## *ECHTRAE NERAI* AND ITS ANALOGUES

IN A PREVIOUS *Festschrift* compiled half a century ago in honour of another great Irish scholar, Eoin MacNeill, appeared what would seem to remain the only comprehensive attempt thus far to relate a specific early Irish story to a specific modern Irish folktale in terms of narrative content and pattern. The story concerned was *Echtra(e) Nera(i)* (henceforth EN) and the author of the article was Séamus Ó Duilearga, who had an unrivalled knowledge of the living oral tradition.[1] It is interesting to note that while he, like many others, would continue to emphasise the importance of the oral process in the shaping of the saga texts, no further studies of this kind were to appear; instead, supporting arguments ranged from mere assumption of the oral-literary relationship to consideration of general structural and stylistic features. And while certain romantic tales have been examined with a view to determining their complex genesis, most notably by Alan Bruford,[2] we tend to regard them as being in a special category: that whatever the precise contribution of manuscript writing/reading and non-literate composition/transmission, or any combination thereof, each tale will remain an identifiable entity within a distinct class, to be considered in terms of its individual history, which it will share to some degree with others of its kind. Inevitably, in the nature of things, neither tale nor class can remain entirely watertight and study of the romance will require occasional reference to the more anonymous folktale of the international kind, to the folk motif and to such general narrative devices as the 'run'. But while there may be coincidence on points of detail, however explained, we do not expect to find overall correspondence between tales belonging to the separate genres, although a thorough search may yet reveal some examples; but, for the present at least, EN would seem to be *sui generis*, if not in the literature then at least in its scholarship. Some reasons for its special position will be suggested below, but the main purpose of this article will be to demonstrate that Ó Duilearga may not have selected the most appropriate modern oral analogue and because of this may have failed to explain EN as a unit; I would hope to show that such a unitary explanation is possible by means of a different although similar model.

The model chosen by Ó Duilearga will account for only 45 of the 196 printed lines of Meyer's edition, although even that much cannot be regarded as insignificant. A related difficulty is that, while he would seem to imply that this division of the story tends to confirm and supplement that of Thurneysen, in reality he differs as much from the literary

---

[1] K. Meyer (ed. and transl.), 'The adventures of Nera', *Revue Celtique* 10 (1889) 212–28, 11 (1890) 210; S. Ó Duilearga, 'Nera and the dead man', in E. Ua Riain (ed.), *Féil-sgríbhinn Eóin Mhic Néill* (Dublin 1940) 522–34.

[2] A. Bruford, *Gaelic folktales and mediaeval romances* (Dublin 1969); idem, 'Eachtra Chonaill Gulban', *Béaloideas* 31 (1963 [1965]) 1–50.

scholar in this respect as he does in his general approach. Rather curi-
ously – although perhaps less so in the ambiance of the period when
such things served to confer respectability on studies of a literary nature
– the only point of disagreement which he mentions in his introductory
remarks is the largely irrelevant one of date.

> Thurneysen [*Heldensage*], p. 312, would put the tale in its present
> form as far back as the tenth cent. – 'Die ganze Erzählung scheint
> mir inhaltlich . . . kaum vor das 10 Jahrhundert zu setzen zu sein'.
> But he would now put the text still further back to the eighth cen-
> tury. It is evident, as Thurneysen points out, [*Heldensage*], 311,
> that E.N. is a compilation of two recensions of the tale rather clum-
> sily merged into one another. But the opening episode of E.N. with
> which this paper is concerned (= Meyer's edit. ll. 1–45) is complete
> in itself, and originally had nothing whatever to do with Nera's fur-
> ther adventures, with which the main body of the text is taken up.[3]

   The private communication which he quotes in a footnote in support
of the earlier date – 'Ich finde kein ernstliches Hinderniss wenn Sie ihn
[i.e. EN] ins 8 Jahrhundert setzen wollen und auf das *blednai* Gewicht
legen' – hardly amounts to putting 'the text further back to the eighth
century'. Nor, for that matter, does his earlier statement – 'Die ganze
Erzählung scheint mir inhaltlich . . . kaum vor das 10 Jahrhundert zu
setzen zu sein' – necessarily 'put the tale in its present form as far back
as the tenth cent.'; rather it served to emphasise its relative lateness as
it appeared to him at the time of writing. But since there has been no
comprehensive linguistic study of the text – the only examples referred
to by Thurneysen being the aforementioned *blēdnai* for *blíadnai*, which
he was not disposed at first to regard as a genuine archaism, and some
verbal forms in -*enn*, such as *do·airthenn*, 'die vor dem 11. Jahrhundert
nicht möglich sind'[4] – and since it is the form of the tale rather than
the language in which it is encoded that is of primary interest to us, it
would be fruitless to pursue the matter further at this juncture.
   As we shall be concerned with the whole of EN and not merely with
Ó Duilearga's 'opening episode', which as we have seen amounts to less
than a quarter of the text, it will be useful to rehearse Thurneysen's
opinion concerning the forces that contributed to its shaping or mis-
shaping. The story, he would claim, is not a coherent one: there are
verbal (lines 90–92 being repeated at 192–4) and other duplications. For
example Nera twice returns to Cruachain from the *síd*, on each occasion

