

Cú Chulainn, Finn, and the Mythic Strands in Ulysses

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Abstract: *Transculturating Irish materials in Ulysses, James Joyce focused primarily on realistic representations of contemporary culture, formal features of Irish literature, and the use of architectonic structures from Irish myth, particularly The Book of Invasions, interwoven with structures from world literature, most obviously the Ulysses theme. Joyce's mythic syncretism in Ulysses comprises other layers of Irish legend as well, including elements from the Cú Chulainn cycle and the Finn cycle, thus anticipating aspects of Finnegans Wake. This essay offers a preliminary identification of Joyce's invocation of those mythic strands in Ulysses, as well as an assessment of their implications for an understanding of his mythic methods. In its mythic syncretism, Ulysses celebrates the vitality and resilience of Irish myth and adds resonance to the characters of Stephen, Molly, and Bloom.*

At the centenary of Bloomsday, it's hard to feel convinced of the need for any justification of Irish culture: a century of Irish literary preeminence, marked by three Nobel prizes to Irish writers, as well as Joyce's own prominence in English letters in the twentieth century, has dampened the need for Irish apologia. But such diffidence lingered on well after World War I, indeed continued even after World War II. It was felt acutely in 1904 when *Ulysses* takes place – a period when the Irish Revival still had not reached its apogee – as well as in 1914 when Joyce began writing *Ulysses*. This Irish impetus to self promotion and cultural justification at the turn of the twentieth century was not trivial: it was a response to English domination, a form of postcolonial resistance that has analogues in later twentieth-century cultural movements aimed at decolonization.

Joyce participated in the validation of Irish culture, most famously by setting all his works in Ireland, creating resistant texts larded with Irish history, cultural allusion, and minutely detailed geographical reference.¹ But he also engaged in cultural translation

and transculturation, using Irish literary techniques and Irish mythos in his own writing. One important Joycean means of asserting the value of Irish culture is also a signature feature of his mythic method, namely literary syncretism. *Ulysses*, for example, is marked by intertwined architectonic elements from diverse textual sources – including the *Odyssey*, the *Divine Comedy*, and *Hamlet* – to which Joyce added structures from Irish mythic materials, most notably from *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (*The Book of Invasions*), Sovereignty mythos, and otherworld literature.² By placing Irish myth on a par with great canonical works of Western literature, Joyce implicitly asserted the importance of Ireland's own literary and mythic tradition, he affirmed his affiliation with Ireland's literary heritage, and he claimed a central position for Irish texts in world literature.

What bears further investigation in *Ulysses* is Joyce's complex interweaving of Irish mythic and historical materials themselves, a syncretism that anticipates textual features of *Finnegans Wake*. As early as 1941 Stanislaus Joyce wrote of *Ulysses*, "whoever studies it in detail will find that a number of generations of Irish history have been superimposed one on another..." (1941, p. 19). This statement certainly can be taken as pointing to the palimpsest of references to significant events and figures in the history of Ireland: Brian Boruma and the Vikings, the Battle of Clontarf, the Norman invasion, Cromwell and the dispossession, the heroes of 1798, Daniel O'Connell, Young Ireland, the Fenian movement, Charles Stewart Parnell, the Irish Revival, and many more. Joyce stuffed *Ulysses* with such references, assiduously drawn from a variety of historical materials, including the annals appended to *Thom's Directory*, the *Dublin Penny Journal*, and works by P. W. Joyce, as well as assorted general histories of Ireland.

Curiously enough, despite its grounding in this historical matrix (and despite its referential and realist surface), *Ulysses* is more Joyce's pseudohistory of Ireland than his history of Ireland, while *Finnegans Wake*, the dreamlike surface notwithstanding, functions as Joyce's exploration of Irish history (and world history), projected through Viconian cycles. As we have seen, in *Ulysses* Joyce depends primarily on the pseudohistorical *The Book of Invasions*, the Sovereignty myth, and on mythic patterns associated with the *síd*, the Irish otherworld, to give *Ulysses* an Irish architectonics that parallels his structural frameworks from world literature (including the architectonics of the Ulysses theme). In *Finnegans Wake*, by contrast, Joyce depends more on hero tales and legends (conspicuously, legends from the Finn cycle) that were taken in Joyce's day as historical rather than mythic. Yet this contrast of legend and myth, history and pseudohistory, is not so absolute as first appears, for in *Ulysses* there are layers of allusions to heroic and legendary materials that anticipate the appearance of similar material in *Finnegans Wake*.³

Moreover, more than a century ago, Standish O'Grady observed that Irish history and pseudohistory form a seamless web, with Irish pseudohistory passing itself off as history by means of a mimetic surface of details, clarity, and precision:

There is not perhaps in existence a product of the human mind so extraordinary as the Irish annals. From a time dating for more than three thousand years before the birth of Christ, the stream of Hibernian history flows down uninterrupted, copious and abounding, between accurately defined banks ... As the centuries wend their way, king succeeds king with a regularity most gratifying, and fights no battle, marries no wife, begets not children, does no doughty deed of which a contemporaneous note was not taken, and which has not been incorporated in the annals of his country. To think that this mighty fabric of recorded events, so stupendous in its dimensions, so clean and accurate in its details, so symmetrical and elegant, should be after all a mirage and delusion ...

Doubtless the legendary blends at some point with the historic narrative. The cloud and mist somewhere condense into the clear stream of indubitable fact. But how to discern under the rich and teeming mythus of the bards, the course of that slender and doubtful rivulet ... In this minute, circumstantial, and most imposing body of history, where the certain legend exhibits the form of plain and probable narrative, and the certain fact displays itself with a mythical flourish, how there to fix upon any one point and say here is the first truth. It is a task perilous and perplexing. (n.d., O'GRADY, pp. 23-4)

These characteristics, comparable in certain ways to the texture of magic realism, make it difficult to know precisely where history and pseudohistory join, where history leaves off and myth begins. This is doubly the case because Irish history has a tendency toward the fabulous, with its larger-than-life posings, its incredible gestures and sequences, and its preposterous coincidences.

