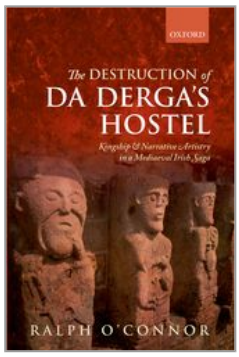

The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel: Kingship and Narrative Artistry in a Mediaeval Irish Saga
Ralph O'Connor

Print publication date: 2013
Print ISBN-13: 9780199666133
Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: May 2013
DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199666133.001.0001

The Road to Da Derga's Hostel

Ralph O'Connor

DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199666133.003.0005

Abstract and Keywords

The sense of mounting tension generated in the saga's first half is sustained by a range of structural and rhetorical devices which are examined in chapters 4 and 5. The chronological gap between episodes is progressively reduced, tightening the narrative focus as the story moves on. The narrative is organized to underline the fact that the king and his foster-brothers are caught up in converging trajectories. Their final destination—Da Derga's Hall—is repeatedly emphasized by the movements of the king's companions, his foster-brothers' scouts, and the monstrous Otherworldly beings which overtake Conaire on the road to the Hall. Their unavoidable future is poignantly sealed by an accumulation of formal predictions and statements of intent, and by the repetition of key words such as *innocht*, 'tonight'.

Keywords: Da Derga, trajectories, momentum, chronology, prophecy, otherworld, fate

It is now clear that the central themes of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, as they emerge in the first half of the saga, derive their significance above all from the ways in which they are arranged, balanced, and juxtaposed with each other. We now turn to explore the overarching structural techniques with which the saga as a whole is bound together.

Two principles underlie the narrative orchestration of the *Togail*: linear momentum and parallel presentation. In this and the next chapter I will focus on how the saga-author has charged the trajectories of Conaire and his foster-brothers with mounting tension, and how at the same time he has presented these trajectories as simultaneous and converging—in other words, how he has at once enhanced the separate tragedies of two groups of characters and bound them together with interlace techniques. Having propelled his narrative towards the very point of final convergence, the saga-author then calls a halt halfway through the text, suspending the consummation of the catastrophe in order to paint, with a fine brush, his colourful portrait of the doomed Irish court. The second half marks a shift in narrative mode from what is essentially a third-person narrative, interspersed with dialogue, to a sequence of descriptions in direct speech interspersed with occasional remarks by the third-person narrator. Only in the last few pages, when events begin to move on again, does this narrator regain his prominence. For all their differences, however, the two halves form an organic whole, dependent on each other to sustain the saga's meanings and effect.

We begin with an overview of both of these plot-lines at once, from the point where the people at Tara are in the process of identifying the new king, up to and including the description-sequence in which the Hostel-dwellers are identified. This part of the story, comprising the bulk of the saga, traces the fracturing of a fosterage relationship into two separate, opposed narratives which spin out in their separate ways and then converge, finally colliding in mutual destruction.[1] This process is represented in Fig. 2.

Initially, Conaire and his foster-brothers are treated within a single narrative strand, that of Conaire's upbringing. As we

saw, they are very close and go everywhere together (lines 115–21). This closeness changes while they are playing together in Leinster, in the Liffey plain: at this point, unknown to Conaire, he has been chosen as king by the prophetic ritual of the *tarbḟeis* or ‘bull-feast’. Conaire (p.105)

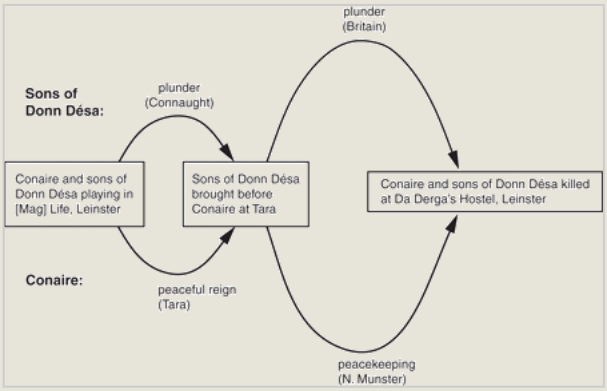

Fig. 2. The parallel trajectories of Conaire and his foster-brothers, lines 127–1394.

does not attend the bull-feast, but continues playing with his foster-brothers. After a time, *Fanacbasa*[2] *a chomaltai occa cluichiu* (‘His foster-brothers leave him at his play’, line 134), and all at once his Otherworldly bird-kin appear to him (line 136) and reveal his true kingship to him, after which he goes to Tara to become king in a more public ritual. As a result, plundering is forbidden (line 178): Conaire's foster-brothers may no longer ‘play’ in their accustomed way (lines 192–4). As they resentfully assert their individual destiny, they embark on a narrative of their own against Conaire's. While he presides in a reign of unparalleled peace and prosperity, they try hard to damage this by robbery and plunder, and he for his part is unwilling to confront them in person. Their plundering in Connaught leads to a scene in which they are captured and brought against their will to Conaire at Tara (lines 210–19), and he exiles them instead of killing them.

