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## Magic naturalism in the *Táin bó Cúailnge*

HELEN FULTON

Presented with a group of stories as intriguingly remote as the early Irish prose tale known as *Táin bó Cúailnge* ‘The cattle raid of Cooley,’ modern readers have, understandably, attempted to make sense of the tale in terms of its origins, textual history, and contemporary significance in early Ireland. My own interest in the text concerns its particular form of narrative: not so much who was telling the story, or why, but how. The narrative mode of the *Táin*, in both its early recensions, was a product of native Irish cultural practices combined with Latin learning, including oral performance (though not oral composition or transmission), the writing of vernacular Irish histories, the translation of Latin secular texts into Irish, Latin conventions of religious commentary, and the Bible itself.

My interest in narrative form owes a debt to Edgar Slotkin, who pioneered the use of narrative theory in relation to Celtic texts, particularly in his fine article on the medieval Welsh tale *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* ‘The dream of Rhonabwy,’ where he drew on the structuralist distinction between ‘story’ and ‘plot.’<sup>1</sup> He was also interested in concepts of orality and literacy in medieval Irish texts, including the *Táin*, suggesting that the instability of the poetic parts of the text, as much as the prose, was due to scribal rather than oral transmission.<sup>2</sup> My approach owes something to Slotkin’s

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The fabula, story and Text of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*,’ *CMCS* 18, 1989, 89–112.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Medieval Irish scribes and fixed texts,’ *Éigse* 17, 1978–1979, 437–450.

essentially structuralist analysis while moving more towards post-structuralist theories of narrative based on the concepts of focalization and diegesis.<sup>3</sup>

The starting point for my discussion of the narrative mode of the *Táin* is the assumption, formulated by a number of scholars, beginning with James Carney, that the tales of the Ulster cycle, as we have them now, are not the results of a long period of oral transmission, but are the literary products of a Christian milieu based on an agglomeration of native and Latin story materials.<sup>4</sup> I would go further and argue that the immediate sources of the *Táin* as we have it (in its twelfth-century manuscript forms) are entirely written, and that any preceding oral material had already been incorporated, or remediated, into written texts.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the tales are conscious literary creations — not ‘literary’ in the sense of aspiring to a place in ‘great literature,’ but in the sense of conforming to contemporary conventions of written texts, both Latin and Irish. We must, therefore, assume that their textual realizations of discourse, structure, and content are not random, accidental, or corrupt, but fully motivated and, therefore, semiotically significant.

My basic thesis is that *Táin bó Cúailnge*, in its two earliest recensions (Recension I in *Lebor na hUidre* and Recension II in the *Book of Leinster*, both twelfth century),

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<sup>3</sup> Accounts of narrative theory which have been particularly influential for this article include Mieke Bal, *Narratology. Introduction to the theory of narrative*, trans. Christine van Boheemen, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997; Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative fiction. Contemporary poetics*, London and New York: Methuen, 1983; and Michael J. Toolan, *Narrative. A critical linguistic introduction*, London and New York: Routledge, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> This argument has been usefully summarized by Ruarí Ó hUiginn, ‘The background and development of *Táin bó Cúailnge*,’ in *Aspects of the Táin*, ed. J. P. Mallory, Belfast: December Publications, 1992, 29–67.

<sup>5</sup> Hildegard Tristram argues that ‘the first attempt at drafting a written text of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* was undertaken in the eleventh century,’ based on both oral and written sources, and this seems feasible. See ‘What is the purpose of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*?’, in *Ulidia. Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. J. P. Mallory & G. Stockman, Belfast: December Publications, 1994, 11–21 at 11.

conforms to a particular narrative style widely used in early Irish and Welsh prose material, a style that has been described in various ways — as repetitive, inconsistent, elliptical, based on oral modes of narrative, and so on — but not so far identified as a specific mode of discourse. I am calling this mode ‘magic naturalism’ and I would argue that it was the preferred medium of Irish and Welsh redactors faced with the task of making an authoritative vernacular written text out of a variety of sources. I also argue that, by its very nature, magic naturalism as a mode of narrative can be realized only through a written (or visual) text, and not through a primarily oral text where the teller or ‘author’ is present to ‘authorize’ the text. Finally, by explaining the devices of magic naturalism, I hope to recuperate Recension I (*Lebor na hUidre*) of the *Táin* as a complete literary artefact with its own particular rationale.

### **Narrative style and structure**

Studies of the *Táin* as narrative, how the story is told, are few in number compared to the scholarly interest in dating, transmission, and historicity. Most critics look for a ‘coherent whole, in which consciously chosen elements are deployed in a carefully planned order, and expressed in an appropriate form,’ finding it most obviously in Recension II, with its striking opening of the ‘Pillow talk’ providing an explicit motivation for Connacht’s invasion of Ulster, but also more residually in Recension I, as Patricia Kelly argues.<sup>6</sup> Stylistic commentaries, when they occur, focus on the literary rather than narrative significance of techniques such as the ‘watchman device’ where a participant describes and interprets events, or the use of flashback, notably the

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<sup>6</sup> ‘The *Táin* as literature,’ in *Aspects of the Táin*, 69–102 at 95; see also 71–72.