The historical patina of Irish myths, hero tales, and pseudohistory is partly a result of the techniques of the *filid* (sg. *fili*), the sacred poets and guardians of Irish lore, who embedded their narratives in a matrix of genealogy, temporal synchronisms, precise indicators of time and space, and other structures which we associated with veridical speech acts. It is also partly the result of the early development and adoption of *The Book of Invasions*, which organized Irish myth and legend along a chronological time line, thus presenting the three major narrative cycles of Irish narrative (the mythological cycle, the Ulster cycle, and the Finn cycle), as well as stories of the traditional Irish kings, within a precise historicized framework.⁴

Dogsbodies All: "Ulysses" and the Ulster Cycle

Of the early Irish narratives, the stories of the Ulster cycle – particularly its tales about the exploits of Cú Chulainn – were probably those taken as most historical by Joyce's contemporaries. The Ulster cycle was the favorite narrative cycle of the Irish Revival, and its stories are showcased in translations and rewritings of the movement (Tymoczko 1999). Yeats' dramatic rewritings of the Cú Chulainn tales hold a central

position in his literary canon and in some ways in his life, for Cú Chulainn was a Yeatsian alter ego. Augusta Gregory produced an entire volume of translations drawn from the Ulster cycle, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. Patrick Pearse celebrated Cú Chulainn in his educational mission and promoted the hero as a model for his students.⁵ It is generally agreed that Joyce had little taste for such “Cuchulanoid” fare, and many Joyce critics would follow Declan Kiberd (1992) in stating categorically that Joyce rejected the Ulster cycle as a scaffold for his work, that he “was reacting against the cult of Cúchulainn” and the glorification of ancient heroism. We might, thus, expect the Ulster cycle to be conspicuously absent from *Ulysses*.

Kiberd’s point seems to be sustained by the episode early in *Ulysses* where Stephen encounters a dead dog on Sandymount Strand (p. 3.286), a dead dog whose carcass is sniffed by a cur wandering the beach with its owners (3.1318, 3.345-55).⁶ Because Cú Chulainn’s name means “the dog of Culann” – usually translated by the Revival as the “hound of Culann”, a more elevated locution – Joyce’s emphasis on low bred and dead dogs at the opening of *Ulysses* might be taken as an oblique rejection of the use of Cú Chulainn stories for the purposes of cultural nationalism. The episode seems to embody Joyce’s view that Ireland’s traditional heroes are dead, that the living who are fixated on those heroes are not unlike dogs sniffing other dead dogs. Like the Old Milkwoman in the opening episode of *Ulysses* – marked by her dry withered breasts and ignorance of her country’s native language – the leitmotif of the dogs in episode three can be read as Joyce’s suggestion that the myths of Irish cultural nationalism are dying or dead. Such an absolutist conclusion might be premature, however, for there is in fact a set of allusions in *Ulysses* to the Ulster cycle that has not been adequately explored. Evidence for a discourse about dogs in *Ulysses* provides an entry way into a subliminal connection between Joyce’s narrative and the Ulster cycle.

Celtic culture gives a positive value to canines – dogs and wolves – that is at variance with Indo-European tradition as a whole; where in English, for example, dogs generally have negative or pejorative associations (e.g. “he’s a dirty dog”), in Celtic tradition heroes are named after dogs and wolves, heroes have dogs or wolves as companions and quasi-totemic counterparts, and canines have a positive emblematic value. There is even some evidence of cultic associations with canines.⁷ A sign of this positive valuation is found in the many names in Irish heroic literature and history which are formed from *cú*, the root for “dog” and “wolf”. Such names are not simply literary conceits, but pepper the historical record as well, as a brief inspection of the annals and genealogies indicates, where many historic kings, chieftains, and heroes bear names made from the root *cú*.

The Ulster cycle is notable for its characters who have “doggy” names and identities. Thus, Ulster’s chief heroes are Cú Chulainn and Conall Cernach, whose names mean respectively “the dog of Culann”, as we have seen, and “victorious mighty dog”. The king of Ulster is Conchobor, whose name means “dog-lover”. Cú Chulainn, the hero whose canine associations are most prominent, acts like a dog as well, taking the

place of a great hound he kills and behaving as a sort of watch dog in guarding the borders of Ulster's territory. It is also taboo for Cú Chulainn to eat the flesh of dogs, suggesting a totemic relationship. Moreover, his battle-distortion (*ríastrad*) has certain features in common with those of enraged dogs: his hair rises, his gullet opens, and so forth. Other Ulster heroes have fierce dogs as companions, including Celtchair and Culann, and the dog of Leinster's king Mac Datho begins to fight on the side of Ulster when he is loosed and given a chance to demonstrate his preferences.⁸

It is perhaps natural, therefore, that there should be dog associations for the character of *Ulysses* most identified with cultural nationalism – the Citizen, for example – for such figures, like the historical Pearse, might be seen as consciously modeling themselves after Cú Chulainn and the Ulster heroes. The Citizen is described in terms that lightly evoke the description of the gigantic Mac Cecht, the chief hero of another legendary “doggy” king, Conaire Mór of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (*The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*), whose name means “great dog-lord”.⁹ This Conaire Mór was historicized as a contemporary of the Ulster heroes, and the Citizen can be seen as himself a sort of dog lord, owner as he is of the storied Garryowen. Garryowen is figured at the end of episode twelve as an *archú* or “slaughter hound”, the sort of dog used by Celtic warriors in historical battles as part of their means of waging war. Joyce's irony in all this is apparent, of course, for the hyperbolic description of the Citizen simultaneously serves to identify him with Homer's Cyclops and with a whole line of medieval beast-people,¹⁰ while his dog is clearly labeled not as a noble beast but as a “bloody mangy mongrel” by the narrative voice of the chapter (12.119-20).

