

John Benjamins Publishing Company



This is a contribution from *Grammatica, Gramadach and Gramadeg. Vernacular grammar and grammarians in medieval Ireland and Wales.*

Edited by Deborah Hayden and Paul Russell.

© 2016. John Benjamins Publishing Company

This electronic file may not be altered in any way.

The author(s) of this article is/are permitted to use this PDF file to generate printed copies to be used by way of offprints, for their personal use only.

Permission is granted by the publishers to post this file on a closed server which is accessible to members (students and staff) only of the author's/s' institute, it is not permitted to post this PDF on the open internet.

For any other use of this material prior written permission should be obtained from the publishers or through the Copyright Clearance Center (for USA: www.copyright.com).

Please contact rights@benjamins.nl or consult our website: www.benjamins.com

Tables of Contents, abstracts and guidelines are available at www.benjamins.com

Allegory, the *áes dána* and the liberal arts in Medieval Irish literature

Elizabeth Boyle

The present study briefly considers the vernacular terminology used to describe figurative language in medieval Irish literature, and then offers an analysis of three explicitly allegorical episodes from medieval Irish narrative texts (two in the vernacular and one in Latin) as preliminary groundwork in assessing whether literature which is not explicitly allegorical, but which shares the same images and motifs as explicitly allegorical literature, might also be read as allegory. The three case studies in question provide allegorical depictions of men of learning or of learning itself. This paper suggests that the nature of medieval Irish education, with its focus on *grammatica*, including *enarratio*, and, at a more advanced level, exegesis, would have facilitated the exposition of literature on a figurative level, and that this should have significant implications for the way that we read medieval Irish narrative poetry and prose.

Keywords: allegory, education, *enarratio*, exegesis, figurative language

One of the functions of *grammatica* was to enable the exposition of literature (*enarratio*), and this included the analysis and interpretation of figurative language.¹ The present study will discuss some uses of figurative language in medieval Irish literature, focusing in detail on three texts which use allegory as a device to comment on men of learning and the learned arts themselves. The discussion will draw on further instances of the use of metaphorical language in general, and allegory in particular, in order to set forth some preliminary conclusions regarding the status of figurative language within medieval Irish narrative literature. Metaphor and allegory were both important features of medieval European literature, and medieval scholars were careful to distinguish between the two. In his

1. I would like to thank Liam Breatnach (DIAS), John Carey (UCC), Daniel Watson (Maynooth), and the editors of this volume, for their useful and incisive comments on various drafts of this paper. I am also grateful to Professor Breatnach and to Professor Greg Toner (QUB) for providing me with copies of articles in advance of publication.

De schematibus et tropis, Bede (d. 735) defined metaphor as *rerum verborumque translatio* “the transfer of a word from one object to another” (Kendall 1991: 196, 203), but his understanding of allegory was more complex and exemplifies the way that the conception of allegory derived from techniques of biblical exegesis (Kendall 1991: 196, 203):

Item allegoria verbis sive operibus aliquando historicam rem, aliquando typicam, aliquando tropologicam, id est, moralem rationem, aliquando anagogen, hoc est, sensum ad superiora ducentem figurate denuntiat.

[Moreover, whether allegory is verbal or historical, sometimes it prefigures an event literally, sometimes it prefigures [it] typologically ..., sometimes it figuratively expresses a tropological, or moral, principle, and sometimes it figuratively expresses an anagogical sense, that is, a sense leading the mind to higher things.]

The mid-ninth-century Irish scholar, Sedulius Scottus, in his commentary on Donatus, outlined the difference between metaphor and allegory as follows (Löfstedt 1977b: 374 (text); Poppe 1999b: 50 (translation)):

...metaphora non nisi in una qualibet dictione translata reperitur, allegoria etiam in plenis orationibus esse pernoscitur.

[...metaphor is only found in one transferred expression, but allegory is found to exist in complete texts.]

In essence, whereas a metaphor is a single instance of transferred meaning, an allegory sustains its meaning *in extenso*. Before proceeding to a discussion of the three texts with which this study is concerned, some preliminary remarks on literary culture and education in early medieval Ireland will be useful.

The surviving evidence from early medieval Ireland indicates that its educational system was predominantly ecclesiastical.² Not all individuals who experienced this ecclesiastical education would have entered monastic life, so to characterise the educational system as ‘monastic’, as is often done, is misleading. Some educated men would have become priests, but not monks; others may have gone on to hold lay positions on the Church’s estates or at the royal court. But the route through which they received their education was inextricably linked with the Church, and this seems to have been the only route by which literacy was acquired. For this reason, modern scholars generally state that the literary culture of Ireland before the twelfth century was the product of an ecclesiastical milieu: even if the individuals who wrote particular texts were not themselves monks or clerics, they would have a shared educational experience, and shared intellectual

2. For an excellent recent overview of education in early medieval Europe, containing much which can be applied to Ireland, see Contreni 2014.

horizons, with those who were. The implication of this is a small intellectual elite, a learned caste of men (and they were predominantly men) who drew from the same pool of fundamental knowledge, even if they specialised in a particular discipline, such as the law, or exegesis, or poetry, or history (see Ó Corráin 1987 for a seminal discussion).

Education began with reading the Psalms (Ó Néill 2003), and moved outward from there, encompassing grammar and exegesis. Indeed, as Ó Néill (1979: 163) has noted, the distinction between grammar and exegesis is a modern one, and the process of reading and understanding texts in the Middle Ages required knowledge of both grammatical and exegetical techniques. The curriculum in Ireland may also have covered history and geography, as well as subjects such as law and poetry, although there is some evidence that specialisation in these subjects at an advanced level was localised, with certain ecclesiastical centres having particular areas of expertise. Emphasising this shared intellectual culture is important for the present discussion because it is significant that the individuals who composed and transmitted narrative prose and poetry, at least up until the late twelfth century if not beyond, shared an educational background with ecclesiastical scholars, including biblical exegetes and grammarians. Therefore the composition, reading and comprehension of narrative texts were shaped by the ecclesiastical education of their authors (and perhaps some portion of their audiences).

From our earliest evidence, medieval Irish literature shows an advanced engagement not only with the theory of language but also with the application of that theory in creative writing in the vernacular. Poems which have been characterised as lyric verse, such as the Old Irish poem *Messe ocus Pangur Bán* (sometimes known in English as “The Scholar and his Cat”; ed. and trans. Murphy 1998: 2–3), make sophisticated use of figurative language. *Messe ocus Pangur Bán* describes a scholar and his cat pursuing their respective arts of searching for knowledge and hunting for mice. Gregory Toner has argued that the poet “deftly weaves his own story with that of the cat so that the cat provides a physical metaphor for his own cerebral activity” (Toner 2009: 7). The activity of the cat is not necessarily a “metaphor” (*sensu stricto*) for the activity of the scholar – rather, the poet constructs an extended analogy – but Toner is surely right to state that “Pangur provides a concrete image to illustrate the intangible workings of the scholar’s mind as he experiences the thrill of discovery and delight in the successful solution of an academic question.” (Toner 2009: 7; for examples of metaphors for learning and thought in medieval Irish poetry, see below). But whereas metaphor, simile and analogy are undoubted and prominent features of medieval Irish literature, both in prose and poetry, the status of allegory is less certain, and there has been debate over the extent to which entire compositions can be read on an allegorical level (see, for example, the comments of Hollo 2011). One productive way of assessing

whether medieval Irish narratives will bear an allegorical reading is to begin by analysing those texts which are explicitly allegorical, in the sense that they include an interpretation of the allegory either embedded within the text or as accompanying glosses, before deciding whether such interpretation can usefully be applied to other texts which, though not explicitly allegorical, may be read as such.

