

Oral Past And Written Present in 'The Finding of the Tain'

Grigory Bondarenko

Pre-Christian Irish culture as any pre-literate society and culture was governed by the traditional type of memory. The medieval Irish texts on the other hand witness gradual shift from this type of memory towards the historical one. The historical type of memory is characterised by its special attention to causes and effects, and to results of actions: this memory fixes crops for particular years but not the sowing-time. This type of memory causes written history to appear on the cultural level (Lotman 2000, 364). It is more or less clear that this shift could not have been an instantaneous one especially as we know that the early medieval Irish *filid* retained forms of the early traditional type of memory during the whole period of Middle Ages. Certain stories from the *dindshenchas* and certain tales devoted to exemplary characters fulfilled mnemonic functions. For instance both prose and metrical *dindshenchas* devoted to the marvels which followed the birth of Conn Cétchathach refer to the more complex narrative of *Airne Fingein*. The traditional type of memory was skilfully analysed by the Russian scholar Y. Lotman and was later applied to early Irish realities by S. Shkunaev (Lotman 1990, 247; Shkunaev 1994, 240). The essence of this memory is the maintenance of the rules governing the existence of the world through the constant reproduction of texts, which also may change through time (as early Irish texts for example), but are believed to derive from time **immemorial**. The link between these texts is a pattern of ritual or action (as a destruction of king in a royal hostel described in *Togail bruidne Da Derga, Bruiden Da Choca* or certain ritualistic contentions on the night of Samain in particular *dindshenchas* (Knott 1936; Stokes 1900; Toner 2007; Gwynn 1913, 276-284)), but this role may also be played by all kinds of mnemonic devices like any natural or man-made phenomena – lakes, idols, trees, fortifications, roads and the like. They concentrate in them the memory of events in sacred time and types of behaviour vital for the community serving as a kind of ‘gravitation centres’ each of them quite often being a separate item in the *dindshenchas* collections.

It is also possible to specify the presumed opposition between unknown keepers of oral tradition (druids?) and the learned professional group of *filid* in the Early Irish society as seen in the context of transitional stage from preliterate to literate culture. That is when I mention the traditional type of memory used by *filid* the term needs certain elaboration. Some scholars in the field of Celtic studies when studying a particular medieval text always presuppose existence of an unknown oral ‘primeval text’ being a component of a large corpus of such texts. According to this view the extant texts were transmitted by *filid* and written down in the Middle Ages and are just distorted recollections and interpretations of the former ‘original texts’. In any case, as it was argued once by Jacques Derrida, the difference between any ‘original text’ and its interpretation corresponds to the difference between the rabbi and the poet existing in the Jewish tradition (Derrida 1966, 102-103). Perhaps such was a difference between that unknown keeper of ‘initial texts’ (druid?) and the later *fili*.

The most intriguing feature is that the difference between ‘initial text’ and ‘exegetic text’ (such as *dindshenchas* or *remscél*) is concealed if not thrown away altogether in the poetic interpretations of the *filid*’s repertoire (i.e. the ‘initial text’ seems to be ‘re-created’). This way the very interpretation begins to play functions of an ‘initial text’. This is likely to have happened at the stage of the *filid*’s entry into the written culture. Although even at this stage a *fili* ‘re-creating’ or ‘finding’ an ‘initial text’ reproduces a pattern or produces a certain simulacrum following traditional prewritten rules. Simulacra then dominate over history (Baudrillard 1993, 71). The methods of such ‘restoration’ can be easily demonstrated in the

legends of ‘finding’ referring to the dindshenchas found by Amorgen the *fili* or to the *Táin* found by Muirgen the *fili* (Stokes 1894, 272; Best and O’Brien 1967, 1119 (fo. 245b)). In other words certain kinds of oral pattern or performance may have a referential base even for the lettered elite such as early medieval Irish *filid* (Goody 1986, 22ff; Patton 1992, 93).

