A Voice from Beyond. The Story of the Deirdre Story

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Abstract: The multiple life of the story of Deirdre and the Sons of Uisneach in the Literary Revival has its roots in the multiple life of its sources. Though mainly connected to the wide range of drama renditions in the background of the Irish Dramatic Movement, the Deirdre story is first of all a narrative concerning language. The Old Irish Version, Longes mac N-Uisleann (The Exile of the Sons of Uisneach) opens with a speech act below the level of articulation, unborn Deirdre’s cry from her mother’s womb. The prophecy of destruction that follows is thus a prescribed text. In medieval versions and folklore renditions, including the Middle Irish text, Oidhe Chloinne Uisneach (The Violent Death of the Children of Uisneach) the detail disappears or it is developed otherwise. However, in its various versions and remakes, words and language are relevant, as taboos, oaths and mutually exclusive words represent a structuring principle. The purpose of this essay is to examine the sources of the Deirdre story and its prose remakes in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, with particular reference to Standish O’Grady, Lady Gregory and James Stephens, shedding light on the way the power of language that characterises the old legend is developed in different cultural contexts.

In A Cry from Heaven (2005), playwright Vincent Woods meant to retell the story of Deirdre and the Sons of Uisneach in the twenty-first century, thus following the steps of the great dramatists of the Revival. His choice to write the play in blank verse “was partly a nod to the past” (Bastos 116), but he also saw the timelessness of a story that breaks the boundaries of time to be endlessly retold, rewritten and restaged. “For me” – he said in an interview to Beatriz Bastos – “it has everything, it has love, it has sex, it has great passion” (116). While the Deirdre plays of AE, Yeats and Synge mainly developed out of the fifteenth-century version Oidhe Chloinne Uisneach (The Violent Death of the Children of Uisneach) and its adaptations and rewritings, Vincent Woods went back to the earliest saga, eighth-century Longes mac N-Uisleann (The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu) whose intrinsic theatricality he identified in Deirdre’s cry from her mother’s womb, a dramatic potential to be developed and staged. In Longes
Deirdre enters the story as a disruptive force, as her cry breaks into “the convivial male environment of the feast” (Herbert, “The Universe of Male and Female” 56) creating disorder and disunity. Deirdre’s cry is thus a catalyst for what remains unsaid and unexpressed. In the same interview, Woods also explained the reasons for his choice of the title:

That title comes from what for me is one of the most extraordinary images . . . before she is born, Deirdre is heard to cry in her mother’s womb . . . For me, the image of the unborn child calling out to life . . . is an extraordinary image . . . And, in the play, that cry becomes a cry down to the present, and in a sense it’s a cry of grief for all life and all death. (116)

Thus, his knowledge of the sources made him also aware that the story of Deirdre in its various versions, translations, adaptations and folklore renditions is also a narrative concerning language; its plot is based on a series of speech acts that are functional to the narrative. Deirdre’s non-human, pre-verbal, nearly animal-like sound is a speech act below the level of articulation (Dooley 156), and it is expanded in the prophecy of the druid Cathbad, traditionally a master of words. He interprets the scream, declaring the unborn baby a cause for destruction, exile and death for Ulster. The voice from nowhere thus turns into the absolute word of the prophecy, a “main structuring word” (155). When Deirdre meets Naoisi, she binds him through the words of geis, a personal taboo. She kills herself because she has given her word not to be possessed by two men (Dooley). The story is “as much a story of treachery and honour as of romance” (Gantz 256) as repeatedly given words and promises are made and broken. After the death of the Sons of Usnach, Deirdre gives vent to her sorrow in the traditional lament for the dead, the caoineadh, or keen, “a verbal art rather than formless expression of grief” (Hollo 83). Ann Dooley identifies the action of Longes mac N-Uisleann as a series of “mutually exclusive words”: the accomplishment of the prophecy is precipitated by geis, disloyalty to given word causes the death of the Sons of Uisneach (Dooley 155). Word as formula has the mesmeric power of prophecy, geis and keening: Deirdre’s half-spoken scream is cast into prophetic words, desire into the formula of geis, the sorrow of loss into the allowed behaviour of keening. The other characters have somehow a similar power of language: the language of authority of Conchobar decrees that Deirdre will become his wife, Deirdre’s father is Fedlimid, the king’s bard, harpist or storyteller; she is also the granddaughter of Daill, whose name associates his blindness to poetry and prophetic vision (Stelmach 146); and in a variety of versions the nurse Lavarcham is a satirist (Gantz 260, Hull 60), and she has, therefore, a power on words. Even Deirdre’s name marks her in the verbal quality that is embedded in her nature. In fact, the druid Cathbad calls her “Deirdre” recalling the violent noise of her cry, derived from the verb derdrithir, “to resound” (Herbert, “The Universe of Male and Female” 57; Dooley 155-9).