An important example in this regard is Erich Poppe's study of *Airec Menman Uraird maic Coise*, in which he argued that the tale "legitimizes an allegorical – or at least a non-literal or non-historical – understanding of the events narrated" (Poppe 1999b: 47). As Poppe noted, "that the past may provide a model for the present is an interpretive approach not unknown to medieval Irish literati, at least as an exegetical method applied to biblical texts" (Poppe 1999b: 49; see also Sims-Williams & Poppe 2005: 306–307). An interpretive approach based on the grammatical and exegetical understanding of figurative language may have broader implications for the study of medieval Irish narrative literature.

The vernacular terminology of figurative language is difficult to pin down, but important terms include *forscáithe* (perhaps from *forscáthaigthe*) which seems to have a primary meaning of "shadowy, obscure" and an extended meaning "allegorical, metaphorical"; *fortched*, "covering over" which has the extended sense of "an obscuration in prosody"; and *dúaihnigud*, which has the primary meaning "obscuring, concealing" and an extended meaning "allegorical, metaphorical". From the terminology of biblical exegesis, which is based on loanwords from Latin, *síans* generally denotes "non-literal/historical meaning", that is, the allegorical or mystical/anagogical meaning of a text (see Lambert in this volume, pp. 90; for recent discussion of Welsh *swys*, see Owen 2013: 105–108), with *anagoig* and *moráil* being used to denote specifically the mystical/anagogical and moral meanings of a text respectively. Another Latin loanword, *metaforde* is used in the Old Irish glosses to denote "metaphorical", but *cosmailius*, which elsewhere would usually mean "simile" or "analogy", is also used in the context of the Old Irish glosses to mean "metaphor". One further term of possible relevance (although its precise linguistic meaning is less clear) is *forrúamanda*, which literally means "dark red", but which seems in rare cases to possess the figurative sense of "obscure, artificial" in relation to language, further illustrating the association between ideas of "darkness", "covering", "concealment" and figurative language as something which can be elucidated, uncovered or made bright through exposition (for all of these terms and examples of their use, see the relevant entries in *DIL*).

Loch Garman

Dindshenchas is the name given to the corpus of Irish prose and poetic literature which provides narrative accounts of how particular places acquired their names. Mark Scowcroft (1995: 124) has commented on the relationship between *dindshenchas*, the development of abstract narrative in Ireland, and the Isidorean approach to etymology, concluding that:

Whether the Irish genre deserves recognition as a native practice that coalesced with medieval Latin learning or was simply a distinctive outgrowth of it, *dindshenchas* is abstract as the narrative expression of onomastic lore. The result may or may not resemble reality and may or may not follow established tradition or conventional patterns of story, but is finally intelligible only by way of etymology, or the multiple etymologies that opened up so rich a field for poetic invention.

The naming and renaming of places is an inherently political act, and much remains to be done in terms of the political and historical contexts of individual items of *dindshenchas*. But each *dindshenchas* collection is also a sophisticated literary composition, and there is similarly much yet to be done in evaluating the stylistic and rhetorical strategies of the authors of *dindshenchas*, in both its prose and poetic forms. I will concentrate here on the *dindshenchas* for Loch Garman (Wexford Harbour) which contains within it an extensive allegorical dream-vision, and an interpretation thereof. In a study of the cosmology of *dindshenchas*, Gregory Toner (2014: 277) has characterised the narratives pertaining to Loch Garman thus:

A well punishes a thief in the Dindshenchas of Loch Garman (Stokes 1894: §40). It supposedly takes its name from Garman Garb, a thief, who was drowned there in the well of Port Cáelranna in the time of Cathaír Már. The feast of Tara was held by Cathaír at Samain, the story goes, and there was no thieving or murder or wrongdoing, but Garman stole the crown of Cathaír's wife. He was pursued to the well of Port Cáelranna and when they were drowning him the lake burst forth. According to the metrical version, the lake was formed as Garman was seized and he was drowned in the lake (rather than in the well). This makes it clear that the well burst forth in reaction to Garman's crime. Thus, supernatural significance – and retribution – are attached to Garman's thieving. His act of theft was not a trivial crime, therefore, but a transgression against the cosmological order which maintains the peace at the feast of Tara.

Toner primarily reads the Loch Garman *dindshenchas* on a literal/historical level and, where he ascribes abstract meaning to it, that meaning is interpreted as cosmological. However, other readings are certainly possible. The story of Garman Garb is embedded within a wider narrative, which consists of a number of elements, not least an allegorical dream-vision. That the dream-vision should be (and, indeed, later in the narrative is) interpreted as allegory is certain; what is more debatable is whether the entire narrative can sustain an allegorical reading, but there is a small item of evidence to suggest that it can. The poet to whom the metrical version of the *dindshenchas* is attributed, Eochaid Éolach ua Céirín (*fl. c.* 1050), states (Gwynn 1903–1935: III, 170–171):

Senchas anma in locha láin,
dia tucam a thuarascbáil,
ria aisnéis, cid mór in mod,
is é a maith, a mínigod.

[The story of the name of the brimming lough,
if we give an account of it,
in the narration – though great the undertaking –
the profit lies in the exposition.]

It is not in the account itself that the value of the poem can be found, but in the interpretation of that account (see *DIL* s.v. *mínigid*, where the range of meanings includes the acts of interpreting, expounding, explaining and setting forth). From this we can infer that the account is not (or at least not only) to be understood literally, but that it possesses a hidden meaning. That is certainly the case for the allegorical dream-vision which is embedded within the poem, and is also subsequently interpreted, but we might suggest that it is not only the vision itself which is to be understood as allegory, but arguably the poem in its entirety. Given that the stanza cited above is separated from the beginning of the dream-vision by twelve intervening stanzas which narrate the story of Gorman's theft and drowning, it certainly seems possible that the whole composition requires a non-literal "exposition", not just the explicitly allegorical section. Thus, perhaps the theft and the crown and the well all symbolise other things, and therefore we should be cautious either in seeing a supernatural or cosmological significance in the episode or in reading it only on a literal/historical level.

The section of the poem which is undoubtedly allegorical is the vision experienced by the king, Cathaír. It begins thus (Gwynn 1903–1935: III, 174–175, slightly adapted):

Fecht robái Catháir ciall glan
 i tossuch búan a bethad,
 co tarfas dó fíiss, rofess,
 tuc slúag Érenn i n-ard-chess.