I would like to examine the structure of the tale *Do fhallsigud Tána Bó Cualnge* (*DFTBC*) in order to demonstrate the phenomenon of Early Irish reception of oral and written texts. The earliest recension of the tale is found in the Book of Leinster (fo. 245a). This well-known short tale was probably composed in the Old Irish period (late 9th century according to its recent editor K. Murray (2001, 19), but cf. MI form *no ragad*, condit. 3 s. from *téit*). According to J. Carney (1955, 166) it constitutes version A.1. the earliest existing variant of ‘The Finding of the *Táin*’. Nevertheless, there is one early reference to the finding of the *Táin* unnoticed by J. Carney. One of ‘The Triads of Ireland’ (*Trecheng breth Féni*, late ninth century) tells us of three wonders connected with the *Táin*:

Trí hamrai la Táin Bó Cúailnge: .i. in cuilmen dara héisi i nÉrinn; in marb dia haisnéis don bú .i. Fergus mac Róig dia hinnisin do Ninníne éicius i n-aimsir Corbmaic maic Fáeláin; intí dia n-aisnéther, coimge bliadna dó.

Three wonders concerning ‘The Cattle-raid of Cúalnge’: the ‘Cuilmen’ in Ireland in its stead; the dead who related it to the living, viz. Fergus mac Róig reciting it to Ninníne the Wise in the time of Cormac mac Fáeláin; one year’s protection to him to whom it is recited (Meyer 1906, 8 §62).

Thus at least two features of the tale are supported by the Triads. At first, an invocation of the dead/ancestor to bear witness, an evidently pagan ritual⁽¹⁾ (cf. later transformation of this practice into the fast against Fergus’ descendants, ss. Brendan, Ciarán and Caillín, in another variant of the story). The second feature is the story of how Isidore’s *Etymologiae* have first appeared in Ireland. As for the pre-Christian substratum of the invocation, it is interesting that the acquisition of knowledge is possible here only with the intercession of the once mighty and wise dead whose grave is a special locus where the hero has to seat or to sleep. The same practice was known in Scandinavian literature where we find a story of a shepherd who became a skald after sleeping on the famous skald’s grave while the latter has appeared in all splendour and delivered his poetic gift to the shepherd (Ellis 1943, 108). According to Eliade this custom among Celts and Germans is typologically similar to the initiation rituals of the prospective shamans or magicians who had to spend the night close to dead bodies or on the graves (Eliade 1964, 382).

Even in the *Iliad* one finds a deliberate wordplay when *σημα* ‘sign, hint’ has another meaning ‘tomb, grave’. Gregory Nagy underlines the importance of the sepulchre in Homeric epos as a physical embodiment of *κλέος* ‘glory’ of a hero which is the main subject of poetry. Patroclus’s grave becomes the hint, the reminder of the presence of the Dead whose spirit Achilles has awoken. In the *Iliad*’s case a possible interpretation can take the poem itself as *σημα* in which the will of Zeus is strengthened and poetry becomes the poet’s grave (*σημα*) (Nagy 1992, 283-292). *Táin Bó Cuailnge* is often compared to the *Iliad* (especially by J. Carney), on which it is said to be modelled. However the influence of the Greek original text with all its wordplay is hardly possible in Early Medieval Ireland where the original Greek was unknown. It is more likely to think that the perception of a poet, a hero and the hero’s grave had universal character, or at least that it was characteristic of the Indo-European poetics.

Tírechán's 'Collectanea', written in the late seventh century, contains an episode possibly deriving from such practice. St. Patrick, together with his followers, finds a huge mound and the saint temporarily resurrects the dead giant from the grave in order to witness God's power and mercy: to baptize the dead one and to save his soul. The giant (who had been a royal swineherd in his life) arises from the grave and tells his story to the audience (Bieler 1979, 154). Mac Cana considered this episode, later found also in the *Vita tripartita*, as a model for the later recensions of *DFTBC* in which Fergus is described as a giant (Mac Cana 1962, 3-5). However, Fergus' gigantic proportions are referred to as a commonplace in many tales of the Ulster cycle.

Ninníne Éices mentioned in the Triads as the 'finder' of the *Táin* is believed to have lived in the seventh century just like Senchán Torpeist, another claimant to this role. Senchán (fl. c. 580–650) was a *rígfile* of Guaire, the king of Connachta (Ó Máille 1921-23, 75). Anyway there could have been no definite person to claim the finding of a lost oral text, this literary or even mythological character is significant here as a function. It is quite significant that even the Triads comprise two different perceptions of the *Táin*'s text: 1) as an oral text communicated by the dead to the living one, or giving protection to its audience; 2) as a written text exchanged for the precious Culmen.