---

[3] Ó Duilearga, 'Nera and the dead man', 522.
[4] R. Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage* (Halle 1921) 312, [abbrevi-
ated as *Heldensage*]. For the alternation *blēdnai/blíadnai* etc. see further R. Thur-
neysen, *A grammar of Old Irish* (Dublin 1946) 36 § 53; for the development of the
-*enn* conjunct ending see G. Murphy, 'Notes on analogy in Middle Irish conjugation'
in *Féil-sgríbhinn Eóin Mhic Néill*, 72–81, pp. 75–6; K. McCone, *The early Irish verb*
(Maynooth 1987) 224–7.

giving an account of his adventures, on the second as though for the first time; in both instances there is a delay of one year before the *síd* can be attacked. Such duplication suggests to him that two parallel tales have been mingled as one, in such a manner that the end of the first has been attached to the beginning of the second, the middle sections of each being included in the composite text and linked to one another in makeshift fashion. He would consider it likely that the division occurs at line 140 with *Erg ass trā*, that the title *Echtra Nerai*, found in Lists A and B and in the Book of Leinster catalogue of *remscéla*, properly belongs to what has gone before, while *Táin bó Aingen[i] / Táin [bó] bé Aingen[i]*, the Yellow Book of Lecan title as he would emend it, originally referred to what followed as it is only in this later section that the fairy woman is called *bé n-Aingeni* (although he would also allow that the YBL title may not be original but a later inference from the text of the story).[5]

The process envisaged by Thurneysen is then a highly mechanical one; the idea of such insensitive bludgeoning of their materials by late editors would seem scarcely more plausible, at least as a general solution to the ills of the tradition as received,[6] than the extreme oral thesis, equally mechanical in concept, which would claim that such texts as this which 'begin well, but tail off badly as the story proceeds . . . can be explained on the hypothesis of recording from oral recitation'.[7] Rather than be bound by such theories in this instance, we shall begin with the proposition that a story, no matter how fragmented it may appear or how diverse the reasons for its fragmentation, is, by virtue of its being a story, a unity of sorts; and it is this unity, however less than ideal, that we have primarily to address. In being repetitive it is not necessarily being redundant. The cyclical might, for instance, be part of the pattern of emphasis or result from the exploration of various narrative boundaries while remaining generally consistent with the objective to be achieved: the story's direction must be found by way of the various indirections imposed by all of the cultural circumstances that applied to its composition, redaction or transmission. Each element, be it of subject matter or environment, will tend to exert its own individual force, a

---

[5] *Heldensage*, 311–12.

[6] The classic statement is that of D. A. Binchy, who, having given reasons for regarding *Scéla Cano* as a compilatory text, would extrapolate: 'It is noteworthy that the Deirdre story, which seems to have been committed to writing as early as the eighth century, underwent a similar "revision" about A.D. 1100 (see Hull, pp. 29 f.), which accounts for the late forms one meets in it from time to time. For other sagas, too, we have evidence of "interpolation" dating from roughly the same period: Bruiden Da Derga, Liadain and Cuirithir, Serglige Con Culaind, and the Táin itself. Indeed it is difficult to resist the conclusion that most of the earlier sagas and stories that have survived were "re-edited" about this time, perhaps as a by-product of the widespread revival of "antiquarianism" which led to the compiling of works like the *Dindsenchas*' (D. A. Binchy (ed.), *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin* (Dublin 1963) xiv).

[7] For a survey and estimation of such theories see S. Ó Coileáin, 'Oral or literary?: some strands of the argument', *Studia Hibernica* 17–18 (1977–8) 7–35.

force that may or may not be controlled by the centripetal overall thrust
of the narrative. The purpose of our study must be to examine these
diverse elements, in so far as they can be discovered, as they compete
for supremacy in the generation of the text, and to identify the cohesive
force that gave them shape. First to recapitulate: in EN we have to do
with a story of 196 lines of printed text which Thurneysen would anal-
yse into two parts dividing at line 140, while Ó Duilearga would see the
opening 45 lines or so as a distinct entity having no connection with the
remainder. Thus, while they agree that the tale is an amalgam of sorts,
they differ as to the point or points of separation, a disagreement that is
hardly surprising in itself considering their very different perspectives,
but one either not observed or else deliberately ignored by Ó Duilearga
when commenting on Thurneysen's earlier findings which, whatever he
may imply or have thought to the contrary, his own study would seem
to contradict rather than to confirm. What, for instance, would he have
us make of lines 45 to 140? Are we tacitly to assume a further segmen-
tation resulting in a story of three parts rather than of two? The answer
would seem to be that for what followed line 45 he had no oral model
and consequently no real concern.