Ingen briugad cétaig cáim
 co ndeilb luchair co lán-áib
 do thócbáil chind, nirbo chol,
 don churaid ina chotlod.

Cach dath cóem atchí duine,
 do gurm do bricc do buide
 is do chorcair, ba súairc sin,
 ina hétgud 'mon n-ingin.

[Once on a time, Cathair was – pure sense –
 in the prosperous prime of his life,
 when there appeared to him a vision that became known,
 which threw the host of Erin into deep distress.

The daughter of a goodly landowner, lord of hundreds,
 radiant of form, perfect in beauty,
 appeared (it was no sin)
 to the hero in his sleep.

Every fair hue man can see,
 blue, dappled, yellow,
 and purple – the sight was pleasant –
 were in the raiment the lady wore.]³

The lady became pregnant and she gestated a child for eight hundred years. When the child was born he was a great hero. There was a hill above the heads of the woman and her son, upon which was a golden tree. Whenever the wind blew, fruit would fall from the tree upon the earth. Even if this account were not followed by an exposition of Cathair's dream, we might still be justified in regarding it as in all likelihood allegorical, given the intimate connection between dream-visions and allegory in medieval literature. As Poppe (1999b: 50, n. 70) has noted, "dreams can be said to function like allegories when they foretell events indirectly in terms

3. Liam Breatnach points out to me that *ciall glan*, in the first line cited, cannot be taken as a compound (*ciall-glan*, 'clear-souled'), as Gwynn suggested in his edition and translation, as the rhyme requires *glan* as an uncompounded monosyllable. Therefore I read *ciall glan* as a cheville meaning either 'pure sense' or, perhaps significantly, 'clear meaning', which may relate to our terminology of darkness/obscuration in relation to figurative language, i.e. in this case the meaning is 'clear' because the interpretation of the dream-vision is provided in the text.

which require interpretation”. In the case of the Loch Garman *dindshenchas*, we have an explicit interpretation which demonstrates the allegorical nature of the narrative. Thus, when Catháir awoke and reported his dream, a wizard interpreted it for him (Gwynn 1903–35: III, 178–181):

Iarsin berid in drúí dóib
breith na físsi co fir-chóir;
feib ruc riam in mbreith co mblaid
dia éis cid cían comalltar.

Is í ind ingen adbal ard
atchondarc-su a rí rogarg,
ind aband fail it tír the,
dianid ainm sír-búan Sláne.

Is iat na datha atbere
i n-étgud na hingine,
áes cach dána núí fo nim
cen inandus ’na n-aistib.

[Thereafter the druid gives them
the interpretation of the vision faithfully:
according as he gave of yore the famous interpretation
it is fulfilled in later times, though long after.

“This is the young woman, mighty and tall,
thou sawest, O fiercest king! –
the river that is in thy land yonder
whose abiding name is Slane.

These are the colours thou speakest of
in the young woman’s raiment –
the men of every new art under heaven,
without sameness in their metres.”]

In the prose version of the *dindshenchas* for Loch Garman in the Rennes manuscript, it is stated that *i n-aimsir Catháir immorro ainmniugud an locha amail asbert hi físe Catháir* “In Catháir’s time was the naming of the lake, as he said in Catháir’s vision” (Stokes 1894: 429–430). Again in this version Catháir sees a beautiful woman with *cath dath ina timtaig* “every colour in her raiment” (Stokes 1894: 429–430), and when the vision is interpreted by Catháir’s wizard, the colours of the woman’s clothes are said to denote *óes cacha dana cen inandus fodla no aiste* “men of every art, without sameness of class or metre” (Stokes 1894: 429; my translation).

It is not entirely clear who or what is meant by the *áes dána* in both the prose and poetic versions. The earliest attestations of this term refer to various types of craftsmen, but by the Middle Irish period the term can be used to mean specifically “poets” (see *DIL s.v. dán*). So for example, in the Old Irish *Bretha Nemed Toísech*, we read (Breatnach 1989: 8–9 with relevant terms underlined):

Cis lir fodlai for sóirneimthib? Ní hansae: a cethair – ecnae, eclais, flaith, fili; it é doírnemid dánae olchenae.

[How many divisions are there of noble dignitaries? It is not difficult: four: ecclesiastical scholar, churchman, lord, poet; the remaining craftsmen are base dignitaries.]

and similarly in the *Uraicecht Becc* (*CIH* 1612.4; my translation):

Dærnemed tra saír 7 gobaind 7 umaide 7 cerda 7 legi 7 breitemain 7 druid 7 æcaca dana olcena

[Base dignitaries are wrights and blacksmiths and coppersmiths and whitesmiths and physicians and judges and wizards and the people of every craft besides.]

But when we turn to the Book of Leinster version of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, the term specifically denotes poets (O’Rahilly 1967: 27, ll. 998–1003):

Dá ndig dano áes dána fo dímaig a Ultaib 7 assin chóiciud, corop é conairr séta 7 maíne dar cend aenig in chóicid dóib. Dá tí dano áes dána ’sin crích, corop é in fer sin bas chommairge dóib co rrosset colbo Conchobuir, corop siat a dúana-sain 7 a dréchtá gabtair ar tús i nEmain ar ríchtain ...

[And if poets leave Ulstermen and the province unsatisfied, that he may be the one to give them treasures and valuables for the honour of the province. If poets come into the land, that he may be the man who will be their surety until they reach Conchobor’s couch and that their poems and songs may be the first to be recited in Emain on their arrival.]

and in the Middle Irish glossing to the Old Irish *Immacallam in dá Thuarad* in the Book of Leinster, we find (*LL* 24650–24651; cf. Stokes 1905: 34–35):

Sluaig rathaig .i. gabait rath o rí 7 doberat diarailib .i. d’áes dána [...]

[Bountiful hosts i.e. they receive bounty from a king and give it to others, i.e. to poets...]

Similarly *fer dána* (originally “man of art”) comes to mean specifically “poet”, as exemplified by the *Bóroma*, again in the Book of Leinster, where both *file* “poet”, “scholar” and *fer dána* are used of the same character (*LL* 38956; Stokes 1892: 103):

At-bertatar a chliar risin fer ndána. Is bec linne ar sīat beith duit-siu i clér chlèrig. Mass ed bar in file fácbam na clércho. 7 tiagam rempo co teg rí Hèrend. Ro gabsat rempo iarum co teg Finnachta. Mar rāncatar ro gab in fer dána dúain Mo Lling. 7 at-bert iss é do-ringne

[His following said to the man of poetry: “It seems to us paltry,” say they, “for thee to be in a cleric’s retinue.”

“If so,” says the poet, “let us quit the clerics and go on to the house of the king of Erin.”

So they fared forward to Finnachta’s house. When they arrived the man of poetry repeated Molling’s eulogy and said that he, Tollchenn, had composed it.]