Episode twelve brings still other Ulster cycle associations into the text. References in the episode to feasting and vats of ale and the passing of cups suggest the plenty found in the hostels in early Irish literature, where welcome and refreshment are available to all comers – as they are by definition in Barney Kiernan's pub, of course (12.280-99). Joyce knew stories about the hostels, and he alludes specifically to a description found in *Scéla Mucce Meic Datho* (*The Story of Mac Datho's Pig*) of the great cauldron in Mac Datho's hostel where those passing along the road can use a “flesh-fork” to stab a portion of meat:

Secht ndoruis isin bruidin ocus secht sligeda trethe ocus secht tellaige indi ocus secht cori. Dam ocus tinne in cach coiri. In fer no-theged iarsint sligi do-bered in n-ael isin coire ocus a-taibred din chetgabail, iss ed no-ithed. Mani-tucad immurgu ní din chéttadall ni-bered a n-aill. (Adapted from Thurneysen 1935, p. 1-2)

There were seven doors in the hostel and seven roads through it and seven hearths in it and seven cauldrons. An ox and fitch were in each cauldron. A man going along a road would thrust a flesh-fork into a cauldron, and what he would get with the first try is what he would eat. If he didn't get anything with the first stab, however, he wouldn't get another chance. (My translation)

This is the textual background to Bloom's musing about communal kitchens, relieving the hunger of children, and soup pots:

Suppose that communal kitchen years to come ... Children fighting for the scrapings of the pot. Want a soup pot as big as the Phoenix Park. Harpooning fitches and hindquarters out of it. (8.704-16)

Rather than being a positive and Utopian image of plenty, Joyce stresses the negative valences of the hostels in both episodes eight and twelve. In episode eight the allusions are associated with the Homeric Lestrygonians, thus with sub-human behavior, including violence, cannibalism, and gluttony. In episode twelve the negative parallels with *The Story of Mac Datho's Pig* are continued, for the episode highlights drunkenness, boasting, intemperate behavior, hatred and prejudice, and violence. When Garryowen sets out to chase Bloom and his friends as they drive away from Barney Kiernan's pub, the narrative takes a twist reminiscent of the end of the early Irish tale, in which Mac Datho's great dog pursues the kings and warriors who have beset the hostel and his master.

Joyce's evocation of the Ulster cycle with reference to cultural nationalists is to some extent predictable, in line with his sentiments about violence and rabid nationalism. What is more surprising is that – like many of the Ulster heroes – the major characters in *Ulysses* are also given “canine” identities or names. Thus, in the very first pages of *Ulysses*, Stephen is called by Mulligan a “dogsbody” (1.112, 15.4178) and Stephen thinks of himself in the same words as well (1.137). Stephen feels a kinship to both the live and dead dogs he sees on Sandymount Strand, and he names the dead dog, like himself, a “dogsbody” (3.351). Bloom, too, has doggy attributes, in his youth getting drunk as a dog (15.266) and behaving in a “hangdog” manner (15.829). Called “pigeonlivered cur” (15.1082), “pigdog and always was ever since he was pupped” (15.1114-5), and “you dirty dog!” (15.1890) by his accusers in Nighttown, Bloom is crowned “Hound of dishonour” by Bello (15.2835). In episode fifteen Bloom has as companion and alter ego the shapechanging everydog of Nighttown, who metamorphoses at need from spaniel to retriever to terrier to wolfdog to mastiff to boarhound to beagle to dachshund, and back again: it is worth noting that Bloom's companion is purebred, where the Citizen's dog is a mongrel. Even Molly has canine attributes. As a girl Molly's pet name was Doggerina (18.613, 18.622) and she had doggy friends (18.615 ff.); she herself admits as well that she is a little like a “dirty bitch” (18.1256). These doggy epithets for the main characters are clearly not always derogatory; both English and Irish semantic elements associated with dogs are conspicuous in the canine connotations Joyce establishes for Stephen, Bloom, and Molly. Like most things in *Ulysses*, they defy any single or pure interpretation. The doggy identities do, however, set Joyce's characters in the company of the heroes of Ireland's heroic literature and history.

Of these various appellations, the most interesting is the use of *dogsbody* for Stephen. It is an unusual English word, not found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, yet repeated in *Ulysses* five times (1.112, 1.137, 3.351-52, 15.4178). The sense seems clear

enough, if it is read as a nonce word formed of two ordinary English words in close composition, and it is clear enough that when Mulligan uses it of Stephen, he has a patronizing, deprecating intent. Nonetheless, the reason Joyce emphasizes *dogsbody* by using it at the outset of *Ulysses* and then repeating it so many times is probably a function of the associations of the Irish words that give a literal translation of the English compound. Joyce chose the English term *dogsbody* because of the supplement in meaning suggested by the sound of the Irish words with the same semantic range as the formators in English, namely *cú* (for *dog*) and *colainn* (for *body*). In close composition – *cúcholainn* – they would translate “dogbody” or “dogsbody” and also provide a pun – albeit a false or folk etymology – on *CúChulainn*, the name of Ireland’s chief hero. By calling Stephen *dogsbody*, Joyce can have it all ways in *Ulysses*: Stephen can stand in for CúChulainn and still be a rather bedraggled and pathetic canine figure, with Mulligan – ignorant of Irish – all unwittingly addressing Stephen as Ireland’s chief hero, even while Joyce on the surface eschews the maudlin and militaristic rhetoric of nationalist Cuchulanoid texts. An insider’s ironic joke, this word play across two languages is a notable example of Joyce’s bilingual double writing based on conventional translation equivalents. (Cf. Tymoczko 2000.)

The light and ironic evocations of Ireland’s main cycle of heroic narratives are given a more precise shape by parallels with specific sagas of the Ulster cycle, including *The Story of Mac Dath’s Pig* in episode twelve. I have elsewhere discussed at length the relationship between the principal characters of *Ulysses* and the figures of Ailill and Medb, particularly as they are configured in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (*The Cattle Raid of Cúailnge*). In that tale Medb insists that she must have a spouse who is without meanness, jealousy, or fear (cf. Kinsella 1970, p. 53), and I have argued that this relationship is in many ways reproduced in the marriage of Molly and Bloom, conditioning our assessment of Bloom’s character in particular (Tymoczko 1994, p. 107-29). Shadows of still other sagas can be traced in Joyce’s work, particularly *Mesca Ulad* (*The Intoxication of the Ulstermen*), which Joyce invokes in episode fourteen of *Ulysses*. The blind and drunken rush of the medicals and Stephen across Dublin in the middle of the night is reminiscent of the drunken midnight journey of the Ulster heroes across Ireland in *The Intoxication of the Ulstermen* (cf. Cross and Slover 1969, p. 221-23). Through such elements Joyce maintains a thread linking *Ulysses* to the Ulster cycle, without doing a traditional retelling of the stories or making his work “Cuchulanoid”.

