Macha, the ancient capital of Ulster. The warriors of Ulster gave chase to the birds and pursued them in nine chariots. Conchobor's daughter Dechtine serving as his charioteer. In the evening, three of the birds led the pursuers to the edge of Bruig na Boinne (Newgrange) where night came upon the Ulsterman. It snowed heavily and the Ulstermen sought shelter. They found a new house where they were made welcome by a couple. The man of the house told them that his wife was in labour. Dechtine went to her and a boy-child was born. At the same time, a mare outside the house dropped two foals, and these were given to the child. By morning both the house and the birds had disappeared, and all that remained with the Ulstermen at the edge of Bruig na Bóinne were the child and the two foals. With these they returned to Emain Macha.

Dechtine reared the child but he fell ill and died. Then a man came to Dechtine in her sleep and said he was Lug son of Eithniu. He told her that she would be pregnant by him; it was he who had brought her to Bruaig na Bóinne, it was with him she had stayed the night, and the boy she reared was his son. It was that boy he had placed in her womb and his name would be Sétanta.

Conchobor betrothed Dechtine to Sualdaim mac Roich, but she was ashamed to go pregnant to Sualdaim's bed and she carried out an abortion. Then she slept with Sualdaim; she conceived again and bore a son Sétanta, who was later given the name Cú Chulainn.⁶

The theme of the Waste Land, with which *Compert Con Culainn* (CCC) opens, occurs frequently in Irish tradition: the laying waste of the land is the ultimate sanction of the gods. In CCC the land is laid waste by Otherworld birds; in other texts this is done by Otherworld horses and pigs; and the fruits of the earth will of themselves dry up when the land is ruled by an unrighteous king, who is displeasing

to the gods. The theme of the Waste Land implies the need for a fecundating hero who will restore the vegetation to Emain Macha. In Irish tradition the fecundating role of the hero is seen most clearly in the lives of the king-heroes who ensure the fertility of land and beast and man by their wise and judicious rule: we shall see presently that Conaire Mór exemplifies this. Cú Chulainn on the other hand is essentially a martial hero, the defender of his people. But it has been argued that in the *Táin*, when he defends Ulster against the ravages of its enemies while Conchobor and the Ulstermen are undergoing their winter sleep, Cú Chulainn exemplifies the vigorous young male as the vital force in nature, and that this scenario represents an ancient vegetation myth, the basic theme of which is 'the triumph of life and fecundity over death and decay, as suggested by seasonal change.'⁷ The occurrence of the Waste Land motif in CCC lends weight to that interpretation. In the immediate context of CCC, however, the motif presages the decisive intervention by the Otherworld in the affairs of Ulster. It also has the function of inducing the Ulstermen to give chase to the birds, who lead them to Bruig na Bóinne.

Bruig na Bóinne is a localisation of the Otherworld, one of the *síde* to which the gods were consigned when men came to share dominion of the land. Thus, these *síde* – the singular is *síd* – were the abodes of the gods: they were located in the mounds of the earth (both natural and prehistoric tumuli), under the lakes, and on the islands of the ocean. The world of the *síd* was distinct from that of men, but contact between the two was frequent, and especially at Samain (1st November) when the *síde* were believed to be open – a belief which has persisted down to modern times. The fact that these *síde* were immediately visible on the landscape will have contributed to the constant awareness among Irish country people of the imminence of the Otherworld. To return to Bruig na Bóinne, this was originally the whole necropolis on the Boyne, but the name came to be used in particular of Newgrange which is but one of the tumuli there. In our text, the Lord of the Bruig is Lug, a Celtic god who is commemorated in the names of a number of continental cities such as Lyons (from an earlier Lugudunum), Laon and Leyden. We have seen that when he later comes to Dechtine in her sheep, Lug explains that it was he who had brought her to Bruig na Bóinne. And he brought her there, not on an errand of doom, but so that Sétanta might be brought into the world. Thus Bruig na Bóinne is here the telluric womb from which emerges the saviour-hero of Ulster.

