

IRISH PERCEPTIONS OF THE COSMOS

COSMIC HEROICS

*In nem maides ná in muir thráges ná in talam condascara ná inn é búadrugud
mo meic-sea so ac comrac ra écomlund for Táin Bó Cúailnge?*

‘Is it the sky that breaks or the sea that ebbs or the earth that quakes or is this
the distress of my son fighting against odds on the Foray of Cúailnge?’¹

DERIVING its figurative power from the comparison of Cú Chulainn’s heroic plight with the rending of the cosmological order, this striking rhetorical question illustrates the centrality of the inherited concept of a three-fold division of the cosmos to Irish ways of thinking. The impassioned query is that of Súaltaim on learning that his own son, Cú Chulainn, was facing Calatín Dána together with his twenty-seven sons and his grandson Glas mac Dega at the same time. It occurs at the beginning of the section entitled *Sírrobud Súaltaim* ‘The Repeated Warning of Súaltaim’ in the second recension of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* in *The Book of Leinster*.² Súaltaim later went to Cú Chulainn. His son told him that he could no longer defend the cattle of Ulster and directed Súaltaim to proceed at once and inform the Ulstermen that this was the case. Súaltaim travelled on the Líath Macha and when he reached the side of Emain he spoke the following words:

Fir gontair, mná berdair, bae aegdair, a Ultu

‘Men are slain, women carried off, cattle driven away, O Ulstermen!’³

This is the warning cry of the sagas, and it should have been answered by an enquiry as to who those wreaking the destruction were, and followed up by the appropriate emergency defence response.⁴ But Súaltaim was more or less ignored and had to deliver his warning a second time. The Ulstermen dared not violate the taboos which forbade any of them to speak before their king, and the king to speak before his druids. Súaltaim proceeded to the stone of the hostages in Emain and gave forth his warning a third time. Only then did Cathbad the druid speak: ‘Who kills them and who carries them off and who drives them away?’ he enquired. Súaltaim told his tale of horror, recounting Cú Chulainn’s plight, but he failed to prompt assistance. Súaltaim ended his address with the following

¹ C. O’Rahilly (ed.), *Táin Bó Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster* (Dublin 1970), ll. 3986–8. Although the translations given in this paper are based on those provided by the text editions cited, they tend to differ from them in general by following the original Irish rather more closely and, in particular, by seeking to pay more attention to the sense nuances of the individual words under scrutiny here. The paper itself has benefited from its presentation in an earlier version at a postgraduate seminar of the Department of Modern Irish, University College, Dublin, in December 1988 at the kind invitation of Professor P. A. Breatnach.

² *Ibid.*, l. 3981.

³ *Ibid.*, ll. 4011–12.

⁴ Compare Conchobar’s response, ‘Who takes them captive? Who drives them away? Who kills them?’ (*Ciche brata, ciche áig, ciche goin?*), on hearing Cú Chulainn’s tidings, ‘Women are taken captive, cattle are driven away, men are slain.’ (*Mná brataitir, . . . éti agatair, fir gonaitir.*) in C. O’Rahilly (ed.), *Táin Bó Cúailnge: recension I* (Dublin 1976), ll. 1214–15.

incitement: 'And unless you avenge this at once, you will never avenge it until the end of doom and the world.' But the hapless Súaltaim was so upset that he thereby transgressed the required protocol and did not show due deference to the body whose help he needed. And he earned a telling rejoinder from Cathbad the druid: 'More fitting is death and destruction and slaying for the man who incites the king in this manner'.⁵ Whereupon Súaltaim became violently agitated and the Líath Macha reared up on her hind legs. Súaltaim's own shield turned against him, so that the edge of the shield severed his head from his body: 'The horse itself turned back again into Emain, with the shield on the horse and the head on the shield.'⁶ And Súaltaim's head spoke the selfsame words:

Fir gondair, mná berdair, báe aegdair, a Ultu,
'Men are slain, women carried off, cattle driven away, O Ulstermen!'⁷

Conchobar was no more impressed of the urgency of the situation than his druid and answered:

'Romór bic in núall sa', bar Conchobar, 'dáig nem úasaind 7 talam ísaind 7 muir immaind immácúaird, acht munu tháeth in firmimint cona frossaib rétlánd bar dunadgnúis in talman ná mono máe in talam assa thalamchumscugud ná mono thí inn fáirge eithrech ochorgorm for tulmoing in bethad, dobér-sa cach bó 7 cach ben díb cá lias 7 cá machad, co'aitte 7 co'adbai fadessin ar mbúaid chatha 7 chomlaind 7 chomraic.'