'Boyhood deeds' section. Linguistic choices such as short, elliptical sentences, use of dialogue, and alternation between prose and poetry are among the literary features most often described. Various kinds of repetition, including the use of 'formulaic' passages and 'threefold repetition' of a sequence of events, have also been noted, with Cecile O'Rahilly drawing particular attention to the way in which passages from one context (or from a variant version) are repeated in another, less fitting, context, 'with complete and sometimes bewildering irrelevance.'<sup>7</sup>

Discussions of style and content in the *Táin* have also drawn attention to the importance of Latin writing and its influence on vernacular writing in early Ireland.<sup>8</sup> While the theories of James Carney and others regarding direct influence from classical epics, particularly the *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, have been rejected as too determinist, a more pervasive influence from Latin literary texts in general, particularly in terms of stylistic convention and genre, is entirely to be expected in the context of Irish scribal activity. Hildegard Tristram argues that the scribes who compiled the first two recensions of the *Táin* were drawing on models of writing with which they were already familiar, namely biblical commentary and exegesis, and translations of Latin narratives into Irish, such as the tenth-century *Imthúsa Alexandair* 'The deeds of Alexander' and *Togail Troí* 'The destruction of Troy,' translated in the tenth or eleventh century with a later recension found alongside the *Táin* in the Book of Leinster.<sup>9</sup> There are clearly

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<sup>7</sup> 'Repetition. A narrative device in *TBC*,' *Ériu* 30, 1979, 67–74 at 74.

<sup>8</sup> For a summary of views on this topic, see Ó hUiginn, 'Background and development,' 35–41.

<sup>9</sup> 'What is the purpose of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*?,' 12. See also Hildegard Tristram, 'The cattle raid of Cuailnge in tension and transition, between the oral and the written, classical subtexts and narrative heritage,' in *Cultural identity and cultural integration. Ireland and Europe in the early Middle Ages*, ed. Doris Edel, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995, 61–81; and Uáitéar Mac Gearailt, 'Togail Troí. An example of translating and editing in medieval Ireland', *SHib* 31, 2000–2001, 71–85.

close links between these early translations from Latin and the native Irish tales, but it is suggestive that the translated Latin stories were crafted into narratives very like the Irish tales, and not the other way round. The Book of Leinster version of *Togail Troí*, for example, is stylistically quite similar to Recension II of the *Táin* in the same manuscript. Rather than the translations influencing the literary production of the *Táin*, it is just as possible that the Latin stories were translated into an already-existing native tradition of narrative which had its own logic and organizing principles.<sup>10</sup>

This is not to say that Latin influence on early Irish literature was nugatory, only that its nature and extent are hard to quantify. Detailed work on classical influences on early Irish secular material has been published by Proinsias Mac Cana, Brían Ó Cuív, and W. B. Stanford, while Kim McCone and D. R. Howlett have examined Latin biblical style and its influence on vernacular writing.<sup>11</sup> A comparison by Dorothy Swartz of classical rhetorical techniques with similar devices in Recension II of the *Táin* shows that, as we would expect, Irish scribes were well-trained in Latin rhetoric and able to apply many of its techniques to vernacular compositions.<sup>12</sup> It is partly due to the appearance of such rhetorical devices that Recension II is perceived by modern readers to be more 'literary' than its predecessor.

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<sup>10</sup> Discussing the second (Book of Leinster) recension of *Togail Troí*, which, like TBC II, is greatly expanded from the earliest translation, Mac Gearailt, 'Togail Troí. An example of translating and editing in medieval Ireland,' 82–83. concludes that it owes more to 'existing literary tradition in Irish and contemporary Irish storytelling tradition' than to direct Latin influence.

<sup>11</sup> Mac Cana, *The learned tales of medieval Ireland*, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1980; Ó Cuív, 'Medieval Irish scholars and classical Latin literature,' *PRIA* 81C, 1981, 239–248; Stanford, *Ireland and the classical tradition*, Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1976; McCone, *Pagan past and Christian present in early Irish literature*, Maynooth: An Sagart, 1990; Howlett, *The Celtic Latin tradition of Biblical style*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> 'The problem of classical influence in the Book of Leinster *Táin bó Cúailnge*. Significant parallels with twelfth-century neo-classical rhetoric,' *PHCC* 7, 1986, 98–125.