Waking Finn: Ulysses and the Finn Cycle

Much more suggestive than the wisps hinting at the Ulster cycle in *Ulysses* is the narrative strand that links Joyce’s principal work to the Finn cycle. The Finn cycle is somewhat difficult to grasp critically if only because of the size of the cycle: Finn tales have been told in Ireland for more than a millenium, dominating the narrative tradition for hundreds of years since the late Middle Ages. Tales are found continuously in the manuscript tradition from the Old Irish period to the nineteenth century, and the cycle is

well represented in twentieth-century Irish oral folklore, constituting in fact the most prestigious storytelling tradition in the modern period. Thus, there are innumerable tales in the cycle to be considered and innumerable multiforms of the tales as well; they are found in virtually every form of Irish narrative, from heroic tale and ballad to romance and folktale, so the stories vary by technique as well as content. The tenor of the stories is also very diverse: some clearly descend from primary Celtic myth,¹¹ others fit in the heroic tradition, and still others are humorous folktales, bordering on elaborate jokes. Thus, the stories range in tone from tragic and heroic to comic and parodic. In part because of the long sweep of time that Finn and his heroes remained popular, their characters are complex, not confined to simple and consistent outlines. Moreover, tales of Finn are told about every stage of his life: his conception and childhood, his manhood in which he establishes himself as hero and demonstrates his heroic status, and his old age in which his prowess and primacy are eclipsed by younger heroes, including his son and grandson.

Because the development and outline of the cycle have been well canvassed for Joyceans by James MacKillop in *Fionn Mac Cumhaill: Celtic Myth in English Literature* (1986), only a brief summary need be provided here. The principal events of the Finn cycle include Finn's conception by the leader of Ireland's *fianna*¹² and the daughter of the king of Ireland. Finn is born posthumously after the premature death of his father at the hands of his enemies, and in some versions the boy is raised in the wilderness by somewhat mysterious female figures. Finn acquires second sight, which he can then access by chewing or sucking his "thumb of knowledge", or by other means.

Many stories tell of the implacable opposition to Finn on the part of his enemy Goll, or Aed, a one-eyed burner, often but not always conceptualized as the leader of an opposing *fián*. Usually Finn and his warriors are on foot, roaming the wilderness with their dogs, hunting and living off the land; they are associated with the Hill of Allen, but they wander everywhere in the Gaelic culture area. Not only do they have geographical mobility, Finn and his men frequently have contact with the otherworld and even enter otherworldly spaces, notably the mounds and hostels of the otherworld. They have been characterized as heroes outside the tribe. In Finn's old age, his young bride Gráinne and one of his chief heroes, Diarmait, elope; Finn pursues the pair, eventually making peace with them, but after a time he reneges and becomes responsible for Diarmait's death. The cycle also includes stories about Finn's death and the destruction of his *fianna* in a final battle. After the death of Finn and his men, a survivor, Oisín, the son of Finn, returns from the otherworld and relates to St. Patrick stories about Finn and the *fianna*.

Before turning to the specifics of how Joyce integrates the Finn cycle into *Ulysses*, it will be useful to review some aspects of Joyce's mythic method. Although Joyce uses mythic parallels extensively in his works, the myths represented are rarely complete, instead being used in partial and fragmentary ways. Moreover, myth does not usually appear on the surface of Joyce's texts, as in a mythic retelling; instead he uses the outlines or fabulas of myths structurally, as a sort of armature, beneath the surface of his texts. Joyce's mythic method reflects the developments of comparative approaches

to mythology in his time, represented in such works as James Frazer's *Golden Bough*. Typically Joyce also uses a single myth in multiple ways in his narratives. For example, he might use a standard version of a myth and simultaneously a revisionist version of the same myth: thus, in *Ulysses* Stephen is both Telemachus looking for his father and also a son resolutely trying to stay clear of fathers (Kenner 1980, p. 17). In Joyce's mythic structures, characters are also often double cast; thus, Molly plays both Calypso and Penelope in the Homeric parallels in *Ulysses*. These aspects of Joyce's mythic method inform his manipulation of the Finn cycle in *Ulysses* as well.¹³

Given Joyce's positioning of Bloom as the central figure of the other myths forming the architectonic framework of *Ulysses*, we might expect Bloom to double for Finn in the elements of the Finn cycle that are used in *Ulysses*. And indeed this is the case: Bloom can be seen as playing out various roles of Finn in the Finn cycle, albeit in ways similar to the partial evocations of other myths utilized in *Ulysses*.

In earlier studies I have suggested that Joyce used the pattern of the *bruiden* ("hostel, large banqueting hall, house") tale – a tale type paradigmatically associated with the Finn cycle – in shaping the Nighttown episode of *Ulysses* (Tymoczko 1994, pp. 177-220). The *bruiden* tale typically recounts an adventure to a fairy mound where the inhabitants are generally hostile to the human invaders who have come unbidden and may wrest from their encounter with the otherworld important powers or knowledge. As in the case of Finn and his *fianna*, in *Ulysses* Bloom and his companions (chiefly Stephen) have an adventure and almost get trapped in Mrs. Cohen's palace of entertainments, a sort of *bruiden* in Nighttown. Straying across the boundaries of the normal, respectable world into the underworld, Bloom escapes the peril of the brothel and Nighttown, having accessed insight but only after some conflict and loss. In this adventure Joyce presents his protagonist Bloom in the most humorous and least dignified light, and it is perhaps relevant that in the *bruiden* tales Finn also often becomes a humorous figure stripped of his dignity. Featuring metamorphosis and strange unearthly figures, the Fenian *bruiden* tales have ruptures, dislocations, and fantasy similar to those in Joyce's Nighttown episode.¹⁴ But these linkages between *Ulysses* and the Finn cycle are generic more than specific to stories about Finn as a character.