'A little too loud is that cry,' said Conchobar, 'for the sky is above us, the earth beneath us and the sea all around us, but unless the sky with its showers of stars fall upon the surface of the earth or unless the ground burst open in an earthquake, or unless the fish-abounding, blue-bordered sea come over the surface of existence, I shall bring back every cow to its byre and enclosure, every woman to her own abode and dwelling, after victory in battle and combat and contest.'⁸

And with that Conchobar sprang to action and began to muster the men of Ulster.

And so Conchobar closed *Sírrbud Sualtaim* 'The Repeated Warning of Súaltaim' with an appeal to the same triad of cosmic divisions with which Súaltaim opened it, by referring to *nem*, *talam*, and *muir*, i.e. 'the sky, the earth and the sea'. Súaltaim employed them at the start of the episode in order to express the awesome extent of the tragedy which was threatening his son, Cú Chulainn, implying that it was equal in significance to the destruction of the natural order of the universe. Of course, this analysis of the province's state was tantamount to proclaiming that the fertility-inducing equilibrium which should exist between king Conchobar and his kingdom or realm was no longer being maintained.⁹ That is why Conchobar had to deny publicly that the situation was so critical. Accordingly, he

⁵ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster*, ll. 4032–3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, ll. 4038–9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, ll. 4040–41.

⁸ *Ibid.*, ll. 4041–7.

⁹ On this aspect of the sacral kingship see for example P. Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology* (London 1970), pp. 119–21.

contended, firstly, that there had been no fundamental alteration in the cosmic scheme of things, that the sky was still above their heads, that the earth still lay beneath their feet and that the sea still surrounded them. But, secondly, in order that this carry public plausibility in the circumstances, he was forced to make his claim in a rather ambiguous way. He therefore alluded to *nem*, *talam*, and *muir* in a manner amounting to a solemn affirmation on oath. And, thirdly, he promised that everything would be put right again – that the cattle and the women would be brought back, unless the cosmic order be sundered. It is interesting to note that Conchobar's expressing of the latter does not entail a mere repetition of the words used earlier but has *in firmimint* 'the sky', literally 'the firmament', instead of *nem*, *dunadgnúis in talman* 'the surface of the earth' as well as *in talam* and *tulmoing in bethad* 'the surface of existence', and *inn fáirge eithrech ochorgorm* 'the fish-abounding, blue-bordered sea' as opposed to *muir*. The second set of lexemes are of a literary nature and include some younger additions to the language. Therefore, Conchobar, king of the Ulstermen, categorically stated that he would ensure that the actions which were challenging him as sovereign would be set at nought, and that he was so resolute in his intention that only cosmic upheaval would prevent him from exercising his regal power.

We may now consider some other instances where reference is similarly made to the three major divisions of the universe. Not surprisingly, the same imagery as that discussed above is to be found in the parallel, if somewhat less elaborate account, entitled *Sírrabad Súaldaim annso* ('This is the Constant Warning of Súaltaim'), in the first recension of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, where Súaltaim enquired:

'In nem maides fa muir thar chrícha fa thalam conscara fa gáir mo maic se,' ol sé, 're n-écomlonn?'

'Is it the sky that cracks, or the sea that overflows its boundaries, or the earth that splits, or is it the loud cry of my son fighting against odds?''¹⁰

And the oath which Conchobar swore in this version is simpler and more direct (the rime between *cendaib*, literally 'heads', and *mbennaib*, literally 'peaks', is to be noted):

'Ba romór a núall sa trá,' ol Conchobar. 'Muir ara cendaib, in nem húasa mbennaib, talum foa cosaib, dobér-sa cech mboin ina hindis díb 7 cach mben 7 cech mac dia tig iar mbúaid chatha.'

'Too loud was that shout indeed,' said Conchobar. '(I swear by) the sea before them, the sky above them, the earth beneath them that I shall restore every cow to its byre and every woman and every boy to their own homes after victory in battle.'''¹¹

UNITARY AND BINARY AFFIRMATIONS

However, all three of the major divisions are not always mentioned. Compare the following promise of Conchobar's warriors, where reference to the sea is wanting:

¹⁰ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: recension I*, ll. 3415–16

¹¹ *Ibid.*, ll. 3448–50.

‘Gébmá-ne íarom i mbale i tám,’ ar na bóca, ‘acht mani maidi in talam found nó an nem anúas foraind, nícon memsam-ne de sund.’

‘We shall hold the spot where we now stand,’ said the warriors, ‘but unless the ground quakes beneath us or the heavens fall down on us, we shall not flee from here.’¹²

Land alone is cited in another affirmation of the same kind made by Gér, Gabar and Fer Rogein in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*:

Íurthar ind orcun maní má in talam fue conon-rommarbtharni occi.