The Old Irish term for Isidore's *Etymologiae*, *culmen*, derives from Latin *culmen* 'height, summit' (earlier Lat. *columen*). OI *culmen* evidently served an equivalent of Latin *summa* as a term for the supreme compendium of knowledge. A native Irish equivalent of the term which has served as a model for the OI nickname of the *Etymologiae* is *druim(ne) suite* 'summit of knowledge, of learning' (DIL, s.v.). This native term refers to the knowledge and art of the *filid* acquired only after many years of learning. *Druimne suite* was a term denoting the rhymes of the last year of the *file*'s learning. For example, a *file* called *Druim Suite* is named as the author of the seventh century alliterative poem on *Eó Rossa* from the *dindshenchas* (Stokes 1895, 277-79). The poet's name is unknown in any other early Irish text and has clearly allegorical significance. *Suite* is a term for the knowledge of *suí* 'sage' < **su-wids* while this knowledge was open to learn, to grasp from teachers, as opposed to *fius* which was thought of as hidden knowledge perceived only after its revelation. This is also relevant for the story of the *Táin*'s finding where an eastern sage (*suí*) plays the most important role in the *Táin*'s concealment and its treatment as a 'learned' written text.

Isidore of Seville (560–635) wrote his *Etymologiae* between 612 and 620 (Shabelnikov and Torshilov 2000, 38). T. Ó Máille seeking historical grounds of *DFTBC* information thought that Isidore's *Etymologiae* would have reached Ireland in the middle of the seventh century through the mediation of Senchán Torpeist (Ó Máille 1921-1923, 75). In any case it seems that the *Etymologiae* reached Ireland not long after its composition. Later the *Etymologiae* became a model for Irish etymological and etiological texts such as 'Cormac's Glossary', *Cóir anmann* and the *dindshenchas* created at the edge of native learning and Latin Late Classical etymological tradition. The *Etymologiae* were also used by the monastic authors of *Hisperica famina*, the poems artificially composed and difficult to understand.

Let us examine once more the turning points of *DFTBC*.

1. *Filid* from all Ireland were summoned in order to find out whether anyone of them **remember** the whole *Táin Bó Cuailnge*. It happened that each of them knew only a part of it.
2. Two *filid* set out for their eastern journey to continental Europe[2] to learn (*do fhoghlaim*) the *Táin* which one sage had previously taken with

him to the East in exchange for the Cuilmen (Isidore's *Etymologiae*).

3. Fergus mac Róig (one of the major heroes from the *Táin*) tells the whole text of the *Táin* to Muirgen the *file* during three days and nights on his own grave covered with thick fog.
4. According to another variant another *file*, Senchán, father of Muirgen, learned the whole *Táin* after he fasted against the saints from Fergus' seed.

There seems to be several levels in this complicated plot. Let us examine them in brief. At first the tale begins with some recollections of the lost 'initial' text which have existed in certain 'initial' mythological time (T1). It now seems likely that the composition of the *Táin* was due to the compilation of several narratives initially probably belonging to different cycles. Nevertheless even the first stage of our plot presumes the existence of a certain integral oral 'initial text' in past (this text had to be **learnt by heart** as it was usually by the *filid*). This 'initial text' appears to have been lost/forgotten in the beginning of our plot (T2). This premise might be seen as a typical *topos* of the degradation of traditional knowledge in the latter days. Oblivion is taken here as *non-knowledge*, that is, a factor connected with *knowledge* which lies at its foundation. The Indic symbolism of oblivion (reflected in *Dīghanikaya* (I, 19-22)), for example, implies that gods fall from heaven when 'their memory is at fault'. Oblivion is often seen as a loss of one's own self, as disorientation, or as blindness (Eliade 1963, 144-145).