But there is a further and more serious difficulty: if EN is not fulfilled
in the oral model, neither, as we shall see, is the oral model fulfilled in
EN. This double frustration of sequence suggests an underlying incom-
patibility in which model and story take equal share. For the adequacy
of the pattern is no less at issue than the explication of the text; in
each lies the resolution of the other. But to restore continuity it will be
necessary to return to the point of departure, from there to survey the
narrative; in order to anticipate the direction in which it was tending
from that point onwards it is at first necessary to understand the route
by which it had arrived there. Following a detailed analysis, collectively
and individually, of thirty-nine variants of a tale, which by reason of its
resemblance to EN he calls EN2, recorded in various districts on behalf
of the Irish Folklore Commission during the years 1931–8, Ó Duilearga
goes on:

> On comparison of E.N.2 with E.N. the following main lines of agree-
> ment are clearly evident:
>     I$A$. Fearless man on quest.
>     I$B$. Meeting with dead man (devil).
>   II$AB$. Dead man (devil) unable to enter first two houses.
>    II$C$. Dead man (devil) enters third house.
>   III$A$. Punishment of dwellers in third house by dead man (devil)
>           for neglect to observe custom (E.N.) – for quarelling
>           (E.N.2).

While he notes that they diverge from this point onwards, EN2 going
on to describe how punishment is averted and evil vanquished, he con-
cludes: 'It is quite evident that Echtra Nerai and the modern folktale are

identical, and even a cursory glance at the analysis of the folk-variants
will show how closely they resemble each other'. One might argue that
the divergence had already taken place within section IIIA, to the extent
that, while in EN the punishment would seem to follow inevitably from
what has gone before, in EN2 it is separately (or at any rate additionally)
motivated. But it is also true that, apart from the common framework
outlined above, there are some marked resemblances on point of detail.
For instance, the lake of fire around the first house to which entrance
cannot be gained in EN occurs also in EN2, being there explained as
due to the domestic fire having being smoored; similarly the lake of
water, owing its existence to the feet water having been properly dis-
posed of, which prevents entry in both tales. While feet water is easily
converted to holy water and Christian talismans of various sorts are
frequently substituted or added, the parallels are entirely convincing.
Even the replacement of hanged man with devil forms part of a natural
progression. In this regard, Ó Duilearga rightly notes that, as is usual
in medieval folk literature, he is 'a stupid devil whose plans are upset
without much trouble; the dead man of E.N. is clearly a much more
dangerous opponent'.[8]

Even more significant than such correspondence in detail, whether
on the level of the motif or tale division, is the shared ethos, one that
is scarcely paralleled elsewhere in the whole of the early literature;[9] we
would not normally expect such common concerns of good husbandry as
the smooring of the fire or the proper disposal of the feet water at night
to motivate the narrative (which may consequently be read on one level
as an *exemplum*). Similarly the beliefs relating to *Samhain*, with which
the tale begins, in juxtaposition with Nera's bearing the dead man on his
back from house to house seeking admission, are more reminiscent of folk
tradition as recorded in the modern period, where we encounter them in
such compositions as *Aistriughadh Thomáis Oidhche Shamhna*,[10] than

---

[8] 'Nera and the dead man', 531–2.

[9] Perhaps the story that comes nearest to it in this respect is *Noínden Ulad* dis-
cussed by Proinsias Mac Cana, 'Mythology in early Irish literature', in *The Celtic
consciousness* (ed. R. O'Driscoll, New York 1985) 143–54, pp. 145–8; and 'Myth into
literature in early Ireland', in *Myth et folklore celtiques et leur expressions littéraires
en Irlande* III (ed. R. Alluin and B. Escarbelt, Univ. de Lille [1988]) 31–43, pp. 40–41.