The pillage will be wreaked, unless the ground breaks so that we shall be slain as we undertake it.¹³

On the other hand, the figurative images attributed to Cú Chulainn in his turn in *Talland Étair*, when he heard the torment of his foster-son, Mess Dead, as he fought against odds, are the same as those of his own father, Súaltaim:

Is nem maides † is muir thráges † talam conscara † búriud mo daltaise oc imbirt ecomluind fair.

It is the sky breaking or the sea receding or the ground quaking or the tormenting of my fosterson as he fights against odds.¹⁴

There is no doubt but that here, yet again, there is a peculiar potency attached to the triad of *nem – talam – muir*, and to the threat that any one of the three major divisions of the universe might collapse in a way which would threaten the human race with immediate and terrible destruction.

Let us recall the following account of Professor J. J. Tierney in his significant paper entitled ‘The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius’, read to the Royal Irish Academy in 1960:

Ptolemy, son of Lagus, tells the story that the Celts living on the Adriatic met Alexander the Great on the Danube, and being asked by him what they feared most answered that it was lest the sky should fall on them.¹⁵

Professor Tierney explains: ‘This story falls into a well-known category of Greek question and unexpected answer . . . It has behind it, however, the current belief in Celtic fearlessness.’¹⁶ It is clear that the same cosmological concept met with in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and other sagas underlies this reply given to Alexander the Great, just as it does episodes in other tales related of the Celts by classical authors. The following two accounts are from the work of Aristotle, and are given here as translated by Tierney. They were written about 330BC. The ‘reckless Celtic bravery in battle’, as Tierney styles it, is being discussed:

¹² Ibid., ll. 4043–4.

¹³ E. Knott (ed.), *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (Dublin [1936] repr. 1975), ll. 723–4.

¹⁴ R. I. Best and M. A. O’Brien (ed.), *The Book of Leinster formerly Lebar na Núachongbála ii* (Dublin 1956), ll. 13411–12.

¹⁵ *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 60 C (1959–60), p. 196.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 196.

‘We have no word for the man who is excessively fearless; perhaps one may call such a man mad or bereft of feeling, who fears nothing, neither earthquakes nor waves, as they say of the Celts.’ Again, ‘It is not bravery to withstand fearful things through ignorance, for example if through madness one were to withstand the onset of thunderbolts, and again even if one understands how great the danger is, it is not bravery to withstand it through high-spiritedness, as when the Celts take up arms to attack the waves, and in general, the courage of barbarians is compounded of high-spiritedness.’¹⁷

Accordingly, we see that earthquakes and waves (of the sea), the equivalents of *talam* and *muir*, are mentioned in the first of these accounts, thunderbolts and waves (of the sea), corresponding to *nem* and *muir*, in the second. It would seem that references to the sea were the most common at this early period. This report of Aristotle was reflected on by the historian Ephorus soon afterwards, and he concluded that more Celts were being drowned than slain on the field of battle. But, unfortunately, Ephorus was not the only scholar to interpret too literally the concrete imagery resorted to by the Celts to convey an abstract concept. Despite the great distance from the Mediterranean to the Netherlands, it is to the latter that J. J. Tierney himself had recourse, as he tried to make sense of the frequent mention of waves in the sources of antiquity, and wrote: ‘These stories must be echoes of some contemporary disaster caused by the flooding of the sea into the area occupied by the Celts in the low countries.’¹⁸ However, there can scarcely be any doubt but that the Celts of old – just like their Gaelic descendants more than a thousand years later – were wont to express their steadfastness and their willingness to fight by boasting that only cataclysmic upheavals of the cosmos could prevent them from carrying out their intention.

LATER LITERARY COMPARISONS

One may now pass from the accounts of classical authors on the Continental Celts and the evidence of Irish sagas from early Ireland to the first major work of the Modern Irish literary revival, namely An tAthair Peadar Ua Laoghaire’s *Séadna*. In this story the reader is told that no sooner had Cormac the bailiff been led into the presence of the king than he started to organise the pursuit of the redoubtable Síogáí:

“A bháille,” arsa ’n rígh, “cé h-é sin?”
“Sin é, a rígh,” arsa Cormac, “an fear cheannuigh na capaill ar aonach an Tobair sa Mhúmhain agus do dhiol an t-airgead bréagach asta. Bhí ceathrar acu ann, agus do rugadh ar thriúr acu. Ach do theip orainn teacht suas leis seo. Agus ní deirim go bhfuil aon chúinne sa chathair seo, ’ná is dócha i n-Éirinn, gan daoine anois ann ar a lorg. Ní mór sgéala do chur amach láithreach go bhfuil beirthe air agus gan fir bhochta do bheith ’ghá marbhadh féin níos sia ag ruith ’na dhiaigh, agus gan é ann le fághail.”