In MacKillop's analysis of the use of the Finn cycle in *Finnegans Wake*, he indicates that the tale about Finn most utilized in Joyce's final work is *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* (*The Pursuit of Diarmait and Gráinne*), the story in which Finn's bride Gráinne elopes with Finn's champion Diarmait (cf. 1986, p. 174). This is a tale that was enormously popular in Irish tradition for hundreds of years and that was very well known in Joyce's day, as at present.¹⁵ The story is localized throughout the Gaelic culture area, with place names commemorating it widely in Scotland and Ireland. In view of the general popularity of *Diarmait and Gráinne* and Joyce's reliance on the tale in his final work, it is perhaps not surprising to find that the story of Diarmait and Gráinne is evoked in *Ulysses* as well. Clearly, the motif of an older man whose wife is being led astray by a younger man – played out by Bloom, Molly, and Boylan in *Ulysses*

– fits the narrative pattern of *Diarmait and Gráinne* and suggests a general identification between Finn and Bloom.

Things are not so simple as they seem, however: at times Bloom seems to take on the role of other characters in the Finn cycle as well. There is a celebrated episode of *The Pursuit of Diarmait and Gráinne* that problematizes the straightforward identification of Bloom and Finn. The episode is not included in most manuscripts of *Diarmait and Gráinne* but rather occurs as an independent tale, generally called *Uath Beinne Éitair* (*The Hiding of the Hill of Howth*). In this tale Diarmait and Gráinne live secretly on Howth Head and narrowly avoid capture by Finn after their hiding place is betrayed by their own servant. The earliest surviving version of this anecdote dates probably from the eleventh century and is found in a fifteenth-century manuscript; it includes one of the loveliest early Irish “nature” poems;¹⁶ because the story is still remembered as part of local legend related to Howth, however, knowledge of the episode does not rest solely on the textual tradition. This famous Fenian tale suggests that the dalliance of Bloom and Molly on Howth Head and their union in a lush outdoor setting is not simple naturalism: it is intertextually related to stories about Howth’s most famous pair of lovers. But the implication of this intertextuality is that – surprisingly enough – Bloom does not only play the role of Finn, the wronged husband, but also the role of Diarmait to Molly’s Gráinne.

In some texts Diarmait is given the by-name Donn, meaning “the Dark-Haired”. There is also a tradition that Diarmait Donn (Diarmait the Dark-Haired) is irresistible to Gráinne and other women; the earliest full manuscript of the story describes Diarmait as a prosperous “sweet-spoken man” with “curling jetblack hair” and “crimson red cheeks”, a man who is “white-toothed” and “the best beloved of women and maidens in the whole of Ireland” (Ní Shéaghda 1967, p. 9). In some versions of the story this attraction to women is attributed to the power of a somewhat mysterious (perhaps magical) “love spot” (cf. Mac Cana, pp. 106, 113). These various characteristics of Diarmait have their counterparts in Joyce’s delineation of Bloom. Bloom’s suitability for the role of Diarmait is guaranteed by his good looks, which Joyce is at pains to establish, and Bloom like Diarmait is dark haired. Even in 1904 Leopold has the power to attract young women, including Gertie and Martha on Bloomsday, and he is still the image of a “matinée idol” (13.417), with dark eyes, “wonderful” and “superbly expressive” (13.414-15), handsome lips (13.718), and “pale intellectual face” (13.415-16). In her final monologue, Molly remembers that Bloom “was very handsome” in his youth (18.208-9) and she refers to Bloom’s fine complexion (18.296) and his “splendid set of teeth” (18.307). She sees him still as a “husband ... thats fit to be looked at” (18.828). In the text there are magical associations for Bloom as well: in Nighttown Bloom imagines himself conjuring in “Svengali’s fur overcoat” (15.2721-25), and in his youth Bloom wore “Zingari colours” (18.296), with the invocations of Svengali and gypsies both testifying perhaps to Bloom’s hypnotic and mesmerizing appeal, a modern “dynamic-equivalent” to the magical power of Diarmait’s “love spot”.¹⁷

A way to unpack this hint of Bloom-cum-Diarmait in Joyce's manipulation of *Diarmait and Gráinne* is to suggest that Bloom – like Molly in her Homeric roles – is being double cast in the roles of the Finn cycle for thematic and psychological reasons. At one and the same time, Bloom plays the role of Diarmait and also paradoxically the role of Finn. Thus, in 1904 as a mature man, Bloom must assert his husbandly claims not just against the seductive attractions of the likes of Blazes Boylan but also against the memory of his own fair and youthful self. In sorting out these multiple roles for Bloom, it is relevant that Diarmait is not the only man marked as attractive in the Finn cycle: Finn's own name means "white" or "fair", the latter in its extended as well as literal senses. Finn, like Diarmait, is, therefore, notably handsome, and a central story of the cycle relates how he acquired his name *Finn* in consequence of his handsome appearance.¹⁸ Thus, we might conclude that Bloom is fair – *finn* – his dark good looks notwithstanding. This play on *finn* may also explain Joyce's emphasis on Bloom's pale skin. In building this complex multivalent relationship to the Finn cycle, Joyce suggests an irony of marriage and long term relationships: the sweetness of memories about a couple's youth is, paradoxically, potentially able to tarnish the loyalties of their maturity.