This pattern is ironically mirrored by later events. Conaire continues his royal efforts at preserving peace by settling a quarrel in Thomond (in Munster), but on his way back to Tara he is headed off from his proper route by phantoms and is driven south into Leinster where he will have his last encounter with his foster-brothers. They, meanwhile, have been continuing their plundering career further afield, and once again are brought against their will to Conaire; but rather than being dragged before him in chains, they are

under the less tangible but far crueller (p.106) compulsion of honour and their deadly bond with Ingcél. This time, when the foster-brothers meet again, the Otherworld has already made Conaire himself an exile from the world (line 250), and as a result he is killed by those he had previously exiled.[3] This takes place at Da Derga's Hostel, also in Leinster.[4]

As shown at the right-hand end of Fig. 2, the two narratives halt just before this final meeting to make way for the long description-sequence. One could hardly call this a cliff-hanger, because their final collision is so inevitable; but the gap is so small and so charged with narrative energy that sparks fly, in the form of the hectic colours, sounds, and movements displayed within each tableau of the description-sequence, and in the highly emotional reactions and utterances of its speakers. As I have attempted to suggest in Fig. 2, the tension of this prolonged moment gains intensity from the powerful sense of forward motion and direction with which the second pair of parabolas has already been charged. I shall now show how this momentum has been achieved.

Perhaps more than any other Irish saga, the *Togail* scatters fragments of one highly specific future event into the narrative present. The destination is continually in view, pulling Conaire and his foster-brothers towards itself. Much of the story's momentum derives from this dynamic, built up by a range of narrative techniques and gestures which make us look anxiously ahead to the inevitable outcome, so that every step of Conaire and his foster-brothers becomes one step closer to violent death.

Chronological Tightening

First, there is a general pattern at work by which the narrative homes in on Conaire's moment of doom and on Conaire himself, thus making us ever more keenly aware of what is going on as the protagonists approach the Hostel. Unlike many of the *Togail*'s structural devices, this pattern is familiar throughout the Western literary tradition. It concerns the way in which the chronology of the saga is arranged, progressively tightening the gaps between each episode narrated. An ‘episode’ is defined here as a group of events which cluster

together in the narrative, forming a single unit to which special attention is drawn. For instance, almost no attention is drawn to Eochaid's death (line 63), which functions less as an episode or event in itself than as a chronological marker, demarcating the Étaín–Eochaid episode from the second and much later episode in which Mess Búachalla is born, exposed and rescued (lines 64–81). Again, this second episode contains several discrete *events*, including a flashback to Mess Búachalla's conception (lines 66–70), but these events are clearly bound together into a narrative unit.

(p.107) The gaps between the episodes diminish from the start. Between the first episode (Eochaid and Étaín, lines 1–63) and the second (Mess Búachalla's birth and exposure, lines 64–81) the implied passage of time is long enough for Eochaid to die in the interim, and for Étaín to have a daughter who grows up to marry and give birth. This would amount to slightly over one generation. A generation later Conaire is conceived and born (lines 82–121); before reaching puberty, he chases the birds and becomes king (lines 122–81). Continuing along the line of Conaire's trajectory, his youthful appearance in the description-sequence implies that only a few years elapse in his reign (described in general terms rather than as an episode in lines 182–92) before he mismanages his foster-brothers' thieving (lines 192–203). At least two years later they take to plundering and he utters his false judgement (lines 204–19). Not long afterwards, while his foster-brothers engage in their own 'overseas episode' with Ingcél (lines 219–28), Conaire settles a quarrel in Thomond (lines 229–35). Ten days later he sets off on his last journey (lines 236–7). From this point on, the rest of the story (lines 237–1539) takes place within twenty-four hours (not counting Mac Cécht's conversation on the battlefield three days later in the epilogue, lines 1496–1509),[5] alternating between the trajectories of Conaire and the plunderers.

The implied gaps which separate the occurrences befalling each party continue to narrow, with a corresponding increase in the level of detail given by the narrator. In this way the movement of events (especially the violation of *gessi*) appears to accelerate,[6] but the narrative attention lavished on these

later episodes constantly pushes against this movement and delays the telling of each subsequent episode. Ingcél's spying represents the consummation of these focusing techniques, requiring the adjustment or focusing (*commus*, line 642) of his single eye to take in all the Hostel-dwellers in a single moment, only to reconstitute them in detail (for both his and the saga's audiences) within the vast, almost atemporal mosaic of the description-sequence.

The dramatic effect of this gradual chronological tightening in the first half of the saga might be characterized as follows. The narrative sweeps along swiftly until it lights upon Conaire. Slowly, it homes in on the young man but, when Conaire makes his first mistake as king, the narrative suddenly seems to coil in around him, intensifying the audience's scrutiny of his ensuing behaviour and fate. This narrative enmity (so to speak) is enhanced by Conaire's subjection within the tale to the scrutiny of various spies and watchers: increasingly, we too see him and his court only through the eyes and judgements of these enemies. Time—both that of the gaps between episodes and that left to Conaire—becomes ever shorter; what began as a series of somewhat disconnected episodes becomes a unified, contingent series of misfortunes, plunging towards catastrophe.