More directly relevant to my interest in narrative method in the *Táin* is Hildegard Tristram's article on the uses of Latin phrases and 'metatextual markers' in Recensions I and II.<sup>13</sup> Tristram argues that the various Latin discourse markers in both versions (such as *dixit*, *incipit*, and so on) derive from Latin exegetical practice, supporting her theory that the first recension of the *Táin* was based, in its episodic structure, on the techniques of Latin biblical commentaries and their Irish equivalents. She also suggests that these markers represent the voice of the 'omniscient narrator' who is guiding us through the text, mediating the narrative from a distance to ensure that the readers receive the message in the way intended by the narrator.<sup>14</sup>

These remarks, like other stylistic commentaries which problematize the episodic and repetitive structure of Recension I while indicating approval for the 'improved' narrative structure of Recension II, are based on an implicit understanding of narrative in its modern, realist mode. In another article, Tristram, while praising both recensions, judges Recension I to be a brave, but unsuccessful, attempt to exercise 'the newly acquired skill of writing extended and coherent translation narrative,' while Recension II is a more evolved improvement which integrates events into a coherent narrative rather than merely aggregating them.<sup>15</sup> Eamon Greenwood cites Thurneysen's influential view that the many contradictions and inconsistencies in Recension I were due to the compiler's lack of literary ability coupled with his motive

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<sup>13</sup> 'Latin and Latin learning in the *Táin bó Cuailnge*,' *ZCPH* 49–50, 1997, 847–77.

<sup>14</sup> 'Latin and Latin learning in the *Táin bó Cuailnge*,' 849.

<sup>15</sup> 'What is the purpose of *Táin bó Cuailnge*?,' 12–13; also 20: 'Recension II is more integrated and aesthetically ambitious than Recension I.'

of including as much of the known material as possible.<sup>16</sup> Patricia Kelly notes that, while the opening sections of both Recensions I and II are generally praised by scholars, there is a consensus that the *Táin* tails off disappointingly into a series of disjointed episodes and that ‘judged as a whole, the *Táin* is a failure.’<sup>17</sup> Kelly herself defends the tale-cycle as a coherent whole ‘in which consciously chosen elements are deployed in a carefully planned order,’ yielding a specific meaning relating to kingship and, ultimately, ‘the futility of martial victory achieved at the expense of fecundity.’<sup>18</sup>

Whilst I agree entirely that the *Táin* is a purposeful and ‘motivated’ structure (in the sense of having a purpose and rationale), I do not believe that concepts of coherence, integration, consistency, omniscient narrator and intended meaning — coming as they do from modern literary criticism applied to realist fiction, particularly the nineteenth-century novel — have the same (or any) relevance to Recensions I and II of the *Táin*. Whatever the *Táin* is, it is not a piece of realist fiction, and to apply to it the standards of realist fiction is to deem it flawed, unsuccessful, a failure. If we are to understand the *Táin* as a motivated narrative structure, we must look for another kind of narrative logic. This is, I suggest, the mode of naturalism.

### **Realism and Naturalism**

The narrative mode of realism is associated by literary critics with the rise of the modern novel in Britain, and by Marxist critics with the development of an industrial

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Some aspects of the evolution of *Táin bó Cúailnge* from TBC I to LL TBC,’ in *Ulidia*, 47–54 at 47.

<sup>17</sup> ‘The *Táin* as literature,’ 94.

<sup>18</sup> ‘The *Táin* as literature,’ 95.



economy. The mode began to manifest itself in the eighteenth century, was developed and refined in the nineteenth century, and is still the dominant mode of expression in fiction (and film) of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>19</sup> The realist mode appeals to us because it reflects back to us the people that we believe ourselves to be and the world that we believe we understand. It constructs narratives that are easy to follow, in a chronological line or with clearly-marked flashbacks or flashforwards, marking out plot sequences based on the logic of cause-and-effect, with characters who seem to reflect our own sense of agency (and its limitations), in a location or narrative 'diegesis' that is seamless and coherent (even if unfamiliar to us personally). Beginnings and endings are clearly marked, particularly the moment of 'closure' when all possible permutations of the plot are closed off once and for all, and the story can move effortlessly to its final page or scene. Contradictions and inconsistencies are introduced as intriguing and suspenseful departures from an accepted norm to which the text comfortingly restores us. Thomas Leitch emphasizes the importance of the 'teleology' of the (realist) story where the ending (*telos*) authorizes and makes sense of what has gone before, acting as its own authority for bringing the story or sequence to an appropriate conclusion, and in fact providing the rationale for the story itself: 'A primary function of narrative endings is therefore to provide or confirm a teleology or retrospective rationale for the story as a whole, and stories which lack such endings ... are often accounted unsatisfactory.'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For a clear description of realism and its ideological implications, see Catherine Belsey, *Critical practice*, London and New York: Methuen, <sup>2</sup>2002.

<sup>20</sup> *What stories are. Narrative theory and interpretation*, University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986, 43.

The *Táin* is far from being a realist text. Any expectation that it should be coherent, that it should have a 'proper' ending, that it should resolve its own inconsistencies, that its characters should have stable identities, that its narrator is creating a hierarchy of viewpoints or is motivated to guide us through the text, is bound to be frustrated. This is not the logic of the text as we have it. It is not surprising that critics have focused on the beginnings of the two recensions, the launchings of the narrative, when the endings present us with no moment of 'closure,' no sense that we are being returned to a pre-packaged world whose 'reality' has been constructed for us by the author. Praise for the 'Pillow talk' sequence that opens Recension II is based on the relief of having some semblance of cause for the dramatic effects which follow, yet the overriding logic of the text, in either of its major recensions, is not that of cause and effect.