These similarities between Bloom and Finn related to *The Pursuit of Diarmait and Gráinne* are significant, but the intertextuality in Joyce's work is indicated much more persuasively by other textual features of *Ulysses*. More important than parallels to *Diarmait and Gráinne* are the qualities of Bloom's enemies. In Irish literature arch-enemies are paradigmatically both one-eyed and gigantic. In *Cath Maige Tuired (The Second Battle of Mag Tuired)*, for example, the champion of the Túatha Dé Danann, Lug, has as his principal enemy the one-eyed Balor, a chaotic figure whose gaze brings death.¹⁹ Finn's principal adversary fits this pattern: Goll mac Morna, like Balor, is also a chaotic figure, a powerful agent of destruction in many stories, and one of the main sources of trouble and unpredictability in Finn's world. The name *Goll* is actually a sobriquet meaning "blind of one eye", a common by-name in Irish literature. Thus, the Citizen, Bloom's antagonist in what is usually called the "Cyclops" episode of *Ulysses*, must be seen as a signifier simultaneously pointing to several mythic levels: the one-eyed Cyclopean enemy of Homer's *Odyssey*; the enemy of Lug, Balor the Fomorian of the mythological cycle; and Goll mac Morna, Finn's arch-rival. The polyvalent and archetypal quality of Bloom's one-eyed enemy in episode twelve demonstrates that even as he was writing *Ulysses*, Joyce was fully engaged in the type of mythic syncretism that dominates *Finnegans Wake*.

The connection between Bloom and Finn emerges even more definitively with respect to the mythic resonances of Bloom's most important rival in *Ulysses*, namely Blazes Boylan. Here we must return to the name of Goll, Finn's rival and enemy in the *fianna*. Goll's name is a sobriquet as we have seen; his original name is actually *Aed*, a common Irish name meaning "fire".²⁰ Popular throughout Irish history, the name *Aed* has been traditionally translated into English as *Hugh*. By designating Bloom's antagonist as Hugh E. (Blazes) Boylan (17.2141), therefore, Joyce triply marks Bloom's rival as connected with fire. In mythic terms Boylan becomes a doublet of Finn's enemy: like

Finn's enemy Aed, Bloom's opponent is connected with fire by his nickname *Blazes*, by his surname which suggests boiling heat and fiery anger, and by his given name which is the English translation equivalent of the Irish name *Aed*, "fire". Finn is the only hero in Irish tradition whose prime enemy has such marked connections to fire and whose principal enemy is named Aed; by underscoring the connection between Boylan and Finn's enemy through their names, Joyce ensures correspondence between Boylan and Aed, and, hence, between Bloom and Finn.

Note the mechanisms of Joyce's mythic method with respect to the Finn cycle. In the treatment of the story of Diarmait and Gráinne, Joyce splits the role of Diarmait between two of his characters, having both Boylan and Bloom play different aspects of the role. This splitting is the inverse of his technique whereby one character plays two mythic roles, a technique also found in Joyce's manipulations of the Finn cycle, where Bloom in general plays Finn, but doubles as the youthful Diarmait with respect to the past. Also of interest is his ability to inscribe Irish myth in *Ulysses* by writing simultaneously in two languages: Joyce evokes the Irish name Aed, hence signalling the Irish word for "fire", by naming his character Hugh E. Boylan. By using the conventional translation equivalent in English for *Aed*, paradoxically he achieves a kind of double writing, invoking signifiers in two languages simultaneously. Boylan's name is a symbolic node drawing together meanings in both English and Irish. This form of double writing can be traced in Joyce's work as early as *Dubliners* (Tymoczko 2000) and continues through *Finnegans Wake*, where, for example, the method behind his identification of H. C. Earwicker with Persse O'Reilly – the latter being the Englished pronunciation of the French word meaning *earwig*, identity being established through a multi-layered conflation of both semantic and phonic translation – is similar to the means of identification between Boylan and Finn's enemy.²¹

In working out the configuration of Bloom, Molly, and Stephen, the Finn cycle would have appealed to Joyce for important reasons. We have seen that the Fenian heroes²² have been called "heroes outside the tribe". The Finn material in *Ulysses* is positioned to mark out and in a sense normalize the nature of Joyce's principal figures, in particular the marginalized and polarized position of the protagonist Bloom in his environment. Thus, the ancient tales ground the modernist alienation of Joyce's main character. At the same time the Finn cycle provides mythic depth to Bloom's physical peregrinations and wanderings. Critics have noted that Bloom is a compulsive walker and have even called attention to his kinship to the turn-of-the-century figure of the flaneur (Duffy 1994). Like Finn, Bloom is afoot in most of his adventures, and he wanders freely through space. The Finn cycle gives a mythic analogue to Bloom's ability to move freely between many spheres and, in a sense, to be protean. We know that Joyce found the figure of Ulysses appealing because he was "all-round ... a complete man ... a good man": "son to Laertes ... father to Telemachus, husband to Penelope, lover of Calypso, companion in arms of the Greek warriors around Troy, and King of Ithaca" (Ellmann 1982, p. 435-36). These are characteristics

of Finn as well, an all-round and complete character who plays many roles in the extensive cycle bearing his name: son, child, lover, husband, father, grandfather, warrior, poet, raider, fool, and more. As such, Finn is archetypal, evoking deep and broad currents of human life that help to add substance to the figure of Bloom. Finally, the love triangle at the heart of the most popular story of the Finn cycle provides mythic grounding for the events on Bloomsday dominating the conscious and unconscious life of Bloom and Molly. The Finn cycle offered Joyce a framework for integrating and expatiating on all these elements.

Mythic Strands in Ulysses: Conclusions

The book opens with a dead dog and curs, rather than a triumphal representation of Cú Chulainn, the great hound that can't be checked.²³ Bloom is at first sight not promising as a Fenian figure: the somewhat uxorious keeper of literature's most well known cat, he has no dogs, no horses, no fían. Yet, as I have argued, there are strands connecting *Ulysses* with both the Ulster cycle and the Finn cycle, as well as mythic continua from *The Book of Invasions* and other Irish mythic complexes. Part of the burden of *Ulysses* – the basso continuo so to speak – is the vitality of Irish mythic traditions, even when they seem to have definitively passed away. The ability of Irish tradition to revive, to be resurrected, to resuscitate, to be reborn, is a note that comes to the surface in *Finnegans Wake*, but it is implicitly present in *Ulysses* as well. What do we learn from the presence of these mythic strands in *Ulysses* beyond their sheer existence and beyond the resilience of Irish myths? What is their import?