[10] É. Ó Muirgheasa, *Céad de cheoltaibh Uladh* (Baile Átha Cliath 1915) 46–9, 214–
16. This version is taken from RIA 23 E 12 (pp. 452–4), a manuscript to which John
Fleming has prefixed this note of warning dated 31/3/[18]84: 'Let no reader, and
especially no transcriber, trust to the correctness of a single piece in this valuable
looking Ms.: every piece in it should be corrected by comparing it with another copy.
There are not in the whole book six songs or poems free from the corrupting taint
of the transcriber, Nicholas O'Kearney; and in many pages he has made changes
in almost every line'. But, whatever of editorial amendments, we need not doubt
the essential authenticity of the *aistriughadh*: Ó Muirgheasa notes (pp. 214–15) that
Douglas Hyde recorded another version from oral tradition in County Leitrim which
he combined with O'Kearney's text in his *Leabhar sgéulaigheachta*; see also Hyde,
*Legends of saints and sinners* (Dublin, n.d.) 219–42; and compare K. Danaher, *The
year in Ireland* (Cork 1972) 215.

of a medieval text. In contradistinction to the romantic tales mentioned
at the outset, many of which he would see as having entered oral tradi-
tion from the manuscript literature, and 'are quite clearly "gesunkenes
Kulturgut" ', Ó Duilearga would offer no such argument with respect
to EN; noting that is not found in any surviving paper manuscript, he
continues:

> Into the difficult question of the relationship between the oral and
> literary or MS. versions I hesitate to enter. Has the story existed
> orally among the people, independent of literary influence? To this
> I should answer that I am satisfied that it is unlikely that such liter-
> ary influence has been exercised in regard to this tale for centuries;
> and that E.N. has existed orally among the people from a very early
> time.[11]

While neither the ethos of the tale nor the specific details that con-
tribute to it are necessarily inconsistent with an aristocratic milieu,
where fires would have been smoored before sleeping, feet water thrown
out before night and the dead also wandered at *Samhain*, one feels that
this part of the tale first took shape at a more plebeian level; this feeling
is supported, although not finally proven, by its barely altered contin-
uation in modern folk narrative and belief. I would suggest that the
persons, events and circumstances which form the system of reference in
EN, while secondary in terms of the story, were the primary reason for its
literary survival; what to us may seem unessential, mere overlay, would
have appeared quite otherwise to the medieval man of letters. Which is
no more than to say that a modern analogue may be as instructive in
its differences as in its similarities. But there remains the question of
the analogue itself if we are to advance the underlying pattern beyond
the point to which EN2 has conducted us. This is in no way to belittle
the value of Ó Duilearga's contribution or of his model: I am very much
aware of following his example even while seeking to extend the pattern.
Such patterns, by their nature, are not mutually exclusive, although
they may be inconsistent with or even contradict one another. As I have
said in another place:

> just as items which show great diversity in the matter of content can
> occupy a morphologically identical position, so the same or similar
> themes may occur in entirely different morphological sequences with
> the result that at such a critical point the story may be switched
> from one sequence to another.[12]

For the first part of the statement we may refer to the work of
Vladímir Propp who distinguishes between the constancy of the function

---

[11] 'Nera and the dead man', 533.
[12] 'Some problems of story and history', *Ériu* 32 (1981) 115–36, p. 124.

achieved and the variability of the means by which it can be realised.[13] The second part of it finds support in the experience of Albert Lord, who speaks of the process which may 'actually lead the singer to mix songs, passing from one song pattern to another at a point at which the two patterns coincide'; this 'mixing' occurs 'because at a number of points in any song there are forces leading in several directions, any one of which a singer may take'.[14] The two parts, the two approaches, are not antagonistic but complementary. The detail is not as incidental to the morphology as Propp would seem to suggest, since as well as fulfilling it may redirect. There is the possible tension between the detail in the abstract and its use in the individual story, between the sum of its story-telling contexts and the necessity of the specific context. The motif is simultaneously lesser and greater than the purpose it might be expected to serve in the narrative: lesser in the sense that, as Propp has shown, it may be replaced by another member of the 'motifeme' in the same function, while greater because it is not confined to the immediate story but brings with it all of its traditional associations, any one of which may prove disruptive, at least temporarily, to the thrust of the action in a given instance. It is because of this potential instability and because its outcome cannot be predicted in the individual case that content must not be divorced from structure or be regarded as subservient to it. We lose more than the picturesque detail by flattening individual stories into a common type and individual types into a common substratum; such flattening imposes a restraint to which assent is often given grudgingly if at all. Stories merge and diverge as they weave their way in and out of common but discontinuous patterns: the relationship of EN and EN2 to one another is a case in point. Neither can be said to be incomplete except in respect of the other: despite their shared beginning, they are not finally of the same type.

In the course of his essay, Ó Duilearga refers in passing to what he calls the '*Sliabh na mBan bhFionn* story' discussed by T. F. O'Rahilly in *Gadelica*.[15] The particular point of contact he would have us observe was the *uisge na gcos* motif, but even on the level of detail the resemblance might have been further pursued. The story is now catalogued, following Aarne and Thompson, as number 501* ('The fairy hill is on fire!') in *The types of the Irish folktale*,[16] the asterisk indicating that it forms a distinctively Irish sub-type, 176 examples of which had been catalogued at the time the index was compiled, a number that may be regarded as virtually infinite when translated into the cultural environment from which the recordings derive. In view of what has been said already it

[13] V. Propp, *Morphology of the folktale* 2nd ed. of transl. (Austin and London 1968).