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 194–5.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 195.

“Go réidh, a bháille,” arsa ’n rígh, “ní deirim ná go bhfuil iaracht de dhearmhad ort.”

“Ó, ní’l, a rígh,” arsa Cormac.

“Measaim,” arsa ’n rígh, “go bhfuil, mar ní h-ort atá an t-aer agus an talamb do choimeád gan tuitim ar a chéile.”

Do gháireadar na h-uaisle go léir. D’fheuch Cormac ’na thimpal ortha agus do leath a bhéal air agus tháinig bior ar a shúilibh, mar ní fheidir sé cad do chuir ag gáirídhe iad.

“Bailiff,” said the king, “who is that?”

“That, king,” said Cormac, “is the man who bought the horses at the fair of Tobber in Munster and who paid for them with the counterfeit money. There were four of them, and three of them were caught. But we failed to get hold of this one. And I would not say that there is any nook in this city, nor probably in [all] Ireland, where he is not being sought now. Word will have to be sent out at once that he has been caught and not have poor men killing themselves any longer running after him, and he not there to be found.”

“Easy, bailiff,” said the king, “I would say that you are somewhat mistaken.”

“Oh, I’m not, king,” said Cormac.

“I think,” said the king, “that you are, for it is not on you that the sky and the ground are depending to keep them from falling together.”

All the nobles laughed. Cormac looked around him at them, and his mouth opened wide and his eyes became pointy, because he did not know what had made them laugh.¹⁹

Of course, one is not contending that there has to be a direct link between the structured cosmic concepts which we have been considering until now and these words of An tAthair Peadar’s king. It does seem significant, nonetheless, that the king should imply that the responsibility for administering his realm rests with him, and that he should compare this function with the maintenance of equilibrium between two divisions of the universe.

We should also remember that the Modern Irish word *aer* has the sense ‘2. Sky’, as well as ‘1. Air’ according to Niall Ó Dónaill’s *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla*, which includes the following examples:

An t-amadán is mó idir aer is uisce, ‘The greatest fool on earth’²⁰

An t-aer is an talamb, ‘earth and sky’²¹ It may well be that the same idea has provided the base for some of the most famous lines composed by Shakespeare himself, those where Hamlet ponders:

To be or not to be, that is the question,
Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,

¹⁹ Ua Laoghaire, An t-Ath. P., *Séadna* (Baile Átha Cliath 1904), pp. 196–7.

²⁰ N. Ó Dónaill (ed.), *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (Baile Átha Cliath 1977), s.v. *aer*.

²¹ *Ibid.*, s.v. *talamb*.

And by opposing, end them.²²

And out on the Heath, King Lear challenges the elements: let the winds blow, let the rain pour down in torrents, let thunderbolts burn his hair, let the thunder flatten the globe of the world and let the moulds of nature break open:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
 You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
 Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!
 You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,
 Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
 Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
 Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world!
 Crack Nature's moulds, all germens spill at once
 That makes ingrateful man!²³

W. B. Yeats made his own of this heritage of motifs in his play, *On Baile's Strand* (1904). When Cú Chulainn realises at last that it is his own son whom he has killed, he wishes to loose his frenzy on the thunder:

BLIND MAN. It is his own son he has slain.
 CUCHULAIN. 'Twas they that did it, the pale windy people.
 Where? where? where? My sword against the thunder!
 But no, for they have always been my friends;²⁴
 And with that, he turns his attack on the waves of the sea. He rushes into the brine and strikes his sword on wave after wave:
 FOOL. He is going up to King Conchubar. They are all about the young man. No, no, he is standing still. There is a great wave going to break, and he is looking at it. Ah! now he is running down to the sea, but he is holding up his sword as if he were going into a fight. [*Pause.*] Well struck! well struck!
 BLIND MAN. What is he doing now?
 FOOL. O! he is fighting the waves!
 BLIND MAN. He sees King Conchubar's crown on every one of them.
 FOOL. There, he has struck at a big one! He has struck the crown off it; he has made the foam fly. There again, another big one!
 . . .
 FOOL. There, he is down. He is up again. He is going out in the deep water. There is a big wave. It has gone over him. I cannot see him now. He has killed kings and giants, but the waves have mastered him, the waves have mastered him!
 BLIND MAN. Come here, Fool!
 FOOL. The waves have mastered him.
 BLIND MAN. Come here!