The world of the *Táin* is not one that we instinctively recognize, which is why the text is so enigmatic — yet our failure to 'recognize' its reality is not due to its historical distance in time, but to its narrative style of disjunction, strangeness, spectacle, digression, and supra-normal hyperbole, all alien to the realist text. The characters do not perform as freely-choosing subjects of liberal-humanism who believe they are the authors of their own actions. On the contrary, our expectation of the coherent subjectivity typical of the realist character is consistently undermined and subverted in the *Táin* — by the Ulstermen, who suffer the *cess* 'debility' over which they have no control, by Cú Chulainn, who undergoes the unearthly transformation of the 'warp

spasm,' by the Mórrígan who shape-shifts, by Medb who changes from mother to queen to battle leader and back again in a fantastic spiral of metamorphosis. These are not the stable, coherent subjects of realist discourse, the kind of people we believe ourselves to be, which is precisely why they seem — especially Medb, object of endless feminist debate — so unknowable and, therefore, inexplicable, despite our best efforts as literary critics.

These enigmas of the text can to some extent be resolved if we read the *Táin* as a naturalist rather than realist narrative. Naturalism is, I would suggest, the dominant mode of early medieval vernacular story-telling because it is based on a specifically early-medieval ideology of the individual. Realism first begins to emerge with the philosophies of humanism in the late fourteenth century, which placed the individual, newly theorized as a person possessing their own agency, more towards the centre of human activity in the world. Naturalism, on the other hand, as a mode of representation, depends on a view of the individual as relatively insignificant compared to larger institutions such as God, the church, the natural world, and the (naturalized) social hierarchy. In a naturalist narrative, therefore, the world is not mediated through self-aware individuals, either within or outside the diegesis (that is, the world of the story), but appears to be directly experienced by both characters and readers (or listeners) simultaneously and from roughly the same perspective.<sup>21</sup> No

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<sup>21</sup> The Aristotelian distinction between *diegesis* 'telling' and *mimesis* 'showing' originally applied only to drama, not to narrative. Modern theorists argue that *mimesis*, in the form of dialogue or indirect speech, is part of the diegesis of narrative, not a separate mode, and this is also how I interpret it. See Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative fiction*, 106–108. The concept of diegesis as 'the world of the text' belongs mainly to film theory; see Rosemary Huisman, 'Narrative concepts,' in *Narrative and media*, H. Fulton et al., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 11–27 at 18–19.

single viewpoint is privileged over another (least of all, that of the narrator) because no single person knows all the answers; only God is omniscient.

### **The *Táin* as a naturalistic text**

Perhaps the most striking feature of the *Táin* as narrative, and one of the key features of naturalism, is its lack of an ‘omniscient narrator,’ that external perspective in the realist novel which knows what the characters are thinking and feeling and who is positioned above and beyond all the temporal events of the text, knowing them all simultaneously. There is certainly an external narrative voice or ‘focalizer’ in the *Táin*, the one who ‘sees’ all the armies mustering and knows all the places they pass through, listing them as if from a ‘bird’s-eye view’ (like a medieval map), but this external narrator claims no privileged knowledge of characters or events.<sup>22</sup> There is thus no external ‘author’ whose role it is to tell us how to evaluate what we are ‘seeing’ through the verbal descriptions of the text; instead, this role is delegated to some of the characters as internal focalizers. Very occasionally the invisible narrator makes a comment such as *amal asrubartmár* ‘as we have [already] related’ (*TBC I* 1263), or in Latin, *ut praediximus* ‘as we have previously said’ (*TBC I* 2508), the Latin clearly indicating a formula which distances the narrator, culturally and linguistically, from the events being related. The formula helps us to keep up with the action of the story (to remember, for example, that Fergus’s sword was stolen by Ailill and replaced with a wooden one), but it offers no commentary or evaluation of the action. In an incident which occurs in the first recension of *Táin bó Cúailnge*, but not in the second, Cú

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<sup>22</sup> In my use of the term ‘focalizer,’ I am mainly following Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative fiction*, 71–85.

Chulainn kills Fer Teidil, the charioteer of Órlám, having previously assured him that he does not kill charioteers (*TBC I 869–896*). The narrator comments: *Ní fír trá amlaid sin ná marbad Cú aradu. Ní marbad ém cen chinaid cip innus* ‘It is not true, then, that Cú Chulainn never killed charioteers. However, he did not kill them without their being at fault’ (*TBC I 918–919*). This narratorial remark, positioned externally relative to Cú Chulainn as the focalized object, seems to be confirming a point of logic rather than making a moral judgment on Cú Chulainn’s behaviour which otherwise passes without authorial comment during the whole of the tale.