[14] A. B. Lord, *The singer of tales* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960) 120.

[15] 'Nera and the dead man', 532; *Gadelica* 1 (1912–13) 277–9.

[16] S. Ó Súilleabháin and R. T. Christiansen, *The types of the Irish folktale* (Folklore Fellows Communications 188, Helsinki 1967).

would be inconsistent as well as foolish to prescribe a set form for the story, which, nevertheless, seems to be fairly stable with regard to its principal components. A very fine (i.e. full and representative) example is that supplied by Amhlaoibh Ó Luínse to Seán Ó Cróinín; Donncha Ó Cróinín has summarised it:

> Two old women from a fairy 'fort', carrying a young girl into whose ear they had put a slumber-pin (*biorán suain*), thus rendering her unconscious, enter a house whose occupant is busily engaged spinning wool. The mysterious visitors put the helpless girl in charge of the woman of the house, and, before departing at dawn, assist her in her work. A week later, the fairy women return and ask the housewife to fetch them some water. She does so but, suspicious of their attitude, on returning from a second visit to the well, she listens to their talk and overhears them chanting a refrain:
>
>> 'A hag carding, and another hag teasing [the wool],
>> And the housewife will serve later as a tasty morsel!'
>
> The housewife fills the cauldron with water, drives an axe firmly into a block of wood, throws some of the water outside the house, hides the bread-stick (*crann aráin*) and then rushes into the house shouting: 'Alas, alas! The *Faidhleann Mhuar* [explained as the name of a hill, the home of the fairy women] is ablaze!' The two old women leave the house in dismay, one crying out that she has lost her son, the other her husband. But, when they find that they have been tricked, they return, only to find the house bolted against them. They call in turn for help from the feet-water, but the water replies that it cannot help as it has been thrown out. Neither can the axe nor an ember from the fire come to their aid, as the axe is fastened in a block of wood, and the ashes have been spread over the embers. The fairy-women are baffled and depart. Having learned from their chatter how the girl whom they had left in her care can recover her speech, the housewife removes the slumber-pin, the girl tells that she had been carried off and a changling substituted for her. The woman restores the girl to her sorrowing parents who reward her by bringing her to their home as she fears another visit from her vengeful visitors.[17]

Concerning the initial visit of the fairy women we read in the original:

> Tráth éigint do bhí bean bhocht ann. . . . Agus do bhíodh ana-dhúil aici bheth a' sníomh agus a' cnutáil agus a' gabháil don olainn ar gach aon saghas slí. Do thuilleadh sí pinginí airgid ar an rud so. D'oibríodh sí moch déanach, agus oíche éigint bhí sí fanta ana-dhéanach ag obair, a' gabháil don olainn, nuair a bhuail

---

[17]S. Ó Cróinín agus D. Ó Cróinín, *Scéalaíocht Amhlaoibh Í Luínse* (Baile Átha Cliath 1971) 357.

chúithi isteach beirt sheanabhan. Ní rabhdar ró-chríona, ach mar
sin féin níor mhná óga iad, agus bean óg acu á thúirt leo a' triall ar
a' seana-mhnaoi. Chuadar chun cainte leis an seana-mhnaoi agus
duaradar léi gur b'shin bean óg a fuaradar amù ansan, 'go bhfuil
taom éigint fáltha aici, is dócha, agus fágfam anso í anois ar feag
tamaill, féachaint a' dtiocfadh aon fheabhas uirthi'.[18]

As it would have been understood by narrator and hearer alike –
assuming a general undefined relationship between text and telling –
this passage corresponds to the beginning of EN in three significant
respects: (i) the ambivalent time (*Samhain* / late at night) that allows
the normally separate domains of living and of dead to interpenetrate,
(ii) the violation of specific taboos that relate to the protection of the
household at such a time, (iii) the ambivalent figure (hanged man /
enchanted girl), not altogether dead nor yet fully alive, who is brought
into the house on the coincidence of (i) and (ii). There is the further
implication in each case that otherworld entry cannot be gained by the
otherworld figure(s) except with the collusion, willing or unwilling, of
mortals from within and without. (Similarly in EN, when first enter-
ing the *síd* on the reverse journey, Nera is accompanied by the fairy
host, who may be said to facilitate his passage, as Nera had that of the
hanged man, and his otherworld consort may be said to fulfil a helper
role similar to that of the negligent housekeeper with relation to the
otherworld visitor.) Apart from the reference to the woman's working
late, feature (ii) is not specifically mentioned at this point but is clearly
to be inferred from what subsequently transpires. But even this defence
may be unnecessary, if not ill-conceived, in so far as it counters an over-
literal approach that is itself largely irrelevant. A traditional audience
would not need to be told such things: it would have been conscious of
the generic as well as the individual telling, moreover one that served to
confirm what was already sanctioned by folk custom and belief. Such
associations are as real as the precise form of words that evoke them;
it is only when they lose their resonance that we are forced to depend
solely on the evidence of isolated texts now all the more partial for being
incapable of being supplemented.