²² *Hamlet*, H. Jenkins (ed.), (London and New York [1982] 1986), act III, scene I, ll. 56–60, *pace* J. Dover Wilson, *Hamlet* (Cambridge 1957), p. 191.

²³ K. Muir (ed.), *King Lear* (London and New York [1972] 1975), act III, scene II, ll. 1–9.

²⁴ W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats*, 2nd edn. (London and Basingstoke [1952] 1977), p. 276.

FOOL. The waves have mastered him.
BLIND MAN. Come here, I say.²⁵

And so, not even the hero himself could get the better of the sea, the cosmos. It is worth recalling that Yeats's title for a later prose version of another of his Cú Chulainn plays, *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1919), was *Fighting the Waves* (1934).²⁶

THE IMPACT OF THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Let us now examine the impact of the Christian tradition on the native understanding of the composition of the universe. Although the influence of Christianity came in time to pervade wide reaches of Irish literature, its precise effect depends on a variety of factors such as the date of the original composition and the particular genre in question. This holds true especially for underlying cultural assumptions that are embedded in the people's subconscious thinking, and are reflected in the structure of the language's lexical fields, assumptions which undergo only gradual surface readjustment.²⁷ One should not forget, for example, that it is in a context praising Christ that the word *druí* 'druid' occurs as late as the year A.D. 750 or so in the poems of Blathmac, son of Cú Brettan, some three hundred years after the bringing of Christianity to the country:

. . . *ferr fáith, físidiu cech druí,*
rí ba hepscop, ba lánsuí.

' . . . better than a prophet, more knowledgeable than every druid, a king who was a bishop and a complete sage.'²⁸

On the other hand, although the basic triad of *nem*, *talam* and *muir* survives in the work of Blathmac, it undergoes change:

. . . *muir mas, nem nglas, talam cé . . .*

'the beautiful sea, the blue heaven, the present earth . . .'²⁹

One interprets the intrusion of the adjective *cé*, which meant 'this, on this side' as signifying that one is moving from a triangular contrast (the central concept of the Irish and their Celtic forebears) to the Christian binary contrasting of this world with the supernatural otherworld, which grew in strength with the passage of time. It is to be noted that Professor Carney translates *nem* in this line as 'heaven', as if the Christian understanding of the cosmos were already in the ascendant.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 277–8.

²⁶ Cf. W. B. Yeats, *ibid.*, p. v; and A. Norman Jeffares (ed.), *W. B. Yeats. Selected Plays* (London [1974] 1979), pp. 7–8. Jeffares dates *On Bailé's Strand* to 1903, p. 8.

²⁷ Cf. Whorf, B. Lee, *Language, thought, and reality* (Cambridge, Massachusetts 1971); and J. Trier, 'Über Wort- und Begriffsfelder', in L. Schmidt (ed.), *Wortfeldforschung* (Darmstadt 1973), pp. 1–38; and L. Mac Mathúna, 'Tilling some Irish lexical fields', *Teanga: Journal of the Irish Association for Applied Linguistics* 9 (1989) 84–99.

²⁸ J. Carney (ed.), *The Poems of Blathmac Son of Cú Brettan* (Dublin 1964), ll. 27–8.

²⁹ Ibid., l. 258.

A further indication of transition is provided by references to the Leviathan, a sea-monster of the Jewish tradition, which is mentioned in the poems of Blathmac at line 966.³⁰ Of particular moment is the fact that the impact of the new culture should have been such that the Leviathan displaced *muir* or *fairrge* from the cosmic triad in a saga text such as *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, which retains the inherited native understanding both of taboos and of the king's justice (*fír flattha*). The cosmic figurative imagery is employed in quite a complex manner in King Conaire's explanation of a great noise:

Ním-thása a samuil, manid talam imid-rae nó manid in Leuidan timchela in domuin [sic] ad-comaicc a erball do thochbur in beatha tar a cheann nó bárc mac Duind Désa ro gab tír.

I know of nothing like it, unless the earth moved, or unless the Leviathan which surrounds the earth is beating his tail in order to turn the world upside down, or the boat of Dond Désa's sons, which came ashore.³¹

This one-sentence extract actually contains quite a number of words close to the concerns of this study. For instance, it demonstrates the contrast between *domun* 'the physical world' and *bith* 'living things of the world', and that between *tír* 'dry land' and the sea.³² Another statement attributed to Cú Chulainn should perhaps be mentioned in this context of the Leviathan's standing for the sea (i.e. *muir* or *fair(r)ge*), namely:

'Adeochosa,' or Cú Chulaind, 'inna husci do chongnam frim. Ateoch nem 7 talmuin 7 Cruinn in tsainrethaig.'