The saga's chronological compression thus almost fulfils the dramatic criterion of ‘unity of time’ developed in early modern Europe on Aristotelian principles, (p.108) according to which all the action of a play must take place within twenty-four hours. This coincidence should not be used as an excuse to apply other neoclassical rules to the *Togail*; but it is certainly no coincidence that the main action of the *Togail* takes place within a single day and night. As in the tragedies of Racine, such compression enhances the saga's dramatic tension and immediacy. That this was a deliberate dramatic ploy is underlined by the saga's obsessive repetition of the fateful word *innocht* (‘tonight’). This word is first used by Nemglan, referring to the night in which Conaire is to be publicly accepted as king. Nemglan tells him in line 149, *Eirg do Themraig innocht* (‘Go to Tara tonight’). After this point—more specifically, after Conaire's judgement upon his foster-

brothers has enabled them to murder Ingcél's king and kin *in n-oenaidche* (‘in a single night’, line 226), thus binding them to Ingcél's own will—the word *innocht* refers exclusively to the last night of Conaire's kingship, rather than the first. Here, as on the former occasion, Conaire is going along the road to Tara—but this time, instead of three kings to welcome him, he encounters spectral apparitions which drive him away and force him to turn south to meet his death at Da Derga's Hostel. To that place the word *innocht* now adheres with increasing strength and emphasis.

This word echoes on throughout the saga, binding together the first and second halves. Its ominous reiteration, spoken in fear as well as menace, charges this particular night with a symbolic value like that attaching itself to Da Derga's Hostel, as if to represent the death awaiting Conaire and the chaos in store for his realm. The link between these two images is made at the very point where the spectres force him onto the southward road: he at once asks, *Cid ragma innocht?* (‘Where shall we go tonight?’, line 256), using this word for the first time, then answers his own question by mentioning, also for the first time, the name *Da Derga di Laignib* (‘Da Derga of the Laigin’, line 265), adding that *iṡ ingnad*[7] *mad brónach frimsa innocht* (‘it would be strange if he were unwelcoming towards me tonight’, line 277). But the word *brónach* also means ‘sorrowful’ as well as ‘unwelcoming’. Athough Da Derga does welcome Conaire and his retinue cheerfully in lines 533–4, it is by now not at all strange to find sorrow following hard on their heels. By lines 1043–4 Da Derga's residence is described in the words *isin bruidin bróntig* (‘in the sorrowful Hostel’).[8]

The next time Conaire uses the word *innocht*, it is in a far less sanguine tone, because despite his son's best efforts the three red horsemen are about to reach the Hostel before him. Realizing that his fate is inescapable, he cries, *Rom-gobsa mo gesa ule anocht* (‘All my *gessi* have seized me tonight’, line 339).[9] The word *innocht* finds (p.109) its way into Conaire's two subsequent encounters with Otherworldly characters whose presence is *geis* for him, but who insist on sharing his hospitality on that night alone. Fer Caille overtakes him on the road: his approach is relentlessly cheery, despite the

unsettling remark he makes in his first statement which hints at his identity with the mythological figure of the 'Lord of the Otherworld Feast':[10]

> 'Fo chen dait, a popa, a Chonaire. Cían ro-feas do thíachtu sund.'
>
> 'Cía feras in ḟáilti?' for Conaire.
>
> 'Fer Cailliu co muicc daitsiu dot ocumul, ar ná rabais hi toichnead innocht. Is tú rí as deach tánic in domun […]'
>
> 'Nach n-aidchi n-aile duib,' ol Conaire, ['roborficba 7 sechnaid innocht duind.'
>
> 'Nathó,' or in bachlach],[11] 'ar roticfa[12] co port i mbía innocht, a phopáin chain Conaire.'[13]
>
> 'Welcome to you, o friend, o Conaire! Long has your coming here been known.'
>
> 'Who gives the welcome?' said Conaire.
>
> 'Fer Caille coming to join you, with a pig for you, lest you go fasting tonight. You are the best king who has come into the world.' […]
>
> '[He[14] will come] any other night you please,' said Conaire, ['only leave this night to us.'
>
> 'No,' said the churl,] 'for I will come to you in the place where you are tonight, O gentle little master Conaire.'

The horrible seeress Cailb, who comes to Conaire in the Hostel itself, shares Fer Caille's prophetic habits, but her conversational style has a more steely edge to it:

> 'Cid geis,' ol sisi, 'ní ragsa co ndecha m'aídidecht[15] di ráith isind aidchise inocht.'
>
> 'Abraid fria,' ol Conaire, 'bérthair dam 7 tindi dí ammach 7 mo ḟuidelsa, 7 anad i maigin aile inocht.'[16]

(p.110)

> ‘Though it be *geis*,’ she said, ‘I will not go until hospitality is given me at once, this very night.’
>
> ‘Tell her,’ said Conaire, ‘an ox and a salted pig will be brought out to her, and my leftovers, only let her stay somewhere else tonight.’

Note here Cailb's relentless emphasis on the word *adaig* (‘night’), reinforcing it with the formula *isind aidchise inocht* (literally ‘tonight tonight’).

The word *innocht* stands out emphatically and ominously in both these Otherworldly conversations, flung back and forth between the king and his many-faced nemesis. In one of the variant accounts mentioned by U (lines 7044–6), this particular night is given additional Otherworldly significance: it is placed on the eve of Samain (31 October–1 November) which traditionally divided summer and winter. On this night the boundary between world and Otherworld dissolved, so that portents proliferated, *síd*-mounds opened, and spectres went about among men.[17]