Senchán Torpéist acting as judge and examiner of his students and younger *filid* is likely to remember the whole text. That is why he becomes the *Táin*'s finder in one alternative variant of our story. It is interesting that our text's author, even when speaking about the *filid*'s memory, which is rather archaic concept associated with poet's functions in many Indo-European cultures, uses a Latin loanword *mebuir* (Lat. *memoria*). He obviously operates with new Christian and Latin terms in the context of his own written culture and Christian worldview instead of using native OI terms such as *ad-muinethar* 'remembers', *aithmet* or *cuman* 'memory', even while examining oral transmission.

The phenomenon of recomposition, restoration of the epic text was noticed by A. Rees in ancient India. According to Indic tradition *Ramayana*'s restorer 'the first poet' (*adikavi*) Valmiki was originally aware of Rama's story (i.e. 'initial text', which means that it was not a mere composition). Nevertheless in order to perceive his task deeper, Valmiki sat for a while and contemplated *Ramayana*'s theme. He could see Rama, other epic heroes and his deeds with the help of his yogic power and concentration, and afterwards he began to recite *Ramayana* (Rees 1966, 56-57). For this kind of typological comparison it is important that *Ramayana* as well as the *Táin* once existed originally as a set of separated oral versions.

The *filid*'s unaccomplished journey to the continent in our tale is necessary both for the localization of the 'initial text' in the 'Eastern world' outside of Ireland and for the sage (rather Irish than foreign), the traveler to the East, to be included in the plot (while the way to the continental Europe via Brittany was very well known to Irish missionaries). The later variant of the tale from D.4.2 (RIA) (A.2. according to Carney) makes the sage a foreigner, a 'Roman sage' (*in sái rōmānach*), who brought the *Táin* from Ard Macha in exchange for the famous Cuilmen (Stokes and Meyer 1907, 5).

The Eastern world of early Irish literary tradition, which includes continental Europe and Asia, was sometimes considered as a foreign Otherworld (even if the term Eastern world belongs to the later period). Its inhabitants are often dangerous and possess supernatural abilities. Here we encounter an ambiguous feature of the early Irish literary tradition. On the one hand local poets (*filid*) in their professional activity were confined to the Goidelic Irish-speaking world (Ireland and Irish kingdoms in Scotland and Wales). Their text was foreign and indistinct for the rest of the world (or for the Eastern world if you like). On the other hand the learned Irish monks, literate both in Irish and in Latin, were often guests and teachers on the Continent. Certain examples of the earliest Irish poetry come from the continental Irish scriptoria. For the travelling monks (*literati*) the Eastern world was not a fearsome otherworldly kingdom at all.

The sage travelling to the East mentioned in the text (*suí* < **su-wids*, ‘one who knows well’) gives us some idea of the perception of the written text by early Irish *literati* (both monastic and secular). It is quite clear that the author means a written text of the *Táin* whose value in the eyes of the Irish erudite is equal to the encyclopedic compilation by Isidore. The book containing the *Táin* was brought out of Ireland, and this implies its high value (and high value of Irish books in general) for the audience in the European context (the Eastern world here is continental Europe). One can see here a rare example of the Book’s absolutization in Early Medieval Ireland. In our tale the written text has appeared for a while in the shape of a learned sage and we go back again to the image of the oral initial text given by revelation in the Otherworld.

Thus textual exegesis becomes the self-sufficient purpose of the text, and it does not seek justifications while trying to look for the hidden essence in the ‘initial text’, that is why such exegetical texts, as Derrida puts it, ‘always run a risk to stay irrational but they would be nothing without this risk’[3]. At the same time, the text stays as a minimal self-sufficient unit of traditional consciousness. This situation persists in the majority of early Irish texts. As in the story when the *file* Amorgen ‘restores’ the *dindshenchas*, the text seems to be reproduced, that is *filid* continue to use their traditional rules in the absence of the ‘initial text’. It means that the Early Irish traditional text, even in its written forms, often carries and reproduces ‘proto-forms’ of its unwritten existence (Piatigorsky 2004, 40). The memory of the ‘initial text’s absence is kept in Ireland during the whole period of the Middle Ages, the latest example can be found in *Acallam na senórach* where St. Patrick together with Cailte and with *aes síde*’s help restores the stories from the Fenian cycle.

[1] As J. F. Nagy suggests, ‘the means of restoring the dead hero (Fergus - GB) to life are totally secular, resulting in an epiphany that seems to have more to do with necromancy than with any Christian notions of communion with the souls of the dead’ (Nagy 1997, 19).