'I beseech the rivers to help me,' said Cú Chulainn. I implore the sky and the earth and [the river] Cronn, in particular.³³

With that, we are told, the river Cronn rose up until it was as high as the tops of the trees.

Whether the latter citation be wholly within the native tradition or not, or whether it be ambiguous, one feels it will be agreed that it is but a small step from its wording to the following expression of the Christian concept, where the sea is merely a subordinate portion of the earthly world, an aspect of the earth:³⁴

*nem gelmár co n-ainglib,
ler tonnbán for talmáin.
'great white heaven with angels, the white-waved sea on earth.'*

³⁰ Cf. Carney, *ibid.*, editor's note, p. 150.

³¹ Knott, *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, ll. 501–4.

³² Detailed analysis of extracts containing the contrasts *muir* – *tír* and *domun* – *bith* is clearly complementary to this paper on *nem* – *talam* – *muir* and is being undertaken in a separate study. Taken together, all three groupings provide a comprehensive referential framework for important aspects of the lexicon of the physical world.

³³ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: recension I*, ll. 1158–9. O'Rahilly's translation includes 'heaven and earth'.

³⁴ G. Murphy (ed.), *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford [1956] repr. 1962), poem no. 4, st. 1, ll. c–d.

This poetic example implies that *talam* stands for both *muir* and *tír*.

It is the binary contrast *nem* -*talam* which is met with in the major collections of Old Irish glosses. In these *talam* is frequently employed with reference to the physical world around us, whereas *nem* has the sense ‘heaven, the kingdom of heaven, the supernatural otherworld yonder’, for example:

.i. *dobeir inso arnab uilib cumactib dichoissin inim ettalam . . .*
 ‘i.e. he puts this for all the powers which exist in heaven and earth . . .’³⁵

and

.i. *cachdúil dianeperr ainm nathar inim et italam isóndathir dó*
 ‘i.e. every creature which is called by the name of father, in heaven and on earth, it is from the Father.’³⁶

as well as:

.i. *dorronad síd etermuntir nime et talman*
 ‘i.e. peace has been made between the household of heaven and (that) of earth.’³⁷

The same understanding that God the father, or the Lord God, owns both heaven and earth is to be found in the *Pater Noster*, to which this gloss refers:

mór assársa forcoimdid nime 7 talman
 ‘great this outrage on the Lord of heaven and earth.’³⁸

Talam is used to render the Latin *terra*, as for instance in the following gloss on *terrae creatio*:

.i. *duucthar trithuistin intalman*
 i.e. it is understood through the creation of the earth³⁹

But, with regard to this last citation, it is significant that references to *nem* ‘heaven’ are to be found in Milan glosses 51 c 27, 28 and 29, which follow almost immediately, as it can scarcely be coincidental that the two lexemes should occur in such close proximity.

CHRISTIAN ACCOUNTS OF THE WORLD’S CREATION

The Irish interpretation of the cosmic understandings presented by the Christian tradition is nowhere more apparent than in those texts which treat of the Bible’s account of the creation of the world. As it happens, the first recension of *Lebor Gabála* closely follows the Genesis account, when detailing the events of the week of creation:

³⁵ Wb. 21 a 13. The texts of this gloss and of the others cited below are from W. Stokes and J. Strachan (ed.), *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* i (Cambridge [1901–03] repr. Dublin 1975).

³⁶ Ibid. Wb. 21 d 4.

³⁷ Ibid. Wb. 26 d 5.

³⁸ Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* i, The Scholium in MacDurnan’s Gospels (Lambeth), 484.7–8.

³⁹ Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* i, Ml. 51 c 24.

IN PRINCIPIO fecit Deus celum 7 terram .i. Doringne Dia nem 7 talmain ar tús 7 ni fil tossa(ch) na forcend fairseom féin. Doringne chétus in maiss nemchruthaig 7 soillsi aínge isin cetna domnuch. Doringne firmimint isin luan. Doringni talmain 7 muire sin máirt. Doringne grein 7 éasca 7 renna nime sin cétain. Doringne enlathie ind aeóir 7 tonnaitecha in mara sin dardain. Doringne anmanna in talman archena 7 Adam do follomnacht foraib isind aine. Ro chum-sain iarum Dia issin tsathurn do forbthiugud dula nua 7 ní o follomnacht sain. Dobert iar sain airchinnchecht nime do Lucifur co noi ngradaib aínge nime. Dobert dano airchinnchecht talman do Adam 7 do Eua cona claind.