Conaire's other uses of the word *innocht* are no less ominous in import. When his foster-brothers beach their boats, Conaire guesses their purpose and suggests that, if only they had remained true to their fosterage ties, then *nísn-áigfimis anocht* (‘we would not fear them tonight’, line 506).[18] His foster-brothers, for their part, first use the word *innocht* within their invocations to God not to let Conaire be in the vicinity that night (lines 491 and 610). Thereafter its use is confined among them to the description-sequence, mostly during Fer Rogain's predictions about what each warrior will achieve during the battle. The word *innocht*, often combined with oaths, here works either to emphasize the grim fact that these warriors’ destructive power will be demonstrated in a very short time (lines 691, 979, 981, 1254, 1356), or to assure Ingcél that his wishes will be carried out in a very short time (line 741). Ingcél's own first use of the word *innocht* echoes Conaire's by yoking together the image of Da Derga's Hostel with that of the night in which it is to suffer the ravages of fire and sword. The first time the Hostel is mentioned by the plunderers is when they formally identify it for Ingcél in lines 631–2, to

which he dryly remarks, *Batar dóichi ém fir maithi do saigid a chéle don bruidin sin innocht* (‘Nobles were indeed[19] likely to seek their fellows at that Hostel tonight’, lines 633–4). This coupling of the Hostel and its fateful night echoes on throughout the description-sequence[20] and on to the very last sentence of the saga (line 1538), continuing to reinforce that sense of focus so carefully built up in the first half.[21]

(p.111) Journey's End

Chronology aside, the sense that Conaire and his foster-brothers are impelled irresistibly towards Da Derga's Hostel is enhanced by underscoring the geographical trajectories of Conaire and his foster-brothers in a mirroring pair of repeating patterns. Conaire himself, as we have just seen, makes the decision to proceed to the Hostel (line 265), but shortly afterwards he encounters several other characters who are also heading that way, who seem to know in advance that Conaire is to spend the night at the Hostel, and whose own presence there is somehow *geis* to him. In other words, his decision is repeated and reinforced by the Otherworld, echoing the way in which, after he has violated some of his *gessi*, they are now forcing him to violate still more of them. Once he has chosen his destination of his own free will, the predestined character of his journey becomes uncomfortably apparent. Da Derga's Hostel now becomes a powerful magnet for Otherworldly personages who are seen hurrying towards it, overtaking the king himself. This overtaking-pattern is important. If these characters were, by contrast, following Conaire, he would appear to be still in control of his journey; as it is, the journey is mapped out before him in the footsteps of others. His inability to stop them going to the Hostel reflects his helplessness in the grip of his own fate.

This pattern is set off by Mac Cécht, whose Otherworldly character will become more apparent later in the saga. He responds to Conaire's decision by saying, *Masu ead nać*[22] *téig, tíagsa co n-ardu*[23] *tenid and ar da chind* (‘If it is there [that] you are going, I will go and light a fire there before you’).[24] He then speeds on ahead, presumably with Conaire's approval, to carry out this formal procedure which will mark the Hostel as

the king's residence that night. His departure thus makes it all the more certain that Conaire will end up there. It is Mac Cécht who reveals just how direct their route is: *in tsligi forsa taí, téit co téit*[25] *isa teach, ar is tresin teach atá in sligi* (‘the road you are on continues until it enters the house, for the road passes through the house’, lines 279–81).[26] Once this has been revealed, every reference to the road along which Conaire is proceeding becomes an implicit reference to Da Derga's Hostel.[27]

(p.112) This specific itinerary is again underlined immediately after Mac Cécht has left, and the next episode begins:[28]

> In tan ro buí Conaire íar suidiu oc ascnom íar Slige Chúaland, rathaiges in triar marcach riam dochum in tigi […][29]
>
> As Conaire was going along Slige Chúaland after that, he noticed three horsemen ahead, making for the house […]

Mac Cécht has gone on ahead with Conaire's implicit approval, but here—almost at once—the same movement is made by three much less welcome characters: three red horsemen whose presence on the road before Conaire is *geis* to him. In this episode Conaire attempts three times to reverse their inexorable forward movement, with no success. Like the *cloenmíla Cernae* (‘crooked beasts of Cernae’, line 248), they remain ahead of him, a taunt from the Otherworld. The urgency of his efforts is suggested by his initial reaction, *ba ges damsa in triar ucut do dul rium* (‘it was *geis* to me, those three going ahead of me’, lines 294–5). This is the first time Conaire mentions his *gessi* in the saga; the fateful implications of his failure are then flagged up at the end of the episode, when he comments in despair, *Rom-gobsa mo gesa ule anocht* (‘All my *gessi* have seized me tonight’, line 339).[30] The episode ends with the narrator following the horsemen all the way south to Da Derga's Hostel:

> Do-chótar riam dochum in tigi[31] corro gabaiset a suide is in tig[32] 7 coro áirgiset a n-eochu dergae do dorus in tigi.[33]

> They arrived at the house before him, and they took their seats in the house, and they tied their red horses at the entrance to the house.

The threefold iteration of the word *tech*, like Conaire's threefold attempt to recall the three horsemen, emphasizes yet again the fatal end-point of his (and their) journey.[34]

(p.113) After this ominous glimpse of the Hostel, the narrator at once returns to Conaire for his next encounter. This episode, like the previous one, begins with an emphasis on the road itself, and with a new act of overtaking:

> Is ed ro gob Conaire cona ślúagaib da Áth Clíath. Is and dosn-árraid in fear maeldub co n-oenṡúil 7 oenláim 7 oenchois [...][35]
>
> Conaire and his men had taken [the road] for Dublin. At this point there overtook them a man with short dark hair, with one eye, one arm, and one leg.