Cú Chulainn shares with mythical personages everywhere the characteristic of dual paternity: he is at once the son of a god (Lug) and of a human father (Sualdaim). What is remarkable in the case of Cú Chulainn is that he is conceived three times: one manuscript of CCC describes him as 'the son of the three years'. The number three is of course everywhere invested with symbolic significance and triplicity of gods and heroes is a singularly common theme in Irish mythology. Cú Chulainn's threefold conception is one of the many expressions of this notion. Another one which may be noted here is the theme of threefold death, of which we have a number of examples in Irish texts and which will be mentioned again in connection with Conaire Mór. Triplicity is a feature also of Celtic iconography, both in Ireland and on the continent, its most striking expression being the head

with three faces. In the particular case of Cú Chulainn, his triplicity is related to his destiny as a warrior, for his martial career is marked by a number of encounters with triple adversaries of one kind or another. One such encounter is his initiatory combat in which he ventures forth and defeats the three formidable sons of Nechta Scéne. This has been identified as a variant of an ancient mythical exploit in which a god or hero slays an adversary who is endowed with some form of triplicity: Dumézil compares Heracles, who conquers the three-headed Geryon, and who was conceived in one night three times as long as normal.⁸

But perhaps the most interesting aspect of the threefold conception in CCC is its structural sequence. The boy is first begotten in the Otherworld by Lug upon his Otherworld consort; then at Emain by Lug upon Dechtine; and finally by Sualdaim upon Dechtine. Thus, there is a progression from fully divine to fully human parentage: in this sequence the hero recapitulates in his own life the history of man since, if we may judge from the occurrence of deity names in their pedigrees, the Irish apparently believed themselves to be descended from the gods. Furthermore, this sequence gives us a very clear example of the manner in which the hero mediates between the gods and men: the second (or middle) conception, linked to the first and third by Lug and Dechtine respectively, mediates the opposition between the divine and the human. In this case at least the 'meaning' of the triplicity of the hero is inseparable from the structure of the narrative.

The manner of Cú Chulainn's conception and birth marks him out for greatness. He is destined to save his people from the ravages of war: how he accomplishes this is shown in the *Táin*. There is a whole cycle of texts about Cú Chulainn which, taken together, make up his heroic biography from conception and birth to death. Rather than follow up these texts here we shall turn now to our second hero Conaire Mór (Conaire the Great). He also has a heroic biography and it follows much the same basic pattern as that of Cú Chulainn. But Conaire is destined to be king and, in contrast to the martial ethic which informs the cycle of Cú Chulainn, Conaire's life is presented in terms of the pacific ethic which was the basis of the Irish ideology of kingship. I have already referred to the fecundating role of the king-hero who ensures the fertility of man and beast and land by his wise and judicious rule. The characteristic of the king which ensured this fertility was known as *fír flatha* 'prince's truth'. 'Truth' in this context is a broad term, embracing the notions of wisdom and justice, and, as well as fertility, it also secures seasonable weather and amity among men. In short it is a cosmic power and the doctrine of *fír flatha* places the king at the centre of the cosmos. This is the doctrine which is expressed in heroic terms in the life of Conaire Mór.

Our text of Conaire Mór is *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (TBDD).⁹ The title is conventionally translated 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel', but the *bruiden* or 'hostel' in question is a localisation of the Otherworld. (It may be noted in passing that this *bruiden* gave its name to Bohernabreena near Tallaght in County Dublin.)¹⁰ It is in Derga's hostel that Conaire met his death and the title of our text is in keeping with the fact that much the greater part of it is devoted to that event and to those which led up to it. TBDD is nonetheless a biography of Conaire dealing in turn with his conception and birth, his boyhood, his elevation to kingship, the

Golden Age enjoyed in Ireland during his reign, and turning only then to the tragic story of his doom. All of this resolves itself into three sections, which we shall consider in turn: the making of a king, the Golden Age, and the tragedy of a king.

(1) The Making of a King. Conaire's mother Mess Buachalla was brought up in humble circumstances, but she was grand-daughter of a king and of a beautiful goddess who was born in a *síd*. Mess Buachalla married Eterscélae king of Tara, but on the night before her marriage she saw a bird on the skylight coming to her. The bird left his 'bird-skin' on the floor and ravished her. He told her that she would bear his son and that he should be called Conaire. So it was, and Conaire was brought up as son of Eterscélae. He was reared with three foster-brothers. Now Conaire had three 'gifts' (*buada*), the gift of hearing, the gift of seeing and the gift of calculation, and he shared these gifts with his foster-brothers, giving one gift to each.

When Eterscélae died and a successor was to be chosen, Conaire was told by his foster-father to go to Tara. He set out and when he reached Dublin he saw great speckled birds which he pursued as far as the sea and onto the waves. Then they cast off their bird-skins and one of them identified himself to Conaire as Nemglan 'the king of your father's birds'. Nemglan instructed Conaire to go along the road to Tara stark naked, bearing a stone and a sling. Meanwhile, it had been prophesied at a bull-feast (a solemn divinatory rite) that the person who arrived in this way would be the future king. So when Conaire appeared he was recognised as king. His nakedness was covered with royal raiment, he was placed in a chariot and he bound the hostages of Tara (which signifies their submission to him). But the people of Tara objected to him since he was young and beardless. Conaire refuted this, however, saying that a king was not disqualified by youth provided that he be generous and that it was his right from father and grandfather to bind the hostages of Tara. This utterance was greeted with great enthusiasm by the people ('Wonder of wonders!' they cry) and Conaire was invested with the kingship. Then the taboos of Conaire's reign are listed: these are prohibitions which were laid upon Conaire, apparently by Nemglan, and so long as they are honoured Conaire's reign is marked by prodigious peace and prosperity.