Although the elements in *Ulysses* derived from the Ulster cycle and the Finn cycle are clearly ancillary to the armature from *The Book of Invasions* and the Sovereignty mythos, as well as Irish otherworld literature, these mythic strands contribute subliminally to establishing Bloom as an Irish Everyman, to constituting Stephen and Bloom as spiritual heirs to all of Ireland's legendary past, to making them universal mythic representatives of Ireland's heritage. The Irish mythic elements seem to be an aspect of a specifically Irish configuration of metempsychosis in *Ulysses*, in which the great figures of the past reappear in other incarnations (Tymoczko 1994, pp. 43-9).

Not incidentally, Joyce's manipulations of canine associations in *Ulysses*, as well as his other echoes of the Ulster cycle, also contribute to the playful and ironic treatment of mythos in Joyce's work, thus helping to establish the double-textured tone of the text. In this regard it is significant that the intertextuality between *Ulysses* and the Ulster cycle singles out the humorous sagas in the cycle. These are the stories that the Irish Revival was most troubled by and least inclined to translate or to retell; the humorous tales undercut the heroic image being constructed by Irish cultural nationalism and also came dangerously close to confirming some of the denigrating colonialist stereotypes of the Irish (Tymoczko 1999, esp. pp. 191-221). In marked contrast to his contemporaries, Joyce seems to have sought out the early humour for inclusion in his work. This must be

related to Joyce's preference for comedy over tragedy, his view that the comic most perfectly "excites in us the feeling of joy".²⁴

The humorous nature of the Finn cycle contributed to Joyce's double-textured tone as well.²⁵ The Finn cycle is far from the dominant in *Ulysses* as it is in *Finnegans Wake*: there are only teasing hints, partial and contradictory parallels to the Fenian prototypes behind the central characters of *Ulysses*. Nonetheless, used even as it is in *Ulysses*, the Finn cycle sets a template for a protagonist who enjoys the freedom of space, who is afoot observing and interacting with the great city that is so much a character of *Ulysses*. As a hero outside the tribe, Bloom-as-Finn escapes the nets of religion, the colonial powers, and the orthodoxies of nationalism. He is not the servant of two masters. The Finn cycle makes archetypal Bloom's freedom to interrogate the pieties and conformities of his age. At the same time, the irreverent figure of Finn links Bloom through space to the entire Gaelic culture area and through time to Irish tradition from its inception to the modern period.

Like *Ulysses*, Finn also is a model of an "all round man": son and father, child and hero, mature leader and old man, fighter and poet, wise seer and stupid giant. The versatility and variability of Finn, as well as the contradictory humanity of the character, are elements in Finn's having become the most popular figure of nineteenth – and twentieth-century Irish folklore, and these are characteristics that Joyce draws upon to give Bloom resonance as well. A significant aspect of the versatility of the Finn stories is also formal variation, and it may be that the variation Joyce observed in this central cycle of Irish literature was one impetus behind Joyce's experimentation with form in the second half of *Ulysses*. Finally, there are hints of verbal realism and paronymy in Joyce's evocation of the Finn cycle in *Ulysses*, aspects that are intrinsic to early Irish texts. All these qualities in *Ulysses* have an intertextual relationship to the Finn cycle; they were also deployed by Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*. Thus, Joyce's literary strategy in his final work is illumined by analyzing the Fenian elements in *Ulysses*.

The idea of mythic return in modern dress underlies all of Joyce's major works, and the mythic strands explored here reveal aspects of Joyce's working methods and processes. We see, for example, the extent to which he recycles materials from work to work, bringing readers back to the same stories, legends, and myths by a commodius vicus of recirculation. John Kelleher (1965) has argued that *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel* provided Joyce with the armature of "The Dead", and it is interesting to find traces of the same tale again in *Ulysses*. *The Book of Invasions* provides a contrast between Davin the Fomorian and Stephen the Milesian in *Portrait of the Artist* (180); it is central to the mythic configuration of *Ulysses* and elements appear in *Finnegans Wake* as well. Similarly, it is evident that Joyce was experimenting with the Finn cycle before *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce had Finn on his mind as a model for his literary protagonist as he was writing *Ulysses*, and he was working with the very tales in the Finn cycle that he later used in *Finnegans Wake*.²⁶ In crafting his works, not only did Joyce rework literary and mythic materials from Irish tradition, he reworked the materials he himself

had reworked before. His play with the Finn cycle is part of Joyce's impulse to return to the same wells again and again.

The extent to which Joyce had a tendency to throw everything into the literary soup is also illustrated by the Irish mythic elements in *Ulysses*. It is an approach to writing that reminds one of the manners and culinary methods in the Duchess's house in *Alice in Wonderland*. The cook takes the view that the cauldron of soup never has enough pepper and that anything can be thrown at the audience. The result is, of course, literary sneezes, shattered glass, and toppling masonry. Where do we stop in analyzing the subtexts and intertextualities of *Ulysses*?

Phillip Herring (1987) has discussed the openness of Joyce's texts and "Joyce's uncertainty principle", a principle implicitly announced in "The Sisters" where Joyce draws attention to the figure of the gnomon in the first story of *Dubliners*: a gnomon is both the geometrical figure of the parallelogram with a smaller similar parallelogram missing from one corner, and also the indicator on a sundial that tells time by casting a shadow. Herring suggests that Joyce created "absences that readers must make speak if they are to gain insight into character, structure, and narrative technique" (1987, p. 4). Through ellipses, hiatuses in meaning, significant silences, emptiness, and incompleteness, Joyce works on his readers to complete the gnomon (ibid), particularly in his complex, full-length narratives.