Inevitably there are differences also, but these are of such a kind as
to confirm the relationship rather than to sever it: for example the roles
of carrier and carried are reversed, being changed from benign mortal
bearing a malevolent otherworld being (EN) to malevolent otherworld
beings bearing a benign mortal (Aa.–Th. 501*) and the male characters
are replaced by female. The single visit to three separate houses (EN)
has become three separate visits to the same house (Aa.–Th. 501*);
in EN entrance is denied on the first two occasions but gained on the
third, while in the modern folktale entrance is gained on the first two
occasions but denied on the third. It is on the link between these visits

---

[18]ibid., 97.

and their consequences that the main part of my argument depends.
Like what went before, that argument does not seek to prove a direct
linear relationship between two individual tales; rather it would suggest
a fairly limited and consistent range of thematic variation within which
both may have been engendered.

The confrontation of natural and supernatural in Aa.–Th. 501* is
described as follows by Amhlaoibh Ó Luínse; the woman of the house
has become aware of her visitors' intention to kill and eat her:

Do tháinig an tseanabhean isteach airís le tadhscán don uisce, agus
an rud go léir airithe aici. Chuir sí sa chorcán é, agus do bhí crích
aici á dhéanamh ar fuaid a' tí ar feag tamaillín. Riug sí ar sheana-
thuaig a bhí ion is bhuail sí buille dhi anuas ar bhloc a bhí ion is
chuir 'na seasamh ion í, agus do chaith sí amach tadhscán uisce.
Thóg sí crann aráin a bhí ion is chuir sí i gcimeád é. Amach léi
airís, agus do tháinig isteach go hanathúil deithinsach. Do chuir sí
liú aisti:

'Olagón!' ar sise. 'Nách muar an scrios é! Tá an Fhaidhleann
Mhuar trí thine!'

Do léim an bheirt sheanabhan a bhí istig. Bhuaileadar a mbasa.
'O, a thiarcais!' arsa duine acu; 'mo mhac! Tá sé imithe.'

'O, eist!' arsan bhean eile. 'Nách measa dhósa mo sheanduine
féin!'

Amach leo, agus nuair a chuadar amach ní raibh aon iúnaí le
fiscint. Ba mhaith a' mhaise sin ag an seana-mhnaoi istig, do chuir
sí glas ar an ndoras agus do choigil an tine. Níor bh'fhada i n'aochor
chun gur tháinig an bheirt amù a' glaoch iad a leogaint isteach.

'Ní leogfad,' aduairt an bhean istig; 'ní haon iúntaoibh liom
sibh.' Bhíodar a' múirnínteacht uirthi ach níor bh'aon chabhair é.
Do ghlaodar ar uisce na gcos chun an dorais oscailt dóibh.

'Ní fhéatainn é,' arsa uisce na gcos, 'mar táim caite amach anso
fé n'úr gcosa san aoileach.'

'Is olc é,' aduaradar. 'Ca bhfuileann tú, a thuaig,' aduaradar,
'nú a' n-oscalófá an doras duinn?' 'Ní féidir é,' aduairt an tua,'mar
táim curtha anso – mo bhéal go daingean sa bhloc.'

'A' bhfuil aon sméaróid tine ansan oscalódh an doras duinn?'
aduaradar.

'Ní fhéatainn corraí,' aduairt an sméaróid, 'mar tá mo chaipín
oíche curtha orm!' – Do bhí an luaith curtha os cionn na tine.

'Ca bhfuil an crann aráin,' aduaradar, 'nú a' n-oscalódh sé dhuinn?'

'Féach ná féatainn, isdóin,' aduairt an crann aráin, 'mar tá mo
chos fén rachta.'

> B'shin mar a bhí. Níor bh'aon chabhair dóibh bheith a' tathant
> ar an seana-mhnaoi – ní oscalódh sí dhóibh, agus b'éigint dóibh
> imeacht.[19]

Rather than the actual death which occurs at this point in EN, here
the breaking of the taboos is followed only by threatened or what we
might call vestigial death, as punishment is avoided by the housewife's
attending to those matters previously neglected by her and by her pre-
tence that the fairy hill has been destroyed. But however developed, in
terms of being carried out or negated, the idea of death is equally present
in both instances. In Aa.–Th. 501* the list of talismans is severally and
variously rendered, first as their potency is neutralised and again when
they announce their new condition; on the second occasion the *sméaróid
tine* is added to the list, the storyteller having forgotten to include its
smooring in his earlier account of the housewife's remedial action.