Like the horsemen, Fer Caille is faster and more energetic than Conaire, despite only having one leg: *Tathchuireathar bedg ara ceand* (‘He sprang in front of him’, line 357). This episode, too, ends with Conaire failing to detain him: *Téit íarum dochum in taigi* (‘Then he went towards the house’, line 370). The narrative then switches to the approaching plunderers, but Conaire's trajectory continues to be pointed up. First the narrator, then the two spies, observe that Conaire is still proceeding along the road (lines 429–30 and 469–70). The plunderers’ progress is later hampered by Mac Cécht lighting the fire he had promised to light, an act shown to us directly by the narrator (lines 479–80): as the sons of Donn Désa well know, this formal act shows that the king must be nearby (lines 487–92), and shortly afterwards he arrives outside the Hostel (line 507).

All these figures—the faithful Mac Cécht, the enigmatic horsemen and the unnervingly friendly Fer Caille—help to prepare the Hostel for Conaire's visit. As we shall see in chapter 5, the uncanny appearance of the last two is in itself an important source of cumulative tension in the saga. But

aside from this, the mere fact that we are presented with these various characters speeding on ahead and settling down in the Hostel works to reinforce the latter's status as the end-point of the story—almost as if, having thus drawn them into itself, the Hostel gains a narrative form of gravitational pull, dragging the reluctant king down the road to ruin.

Meanwhile, the trajectory of Conaire's foster-brothers is underscored in a complementary manner. The overtaking-pattern would here be inappropriate, for the obvious reason that the plunderers' strategy is for them all to attack the Hostel at once. Instead, their trajectory is underlined by having them repeatedly retrace their own steps. Either they suddenly retreat, only to advance still further along the same path, or else they send scouts ahead to spy, who then return before the whole group advances. Like Conaire, the plunderers are drawn inexorably towards Da Derga's Hostel, as Ingcél repeatedly compels them to admit in the emotionally charged sequence of formal statements of intent examined in chapter 3. Unlike Conaire's progress towards the Hostel, however, theirs is marked by moments of hesitation and the cautious dartings of their spies. While Conaire moves steadily if fearfully southwards, his reluctant foster-brothers move more like a rising tide whose individual waves advance, retreat, and advance again, but whose progress inland is no less inevitable.

(p.114) These movements are represented in Fig. 3, which shows—in greater detail than the overview in Fig. 2—the parallel trajectories of Conaire and the plunderers from the false judgement to the battle itself. The points of particular interest here are labelled A–E. Two of these points, A and D, present us with spying-episodes, setting out a pattern of rapid advance followed by rapid retreat. At A (beginning on line 431), when the plunderers' fleet is floating some way off the coast near Howth Head (Benn Étair), the two Maines are sent out to spy while Conaire proceeds *íar Slighi Chúalann dochum na Bruidhne* ('along Slige Chúaland towards the Hostel', lines 429–30). On reaching Howth Head, they observe his retinue (lines 445–70) and at once return to the fleet (lines 471–2) to describe what they saw. At D (beginning on line 640), Ingcél

makes a similar foray, going right up to the Hostel to spy on its occupants. However, even this formidable and fearless character displays caution in so doing, for when he is perceived by the Hostel-dwellers, he rushes or leaps (*ta-cuirethar beadg*, line 645) back to the main group to describe what he saw.

Each of these instances of an advance-and-retreat pattern is paired with a corresponding retreat-and-return pattern. Immediately after hearing the two Maines describe what they saw, the plunderers move in to land (B, beginning on line 474), but at this point the fiery force of Mac Cécht's spark suddenly drives them back out to sea (lines 480–2). They presently come back to land (line 496), and this time they are not repulsed. Likewise, as Ingcél is in the process of reporting what he saw on his spying-mission, his description of Mac Cécht (E) achieves a similar effect on the plunderers, this time psychological rather than physical: *Teigsit íarum tar teóra foithribi la crith 7 omun Meic Cécht* ('Then they went [i.e. retreated] over three valleys in fear and trembling of Mac Cécht', lines 865–6). The pledges are at once reaffirmed (lines 866–7), marking this as only a temporary retreat; but the rest of the description-sequence is played out here, at a safe distance from the destructive power of Mac Cécht.

Rapid back-and-forth movements, then, are characteristic of the trajectory of these increasingly nervous plunderers. In both instances an episode involving spying, description, and identification is quickly followed by a sudden retreat. This pattern may help illuminate (although it does not explain away) another of the saga's apparent contradictions. In lines 581–619 the plunderers are seen observing the Hostel from Lecca Cind Ślébe, and Fer Rogain identifies the firelight as Conaire's; but in lines 620–1, just after point C on Fig. 3, they are presented as setting out again from the beach on which they had landed earlier. West has called this second episode an 'episodic doublet', a passage which repeats an earlier episode and destroys the basic logic of the narrative.[36] But if we view this passage in the light of larger patterns already displayed in the narrative, the inconsistency seems less glaring. As with the other two spying-and-identification episodes, this one is followed by a retreat and then a return.

The sentence in question conveys the rapidity which we have so far found to be characteristic of these movements: (p.115)

(p.116)

Tos-chuirther beadc na díbergaig a Trácht Fuirbthin 7 do-beraid cloich cach fir leó do chur chairn […][37]

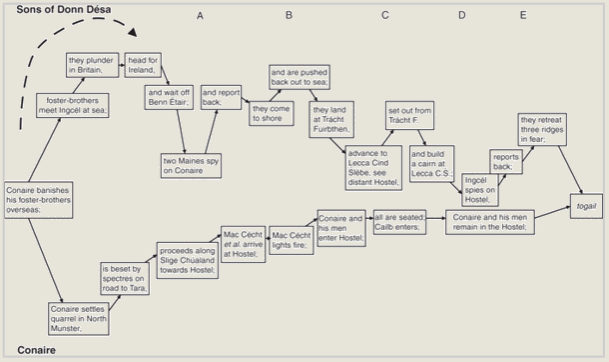

Fig. 3. The parallel trajectories of Conaire and his foster-brothers, lines 214–1421.