This narrator is external, but not omniscient in the sense of knowing what will happen or how a character will react or what a character is thinking or feeling. The entire knowledge-system of the text is based on having the inexplicable or the imperceptible interpreted for us, in direct speech, by a character in the diegesis. Diegetic voices from within the text are therefore privileged over the narrator’s non-diegetic voice, and this is another way of collapsing the diegesis into the real world. The internal focalizers, describing warriors approaching or explaining the meaning of particular events, position us right inside the diegesis, seeing what the characters see, speaking to us in the language of the characters. In this way, the diegesis itself is almost dissolved; our point of view or focalization is that of an observer within the scene, on the same level as the participants, knowing exactly what they show us and what they tell us, no more and no less. This in turn produces a high ‘modality,’ or assumption of truth and certainty: modality ‘creates an imaginary “we”... [it] produces

shared truths aligning readers or listeners with some statements and distancing them from others.’<sup>23</sup>

We thus experience the world of the text ‘naturistically,’ as if it appears before us unmediated by any obvious narrative control (in direct contrast to realism, which works through a strong and often foregrounded narrative control). One effect of this is that there is no fixed centre of knowledge and authority from which we can evaluate the significance of events or the performance of each character. The authority of knowledge which is abrogated by the narrator is instead projected on to a considerable number of the characters, particularly Cú Chulainn and Fergus, but also those ‘watchmen’ figures who explain and interpret the people who approach both us and them. When Medb consults the prophetess Feidelm, before she invades Ulster, she rejects Feidelm’s warning, even though it is authenticated in verse (*TBC I* 40–112; *TBC II* 196–278). Medb’s role as questioner (rather than provider of answers) and her denial of what she is told indicates to us that it is Feidelm, and not Medb, who has knowledge and therefore authority. This is something we seem to intuit for ourselves, as witnesses of the scene, and not because the narrator has (noticeably) positioned us in relation to these characters.

Yet these figures of knowledge are not stable, nor are they arranged into a clear moral hierarchy from which we can gauge their reliability. Fergus is the most obviously positive character, yet he is Medb’s lover, he is fighting against his own people, and he is humiliated by having his sword replaced by a wooden one. Cú Chulainn is a force of nature, almost entirely unacculturated and therefore ‘mythic’ in

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<sup>23</sup> Gunther Kress & Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading images. The grammar of visual design*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, 159–160.

the Barthesian sense of appearing ahistorical, naturally produced, and entirely factual within the terms of the story.<sup>24</sup> Conchobar, the great king of Ulster, is depicted as a *roi fainéant* ‘do-nothing king,’ who is unwilling or unable to act decisively. Other characters who seem to wield authority, such as Lugaid, Láeg, and Lug, all avatars of Cú Chulainn’s otherworld father, have walk-on roles in the drama and then disappear off-stage again without explanation, leaving us with no moral centre where truth values clearly reside.

The relative absence of cause-and-effect relations reinforces this lack of anchorage. Naturalism as a narrative mode is characterized by its concentration on effects rather than causes, and this is largely what we are presented with in the *Táin*. While Cú Chulainn’s actions are framed by the invasion of Ulster by the men of Ireland, providing a broad reason for his violence against the enemy, many of his actions seem motiveless and are recounted merely to illustrate the ‘effect’ of a resultant place-name, as in this example:

Buí ara Ailella .i. Cuillius oc nigi na fondad issind áth mattain. Benti-seom co cloich conid ro marb. Is de attá Áth Cuillne hí Cúil Airthir (*TBC I* 1230–1232).

Ailill’s charioteer, Cuillius, was washing the chariot-wheels at the ford in the morning. He [Cú Chulainn] hit him with a stone so that he was dead. It is from that it is called Cuillius’s Ford in Cúil Airthir.

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<sup>24</sup> I am following Henrietta Lidchi’s reading of Barthes here. Lidchi says: ‘Myth’s duplicity is therefore located in its ability to “naturalize” and make “innocent” what is profoundly motivated;’ see ‘The poetics and the politics of exhibiting other cultures,’ in *Representation. Cultural representations and signifying practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, London: Sage, 1997, 151–221 at 182.

The lack of causes — provided in realist texts by the external narrator who knows the motivations of all the characters and who has control of all events simultaneously — confers a factuality on the narration which asks us simply to accept all the events as ‘what happened,’ as if we were ourselves eye-witnesses. But it also creates what are perceived from a realist perspective to be inconsistencies or incongruities in the narrative. In Recension I, there is no explicit motivation for Medb’s invasion of Ulster; subsequent references to the cattle-raiding and to the fighting of the two bulls are fragmentary and unmotivated. What this ‘means’ in terms of interpreting the narrative is that events in the world are frequently random and unexplained, and individuals have little power to change or affect the course of events; they have little agency, apart from brute force. Unless an authority figure, such as a prophet or druid or privileged warrior, can offer an explanation, we must simply accept events as they happen. But explained or not, we have little power to change the way things are.