So it is possible that the multi-coloured raiment of the woman represents craftsmen generally or that it represents poets specifically;⁴ the reference to their *aiste* (OIr *aisti*) in both the poetic and prose versions, does not necessarily clarify the matter, since we might translate that term as “characteristics” or “varieties”. However, on balance, I think the best translation of *aiste* in this context is “metres” (following Gwynn in the *corrigenda* to his edition of the poetic version) and this therefore makes it highly probable that the *áes dána* here are specifically poets. The *áes dána* are also portrayed allegorically in our second text, but the precise imagery employed is, as we shall see, rather different.

Cormac’s adventure in the Land of Promise

There are three main recensions of a text which portrays Cormac mac Airt’s journey in the “Land of Promise”. The third recension is Early Modern and is outside the scope of the present study. The first recension, which was edited by Whitley Stokes (1891), forms part of a longer text, entitled *Scél na Fír Flatha, Echtra Cormaic i Tir Tairngiri, ocus Ceart Claidib Cormaic* “The Tale of the Ordeals, Cormac’s Adventure in the Land of Promise, and the Decision as to Cormac’s Sword”. This recension is preserved in the Book of Ballymote and the Yellow Book of Lecan, but is linguistically late Middle Irish, and can probably be dated to

4. I am grateful to Deborah Hayden for the observation that there is a verse on the colours of clothing appropriate to different individuals preserved in the Book of Ballymote (f. 161vb2–14) in the so-called “pedagogical section”, immediately following lists of the seven grades of the Church and of Latin scholars, and immediately preceding a list of the seven grades of poets. The same verse is also in the Book of Uí Mhaine (f. 136rb63–136va9), where it is sandwiched between two metrical tracts (MV III and MV I). Although this verse only refers to wizards, women, kings, warriors and clerics, rather than poets, the juxtaposition of a verse concerning clothing with items concerning poets and poetry is at least suggestive of a perceived connection between the two.

c. 1200. The text as a whole investigates concepts of truth and falsehood – and how truth might be established or revealed – through a variety of strategies, including drawing on a range of legal and (pseudo-)historical texts (for brief comments situating it within the context of other legal texts, see Ó Corráin 1987:293). The episode of Cormac’s adventure in the “Land of Promise” is embedded within the larger text, and is presented as an allegorical dream-vision: the allegorical tableaux which Cormac witnesses during his adventure are subsequently interpreted (while the vision itself is still in progress) by Manannán Mac Lir. One episode is particularly relevant to the present study (Stokes 1891:§32):

Focerd Cormac a magh mor a aenur. Dun mor ar lar in maighi. Sonnach credhu-mae uime. Teag findairgid isin dun 7 se lethtuighthi do eitib en find. Marcsluag side oc tathaiged in tigi 7 utlaigi do eitib en find ina n-octaibh do thuighi in tighi. Ticeadh athach gaíthi chuici beous, 7 gach ní dotuighthi de doberedh in ghaeth as beous.

[Cormac found himself on a great plain alone. There was a large fortress in the midst of the plain with a wall of bronze around it. In the fortress was a house of white silver, and it was half-thatched with the wings of white birds. A fairy host of horsemen (was) haunting the house, with lapfuls of the wings of white birds in their bosoms to thatch the house. A gust of wind would still come to it, and still the wind would carry away all of it that had been thatched.]

When Manannán comes to interpret what Cormac has seen, he explains the scene thus (Stokes 1891:§53):

“Is e in marcsluag atconnarcais ic tuighi in tighi, aes dana Erenn annsin ag tinol cruith 7 cethri, 7 teit ar neimthní ass [...]”

[“The host of horsemen which thou beheldest thatching the house are the men of art in Ireland, collecting the cattle and wealth, which passes away into nothing ...”]

In the second recension of the text, called *Echtra Cormaic Maic Airt* “The Adventure of Cormac mac Airt”, which is preserved in the Book of Fermoy and is also late Middle Irish (but possibly earlier in date than the first recension: Hull 1949), the same scene is presented, and interpreted, in subtly different terms. There are some problems with the legibility of the manuscript here, but Hull’s edition and translation convey the key elements of the passage (Hull 1949:876,879):

Do-rala iar sin Cormac a aenur ar lar mhuígi moir. Dun m[or] ar lar an mhuighi 7 sondach airgít uime 7 teach leth [n-oir ar] lar an duín ar tuighi a leithi dó eitib en 7 marc-šluag [sidhamhail] ac tinol eitedh n-en n-ill-dhathach cum an tigi sin 7 ro ... fair gan scólb na heitedha sin 7 no-thuitidis f... 7 is e sin ord an marc-šluag sin o thosach an bethad c[oa dederh ...]

[After that, Cormac happened to be alone in the middle of a large plain. A big fort was in the center of the plain with a palisade of silver about it, and in the middle of the fort (there was) a house half of gold having its side thatched with birds' feathers, and a fairy troop of horsemen (was) gathering the feathers of multicolored birds for that house. Those feathers [were fastened?] on it without a scollop, and they used to fall [down?]. And from the beginning of life unto its end, such was the procedure of that troop.]

This time the vision is interpreted as follows (Hull 1949: 876, 882):

“Is e [bith as]a tangais an bith fregnairc. Is e marc-sluag do-co[nnarrais] ac tuíghi an tíghi aes dana in domhain ...ala 7 cacha a tabhraid leo día tigh arin cuairt ... gein bír arín cuairt eile leghaidh 7 lebhaidh [ar nem-ni] ás gan sonus gan saidhbres.”

[“The present world is the world out of which you came. The people of art of the world are the host of horsemen that you saw thatching the house [...], and whatsoever they bring with them to their house upon the [first?] search dissolves and decomposes (?) away to nothing without good fortune and without prosperity while they are engaged upon another search.”]

The shared elements of this scene in both recensions of “Cormac’s Adventure” are that the otherworldly troop of horsemen is interpreted as the very human *áes dána* “people of art”, “poets”; and that their Sisyphean task of thatching a roof with feathers which are destined always to blow away/fall down is interpreted as their futile chasing after worldly, and therefore transient, wealth (for previous discussion of this passage, see Carey 1987: 11). This is a different allegorical vocabulary for the *áes dána* than that which we witnessed in the Loch Garman *dindshenchas*, although the “multicolored birds” of the second recension dimly echo the multicoloured raiment of the beautiful woman in “Loch Garman”. An association between poets and the wearing of multicoloured and feathered garments is evidenced in the Old Irish *Immacallam in dá Thuarad* “The Colloquy of the Two Sages” (Stokes 1905: 12–13) and “Cormac’s Glossary” (Stokes 1862: 43, s.v. *tugen*). The redeployment of the images of colourful raiment and feathers in different allegorical contexts to denote poets and their activities seems therefore to be a deliberately resonant choice of symbolism.

In the first recension of “Cormac’s Adventure” there is an additional allegorical tableau, which is also interpreted in terms of the learned arts (Stokes 1891: §35):

Atchi didiu topur taitneamach isin lis, 7 coíc srotha ass, 7 na sloigh imaseach ic ol usci na sroth. Nai cuill buana oscind in tobuir. Focerdaidh andsiu na cuill corcarrda a cnaí isin topur conus-tennat na coíc eicne filead isin topur, co curtar a mbolga for na srothaibh. Fuaim eassa na sroth sin didiu, ba bindi na cach ceol a cantais.