IN PRINCIPIO fecit Deus celum 7 terram i.e. God made heaven and earth in the beginning and there is [neither] beginning nor end to himself. He first of all made the formless mass and the light of angels on the first Sunday. He made the firmament on the Monday. He made the earth and the seas on the Tuesday. He made the sun and the moon and the stars of heaven on the Wednesday. He made the birds of the air and the swimming-creatures of the sea on the Thursday. He made the animals of the earth besides and Adam to have control over them on the Friday. God rested from completing new creatures on the Saturday, and that is not from controlling. After that he gave the headship of Heaven to Lucifer and the nine grades of angels. He then gave the headship of the earth to Adam and Eve and their children.⁴⁰

It is worth alluding specifically to some elements in this retelling. The *Lebor Gabála* account begins the story of the creation with the division between the supernatural world beyond and the physical world about us, with the twofold division of *coelum* and *terra*, just as Genesis does. On the other hand, a tripartite division surfaces immediately in both the Bible and *Lebor Gabála* in the form of *firmimint* (on Monday, the second day), *talam* and *muire* (plural) (on Tuesday, the third day). The story is developed with the accounts of what transpired on the other days, when the birds of the air, the swimming-creatures of the sea, and the animals of the land in general were created (on Thursday and Friday).

The Biblical account of the creation of the firmament is more complete, however, as it relates that God said:

‘Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’ And God made the firmament and separated the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament And God called the firmament Heaven.⁴¹

Lucifer and the nine grades of angels were given charge of heaven, while Adam and Eve and their offspring were given charge of the world.

John Carey has analysed the various strands which the author wove together when composing the first canto of *Saltair na Rann*:⁴² praise of the Creator (lines

⁴⁰ Best, R. I., et al., *The Book of Leinster formerly Lebar na Núachongbála* i, ll. 1–12.

⁴¹ *The Holy Bible. Revised Standard Version. Catholic Edition* (London 1966), Genesis 1:6–8.

⁴² See J. Carey, ‘A Tract on the Creation’, *Éigse* 21 (1986) 1–9.

1–12 and 321–36), loose retelling of Genesis 1:1–5 (lines 13–20), Genesis 1:6–25 (lines 281–320), and what he terms ‘a cosmological digression’ (lines 21–280).⁴³

But even the introductory lines of praise contain lexemes from the area of vocabulary of concern in this paper. The poet addresses:

Moríse rí nime nair, . . . , dorósat domun dualach,
‘My king, the king of noble heaven, who created the proper(?) world’⁴⁴

It is further stated that it was God who created the sun and the depths of the ocean.⁴⁵ With regard to those verses which broadly correspond to the Biblical account, it is related that it was God who created *nem* and *talam*.⁴⁶ We are later informed that it was this same king who formed the true firmament, together with its stars surrounding the world:

Ri rodelb firmimint fir
conareannaib cendimbrig,
imthalmain, . . .
‘King who formed the true firmament, with its stars without debility
about the earth,’⁴⁷

This is followed by an account of the creation of the sun,⁴⁸ the moon,⁴⁹ and the sea.⁵⁰

Then one *muirlinn*, literally ‘sea-pool’, of water was created above the firmament and another *muirlinn* – the sea itself (i.e. *muir*) – about the earth:

Ri dorigni muirlinn mair
osanfirmimint imslain,
inmuirlinn aili isi inmuir,
fo[r]daniada imthalmain.
‘King who made the great sea-pool above the quite perfect firmament,
the other sea-pool it is the sea, which closes about the land.’⁵¹

Although the Christian tradition gave precedence to the direct opposition of *nem* and *talam*, memory of the native triad lived on and could surface on occasion, even in an account of the very act of creation:

⁴³ J. Carey, ‘Cosmology in *Saltair na Rann*’, *Celtica* 17 (1985) 33–52, discusses the complex description of, *inter alia*, the principal and secondary winds; the seven heavens; the five zones of the firmament; the distances between the earth and the firmament, between the firmament and the *riched*, God’s dwelling in Heaven, between the earth and the depths of Hell; the seventy-two windows of the firmament; and the signs of the zodiac.

⁴⁴ W. Stokes (ed.), *The Saltair na Rann* (Oxford 1883) i, pt. 2, ll. 1, 3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, ll. 5–6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, ll. 13, 15.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, ll. 281–3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 291.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, l. 293.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, l. 294.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, ll. 285–8.