The compiler of Recension II, while still writing in a naturalist mode, attempts to provide more motivation for events. Thus the opening ‘Pillow talk’ explains Medb’s desire for the bull of Cúailnge, while some of Fergus’ behaviour, such as the smashing of Connacht chariots, is given a more motivated explanation: in Recension I, Fergus smashes 14 chariots in the effort to pull a forked branch (cut and thrown by Cú Chulainn) out of the water (*TBC I* 330–356), while in Recension II, Fergus smashes 17 chariots and is then accused (quite plausibly) by Medb of deliberately delaying her army until the Ulstermen have recovered from their debility (*TBC II* 636–651). This extra layer of motivation that we find in Recension II does not remove all the



inconsistencies or create a fully realized ‘plot.’ The narrator of Recension II is still an external focalizer who delegates the knowledge of characters’ motivations to other characters in the diegesis. But the focalized objects, such as Fergus and Medb, are seen from within, rather than outside, the diegesis, as when the narrator describes Fergus after the chariot-smashing incident:

Cia baí dia chalmacht 7 dia churatacht dosfarlaic intí dosfarlaic síis, baí dia nertmaire 7 dá óclachas dasfucastar in cathmílid 7 in chliathbern chét 7 [in t-]ord essorgni 7 in bráthlec bidbad 7 in cend costuda 7 in bidba sochaide 7 in cirriud mórslúaig 7 in chaindel adantai 7 in toísech mórchatha (*TBC II* 654–659).

As was the strength and bravery when it was driven in by the one who drove it in, so was the might and valour with which the warrior drew it out, the breaker of a hundred and the hammer of striking and the stone that destroys enemies and the leader of resistance and the enemy of hosts and the destroyer of a great army and the burning torch and the leader of a great battle.

This unequivocal endorsement of Fergus as the hero of the story mimetically imitates the voice of someone who might be in the story, specifically a supporter of the Ulstermen. Neither Fergus nor the Ulstermen are explicitly favoured by the external narrator, but this type of imitative indirect speech suggests an internal point of view which locates us on the Ulster side of the conflict.

Here, as in both recensions, the narrative voice privileges mimesis — imitation of speech through dialogue and indirect speech — over the basic diegetic method of narration by the external voice. Motivation, emotion, relative positions of power, and knowledge are all conveyed primarily through dialogue, direct speech, and indirect speech. The section called ‘The boyhood deeds’ of Cú Chulainn is often hailed by modern critics as an example of ‘flashback,’ but this term suggests an authorial control of temporality which is not otherwise displayed in the two early recensions; events play themselves out in their own time, naturalistically, and there are virtually no references to the time frame, how long events lasted, or the chronological order of events. The ‘Boyhood deeds’ provide the opportunity for a sequence of dramatic performances by several of the exiled Ulster warriors, speaking in their own voices in a public forum, as if on stage. As such, these episodes are very similar to other instances of direct speech and dialogue, including the poetry. The characters literally speak for themselves, without apparent authorial mediation, and the effect is to produce a high modality — that is, a high degree of factuality, of believability. Whether or not Cú Chulainn actually achieved all those feats as a young boy, we can be absolutely sure that Fergus is telling us about them, and this in turn endorses the believability of the whole tale, that the invasion of Ulster by Medb and her army really happened.

The dramatic use of direct speech and dialogue in the *Táin* is one aspect of its overdetermined visuality — we have to be made to ‘see’ what is happening in order to accept it. In many ways, the *Táin* is less like a written story and more like the outline of a feature film, complete with the kind of spectacle, such as Cú Chulainn’s warp spasm, which can be achieved so effectively using computer-generated imaging and other

special effects. The use of poetic interludes, much expanded in Recension II, highlights the aspects of internal orality and performance which are central to the tale as part of its mimesis (and which have suggested to some critics that the tale is based on oral transmission). Another way of realizing the visual is through the many detailed descriptions of approaching armies or warriors, delivered in direct speech by a 'watchman' (literal or metaphorical) who describes the clothing, appearance, and armour of the approaching figure. This is how we receive our only description of Medb in Recension I (ll. 3205–3211), when Cethern describes 'a tall beautiful woman with pale, tender face' and Cú Chulainn identifies her as Medb. The density of each description, comprising details which, though conventional and often formulaic, are highly specific and keenly observed, reinforces the factuality of the diegetic world. At the same time, the estimated distance of the eye-witness from the person approaching — close enough to see the folds of clothing and the colour of hair, but not close enough to see expression — implies the relative power of each approaching warrior and the social distance between observer and observed.

The numerous descriptions of this type gradually reach a crescendo as the tale reaches its end, culminating in Mac Roth's series of descriptions of the companies of Ulster warriors marching to battle, and the visual effect of this, intensified by all the lesser descriptions that have gone before, is sufficient to indicate to us, mimetically, not through authorial intervention, that Ulster is the winning side. Again, the use of direct speech increases the factuality, though the set-piece descriptions of Cú Chulainn's battle-dress, chariot, feats, and warp-spasm, among the most striking scenes of the tale, are written in third-person narration by the external narrator. In keeping

with the naturalist mode, these scenes appear oddly unmotivated — they could be inserted at almost any point in the tale — and the narrator addresses us as if we were eye-witnesses to the event, or watching it in a film. This is what David Graddol, speaking of another genre entirely (television news), calls the ‘visual accomplishment of factuality,’ where visual scenes, naturalistically presented, create a sense of unmediated reality, the world as it is.<sup>25</sup>