In EN there is, in addition to the punishment of the remiss household,
the threat that further death will be wreaked upon Nera's people by
otherworld beings if the *síd* is not first destroyed. Beginning at line 44,
Meyer's translation continues beyond the point at which Ó Duilearga's
study breaks off:

> Thereupon he carried him [i.e. the hanged man] back to his torture,
> and Nera returned to Cruachan. Then he saw something. The dun
> was burnt before him, and he beheld a heap of heads of their people
> (cut off) by the warriors from the dun. [There would seem to be
> some confusion at this point between the forces of the *dún* and those
> of the *síd*.] He went after the host into the cave of Cruachan. 'A
> man on the track here!' said the last man to Nera. 'The heavier is
> the track', said his comrade to him, and each man said that word
> to his mate from the last man to the first man. Thereupon they
> reached the sid of Cruachan and went into it. Then the heads were
> displayed to the king in the sid.[20]

It is subsequently explained to Nera by his fairy consort that the
destruction is illusory but may yet come about:

> 'Come hither a little', said Nera to his wife, 'that thou mayst tell
> me of my adventures now'. 'What has appeared to thee?' said the
> woman. 'Not hard to tell', said Nera. 'When I was going into the
> sid, methought the rath of Cruachan was destroyed and Ailill and
> Medb with their whole household had fallen in it.' 'That is not
> true indeed', said the woman, 'but an elfin host came to thee [*v.l.*
> to them]. That will come true', said she, 'unless he would reveal
> it to his friends'. 'How shall I give warning to my people?' said
> Nera. 'Rise and go to them', said she. 'They are still round the

---

[19]ibid., 98–9.
[20]*Revue Celtique* 10 (1899) 217–19.

same caldron and the charge has not yet been removed from the
fire.' Yet it had seemed to him three days and three nights since he
had been in the sid. 'Tell them to be on their guard at Halloween
coming, unless they come to destroy the side. For I will promise
them this: the sid to be destroyed by Ailill and Medb, and the
crown of Briun to be carried off by them.'[21]

In Aa.–Th. 501* threatened death is averted by feigned destruction
of the fairy hill, the name and location of which will usually derive from
the storyteller's own physical and psychic geography. In EN there is a
similar nexus, the actual death of the people of the house being rein-
forced by the simulated death of the inhabitants of Cruachain, a fate
that can be averted only by the real destruction of the neighbouring *síd*.
In view of those relationships and of those established earlier, I would
claim that EN and Aa.–Th. 501* are true congeners. It may be that the
attenuation of certain of the harsher features of the earlier story (the
replacement of hanged man with enchanted girl, of actual with threat-
ened death of the offender, of real with pretended destruction of the *síd*)
represents the effect of a gradual weathering process on the generic tale
over the centuries, or it may be that the tale type would have accommo-
dated such a range of variation from the beginning – we simply have no
way of knowing. But whatever of this, the destruction of the *síd*, verbal
or otherwise, far from being extraneous, may be claimed to have formed
part, indeed the most important part, of the thematic complex underly-
ing EN; it is to this end that the story inexorably proceeds having been
temporarily delayed in attending to other necessary but, in terms of the
compositional dynamic, clearly subordinate considerations. These con-
siderations are not in any sense irrelevant and I have already suggested
they were almost certainly not so with regard to the survival of EN in
the manuscript literature. What is of greater interest, in the context
of the present discussion, is the likelihood that they would have altered
the shape of the story not only by interrupting its course but also and
more profoundly by the consequences of such interruptions. For exam-
ple, following the Morrígan episode (§§ 13–14), Nera sets out again,
quite unnecessarily it might seem, to warn his people. It is here, at line
140, that Thurneysen would divide the story for the reasons described
and considered earlier. An alternative explanation might be that it is
not Nera but the storyteller who must retrace his steps, not so much
to remind his audience of what has gone before as to regenerate the
thematic energy that will carry the narrative through to its conclusion.
It would seem to be part of the traditional bargain that nothing can
finally remain at odds with its surroundings: compositional breathing
space must be created where none already exists, which is not to say
that perfect unity and consistency will always result.

[21] ibid., 219–21.