[Then he sees in the garth a shining fountain, with five streams flowing out of it, and the hosts in turn a drinking its water. Nine hazels of Buan grow over the well. The purple hazels drop their nuts into the fountain, and the five salmon which are in the fountain sever them and send their husks floating down the streams. Now the sound of the falling of those streams is more melodious than any music that (men) sing.]

Manannán interprets the scene as follows (Stokes 1891: §53):

“As e in topur adcon[n]arcais cusna coic sroithaibh ass .i. topur in fis. Ia iad na cuic cétfadha triassa tarrthaitear in fis, 7 didiu ní bia dan lais nach ní na hiba dig asin tobur fesin 7 asna srothaibh. Lucht na n-illdan is iad eabhus estib diblínaib”
 [“The fountain which thou sawest, with the five streams out of it, is the Fountain of Knowledge, and the streams are the five senses through the which knowledge is obtained (?). And no one will have knowledge who drinketh not a draught out of the fountain itself and out of the streams. The folk of many arts are those who drink of them both.”]

The symbolism of the well or fountain recalls the well or fountain in the Loch Garman *dindshenchas*, although the precise relationship between the words *topar* “well, spring, fountain” used in “Cormac’s Adventure” and *tipra* “well, spring, fountain” used in “Loch Garman”, has not, as far as I know, been explored. The allegorical symbolism of the “fountain of knowledge” in “Cormac’s Adventure” should at least make us cautious about interpreting it literally in “Loch Garman”, given that in the latter it is embedded within a narrative containing an allegorical vision. There is reason to think that some of the allegorical symbolism employed in “Cormac’s Adventure” can be understood further in light of other texts – particularly the image of the salmon severing the husks of the hazels – and these are discussed below.

One final point to make in relation to “Cormac’s Adventure” at this stage is the statement with which the interpretation of the otherworldly horsemen begins in recension 2: *Is e [bith as] a tangais an bith fregnairc* “The present world is the world out of which you came”. This is an important statement: “the present world”, that is, the mysterious otherworld in which Cormac witnesses these strange sights and speaks to Manannán, represents the world out of which he came, that is, the real world. In other words, the allegorical interpretation of the otherworld is that it signifies the real world. In texts such as *Echtra Chonnlai*, the otherworld over the sea can be convincingly understood as an allegorical representation of the Christian religious life (McCone 2000). In tales where the otherworld is located within a “fairy-mound”, such as *Serglige Con Culainn*, the royal court of the otherworldly king can be interpreted as a mirror image or idealised “equivalent” of a worldly royal court (Carey 1987: 5). In this case, we see the otherworld not as metaphor

or allegory, but rather as an extended analogy or model, a different technique of figurative language (perhaps recalling Macrobius's argument in his commentary on the "Dream of Scipio" that *similitudines* and *exempla* must be used to express the otherwise inexpressible (Armisen-Marchetti 2001: 1.2.13–16)). The explicit statement in recension 2 of "Cormac's Adventure", that the otherworld represents reality, raises the question of whether medieval Irish literary journeys to the otherworld can be taken as any kind of residual evidence for pre-Christian (or non-Christian) belief or mythology, or whether they should primarily be understood in figurative terms as something inextricably linked to the theory and practice of *enarratio* (cf. Carey 1987: 12). As Scowcroft (1995: 156–157) has noted:

Once organised paganism ceased, its *idéologie* would be rapidly dissipated by mythopoeia itself, the multiplication and variation of ancient traditions diluting (if not obscuring) their specifically religious associations, to provide the literati instead with a corpus of hidden learning and "implicit metaphor" as compelling and useful as classical mythology for the rest of medieval Christendom.

The implications of this have not been fully absorbed by scholars who persist in seeing a cosmological or mythological significance in texts which – if read as allegory – might in fact have very different meaning than that immediately suggested by their literal meaning. All of the apparently supernatural elements of "Cormac's Adventure", for example, are interpreted as having mundane (and moralistic) meaning. Similarly, the supernatural elements of the dream-vision in the Loch Garman *dindshenchas* are interpreted as possessing meanings which correspond to physical and political aspects of the real world. It seems likely that medieval Irish authors used texts set in non-Christian environments, or containing apparently non-Christian motifs, for their value as "implicit metaphor" and that any cosmological truth-value which they might be deemed by their authors to possess is not necessarily (or not only) to be found on the literal level. For our final example, we turn to a Latin allegorical poem, which at first seems closer to the European allegorical tradition which as Scowcroft observed is indebted to classical mythology, but which, on close reading, has strong connections with, and casts further light on, our examples of vernacular allegory.

Mentis in excessu

The Latin poem beginning *Mentis in excessu* survives only in a late-twelfth-century manuscript, British Library MS Cotton Titus D. xxiv, in which it is ascribed to a bishop named Patrick (Gwynn 1955: 84–101). The poem's editor, Aubrey Gwynn, identified that Patrick as the bishop of Dublin whose death by drowning

is recorded in the year 1084 (Gwynn 1955: 1–4; but cf. Brett 2006: 33–35, for problems with this identification). The poem is heavily glossed, and the glosses interpret the allegorical symbolism of the poem. In this regard, it is somewhat different to our vernacular texts where the interpretation of the allegory was in both cases integral to the body of the text. However, that the glosses on *Mentis in excessu* were (judging by the layout on the manuscript page) copied from the exemplar suggests that the poem and glosses were intended to be transmitted and read together.

The poet describes a vision which he experienced “in ecstasy of mind” (*mentis in excessu*), in which a woman, interpreted as *Studiositas* “Studiousness”, took him on a journey through a pleasant landscape (glossed as “Scripture”). They see numerous sights in the course of their journey, some of which will be discussed below. One tableau is of particular significance for the present discussion, that is, when our visionary poet encounters seven sisters, that is, the seven liberal arts (Gwynn 1955: 88–91):

[...] Ast similes septem tum cerno sorores:
 Quatuor illarum tacitas, iam tresque loquaces:
 Quod sapiunt tacite pulcro que more locuntur.
 Vna tenet cytharum: manibus sic proxima uirgam:
 Vna tenet dextra solem lunamque sinistra:
 Octo tenere manu dextra septenaque leua,
 Innumeros numeros gremio quoque quarta uidetur.
 Sic aderant tacite diuerse quatuor ille.
 At tenet una trium manibus documenta sororum
 Infantum: ualidas hastamque secunda cathenas:
 Purpuream clamidem gemmis auroque decoram
 Tercia habebat: eas ualde mirabar honestas.
 Munera que dederant preter michi mitto relatu.
 Femina tum docuit (prima est) modulaminis odas
 Me cithara chordis que sex resonare solebat:
 Qua populis modulos, michimet qua sepius utor.