The overdetermined visuality of the *Táin* produces a forward movement to the tale that is based on spectacle rather than plot. In keeping with naturalism generally, the plot of the story (and I use these terms in their denotative rather than structuralist meaning) is vestigial and consists of a linked series of events rather than a worked-out teleological structure. Cause-and-effect relations, where they exist, are implied by sequential positioning — according to the logic of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* — rather than any explicit motivations. The series of spectacles, comprising descriptions, single combats, battles, and dramatic dialogues, interspersed with poetic moments of intensity, continually postpones the action and problematizes the chronology. As with the description of Cú Chulainn, many of the spectacles and the poems could be placed in almost any order in the tale. The narrator continually reminds us that there are ‘other versions’ of the tale, and its sequential structure shows us why this might be so. Within the conventions of naturalism, however, this episodic progression is not a flaw in the narrative, but rather a way of reminding us that we have little control over the way events are shaped and the way things pan out. Spectacle, poetry, and description,

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<sup>25</sup> David Graddol, ‘Constructing experience in images. The visual accomplishment of factuality,’ in *Media texts. Authors and readers*, ed. David Graddol & Oliver Boyd-Barrett, Clevedon: Open University Press, 1994, 136–157.

the major events of the tale, are all forms of digression that lead us away from the actual moment of battle or the meeting of the bulls, postponing the moment of closure to the point where it never actually arrives.<sup>26</sup>

The contingent structure of the naturalistic narrative denies the *telos*, the point of closure which provides a rationale for the whole story, which realism both requires and constructs. Cecile O’Rahilly’s previously cited observation that episodes and passages from variant versions of the *Táin* are removed from one context and inserted into another ‘with complete and sometimes bewildering irrelevance’ misunderstands the nature of the narrative, which is naturalistic rather than realist and, therefore, has no single authorized narrative order of events.<sup>27</sup> It is part of the effect of naturalism that, in reading the story, we seem to enter an ongoing sequence of events which has no clearly-marked beginning or ending and very little ‘plot’ in the realist sense of a story crafted by an author. In naturalistic fiction, plot is less important than the interactions between characters, who are not ‘introduced’ to us complete with back-story, apart from Cú Chulainn, whose back-story is told to us mimetically within the diegesis, as if we were one of the warriors listening to Fergus and the others.

The external narrator, then, is not an author who invents and authorizes a fictional world, but a teller who describes a world that already exists, a world that was already there before the story started and will continue without us once the story has ended. It is interesting that the compiler of Recension II felt the need to provide a ‘beginning’ in the form of the ‘Pillow talk,’ but neither of the two early recensions provide an ‘ending’

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<sup>26</sup> This is precisely the structure of the Middle Welsh tale *Breudwyt Ronabwy* ‘The dream of Rhonabwy,’ developed almost to the point of parody.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Repetition. A narrative device in *TBC*,’ 74.

in the realist sense of a point of closure. The bulls kill each other, the armies disperse, the story stops without really being ‘finished’ — it is simply that the narrator has recounted all that is known (to him). To many modern critics, expecting the *telos* of realism, this lack of ending is unsatisfactory, an unwelcome reminder that the *Táin*, as fine a piece of literature as it is, is nevertheless flawed. But the narrative’s coming to a stop is part of the factuality constructed by naturalism: this is one place to stop, but there could be others which are just as valid.

In the naturalist mode of the *Táin*, there are clear echoes of the medieval idea of history as ongoing chronicle, a recount by an external narrator of what is known of the past. As the literary theorist Émile Benveniste pointed out, history seems to narrate events without a speaker: ‘the events seem to narrate themselves.’<sup>28</sup> In the *Táin*, both recensions refer to the deaths of Roán and Roae who are described as *dá senchaid na Tána* ‘the two historians of the *Táin*’ (*TBC I* 1013; *TBC II* 1360–1361), where the word *sencha* ‘the keeper of old traditions,’ carries the connotation of professionalism, like *fili* ‘the seer or poet.’ The narrators of the *Táin*, in its two early recensions, are themselves the *senchaid* who record what is known of the past, but who take little responsibility for shaping the content into a ‘plot.’ The compiler of Recension II explicitly denies such responsibility at the end of the recount: using Latin to stand right outside the text and to distance his comments from the tale itself, which he calls *historia aut fabula* ‘history or fable,’ the compiler declares that he does not believe a word of it. In the same way, the many references in both recensions to different versions of the tale indicate that a variety of tellings, a variety of focalizations, are possible; and since there is no single

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<sup>28</sup> *Problems in general linguistics*, trans. Mary E. Meek, Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1972, 208.

'original' plot or viewpoint that claims to be the truth, the compilers are under no obligation to arrange the episodes and events in a particular order. Their role is to preserve what is known.