The above analysis would not pretend to exclude other models any more than it would exclude that of Ó Duilearga. For instance, EN will also share to a greater or lesser degree in the general characteristics of the *echtrae* which David Dumville, seeming to anticipate Liam Breatnach's explanation of the word as the abstract noun corresponding to the preposition *echtar*, translates as '(an) outing' and gives as its central theme 'that of a human being drawn on a journey to the otherworld'. Although not referred to specifically in this connection, EN would seem to give particular support to Dumville's suggestion, based on the 'parallels drawn by Rachel Bromwich between magic treasures brought back by Irish heroes from otherworld visits and similar items in Welsh texts, chiefly the *Tri thlws ar ddeg Ynys Prydain*', that 'the *echtrae*, as a genre, may perhaps be shown to be part of the Common Celtic inheritance of Ireland and Wales and therefore of great antiquity'.[22] In fact the three wonderful things said to have been recovered from the *síd* on its destruction – the mantle of Lóegaire in Armagh, the crown of Brión in Connaught and the shirt of Dúnlaing in Kildare of Leinster – would seem to provide more compelling evidence of this suggestion than any of the Irish examples adduced by Bromwich.[23]

Other analyses may be possible, deeper meanings found. For example, Alden Watson, using a modified version of the paradigmatic model developed by Lévi-Strauss, one based on 'contrasting parallelism' rather than on binary opposition, would claim that '*Echtra Nerai* is a tale whose primary concern is an elucidation of the concept of sovereignty in relation to the function of the hero'.[24] The method is interesting, the

---

[22] D. Dumville, '*Echtrae* and *Immram*: some problems of definition', *Ériu* 27 (1976) 73–94, pp. 73–4; L. Breatnach, 'On abstract nouns from prepositions in Irish', *Celtica* 15 (1983) 18–19; R. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* (Cardiff 1978) cxxx-cxxxv. See also P. Mac Cana, *The learned tales of medieval Ireland* (Dublin 1980) 75–6.

[23] The Irish items are especially interesting in view of Bromwich's suggestion (*Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, cxxxv) 'that the original nucleus of the Welsh Treasures may also have consisted in stories concerning magic objects which had either been won from the Otherworld or bestowed on mortals by its inhabitants'. Pádraig Ó Riain has suggested to me that one function of EN could be to serve as an aetiological tale in respect of what may have been dynastic heirlooms of Uí Néill (through Lóegaire mac Néill), Uí Briúin and Uí Dúnlainge. *Samhain* and *síd Crúachan* are associated elsewhere also with the discovery of *barr Briúin*: W. Stokes (ed. and transl.), *Lives of saints from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford 1890) xxix–xxxi; J. Vendryes (ed.), *Airne Fíngein* (Dublin 1953) §§ i, v.

[24] A. Watson, 'A structural analysis of *Echtra Nerai*', *Études Celtiques* 23 (1986) 129–142, p. 142. In his preface to Propp (*Morphology of the folktale*, xi–xii), Alan Dundes makes a useful distinction between 'syntagmatic' and 'paradigmatic' structuralism. The syntagmatic is 'the type of which Propp's *Morphology* is the exemplar par excellence. In this type, the structure or formal organization of a folkloristic text is described following the chronological order of the linear sequence of elements in the text as reported from an informant'. The paradigmatic 'seeks to describe the pattern (usually based upon an a priori binary principle of opposition) which allegedly underlies the folkloristic text. This pattern is not the same as the sequential structure at all. Rather the elements are taken out of the "given" order and are regrouped in one or more analytic schema'.

parallels occasionally suggestive, even striking (e.g. the resemblance of Nera's carrying the hanged man to the blind man carrying the lame), but the conclusion unconvincing; even if it were otherwise, and some may find it so, it is a conclusion that could have no bearing on the outcome of the present study which has been carried out for an altogether different purpose following a more conventional syntagmatic approach.

ADDENDUM

John Carey's article, 'Sequence and causation in *Echtra Nerai*', *Ériu* 39 (1988) 67–74, was not available to me when writing the above. Apart from our insistence on what he calls the 'thematic wholeness' of EN, there would seem to be no necessary agreement or disagreement between us. Much of his discussion concerns what Frank O'Connor (*The backward look* (London 1967) 44) has referred to as 'the relativity of time' or what Mircea Eliade (*Patterns in comparative religion* (Meridian Books ed., 1963) 391) terms its 'heterogeneousness'. The type of inverse relationship between the opposite ends of the Irish year, *Samain* and *Cétamain/Beltaine*, between 'here' and 'there', that Carey (pp. 71–2) discovers in the context of the story, has, like the story itself, its reflexes in popular tradition: see, for example, R. P. Jenkins, 'Witches and fairies: supernatural aggression and deviance among the Irish peasantry', *Ulster Folklife* 23 (1977) 33–56, and S. Muller, '*Samhain* – the dead centre of time', *Sinsear* 5 (1988) 88–99.

SEÁN Ó COILEÁIN

*University College, Cork*