[... Then do I spy seven sisters, all alike:
 Of whom four are silent, and the other three ready to talk:
 The three give fair utterance to the wisdom of the silent four.
 One holds a lute: next to her one holds a rod in her hands:
 One holds the sun in her right hand, the moon in her left:
 The fourth holds the number eight in her right hand, seven in her left,
 And is seen to hold unnumbered numbers in her lap.
 Thus stood these silent four, in diverse form.
 But one of the three holds in her hands the letters of her speechless

Sisters: the second holds strong chains and a spear:
The third a purple cloak, adorned with gold and gems:
All three I beheld with wonder at their great beauty.
The gifts they gave me I omit to tell.
Then the woman (she was the first) taught me songs of melody
On a harp that was wont to sound with six strings:
On it I make melody for the people: often I play for my own pleasure.]

He converses with the three sisters who can speak – grammar, dialectic and rhetoric – and observes the four silent sisters – music, geometry, astrology and arithmetic. The three “give fair utterance to the wisdom of the silent four” because, we are told by the glossator, “whatever the four disciplines know is expressed in the rules of grammar, dialectic and rhetoric because there is nothing except these three things” (Gwynn 1955: 89; all translations of glosses are my own). We are told that Astrology holds the sun (i.e. power) in her right hand and the moon (i.e. difficulty) in her left. Arithmetic holds the number eight (i.e. even numbers) in her right hand and the number seven (i.e. odd numbers) in her left. The unnumbered numbers in her lap represent infinity which is concealed within her *ingenium*, her mode of thinking. Of the sisters who speak, Grammar holds in her hands the letters of her speechless sisters, that is, the “precepts of writing and syllables and parts which they teach first”. Dialectic holds strong chains and a spear, that is, inferences and syllogisms. Rhetoric wears a purple cloak adorned with gold and gems, that is, speech made eloquent through tropes and schemas. Here the poet recalls Martianus Capella’s description of Rhetoric in his *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, in which he refers to the *lumen* (“light”), *figurae* (“devices”), *schemata* (“figures”), *colores* (“colours”) and *gemmae* (“jewels”) of her clothing, which “are all terms which might be applied to rhetorical ornament” (Stahl, Johnson & Burge 1977: 156); but this also reminds us of the manifold colours of poetic raiment in our vernacular sources discussed above. Our poet ends this section by returning to his first woman, *Studiositas*, glossed here also as *Scientia*, who teaches the poet “songs of melody” (that is, the metrical arts) on a harp with six strings: the six strings represent the hexameter verse in which the poem itself is written. Sometimes his compositions are for the people, but often they are simply for his own pleasure. This last statement is deemed to require no explanatory gloss.

At first glance, this poem seems to operate in a very different mode to our two vernacular examples: the composition in Latin hexameter verse rather than vernacular prose or poetry, and the focus on the liberal arts rather than the *áes dána*, seem to point to an entirely different intellectual milieu. But on closer inspection, the Latin poem has more in common with our vernacular examples than we might assume and, indeed, we can see precise examples of shared allegorical symbolism.

Employing the vernacular Irish technique of *dúnad*, the Latin poem begins and ends with the same word, *mentis*.⁵ The poem begins (Gwynn 1955: 84–85, ll. 4–9):

Mentis in excessu lati loca ruris amena
 Forte michi subitis gradibus lustrare uidebar:
 Sic ego mira diu rerum spectacula cernens
 Captus eram. Subito michi tunc apparuit una
 Femina que miseris spargebat ad astra querelas.
 [In ecstasy of mind through pleasant places in a wide countryside
 It chanced that I seemed to wander with hasty steps:
 Thus gazing at length on wondrous sights and things
 I was held captive. Then suddenly appeared to me
 A woman uttering a stream of lamentable complaints to the skies.]

As the poem proceeds, the woman, “Studiousness”, mourns her dead husbands and regrets that no man will now take her as a wife. She introduces herself as Egle, and speaks of her three sisters, Esper, Medusa and Arethusa, and the glossator – drawing on a tradition deriving from Fulgentius – tells us that they are “intellect”, “memory” and “eloquence” (see Boyle forthcoming). The visionary structure of the poem is reinforced by its conclusion, in which the poet tells of the departure of the woman, Egle “Studiousness” (Gwynn 1955: 100–1, ll. 252–255):

Tum uolat hec iurans iterum se inuisere nostra
 Limina: set rediens ego lassus in ede uidebar
 Nam propria, qua raptus eram ad spectacula mentis
 Mentis in excessu.
 [Then did she fly away, taking oath once again to visit
 Our doors: but I, coming home weary, seemed to be once more
 In my own house, whence I had been borne away to these sights of the mind
 In ecstasy of mind.]

In terms of the text proper, it would appear that the narrator had been literally transported – out of his body – in order to witness these “sights of the mind”, and yet the glossator informs us that this out of body experience is only metaphorical: the gloss states: “*in ede: i. in carne*, that is, in the flesh, because to be outside the flesh is to contemplate those things that are outside the flesh, i.e. incorporeal things. But to be in the flesh is to think about fleshly things, i.e. corporeal things, not to wander outside the mind as is done above” (*i. in carne, quia extra carnem esse est que sunt extra carnem cogitare i. incorporalia. In carne autem esse est que*

5. The scribe repeats the opening phrase, *Mentis in excessu*, after the final line of the poem, thereby emphasising the *dúnad*. This seems to me to suggest that the scribe may have been copying from an Irish exemplar, since this is a standard feature of vernacular Irish poems.

sunt carnis intendere i. corporalia, non mente foras euagari ut supra factum est, Gwynn 1955: 100, gloss on l. 253). That being “outside the flesh” is explicitly stated to be a metaphor for the contemplation of incorporeal matters, and that the glossator can see the “visionary” element of the text in purely figurative terms, should perhaps be borne in mind by those who seek to interpret vision texts as accounts of historical events, whether as near death experiences or as ecstatic moments of divine inspiration (e.g. Zaleski 1988). In this case at least, the vision is self-consciously, and self-referentially metaphorical.

In this connection, we might consider a late Middle Irish (possibly twelfth-century) poem in which the term *aislinge* “dream” or “vision” is used to characterise an unambiguously allegorical text, namely *Aislinge Augustín áin* (Ó Cuív 1975–1976: 3–5; for discussion see Boyle forthcoming). This poem describes Augustine having a vision in which he was being chased by eight wolves across a plain and sought sanctuary under a great tree. We are told that Jerome interpreted the vision for Augustine, informing him that the wolves represented the principal vices, and the great tree represented Psalm 118 (Hebrew: 119), that is, the *Beati*. The poem draws on a number of elements, including other Irish textual traditions regarding the particular efficacy of the *Beati* (for a Middle Irish text which offers a mystical/anagogical interpretation of the *Beati*, see Bergin 1932; Ó Cróinín 1983). In the second half of the poem, the poet offers an entirely allegorical interpretation of the *Beati*, with the branches of the great tree being interpreted as the verses of the Psalm, and so on. For our present purposes what concerns us is that Augustine’s *aislinge*, like our Latin poet’s “sights of the mind”, is explicitly understood (and interpreted) as allegorical.