[2] *Letha* — continental Europe, later Armorica or Latium in Italy (Anscombe 1908, 75).

[3] Cit. from (Megill 1985, 320).

References:

- Anscombe, A. (1908) ‘The langobardic origins of St. Sechnall’, *Ériu*, 4, 74-90
Baudrillard, J. (1993) *Symbolic exchange and death*. London
Best, R.I. and O’Brien, M. (1967) Ed. *The Book of Leinster*, vol. V. Dublin
Bieler, L. (1979) Ed. *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*. Dublin
Carney, J. (1955) *Studies in Irish literature and history*. Dublin
Derrida, J. (1966) *L’Écriture et la différence*. Paris
Eliade, M. (1963) *Aspects du mythe*. Paris
Eliade, M. (1964) *Shamanism. Archaic techniques of ecstasy*. New York

- Ellis, H. R. (1943) *The road to Hel. A study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature*. Cambridge
- Goody, J. (1986) *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*. Cambridge
- Gwynn, E. (1913) Ed. *The Metrical Dindshenchas*. Part 3. Dublin
- Knott, E. (1936) Ed. *Togail bruidne Da Derga*. Dublin
- Lotman, Y.M. (1990) *Universe of the Mind*. London; New York
- Lotman, Y.M. (2000) *Semiosfera*. St. Petersburg
- Mac Cana, P. (1962) 'The origin of Marbán', *The Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 19, 1-6
- Megill, A. (1985) *Prophets of Extremity*. Berkley, Los Angeles, London
- Meyer, K. (1906) Ed. *The Triads of Ireland*. Dublin
- Murray, K. (2001) 'The Finding of the Táin', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 41, 17-24.
- Nagy, G. (1992) *Greek Mythology and Poetics*. Cornell University Press
- Nagy, J. F. (1997) *Conversing with angels and ancients. Literary myths of medieval Ireland*. Dublin
- Ó Máille, T. (1921-1923) 'The authorship of the Culmen', *Ériu*, 9, 71-76.
- Patton, L.L. (1992) 'Space and Time in the *Immacallam in dá Thuarad*', *Folklore*, 103:i, 92-102.
- Piatigorsky, A. (2004) *Neprekraschaemiy razgovor*. St. Petersburg
- Rees, A.D. (1966) 'Modern Evaluations of Celtic Narrative Tradition', *Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Celtic Studies held in Cardiff 6—13 July, 1963*. Cardiff
- Shabelnikov, D.B. and Torshilov D.O. (2000) Ed. *Hisperica famina. Gesperiyskie recheniya*. St. Petersburg
- Shkunayev, S.V. (1994) 'Material changes and traditional behaviour in some Ulster cycle tales', *Ulidia. Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, eds. J.P. Mallory and G. Stockman, 239-242. Belfast
- Stokes and Meyer (1907) Ed. *Archiv für celtische Lexikographie. III. Band*. Halle
- Stokes, W. (1894-95) Ed. 'The Prose Tales in the Rennes Dindshenchas', *Revue celtique*, 15, 272-336, 418-84; 16, 31-83, 284-312, 135-67, 269-83.
- Stokes, W. (1900) Ed. 'Da Choca's Hostel', *Revue celtique*, 21, 149-65, 312-27, 388-402.
- Toner, G. (2007) Ed. *Bruiden Da Choca*. Dublin: ITS Society, vol. lxi.

© Grigory Bondarenko

This work is also published in:

Ulidia 2

Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales

Maynooth 24 – 27 June 2005

Edited by Ruairí Ó hUiginn and Brian Ó Catháin

ISBN: 1903896460

An Sagart Maigh Nuad 2009

Dr Grigory Vladimirovich Bondarenko is Assistant Editor of eDIL project, devoted to the digitisation of the Dictionary of the Irish Language. He completed his PhD thesis (Early Irish literature and Medieval Studies) devoted to the mythological perception of space in Early Irish literature in 2001 in Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow. He is member of the Editorial Board of *Odysseus*, the yearly almanac of social history and historical anthropology (Moscow).

We are grateful to Grigory Bondarenko for kind permission to host this work on aughty.org