The begetting of Conaire represents an Otherworld intervention in the affairs of Tara. We are reminded of the Otherworld birds in CCC who summon the Ulstermen to Bruig na Bóinne. In TBDD the birds have a more direct role: Conaire is begotten by a god who appears in the guise of a bird; he is called to his destiny as king by the bird-man Nemglan; and his reign is called the bird-reign (*én-flaith*). This Otherworld intervention is an integral part of the election of Conaire to kingship and it seems right to compare the sequence summarised above with the scenario which Dumézil has traced in the traditions concerning the primitive Hindu king Prthu. There were three stages in the election of Prthu: designation of the gods, recognition by the wise men and acceptance by the people.¹¹ These three elements occur in TBDD: Conaire is designated by the very manner of his conception; he is recognised as king when he arrives on the road to Tara in fulfilment of the diviner's prophecy; and he is accepted by the people when he successfully meets their objection to his youth and beardlessness. Each of these stages has its proper place

in the structure, but it is in the last one that Conaire establishes his right to the kingship. This he does by delivering a true judgment on the matter of his own eligibility for kingship, a judgment which reveals his understanding that it is essential for a ruler (*flaith*) to be generous – a notion which is reflected in the Modern Irish *flaithiúil* ‘generous’. This true judgment shows Conaire to be possessed of *fír flatha* which, as we have seen, is the distinguishing characteristic of the rightful king.

(2) The Golden Age. TBDD described the state of peace and plenty which was enjoyed in Ireland during the reign of Conaire Mór. The ideal conditions which characterised his reign are reminiscent of the Otherworld in its beneficent aspect as it is depicted in Irish texts. They represent two different responses to the paradisaal yearning: the Otherworld is separated in space, the Golden Age in time from the storyteller and his audience. In Old Irish the word for ‘peace’ is *síd* which is a homonym of the word which denotes the habitation of the gods. These homonyms were originally one and the same: I have argued elsewhere that the homonymy reflects the nexus between the Otherworld and conditions in this world, as mediated in the person of the king. The Otherworld is the source of the king’s cosmic Truth (*fír*) and peace is its symptom; the state of peace secured by the kings of the mythical past, whose kingship was sanctioned by the Otherworld, is seen as a re-creation in this world of the paradisaal condition; and, as a material correlative to these abstract connections, the king would seem often to have been consecrated upon a *síd*.

(3) The Tragedy of a King. The Golden Age of peace and plenty depicted in TBDD is a measure of the beneficent role of the rightful king. In fulfilling this role the king is constrained by his *gessi* (taboos) and by the requirement to maintain the order based on cosmic Truth. Conaire’s tragedy is that he is faced with a conflict between his duty in these respects and his love for his foster-brothers, and that he puts love before duty. What happened is that Conaire’s foster-brother took to thieving in order to see what punishment the king might inflict upon them and how the theft in his reign might damage him. Conaire repeatedly refused to punish them. They were therefore emboldened to advance in crime from theft to marauding, the significance of this being that one of the taboos laid upon Conaire was that there should not be marauding in his reign. By failing to punish his foster-brothers for their earlier and less serious crime, Conaire caused the violation of one of his own taboos. And then, when the foster-brothers and their companions in crime were brought before him on the charge of marauding, Conaire delivered a false judgment, decreeing that the others should be slain by their fathers but that his foster-brothers should be spared. Conaire saw the injustice of his judgment and revoked it, saying ‘The judgment I have given is no extension of life to me’: he ordained instead that all the marauders should be spared and banished overseas. Ironically, even this revised judgement proved ‘no extension of life’ to Conaire, for in due course the marauders whom he has spared returned to destroy him in the *bruiden* of Da Derga.

All of this provides us with an Irish example of an old Indo-European theme which Dumézil has called the ‘sin of the sovereign’, which ‘destroys either the *raison d’être* of sovereignty, namely the protection of the order founded on truth . . . , or the mystical support of human sovereignties, namely the respect for the superior

sovereignty of the gods and the sense of limitations inherent in every human delegation of the divine sovereignty. The king falls prey to one or other of these risks, which are at bottom reducible to the same thing.¹¹ Dumézil was not aware of the occurrence of this theme in Irish tradition, but his formulation stands as an excellent summary of Conaire's 'sin' in TBDD, save that Conaire falls prey to both of the 'risks' described by Dumézil. The taboos which have been laid upon him constitute in effect a contract with the Otherworld, and his transgression of one of these taboos destroys the respect of the Otherworld personages who have delegated sovereignty to him. In failing to punish his foster-brothers, and later in delivering a false judgment, Conaire destroys the respect for the order founded on truth.