In this regard, we can explore further the Latin poet’s (and his glossator’s) conception of vision, in its intellectual and spiritual senses. In *Mentis in excessu*, after his encounter with the Hesperides, and with the lionesses – pride and despair – who are defeated by the maidens – humility and hope – our narrator sees five horses (Gwynn 1955: 88–89, lines 63–73):

Tunc ego ruris equos spatium cito quinque uidebam
 Transuolitare, suum qui precipitando ruerunt
 Sessorem qui solus equis insedit eisdem:
 Nullis nanque miser frenis agitabat eosdem.
 Ex quibus unus erat multo uelocior Euro,
 Qui superabat aues cursu ceruosque fugaces:
 Qui mare transuolitans nauem nec poscit ab ullo,
 Quique solo celum saltu concendit ad altum.
 Set mirabar equis uelocius ire sedentem:
 Nam propriis gradibus cursu quam fertur equino
 Vt cicius uolat, solus sic longius ibat.

[Then did I see five steeds swiftly through the countryside
 Speeding, who reared and threw their rider
 Who alone sat and rode these steeds:
 For, to his grief, he held them on no bridle.
 One of them was far swifter than the wind,
 And outpassed in speed the birds and fleeting deer.
 Coursing over the sea he seeks no ship from man,
 And with one leap he rises from earth to highest heaven.
 But I wondered to see the rider move more swiftly than the steeds:
 For as each of them bounded forward on its own course,
 The speedier its flight; the further went its lonely rider ahead.]

Significantly, some of this section of the poem appears to be identical with a quatrain of a Middle Irish poem beginning *Is mebul dom imrádud*, which was dated by Gerard Murphy to the tenth century. The relevant quatrain is (Murphy 1998: 40–41):

Cen ethar 'na chlóenchéimmim
 cingid tar cech ler;
 lúath linges 'na óenléimmim
 ó thalmáin co nem.
 [Without a ferry in their perverse path
 they go over every sea;
 swiftly they leap in one bound
 from earth to Heaven.]

This stanza is a vernacular articulation of the Latin couplet beginning *Qui mare transuolitans ...*, but in the Middle Irish poem it is flighty thoughts – rather than the senses – which travel in this manner, offering a further example of the workings of the mind being described through extended metaphor. There are other similarities in the same poem (*is lúaitiu ná in géth* seems to equate to *Ex quibus unus erat multo uelocior Euro*), and the metaphorical portrayal of the flightiness of thought in *Is mebul dom imrádud* suggests the same intellectual approach as witnessed in both *Mentis in excessu* and *Aislinge Augustín áin*. We might note other similarities between this passage of *Mentis in excessu* and *Aislinge Augustín áin*, in both of which we see animals running swiftly across the landscape. In the latter poem it is wolves, which represent the vices; wolves appear elsewhere in *Mentis in excessu* but are interpreted there by the glossator as demons (l. 152). In the case of *Mentis in excessu*, the five horses which run swiftly across the landscape are the five senses; and the rider, who can move more swiftly than any of the senses, is the soul. The one horse which is faster than the others, and which can outpass in speed the birds and fleeting deer, is the sense of “sight”. But no matter how fast “sight” can travel, the “soul” is always faster. The glossator tells us that this is because “the soul runs more swiftly in thought than it sees or hears or touches and the rest”

(*cicius currit enim animus cogitando quam uidet uel audit uel tangit et reliqua*, Gwynn 1955:88, gloss on l.71). And in the next gloss, we learn that the rider, or soul, is always ahead of even the fastest horse because: “the five senses do not perceive anything except bodily things but the soul knows and comprehends even incorporeal things. The soul even comprehends bodily things which it does not see through the eye of the body” (*quia non sentiunt quinque sensus nisi corpora. Animus uero scit et cogitat eciam incorporalia. Cogitat etiam animus corpora que non uidet oculo sui corporis*, Gwynn 1955: 88, gloss on l.73). Thus, in a formulation ultimately derived from Augustinian thought, although sight is the superior of the five senses, it is still inferior to the *oculus animi*, the eye of the mind.

The depiction of the five senses as horses traversing a landscape employs a different allegorical vocabulary to that of the first recension of “Cormac’s Adventure”, where the five senses were depicted as five streams flowing into the fountain (or well) of knowledge. However, there is one aspect of the allegorical symbolism of “Cormac’s Adventure” which seems to connect it to that of *Mentis in excessu*, and that is the image of the hazels which drop their nuts into the fountain, only for the salmon to sever their husks and send them floating down the streams. Our understanding of this image in “Cormac’s Adventure” can be illuminated by another passage of *Mentis in excessu*, that is, the poet’s journey to the island of Archipolis, the ecclesial, and simultaneously eschatological, city, which he describes at length. Towards the end of that passage he states (Gwynn 1955:90–91, ll. 108–115):

Circumquaque dehinc siluas bona poma ferentes
 Conspexi, quorum multi satiantur odore.
 Hec mandentis item seruant sine fine salutem:
 Que spirare uolunt multi, set mandere pauci.
 En aliis illam mos est habitantibus urbem
 Frangere dente nuces fructusque uorare latentes.
 Frangere mos aliis esumque dedisse propinquis
 Qui saciant alios nucibus quas sumere curant.
 [Then all around I saw woods bearing goodly fruit,
 And by their odour many are sated.
 This fruit preserves unending salvation of him who eats:
 Many are willing to breathe its odour, but few to eat.
 Lo, it is custom for those who dwell in that city
 To break the nut with their teeth and swallow the fruit within.
 For others it is custom to break the nut and give food to those near to them,
 Who sate the hunger of others with the nuts which they are eager to take.]⁶

6. The translation is based on Gwynn’s, but I have changed his “rind” to “nut” and his “hidden fruit” to “fruit within”, as I think this more accurately conveys the sense of the Latin. For the glosses see Gwynn 1955:91.

The glossator interprets the island, Archipolis, as the church. On that island, he sees the woods (books) bearing goodly fruit (precepts and commandments). By their odour (knowledge) many are sated. Many are willing to breathe its odour (to know that knowledge) but few to eat (to take it in). It is the custom for those who dwell in that city (the church) to open the nuts (literal meaning) with their teeth (*ingenium*, mode of thinking) to swallow (understand) the inner fruit (spiritual meaning). For others it is custom to break the nuts and give food to their neighbours (to preach to others) who sate the hunger of others with the nuts (mystical precepts) which they are eager to take.