The plunderers sprang from Trácht Fuirbthen, and each man brought a stone with him to build a cairn […]

This sentence also provides a possible reason for their retreat: having established that the king is nearby, Ingcél and his men need to return to the beach to collect stones in order to mark their attack as an *orgain* or destruction. The retreat itself (point C) is not mentioned, hence the contradiction: either a sentence was accidentally omitted, or the author felt no need to give this information.[38]

Thus, each of the three spying-and-identification episodes is followed by a sudden retreat and return. As a whole, this pattern embodies on a physical level the tension within this crowd of plunderers. Some of them (the sons of Donn Désa and perhaps their followers) are reluctant to go ahead and attempt various delaying tactics, while others (Ingcél and the 'evildoers' around him) are determined to press on with the raid. It is of course Ingcél who prevails, and these occasional retreats only serve to underscore the line along which the plunderers are inexorably moving—a line which leads directly from the British hall of Ingcél's former king to Da Derga's Hostel in Leinster. Thanks to the force of Ingcél's demand for

a corresponding raid in Ireland, their path leads as surely to the Hostel as does Slige Chúaland itself.

Indeed, the overall trajectory traced by the sons of Donn Désa from their banishment to their return—a trajectory represented as a parabola in Fig. 2—may be seen as a large-scale equivalent of these small retreats and returns. The martial strength with which Conaire's champion Mac Cécht unwittingly drives back the plunderers on two occasions is, on one level, a literal reflection of Conaire's own power (as demonstrated earlier on in the saga) to drive them out of the country altogether. The latter expulsion is narrated twice, and on the second occasion special emphasis is placed on the force of Conaire's power: *Robaiseom do nirt 7 cumachta a n-indarba a tír Hérenn do athchor a ndíbergi allanall* (‘He had the strength and power to banish them from the land of Ireland in order to expel their plundering over there’, lines 399–401). In Irish sagas exile, especially exile in Britain, rarely occurs without a corresponding return, and this prospect is encapsulated in the ambivalence of the word *athchor* itself, which can signify both ‘expulsion’ and ‘return’ (as well as postponement).[39] Like Mac Cécht, the force of Conaire's rule can hold the enemy only temporarily at bay. Conaire's forceful expulsion of the plunderers contains their return within itself, like the throwing of a boomerang, since his action precipitates their meeting with Ingcél.

This dynamic is represented by the dotted arrow in Fig. 3. It is heavily underscored, not only by Ingcél's insistent demands for *orcain fon orgain* (‘a destruction for a destruction’, line 437), but also by the narrator, who specifically mentions (p.117) their imminent return three times. On the third occasion, such a statement—*ath-ralsat íar suidhi dochum nÉrenn* (‘after that they headed for Ireland’, line 428)—immediately precedes their arrival off Howth Head; but, on the other two occasions, these statements function more like the repeated word *innocht*, pointing ahead to the final catastrophe.[40] First, the initial narration of their banishment and the British massacre (lines 219–26) concludes:

> Do-lotar trá forsin fairrgi anall a tír nÉrenn do chuindchid orcne fon orcain sin dligistair Ingcél díb.[41]
>
> Then they came here, over the sea to the land of Ireland, to seek out a destruction for that destruction, which Ingcél was entitled to [have] from them.

More strikingly, the second narration of their banishment incorporates a similar statement out of its chronological order. The whole sentence, partially quoted above, reads as follows:

> Robaiseom do nirt 7 cumachta a n-indarba a tír Hérenn do athchor a ndíbergi allanall 7 tuidheacht doib dochum a tíre íar n-athchur a ndíbergi.[42]
>
> He [Conaire] had the strength and power to banish them from the land of Ireland in order to expel their plundering over there, and after their plundering had been expelled they came back to their land.

This sentence plays on the double meaning implicit in the word *athchor*, twice coupled with the word *díberg* to signify Conaire's forceful ‘expulsion’ of the plunderers’ activity onto foreign shores; the juxtaposition of these two words also hints at the plunderers’ inevitable return, because they now owe Ingcél *a athchor ndíbeirgi* (‘plunder in return for it [i.e. for the British plunder]’), as Ingcél himself will later point out (lines 616–17). This information about their return to Ireland is then followed by a detailed account of their initial meeting with Ingcél,[43] eventually concluding with a third iteration of the statement that the plunderers went back towards Ireland and the account of their arrival off Howth Head (line 428).

This repetition of the same basic information may derive from divergent sources, as West has suggested.[44] But within the composite structure of the extant *Togail*, the repetition plays its part within a larger strategy by which the story's momentum is sustained and its audience continually reminded of the protagonists’ fateful destination.[45]

(p.118) Interlace and Viewpoint

The most problematic feature of the repeated passage just examined is its disruption of the story's internal chronology. In the *Togail*, chronological discontinuities are manipulated to infuse individual parts of the story with a significance that reaches out beyond their due chronological placing. Events told out of sequence can indicate the direction of the story, either by recalling the seeds of events now beginning to germinate (as in a flashback) or, more commonly in the *Togail*, by showing where the narrative is heading (as in a prophecy, omen, or flash-forward).