No sooner has the king's judgment been given and the marauders departed than we hear that the perfect peace has broken down which had been enjoyed during Conaire's reign. The Otherworld now takes on its malevolent aspect and Conaire proceeds to transgress all the taboos which have been laid upon him. He sets out from Tara and finds that he cannot return, for the lands round about are full of raiders coming from every side, men roam about naked, and the land is all on fire. This is a sign that the law has broken down there. And so Conaire turns away and he takes the path which leads him to his doom in the *bruiden*. He encounters a number of malevolent Otherworld beings on his way to the *bruiden* and in the meantime his foster-brothers and their allies return to Ireland. They assail Conaire in the *bruiden* which they set on fire three times. Conaire's head is cut off, and the severed head is given a drink of water which has been taken by his servant Mac Cécht from Uaran Garaid on the plain of Cruachan after a tour of the rivers and lakes of Ireland. The severed head thanks Mac Cécht, and Conaire dies.

Conaire dies by decapitation but the elements of fire and water are also present: the *bruiden* is set on fire, and Conaire dies only after water has been poured into his throat and gullet. I suspect that we have a variant here of the motif of three-fold death. This is well-represented in Irish sources, and in its classic form comprises death by wounding, drowning and burning. Although Conaire is not drowned and it is not explicitly stated that he is burned, the elements of iron, water and fire are brought into play in the account of his death.

There is another instance of triplicity in TBDD which is made explicit and which has a bearing on the interpretation of the text, namely Conaire's three foster-brothers. Irish tradition presents examples of trios which are merely triplications of a single personality. Perhaps the best known of these is in the Deirdre story, where the three sons of Uisniu are always found together and only Naoise has a definite personality. Áinle and Ardán are but shadows of Naoise and they die when he died.¹² The three foster-brothers in TBDD (who are themselves blood-brothers) are a somewhat different trio, for they are identical in appearance and dress, not only among themselves, but also with Conaire: the text says that all four were identical in clothing, weapons and hue. Moreover, it will be recalled that Conaire distributed his gifts (*buada*) to them: each one of them represents an aspect of his triple self and together they are his equal. These three personages are cast in Conaire's image and use his own 'gifts' to destroy him: it is scarcely too much to suggest that they may be taken to represent the evil side of his own nature. In this

way they are a projection in corporeal form of 'the enemy within'. They too die at the destruction of the *bruiden*.

The two texts which I have been discussing exemplify some of the ways in which Irish myth presents the destiny of the hero who mediates between man and the gods. The world view of these texts is an anthropocentric one: man is the centre of the cosmos, and the fruits of the earth and the workings of the elements are contingent upon the physical and moral excellence of the king – and, in texts where the martial ethic prevails, upon that of the champion. But the hero is subject to constraints from within and without and Otherworld personages intervene at all the crucial moments in his career. These interventions may be benevolent or malevolent, reflecting the contradictory aspects of the Otherworld. A benevolent god may function as progenitor and helper, but a malevolent one will act as a villain and destroyer. The burden of heroism is a heavy one, and is ultimately unenviable. While celebrating the achievements of the hero, Irish myth asserts the precariousness of man's position in the cosmos.

1. Quoted by Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London, 1977), 12.
2. T. S. Eliot, quoted in Mattheissen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* (Galaxy ed., New York, 1959), 40.
3. *The Destiny of a King* (Chicago, 1973), 115.
4. See Edmund Leach, *Genesis as Myth and other essays* (London, 1969), 11.
5. I have made an extended study of another king-hero in *The Heroic Biography of Cormac mac Airt* (Dublin, 1977).
6. Text edited by A. G. Van Hamel, *Compert Con Culainn and other stories* (Dublin, 1933). There is a translation by Thomas Kinsella in *The Tain* (London, 1970), 21-23.
7. Tomás O Broin, *Éigse* 10 (1961-63), 286-299.
8. G. Dumézil, *The Destiny of a Warrior* (Chicago, 1970), 16.
9. Text edited by Eleanor Knott, *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (Dublin, 1963).
10. cf. T. F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin, 1946), 121.
11. *The Destiny of a King*, cit., III f.
12. Cf. 'L'unité en trois personnes chez les Celtes', in J. Vendryes, *Choix d'Etudes Linguistiques et Celtiques* (Paris, 1952), 233-246.