### **Magic naturalism and the *Táin***

I have been arguing that naturalism, as a narrative mode, is the dominant mode of the *Táin*, as of most early Celtic prose. I am also introducing the descriptive term 'magic naturalism' by analogy with the literary concept of 'magic realism,' referring to realist works of fiction which explore the supernatural possibilities of real life in order to reveal, through allegory and mythology, deeper truths than can be shown by realism itself.<sup>29</sup> Magic naturalism goes one step further in presenting 'magic' (that is, all aspects of the supernatural and superhuman) as a naturalized form of reality, as factual as any other part of the narrative. Just as modern scientific discourse presents us, objectively and factually, with aspects of the world which we cannot perceive through any of our senses, so medieval 'magic' presented truths about the world that could not be perceived in any other way. In a narrative tradition mediated by the medieval church, 'magic' offered no contradiction to the prevailing view of reality, as we can easily see from the work of, for example, Gerald of Wales, who recounts bizarre and unlikely events as part of the factuality of his journeys around Wales and Ireland.

The predominance of magic naturalism in medieval Irish and Welsh literature (where it is used in most of the prose tales in the *Mabinogi* collection) suggests that, like

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<sup>29</sup> For a useful historical overview of magic realism in the twentieth century, see Luc Herman, *Concepts of realism*, Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1996, 122–136. See also Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) realism*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

realism in post-Enlightenment societies, it was an effective means of articulating a particular 'truth' or philosophy about relations between humans, the world, and reality. The ability of naturalism to construct an apparently unmediated version of reality validated the supernatural powers of ancestors, kings, and heroes as part of the real world, while the 'authorless' text, unclaimed by any named writer, allowed the clerical compilers to distance themselves from what they perceived to be pagan or non-Christian material.

In reading the *Táin* as a naturalistic text whose narrative mode works to construct factuality, I interpret the tale as a version of the historical past produced within a specific knowledge-system, one based on assumptions of the church's superiority to secular rule and the power of the written word to record the truth. What is being described in the *Táin* is an objective world which exists 'out there,' regardless of human agency, and which is only knowable through experience, either direct sensory experience or mediated through speech, not through the written word. That world literally 'speaks for itself,' through the mimesis of the speaking characters. As a written text, the *Táin* is externally authorized by its compilers; but in the world of the text, there is no such authorization, only the instability of the spoken word whose meaning depends on who is speaking. The mode of naturalism is itself a written genre: it implies a complete remediation, not an imitation or compilation, of any related oral material since naturalism is, by definition, a literary mode which has no speaking narrator who addresses an audience directly.

By reading the *Táin* as naturalistic, rather than realistic, we can, I hope, re-evaluate its literary qualities. As I have indicated, modern critical opinion tends towards the



view that Recension II (in the Book of Leinster) is an improvement on Recension I, since it adds more detail, particularly the opening 'Pillow talk', and seems more coherent. In fact, I consider Recension I to be the more authentic text: based on the naturalistic style of the Bible, it pursues its own logic and follows its own dramatic movement. The Book of Leinster version, in its attempt at greater elaboration, sometimes obscures what was significant in Recension I. For example, in the account of Cú Chulainn's boyhood, where his rage is quelled by the appearance of naked women, Recension I makes it plain that Cú Chulainn automatically covered his eyes, at which point his fellow warriors were able to seize him and cool him down in a tub of cold water (*TBC I* 810–821). In Recension II, however, the motivation of shame is attributed to Cú Chulainn and his immersion in the tub of water is simply what happens next. The clerical eagerness to attribute shame to the young Cú Chulainn obscures the more significant point that no-one could get near him unless he closed his eyes and could not see them coming.

In the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, particularly in Recension I, with its reluctance to endorse any single site of authority, Irish story-tellers and compilers created a vernacular history where only the land, mapped in detail, can authenticate events. The mode of magic naturalism uses geography and cartography to collapse the boundaries between the 'real' and the 'other' world, while creating a factuality of the past as 'the way things were.' The narrative mode of the *Táin*, which has its own logic and its own aesthetic, reveals a view of individuals as unmotivated products of nature rather than motivated agents, while the role of military force is to substitute for any form of centralized authority, secular or religious. The text is also saying something about orality and

literacy, about meaning and where its authority resides — if it resides only in speech, then meaning is unstable and unreliable. Written texts, however, like the land itself, are physically present enough to guarantee a permanency of meaning.

Already in Recension II, a clerical compiler is reminding us that only the church can fill the vacuum of authority, can provide motivation and meaning in an otherwise random world. What the *Táin* constructs is the ‘myth’ of Ireland’s past before the coming of the church as an authorizing institution, a naturalized and unmediated account of a world that is not subject to a single authoritative explanation, but is plural, unstable, oral, and unaccountable. Yet this account, despite its naturalism, is itself ‘motivated:’ it serves a number of purposes or agendas, most obviously that of the church itself in suggesting that kings and warriors cannot provide the moral and spiritual leadership — or the written records — that society requires. The world of the *Táin* precedes and evades any ‘grand narrative’ or totalizing account of how the world works, which is why any authoritative interpretation will always elude us. It is a postmodern narrative from a pre-modern world.