The purpose is to examine the role language and words have as structuring principles in the sources of the Deirdre story and to consider the way in which some of its
prose remakes in the nineteenth and early twentieth century developed or neglected this feature in view of Vincent Woods’ reworking. Indeed, in prose renditions the flexibility of narrative made it possible to exploit and elaborate Deirdre’s cry from the womb and make it a catalyst for the story’s concern with language.

What is generally known as the Deirdre story is a protean text with a multiple life. The Old Irish version, eighth-century *Longes mac N-Uisleann (The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu)* belongs as a *remscela*, or prefatory tale, to the epic of *Táin Bó Cuailnge (The Cattle Raid of Cooley)*. A Middle Irish version, *Oidhe Chloinne Uisneach (The Violent Death of the Children of Uisneach)* is remembered as the “romantic” version and it is actually a different story with the same characters rather than a different version (Mac Giolla Leith). Here, the circumstances of Deirdre’s birth and the prophecy are omitted (Hull 2), while the rest of the story is expanded in the number of poems included, in the room left to combats (2) and the concern with magic and omens (McHugh 41). The story develops around the protagonists’ exile in Scotland and focuses on Fergus’s betrayal and the death of the heroes. Deirdre is a woman of vision, who casts her dreams into the formulaic words of revelation. Likewise, her verbal activity revolves around her *Lays*, often recorded as individual poems, like her “Farewell to Alba,” or her lament over Naoise’s body. Her death too is made more appealing. Rather than dashing her head against a boulder, as in *Longes mac N-Uisleann*, in *Oidhe Chloinne Uisneach* she dies beside her lover’s body, or she stabs herself. Thus, her story ends with the loss of language (Dooley 157).

These variants exist alongside folklore renditions and, though there may be considerable differences in details, plot and structure remain basically unaltered. The story can be read as a social drama (Herbert, “Celtic Heroine” 13); by choosing Naoise Deirdre turns away from the established order of King Conchobar causing disruption in hierarchy and kingship. It is also a highly personal tragedy, where Deirdre is an agent of destruction for her lover and herself. However, the Deirdre story is basically a prescribed narrative: it is generated by and it develops according to fatal prophecy, whose authority pre-exists the language of its verbalization, and plot follows a process of “filling in” (Dillon 55). In the narrative pre-arranged by the prophetic words, word becomes deed.

The story was the object of considerable attention during the eighteenth and nineteenth century and it was the object of more than thirty adaptations between 1834 and 1937 (Stelmach 144). Poetic renditions – from MacPherson (“Darthula”) to R.D. Joyce (*Deirdré*, 1876), Aubrey deVere (*The Sons of Usnach*, 1884) and Herbert Trench (*Deirdre Wedded*, 1901) – are preceded by English translations, popularizations and adaptations of its sources, for example by Geoffrey Keating (1634-40) and Theophilus O’Flanagan (1808). In turn, these derivative texts became sources for other texts of further rewritings and retellings in a diversity of artistic uses (Fackler ix). Therefore, the early-Irish story appears to be a palimpsest (Herbert, “The Universe of Male and Female” 53). Furthermore, the Deirdre story as such is an unstable text, or rather it exists as a multiplicity of fluid and unstable texts. The endless rewriting of the pretext of the story
is an echo of the prophetic words at the opening of *Longes mac N-Uisleann* – “Yours will be a story of wonder forever” (Gantz 259).

The ancient story has a binary quality. *Longes mac N-Uisleann* is an autonomous, self-contained type of narrative, epitomised in the birth-death process, as Deirdre’s “life span is encompassed within the limits of the story” (Herbert, “The Universe of Male and Female” 56); yet, by being a *remscela* to *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, it works on the level of plot as explanatory unit functional to the epic as a whole to justify the presence of Ulster exiles on the side of the Connaught army later in the war. Unlike dramatic versions, narrative prose renditions tend to take the story into account as part of the whole it belongs to. As a precursor, Samuel Ferguson made his 1834 “Death of the Children of Usnach” the first of the seven stories in *Hibernian Nights Entertainments*, where a unifying device is provided by the voice of the bard Turlogh Buy O’Hagan; isolated from Irish saga, the Deirdre story is yet part of an even whole.

This is a pattern that most of the prose writers of the Revival follow when dealing with the story of Deirdre. Standish James O’Grady, Lady Gregory and James Stephens all conceive their retellings of the Irish sagas as a whole, in which the legend of Deirdre, rewritten and refashioned according to individual needs, is not isolated. Each of them also exploited the verbal quality of the story in different ways according to specific requirements and standards.