It is important to note in this regard the paucity of exiguous and explicit references to the Irish legends and myths woven into *Ulysses*. The thinness of the surface references to the materials explored above might suggest that the connections I have outlined are tenuous. But it is easy to forget how thin are the references within *Ulysses* itself to the Homeric parallels. Much of our ability to perceive the Greek elements has to do with the mental categories we bring to *Ulysses*, the grid within which we customarily situate the text (based to a large extent on the critical tradition), and the framework we use to read it (provided in part by Joyce directly in the Linati scheme, in part by the scheme and exegesis in Stuart Gilbert's *James Joyce's "Ulysses"*). It is easy to forget that before publishing *Ulysses* Joyce deliberately eliminated the episode titles that critics so blithely use in their discussions of *Ulysses*: Nestor, Calypso, Hades, Cyclops, Circe, Penelope ... We supply all these and supplement the text of *Ulysses* with classical framing devices, despite the fact that Joyce himself purged the text of all such exiguous references to the Greek mythos, leaving only the title of the book as his key to this mythic reading.

Joyce distributed no schemas for his Irish architectonics, perhaps because he judged that they would have been counterproductive to his being read in the modernist tradition, because they would have harmed his reception as an avant-garde writer rather than have helped further his reputation, and because they would have increased the mystification of his avant-garde audience more than they could have elucidated his work. So we must perceive the Irish frameworks ourselves, keyed by the few explicit allusions and intertextual references provided. Fortunately, comparative patternings and Joyce's double writing remain to guide us in our Irish readings.

There are always different possible ways to close any open structure. The complexity of mythic strands, allusions, and intertextualities is one aspect of the openness of Joyce's texts. His method produces texts that are both underdetermined in their meanings and overdetermined by their plenitude and copiousness. Here I have traced some of the Irish textualities I use to make Joyce's absences speak, producing readings based on Irish contexts. What do such readings mean to those who know nothing about Irish literature? Is it possible to perceive radically different architectonic structures, to extend the lines of the gnomon so as to close the figure in radically different ways? If so, what are the implications for the critical concept of intertextuality itself?

Notes

- 1 Sommer 1992 outlines the characteristics and purposes of resistant texts.
- 2 This argument is presented in full in Tymoczko 1994.
- 3 Joyce's knowledge of the stories discussed below is discussed at length in Tymoczko 1994, pp. 221-326.
- 4 Background on *The Book of Invasions* is found in Tymoczko 1994:ch. 2 and sources cited; see also Scowcroft 1987, 1988.
- 5 See Tymoczko 1999, p. 80 and sources cited.
- 6 Citations of *Ulysses* refer to episode and line number from the edition by Gabler et al. 1986.
- 7 Ross 1974, pp. 423-27 discusses the role of dogs and wolves in Celtic culture and myth. See also MacKillop 1986, pp. 49-50 on the role of dogs in the Finn cycle, as well as Nagy 1985, p. 44, who suggests that various members of the *fianna* also have a canine nature.
- 8 Relevant Ulster cycle tales include *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*, *The Story of Mac Datho's Pig*, and *The Death of Celtchar mac Uithecair*, in Cross and Slover 1969; *The Cattle Raid of Cúailnge*, trans. Kinsella 1970, pp. 51-253, particularly 77-78, 82-84, 150-55; and *The Death of Cú Chulainn*, trans. Tymoczko 1981, pp. 49-50.
- 9 A translation of the parodic description of Mac Cecht is found in Cross and Slover 1969, pp. 114-15.
- 10 The guardian of the bulls in Chrétien de Troyes's *Yvain* (1993, pp. 284-85) offers a convenient example of this medieval topos.
- 11 Murphy 1953:lxxvi-lxxxv; cf. Mac Cana 1970, p. 110. It is possible that Finn's name represents a propitiary name for the Celtic god Lug. The root *wind – (which gives Irish *finn*) also underlies the names of many important (cultic) Continental Celtic sites seemingly named after a deity, including the modern Vienna.
- 12 Sg. *fíán*, "warrior-band". In the tales the *fianna* are bands of warriors who live outdoors on the margins of Irish society, hunting, traveling at will, and serving at times as professional fighters. For a scholarly assessment, see Nagy 1985.
- 13 Tymoczko 1994 offers a more detailed consideration of Joyce mythic method; see chs. 2 and 9.
- 14 Cf. MacKillop 1986, pp. 28, 168 on humor in the bruiden tales and on Finn as a humorous figure. Joyce's interest in bruiden tales is also reflected in the traces of *The Story of Mac Datho's Pig* discussed above and in his use of *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel* discussed below.
- 15 The earliest full version of the tale is found in a seventeenth-century manuscript; it is edited and translated in Ní Shéaghda 1967. The story derives from a tale documented as early as the tenth century, but recast in the modern form perhaps in the thirteenth century (Ní Shéaghda 1967, pp. x-xiv).

- 16 Edited and translated in Meyer 1890. Meyer points out that the title of the tale is mentioned in a tenth-century tale list and the poem itself is contained in two twelfth-century manuscripts with a different frame story. For the dating of the text see Ní Shéaghda 1967, p. xii.
- 17 On dynamic equivalence see Nida 1964, pp. 159-67.
- 18 A translation of the tale is found in Cross and Slover 1969, pp. 360-69.
- 19 A translation is found in Cross and Slover 1969, pp. 28-48.
- 20 Other enemies of Finn are also connected with flames and burning. See Murphy LII-IV, LXIII-XXIV.
- 21 Verbal realism is an essential strategy in the construction of *Ulysses*, discussed at greater length in Tymoczko 1994, pp. 120-24, 160-66, 349-50. Cf. also Tymoczko 2004.
- 22 Let's not ignore the subliminal political valence of *Fenian* here.
- 23 Cf. Kinsella 1970, p. 121.
- 24 A fuller discussion of *Ulysses*, the Irish comic tradition, and Joyce's theory of comedy is found in Tymoczko 1994, pp. 79-91.
- 25 As the most significant aspects of the Finn cycle for *Finnegans Wake*, MacKillop (1986, pp. 163-93) suggests that Joyce turned to the cycle for its ability to supply a humorous framework and to provide an Irish incarnation of the monomyth.
- 26 In fact Joyce's interest in the Finn cycle can be traced through all his major works: in work yet to be published, Cólín Owens argues that elements of the Finn cycle supply dominant discourses of *A Portrait of the Artist* as well (see Owens 2003 for a summary of his forthcoming work).

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