In chapter 2 we saw how such discontinuity can help to underscore important thematic parallels or dramatic ironies by bringing two chronologically distant events into close narrative proximity. For example, the placing of Conaire's *gessi* as a flashback during his coronation at Tara (lines 168–81) indicates their defining importance for his kingship, as well as emphasizing Nemglan's status as the supreme *gaeth* (‘wise one’) (Conaire having just promised to learn wisdom *do gaethaib*, from the wise, in lines 166–7). Then, each time Conaire commits a *geis*, the narrator points us back to that defining episode by remarking that *Ba geis dosom* (‘It was *geis* for him’). The repetition of the plunderers’ exile-and-return narrative just discussed, by contrast, not only underscores the inevitability of their collision-course with Conaire, but also allows the saga-author to dramatize Ingcél's transformation into a monster and to point up unexpected parallels between Conaire's dilemma and that of his foster-brothers.[46]

These chronological discontinuities are also part of a wider pattern by which the narrative moves back and forth between Conaire's trajectory and that of his foster-brothers in order to present them as simultaneous. In this way the sense of forward momentum is convincingly preserved: the narrative progression of Conaire's group may be placed ‘on pause’ by a long lyric description or dialogue, but we are made to remember that at that very moment, the other protagonists are still moving inexorably along their designated route. This technique of switching between narrative strands, known as

‘interlace’, is well attested in other mediaeval narrative genres, including Latin historiography, vernacular epic, prose romance, and the Icelandic saga.[47]

However, the interlace of Irish saga (of which that in the *Togail* is an unusually vivid and sustained example) is less self-conscious and less transparent than that found in many of these other, generally later examples.[48] In the thirteenth-century Icelandic *Brennu-Njáls saga* (‘The Burning of Njáll’), the audience is enabled to keep track of the chronology by the saga-author's clear indications of when the narrative is doubling back on itself and precisely where it is moving to. For example, (p.119) one chapter-opening signals a narrative retreat of several months, after Þráinn Sigfússon has escaped to Iceland and settled down to his farming: *Nú er þar til at taka, er Hákon jarl missti Þráins* (‘Now it is time to take up [the story] where Earl Hákon realized Þráinn was gone’).[49] Such external narratorial pointers—what Gérard Genette calls ‘extra-diegetic’—are largely absent from the *Togail*.[50] Its narrator rarely steps outside his narrative when he departs from sequential progression, instead leaving us to infer our chronological whereabouts from a range of more allusive internal pointers.

For the modern reader, the absence of an explicit calendar of events can be disorienting. In Fig. 4 I have given an approximation of the saga's *relative* chronology, but rather than attempting precise correlations, I have designed this table to show where the third-person narrative leaps out of chronological order or *ordo naturalis* (usually leaping backwards). The descending order of events on the page represents the progression of events within the saga's implied chronology (the narratologists’ ‘fabula’), while the order in which these events are ‘shown’ or presented in the text is indicated by superscript numbers to the left of each event, with line-numbers in brackets to the right. Events narrated outside chronological order are set in bold type to draw attention to them. I have also placed gaps in the earlier part of the list to indicate where there seems to be a separation between distinct episodes, as was discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

Several events are narrated more than once, first in their chronological order and then in a different position. The most noticeable of these concerns the sequence of events in which plundering becomes rife in Ireland, Conaire banishes the miscreants, and they join forces with Ingcél to carry out an *orgain* in Britain before heading for Ireland again. The first iteration of this sequence directly follows the description of Conaire's peaceful reign in lines 182–91. Thus far it remains in chronological order. But having brought the plunderers to the point at which they turn towards Ireland, the saga switches over to Conaire's story with the words, *Lánśíth i nHérinn i flaith Conaire* (‘There was full peace in Ireland in Conaire's reign’, line 229), signalling a resumption of the peace now that the plunderers have gone. This general statement of what Ireland was like implies a slight jump back in time, since at least ten days now pass before the plunderers land in Ireland (line 234); but the narrative then resumes chronological order to follow Conaire as he violates one *geis* after another. The vision of the burning land (whether real or spectral) provides a sharp reminder of his fatal error and his foster-brothers’ depredations.

Having followed Conaire up to the point at which he meets Fer Caille and Cichuil, the narrator then doubles back sharply to give a second account of the plunderers’ activities (lines 374–428), in flashback. This repeated material—with (p.120)

(p.121) all its dramatic amplifications—concludes with the information that the plunderers are heading for Ireland. Then comes a clear chronological pointer referring to Conaire's whereabouts at that moment: *Is ann sin trá, do-luid Conaire íar Slighi Chúalann dochum na Bruidhne* (‘It is at that time, then, that Conaire was coming along Slige Chúaland towards the Hostel’, lines 429–30). The narrator presents Conaire's and his foster-brothers’ journeys as simultaneous by enclosing part of Conaire's journey within two accounts of the same phase in his foster-brothers’ movements.