Dia . . . is e do-roine nem 7 talam 7 muir.
 ‘God, it is He who made heaven and earth and the sea.’⁵²

CONCLUSION

I should like to conclude this paper with a return to the beginning of the Bible, to see whether or not we can trace any vocabulary development from the Middle Irish of *Saltair na Rann* and *Lebor Gabála*, through the seventeenth-century Modern Irish of Bedell’s *Old Testament*,⁵³ to the present-day Irish of the Maynooth Bible, *An Bíobla Naofa*,⁵⁴ in a summary juxtaposition:

<i>Saltair na Rann</i>	<i>Lebor Gabála</i>
nem 7 talam	nem 7 talam
firmimint	firmimint
talam + muirlinn (x2)	talam 7 muire
indfairge	

<i>Bedell</i>	<i>Maynooth</i>
neamh 7 talamh	neamh 7 talamh
spéur = ‘heaven’	firmimint = ‘heaven’
talamh 7 fairge	tír 7 farraigí
na neamhdha agus an talamh	neamh 7 talamh

The basic Christian opposition *nem* – *talam* lives on in both the seventeenth-century and the current Modern Irish versions. The technical term *firmimint* has reappeared, although God himself uses *neamh* in its physical sense. Perhaps one might have expected that *talamh* would long since have yielded its place to *tír* in the contrast with *muir/farraige*, because of the pressure of the regular juxtaposition of *tír* and *muir*, but this has only happened in the Maynooth Bible. The inhibiting factor was presumably the perceived appropriateness of *talamh* in the cosmic context. It is clear too that the number of the noun in the original text created difficulties for the translators in the case of *muirlinn*, *muire* and *farraigí*, although it may be that *farraigí* is no more strange than the *muire* of the *Lebor Gabála*, while Bedell’s text, like *Saltair na Rann* before it, remained true to the normal singular usage of the Irish language.

I should therefore wish to contend that close analysis of textual extracts containing *nem* – *talam* – *muir* helps to provide a referential framework for wider areas of the lexicon describing the physical world, and that this in turn should improve our understanding of the handling of basic concepts of life in the literature.⁵⁵ It

⁵² Atkinson, R. (ed.), *The Passions and the Homilies from Leabhar Breac*, (Dublin 1887), l. 989.

⁵³ Bedell, W. (ed.), *Leabhair na Seintiomna . . . : The Books of the Old Testament* (London 1685).

⁵⁴ Ó Fiannachta, P. transl. *An Bíobla Naofa* (Maigh Nuad 1981).

⁵⁵ Comprehensive treatment would require study of the other principal words which belong to the same lexical fields. In the case of *firmimint* these other lexemes would be Old Irish *fraig* i, f., in Middle Irish also declined as a dental stem, ‘(a) an interior wall, or a wall viewed from inside, generally of a house; (b) in poetic style, of vault of sky, generally plural. Hence absolutely the sky’, and Modern Irish *spéir* f. ‘(a) sphere, circle . . . Of a cone; (b) orbit (of a heavenly body); (c) sky, heaven, firmament.’ In

shows us what influence the native culture and Christianity had on each other in these spheres of thought which were not the exclusive preserve of either. King Conchobar believed that the sky would remain above his people, the ground beneath them and the sea around them and that there was therefore no need for the degree of excitement being generated by Súaltaim. It would seem that Conchobar has been proved right. His physical cosmos lived on, side by side with the spiritual cosmos composed of heaven and earth, just as Blathmac managed to convey with exemplary succinctness long ago:

muir mas, nem nglas, talam cé
 ‘the beautiful sea, the blue heaven, the present earth’⁵⁶

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the case of *muir*, the author has already published a study of Old Irish *ler* o, m. ‘sea, ocean’, *fáir(r)ge* iā, f., ‘1, extent, expanse (?); 11, the open sea, ocean, *ocean* (*océn*) o, m. the ocean, generally of deep sea as opposed to shallower water near land,’ in L. Mac Mathúna, ‘Continuity and Innovation in Early Irish Words for “Water Expanse”’, in W. Meid, (ed.), *Studien zum indogermanischen Wortschatz* (Innsbruck 1987) 83–99. The words against which the senses of *talam* have to be set include *tír* s, n., later m. and f. ‘1 (a) earth, ground (opposed to water); (b) portion of land; (c) territory, province’, *domun* o, m. ‘1 the world, the earth. In religious literature the world, i.e. the earthly life, etc. (opposed to eternity). In physical sense earth; 11 in limited sense, country, native district, (of a ruler) realm’ and *bith* u, m., ‘1 (a) the world; often in theological sense the (temporal or material) world as opposed to the spiritual one; (b) land territory, soil; (c) existence, life. 11 age, period’.

⁵⁶ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac son of Cú Bretian*, l. 258.