In learned poetry allegorical symbolism could be employed without the need for interpretation. Thus, for example, in the Middle Irish poem on metrics by Cellach ua Ruanada (d. 1079), we find imagery which seems to draw on the same ideas as those expressed in *Mentis in excessu*. The poet, Cellach, refers to “fields of vigorous poetry”, and elsewhere uses the term “garden” as a metaphor for poetry as a whole. Significantly, Cellach describes the reward of poetry as being *do chnúas na cnó cumraide* “from the fruit of the fragrant nuts” (Breatnach 2015: 75). Calvert Watkins (1976) interpreted the “fruit of fragrant nuts” as being primarily indicative of the “poet-patron” relationship: the poem is a gift which requires a reward, in this case the patron’s counter-gift being “symbolized” in the form of nuts (Watkins 1976: 274). I do not think that Watkins’ explanation is sufficient: the poem itself is an experimental and self-consciously literary composition, which outlines different types of poetic metres and their uses. Each stanza describes a different poetic metre and each stanza is written in the metre it describes. It is hard to see what kind of noble patron would be interested in receiving such an intellectual exercise which seems to me to be directed more at other poets. We might even think of the Latin poet’s statement that he often writes for his own pleasure. It is probable that the “fruit of fragrant nuts” from which Cellach hopes to be rewarded in this case is allegorical, that is, he seeks his reward from the intellectual harvest of knowledge: as our Latin verse and its interpreter put it, the nut has a hard shell (the superficial meaning), which can be cracked with one’s teeth (mode of thinking) to reveal the inner fruit (the “true” or mystical meaning).⁷ We might compare this with the statement in the

7. There are references in medieval Irish law-texts to *cnóe gnáe* (“beautiful nuts”) as a source of poetic inspiration. For example, a gloss on *Bretha im Fuillema Gell* (“Judgements about Pledge-Interests”) explains these nuts as *cno mor[a] aibinde 7 ni eistib eabar int aircetal acht is dib* (“big beautiful nuts and it is not out of them that poetry (= poetical inspiration) is drunk but it is from them”; cited and translated in Kelly 2010: 213, where the nuts are understood in very literal terms). There is a slightly different nut-related metaphor found frequently in legal texts, namely *cnú caech*, “a nut without fruit” or “an empty husk” to mean something profitless or futile (Stokes 1904: 443–444; cf. O’Brien 1938: 369).

Fecunda ratis by Egbert of Liège, roughly contemporaneous with Cellach's poem, and indeed with the likely date of the *dindschenchas* and the poem attributed to Patrick of Dublin (Babcock 2013: 96–97, ll. 923–924):

Qui sine commento rimaris scripta Maronis,
inmunis nuclei solo de cortice rodís.

[You who investigate the writings of Virgil without a commentary are gnawing only at the outer bark of an untouched core.]

Egbert's image of Virgil's writings as a nut whose words alone, without a commentary to aid the uncovering of inner meaning, are merely the outer shell, provides a striking parallel to the image in our Irish texts.

This enables us to make sense of the motif (mentioned above) in recension 1 of "Cormac's Adventure" in which the "purple hazels drop their nuts into the fountain, and the five salmon which are in the fountain sever them and send their husks floating down the streams". Using the interpretation offered in *Mentis in excessu*, we might suggest that here also the severing of the nuts from their husks represents the breaking open of literal meaning in order to discover the hidden meaning inside. I would suggest that the same allegorical symbolism can be seen in the Old Irish text "Finn and the Man in the Tree" (Meyer 1904), which, it has recently been argued, utilises striking Eucharistic imagery (Hollo 2012). Like the first recension of "Cormac's Adventure", "Finn and the Man in the Tree" is inextricably linked with legal literature, as it is preserved in the Old Irish glossing of the great legal tract, the *Senchas Már*, thereby dating the tale to the eighth century or perhaps slightly earlier (Breatnach 2005: 344). One of the elements of the tableau discussed by Hollo is the distribution of food and drink by the man in the tree to the various animals that surround him. Of particular interest here is the passage which tells us (Meyer 1904: 346–347):

...ba hē abras ind fir teinm cnō 7 dobered leth n-airne na cnō don lun nobith for a gūalaind ndeis, no-ithed feisin al-leth n-aill...

[...And this was the practice of the man, cracking nuts; and he would give half the kernel of the nut to the blackbird that was on his right shoulder while he would himself eat the other half ...]

Albeit with the caveat that *Mentis in excessu* is likely to have been composed some centuries later than "Finn and the Man in the Tree", we may yet suggest that "cracking nuts" symbolises the search for the hidden meaning, and that giving half of the kernel (or inner meaning) to the blackbird symbolises, as in *Mentis in excessu*, "preaching to others". Certainly such symbolism would accord with the Eucharistic imagery present in the scene, as elucidated by Hollo.

In *Mentis in excessu* the interpretation is fundamentally moralising and didactic: on the ecclesial island of Archipolis, the summit is reached by six flights of steps, which the glossator tells us means that heaven is reached by the six works of mercy. We also find this motif of the six works of mercy being six steps into the eschatological church, or heaven, in *Scéla Laí Brátha*, an eleventh-century vernacular homily (Best and Bergin 1929, ll. 2330–2340). And, despite the rich allegorical symbolism, derived in large part from classical tradition, the message of *Mentis in excessu* is less about learning *per se* and more about imitation of Christ and abiding by Christ's injunction to act out the six works of mercy. Similarly, in "Cormac's Adventures" the *áes dána* are criticised by the authors of both recensions for their futile pursuit of transient worldly gain. In *Mentis in excessu* the woods are "books", bearing spiritual fruit, which are "precepts and commandments", which people want to know, but not to absorb or internalise. The glossator tells us that "intellect fails if studiousness is lacking"; where the poet tells us that in the city he saw those who were not willing to feast, the glossator tells us that this means that in the church there are those who are not willing "to put in the work". It is all very well to know doctrine and mysteries and commandments, but to ensure salvation one has to absorb and enact them, to live out the six works of mercy. The otherworldly landscape in which our narrator wanders is, we are told, Scripture. The sense of sight is paramount, because it is by reading Scripture that we are better able to achieve spiritual vision. Significantly, we are told that the honey with which those who wish to feast load their tables, is the narrative and allegory with which they fill their books (Gwynn 1955: 92–93, l. 130, and accompanying glosses. Cf. Lucretius, *De natura rerum*, (l. 936–950) for a similar metaphor for writing philosophy in verse, namely putting honey on the rim of a cup of bitter medicine.) Thus, ecclesiastical learning can be made sweeter with the "honey" of allegorical narrative. I suggest that this is as true of vernacular narrative literature in Ireland as it is for Latin.

In *Mentis in excessu*, we are presented with an intellectually satisfying and aesthetically pleasing account of *Studiositas*, using imagery which seems on the one hand familiar, somewhat Boethian, drawing on a repertoire of classical learning, and on the other hand strikingly original. But the glossed interpretation of the poem tells us that the purpose of such studiousness is the moral betterment of the scholar. That our vernacular texts differ from each other in portraying poets as, on the one hand, the gloriously variegated raiment which envelops a beautiful woman and, on the other, as otherworldly horsemen engaged in a futile and endless task of roofing a house with feathers, shows that the precise repertoire of allegorical symbolism for poets and their learned arts could be specific to individual texts. The preceding discussion has used explicitly allegorical texts as case studies which

might provide us with tools to investigate the use of allegory, metaphor and analogy in a broader range of medieval Irish literature. The work here is admittedly preliminary, but I hope that it will stimulate further investigation and discussion. Certainly it is the case that early medieval Irish education would have provided training in the art of *enarratio*, which could be utilised by other learned scholars in order to make clear the “dark speech” of their fellow men of art.