Like Ferguson, Standish O’Grady is an adaptor of the legend as he “manipulated the extant sources” (Pereira 69) to respond to his “good story approach” (Marcus 18). His two-volume *History of Ireland* (1878-1880) and the romance *The Coming of Cuculain* (1894) want to make the story acceptable to Victorian moral standards. Cuculain, the hero who is notably absent in the story of Deirdre, is the personification of heroism and Concobar an ideal of aristocracy and of authority.

In his adaptation of the story, O’Grady erases or manipulates the verbal quality it originally had. The traumatic entrance of Deirdre into the world and into her story and her likewise traumatic exit (Herbert, “Celtic Heroine” 17) are twisted into silence, so that Deirdre is given no voice. O’Grady opens his remake with sounds announcing “a year of prophecies and portents” (O’Grady, *History* 113). The atmosphere of festivity that corresponds to the feast in Fedlimd’s house is characterized by “the sounds of revelry,” “the sound of the harp and of singing voices” (114), time is marked by “the shrill cry of the cock,” but instead of the disquieting cry of Deirdre “a shrill and agonizing scream” is heard (114). This unexplainable prodigy replaces Deirdre’s scream and it is echoed by “low thunder-like mutterings,” “sounds of battle,” “crash of meeting hosts . . . and the war-cries of the Clans of Ulla” (114). Deirdre’s voice disappears in this multiplicity of sounds and the mysterious shrill cry finds a verbal development in Cathfah’s prophecy, which is notably the only part of the story in direct speech. While both *Longes mac N-Uisleann* and *Oidhe Chloinne Uisneach* contain extended parts in direct speech, from the prophecy to the laments for the Sons of Uisneach, O’Grady’s *History* shifts to indirect speech. In a process of compression, Deirdre does not give voice to her desire and her sorrow, and significant elements in the original saga are reduced to a minimum. For
example, farewell and lament which play a relevant role in the original texts are simply referred to as alien texts: “Innumerable were the lamentations of Deirdré concerning the Children of Usna, and *they are preserved in the books of the poets*” (118, emphasis added).

Also Deirdre the seeress of *Oidhe Chloinne Uisneach* is not allowed the ritual speech of prophecy, which is mediated through indirect speech, she simply “related dreams and omens” (118). Thus, the authority of the prophecy holds control over the narrative, it is the only power capable to manipulate the text and prescribe its referent, which balances with Concobar’s authority of “sentence of perpetual banishment and exile” (117). Deirdre’s visions and forebodings “prove well-founded” as Concobar does not keep his promise to “reverse the sentence,” which will lead to the death of the Sons of Usna (McAteer, 30). Word is formula. What in the old saga was ritual verbalizing – lay and keen – is diluted in the only existing voice of authority.

In *The Coming of Cuculain*, the first volume of a trilogy meant to be a novelistic rendering of his *History* (Hagan 132), O’Grady deals with the Deirdre story again, but now her cry is not neglected: “The birth of the child Deirdré, daughter of the chief poet of Ulla, was attended with a great portent, for the child shrieked from the mother’s womb” (O’Grady, *Coming of Cuculain* 71).

However, the verbal potential of Deirdre’s voice does not continue and in a process of compression also the death of the Sons of Usna is brief and concise: “…and they were slain by Concobar mac Nessa, according as he had promised by the words of his mouth” (96).

Likewise, Deirdre fades away from her story, no mention is made of her destiny or her death. In the conclusion of the episode, O’Grady reminds his readers that this is just a fragment within the wider spectrum of the epic: “So these chapters which relate to the abduction of Deirdré and the rebellion and expulsion of Fergus, are a vital portion of the whole story of Cuculain” (98).

A similar perspective also characterises Lady Gregory’s account of the story of Deirdre, which she considers within the frame of the epic and represents a considerable part in her 1902 *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*.

“The Fate of the Sons of Usnach” is based on different texts including a Scottish folk version, which Lady Gregory exploited to compile a “readable version” (Golightly 117), thus editing the extant sources she used. The text mostly follows the Middle Irish version, *Oidhe Chloinne Uisneach*, and opens with a one-sentence paragraph, whose compactness makes the story a single entity, drawing attention to story-telling itself: “Now it was one Fedlimid, son of Doll, was harper to King Conchbar, and he had but one child and this is the story of her birth” (Gregory 104).

The voice of oral storytelling (“Now it was one Fedlimid . . . .”) emphasizes the story as story and anticipates acts of storytelling later on in the plot. Gelban, Conchobar’s spy, relates what he has seen from the window and “told him (Conchobar) the story from beginning to end” (128). Likewise, after the sons of Uisneach have been slain, a distracted Deirdre meets Cuchulain “and she told him the story from first to last” (135). Deirdre thus turns deed into word, she uses the words of a text already told and predetermined,
where only the final line is missing. This is anticipated by the words in the second part of Cathbad’s prophecy. In *Loinges mac N-Uislenn*, Cathvah’s prophetic formula ends with the words “yours will be a famous tale, o Derdriu” (Gantz 259), thus drawing attention to the “narrative as artifact” (Dooley 158). Lady Gregory twists these words into: “you will be a tale of wonder for ever, Deirdre” (Gregory 106, emphasis added). Deprived of the skill of self-expression of her cry, Deirdre is now identified with her famous tale, she is narrative as artifact. She turns into a text and as such is multivalent and multifaced. Which text does she turn into? Does she become the text as preordained or preordaining? Does she become the text of her story as act or as word? Is SHE herself absolute word?

Repetition is a relevant strategy in the episode and it is also at the heart of the first meeting of the lovers, where Lady Gregory makes the cry from the womb in *Loinges mac N-Uislenn* overlap with the bond of geis. In fact, following the plot of *Oidhe Chloinne Uisneach*, Deirdre calls after the Sons of Usnach three times: “. . . she cried out after them, “Naoise, son of Usnach, are you going to leave me?” (112).

The triple repetition of this formula belongs to a structural pattern of the text based on the number three (Fackler 85), but it also replaces the words of shame with which Deirdre binds Naoise in *Loinges mac N-Uislenn*, thus reproducing the arbitrary power of language: “Two years of shame and mockery these unless you take me with you!” (Gantz 261).

However, in her revision or adaptation of the story, Lady Gregory makes Deirdre a master of words when learning from Levarcham the names of plants and animals as a child. She also leaves considerable room to Deirdre’s lament, which in its traditional mode of expression is a sort of story within the story. Deirdre’s formal recitation recalls the formal recitation of the Druid’s prophecy in the sources Lady Gregory used; both texts-within-a-text are self-contained units and draw attention to their performance. The keening woman dishevels her hair (“Deirdre . . . tore her fair hair”, Gregory 134) before praising the accomplishments of the deceased, at the same time considering the composition itself. “I will make keening at their burial” (135), “I will be along with them in their grave, making lamentations and ochones” (136), thus recalling the conscious artifact of Cafbad’s prophecy, “You will be a tale.”

If Lady Gregory’s *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* was a source for most of the writers of the Revival, James Stephens went “even further” in his novel *Deirdre* introducing “extraneous material” (Martin, “Deirdre” 28) from other sagas. This can be explained with his plan to rewrite the whole cycle of the Irish sagas and he turns to the epic of *Táin Bó Cuailnge* to create autonomous and interdependent narratives. Of the five volumes originally planned only three are published, *Irish Fairy Tales*, *In the Land of Youth* and *Deirdre*. However, by fragmenting the cycle into manageable parts, Stephens recognizes the autonomy of each and their being functional to the whole of his aim, “the great Tain.” The closing lines of the novel are indicative of his original plan: “So far the fate of the Sons of Uisneac and the opening of the great Tain” (Stephens, *Deirdre* 286), a formula that is also used in the other Tain novel, *In the Land of Youth* (Stephens, *Land
of Youth 304). He was well acquainted with the Irish sagas and “he knew the work of Kuno Meyer, Osborn Bergin, Douglas Hyde, and Standish Hayes O’Grady” (McFate 60). However, with its publication in 1923, Deirdre outlives the time of Irish saga as a source of personal response to ideal heroism, belonging in spirit to the first decade of the century (Martin, “Deirdre” 25). Stephens was also the first and only writer to adapt the Deirdre story to the novel form, that is to treat epic as fiction (Martin, James Stephens 140). Namely, Augustine Martin points out the narrative details following the birth of Deirdre and the Druid’s prophecy:

They carried the little morsel to him and she was laid across his knees.
“For you are to destroy my kingdom and bring evil to mighty Ireland?” The babe reached with a tiny claw and gripped one finger of the king. “See,” he laughed, “she places herself under my protection”, and he moved his finger to and fro, but the child held fast to it. (Stephens, Deirdre 7)

Interestingly enough, Vincent Woods exploits the same detail and episode in Act One, Scene Two of A Cry from Heaven, where Cathach’s prophecy is counterbalanced by Conor’s reaction:

This baby will destroy me? This thing?  
Look, she grips my finger and she smiles,  
Not an hour old.  
(Woods 16)

In a process of compression and expansion (McFate 79), Stephens reworks the verbal quality of the old legend because he structures his novel into two parts, formulated as an answer to the two major questions of the legend. Part 1, Patricia McFate points out, is the answer to the question in Longes mac N-Uisleann – “What caused the exile of the Sons of Usnac?” Part 2, the response to the Oidhe Chloinne Uisneach question – “What caused the death of the Sons of Usnac?” (McFate 74-5). The structure superimposed on the novel firmly establishes the novel itself as a speech act, a question-answer pattern, whose dynamic is a mirror to the word from nowhere, the absolute arbitrariness of the language that is both object and subject of narration.

However, Stephens also reworks the ominous cry from the womb of unborn Deirdre in a perspective more suitable to fiction. “As he (Cathbad) spoke a thin wail came from somewhere in the building, and the men present turned an ear to that little sound…” (Stephens, Deirdre 6, emphasis added).

The half natural cry is replaced by the more natural “thin wail” (6) of newborn Deirdre. Both are functional to the narrative, both belong to the same code, both are the first attempt of Deirdre at self expression, both are unaccomplished “words” breaking the established order and leading to the pattern of word per se of the prophecy. Unlike the cry in Loinges mac N-Uisleann, Stephens’s is a “little sound” (6), from which the
absolute text of prophecy develops. The latter, though, is not the rhetorical formula of the original saga, but rather, a brief and even casual verbalizing, which matches with the natural dimension of birth. Thus the long ritual prophecy is reduced to a minimum: “You hear – says Cathfa – A child has just been born in this house. She will bring evil to Ireland, and she will work destruction in Ulster, as a ferret works destruction in a rabbit’s burrow” (7).

Stephens’s “thin wail” and “little sound” also recall the second part of Cathfa’s prophecy in Longes mac N-Uisleann. When interpreting the cry, Cathfa puts his hand on the mother’s womb and from the liminal world of pregnancy Deirdre reacts with a kind of echo of her cry, a “resound” (Hull 61) or “murmur” (Gantz 259), again inarticulate words that establish identity in terms of sound. Deirdre’s “thin wail” is thus absolute text on the limits of articulation, voice-word from nowhere, like the prophecy in which it is expanded. It is also escape from the text that itself is on the making, because of its articulation it tries to outdo the boundaries established by the authoritative text of the prophecy. The story of absolute verbal power is also the story of word caught in its being, half way toward utterance.

The novel closes on a verbal element that balances the opening. For his novel Stephens prefers the romantic version Oidhe Chloinne Uisneach, where Deirdre dies beside Naisi’s corpse: “Deirdre knelt by the bodies, and she sang her keen, beginning: ‘I send a blessing eastward to Scotland.’ When she had finished the poem she bowed over her husband’s body: she sipped his blood, and she died there upon his body” (Stephens, Deirdre 286).

James Stephens chooses to insert just one line of the keen omitting what in the original texts is a relevant part. His process of compression of formula is the same as he uses in the “thin wail” and the syncretism of Cathfa’s prophecy. The twin arts of prophecy and keening are the power of language in terms of beginning and end, life and death. Intermediate verbal paths are scattered throughout the novel, interlinking the hesitant wail of babe Deirdre to Cathfa’s prophecy, to the song of the sons of Usnac, to the various layers of verbal power of Lewarcham, “a conversation woman” in Stephens (Martin, “Deirdre” 26), and as such a master of words. She too is responsible for the story as artifact: the novel is structured around tales about Conchobar told to Deirdre, of her childhood told to the king, whispers and rumors about her beauty, fate and elopement.

The power of language and words is a catalyst in the sources of the Deirdre story as well as in its narrative remakes that provide a background for the dramatists of the Revival. In different ways, the “cry from Heaven” that Vincent Woods considers the focus of his twenty-first-century play reworks a pattern of speech acts that make language both subject and object of narration in the discourse of the various tales. In a “nod to the past,” Woods stages the cry, according to the stage directions “a cry is heard, a scream, a note unearthly, human, terrible” (Woods 9), yet he also multiplies it into various cries, but in the long prophecy of Cathach “her name – Deirdre” will be “remembered when we are long forgot” (13). It is Deirdre herself who will make her story an artifact. In
a parallel sequence to Deirdre’s keen, in Woods’ play she asks Labharcham to tell her baby their story:

Let him know our story  
Let him know of Naoise and Deirdre  
The story of the Sons of Usna (107)  
In the beginning was the word. And in the end too.

Works Cited


______. *The Coming of Cuculain*. London: Methuen, 1894