Immediately after the information about Conaire just quoted, the narrator returns to the plunderers: *Is and tángadar na díbergaig co mbátar i n-airear Breag comardu*[51] *Étair forsind ḟairrgi* (‘Then the plunderers approached until they were off the coast of Bregia on a level with Howth Head, on the sea’, lines 431–2). This topographical pointer reveals that the two groups are converging.[52] Now that the plunderers are close

Fig. 4. Chronology of events narrated in the *Togail*, arranged in chronological order according to the plotline. Numbers in brackets are the line-numbers of Knott's edition; superscript numbers to the left give the order in which events are narrated in the text (as opposed to the descending order in which they are supposed to have happened). Bold type highlights those events which are narrated out of their due chronological order.

enough to spy on Conaire, such shifts between narrative strands become, effectively, shifts in narrative viewpoint concerning the same objects, namely Conaire and those around him. Up to now we have been tracking Conaire's progress from the king's viewpoint along Slige Chúaland; now, however, Maine Andoe and Maine Mílscothach spy on the king, and we watch him proceeding along the road from their viewpoint. Through their eyes the royal company appears more glorious than doomed, the litany of mountains and river-mouths over which they travel indicating Conaire's rule over the whole of Ireland:

> ‘Tá chéin,’ for Maine Milscothach.
> ‘Cid sin?’ for Maine Andoe.
> ‘Fúaim n-eachraide fo rígh ro-cluiniursa.
> ’‘Ata-chíusa tria búaid rodeirc,’ for a chéle.[53]
> ‘Cest, cid at-chísiu hi suidiu?’
> ‘At-cíusa,’ orse,
>
> ‘echrada ána aurardai
> áilde ágmara allmara
> foṡeaṅga scítha sceinmnecha
> féigi faebardhai femendae[54]
> fo réim fo-crotha
> mórcealtar talman.
> Dor-riagat ilardae
> uisscib indberaib ingantaib.’
>
> (p.122) ‘Cit n-é uisce 7 ardae 7 indbera do-riadhad?’

‘Ní anse:

‘Indein, Cult, Cuilten,
Mafat, Amatt, Iarmafat,
Findi, Goisce, Guistine.
Gaí glas húas chairptib;
calca détt for sliastaib;
scéith airgdidi húas uillib;
leth ruith 7 leth gabra.
Étaigi cach n-oendatha umpu […]’

‘Tongusa a toinges mo thúath,’ for fer ind rodeirc, ‘is slabra nach suithchernai in sin. Is hí mo airdmes de, is é Conaire mac Etirscél co formnaib fear nÉrenn imme do-rét in tsligi.’[55]

‘Listen!’ said Maine Mílscothach.
‘What is it?’ said Maine Andoe.
‘I hear the sound of horses bearing a king.’
‘I see them with my gift of far sight,’ said his companion.
‘So what do you see there?’
‘I see,’ he said,

‘Glorious, lofty horse-troops,
Splendid, warlike, awesome,
Slender, weary, nimble,
Keen, spirited, eager,
On a course which shakes
The earth's great mantle.
They ride on many heights,
By waters and wondrous river-mouths.’

‘Which are the waters and heights and river-mouths that they ride across?’

‘Easily told:

‘Indein, Cult, Cuilten,
Mafat, Amatt, Iarmafat,
Findi, Goisce, Guistine.
Grey spears over chariots,
Ivoried swords on thighs,
Silvered shields over elbows,
Half on wheels, half on horseback,
Clothes of every hue upon them […]’

> ‘I swear what my people swear,’ said the far-sighted man, ‘that is the herd of some generous lord. This is my judgement of it: it is Conaire mac Eterscéle who rides along the road, with the best of the men of Ireland about him.’

Direct speech has gradually been taking on a more significant role in the narrative, but it has only just begun to erupt into poetry (with the laconic prophetic poems uttered by the three red horsemen). In Maine Andoe's description a more expansive form of lyricism makes its way into direct speech for the first time, already seen in (p.123) the third-person descriptions of Étaín and of Conaire's perfect reign. Even as the Otherworldly imagery darkens around the king in his own strand of the story, he is repeatedly presented from the plunderers’ viewpoint in all his sovereign splendour. Both dynamics will find their culmination in the multifaceted composite image of Conaire at the centre of the description-sequence.

We have seen how the narrator homes in on Conaire and his fate by tightening the chronological gaps between narrated events, enabling the audience to scrutinize closely the king's behaviour and demeanour in his final hours. This focus is now enhanced by his subjection *within* the tale to the gaze of various spies and watchers. Increasingly, events reach us through hostile eyes, and in direct speech, rather than through the omniscient third-person narrator, until at last the baleful eye of Ingcél becomes the window through which half of the tale is told.[56] The procession of direct-speech descriptions of Conaire operates more on a symbolic than a mimetic level, their colourful formulae not merely presenting Conaire but representing the significance of his kingship in heightened language. The dreamer at the *tarbḟeis* sees a vision of the future king in the innocence of youth, walking towards Tara with a stone in his sling like a latter-day David on his way to meet Goliath (lines 130–2). Hereafter, all the watchers are hostile: the two Maines, then all the plunderers looking at the Hostel from afar, and finally Ingcél, whose unusually comprehensive scrutiny carries an almost physical force (see lines 1049–66, 1175–80).

By propelling this cumulative shift away from a third-person viewpoint, the interlace technique plays an important part in binding together the two halves of the saga. Nor should we lose sight of the more obvious dramatic possibilities of interlace. From the point where the two Maines spy on Conaire to the point at which the plunderers are facing the Hostel, the narrative switches from one strand to the other with increasing frequency, contributing to the rising tension. One inevitably speaks of such narratives ‘cutting’ between strands, using the modern language of film, although mediaeval examples litter the Icelandic sagas.

After the two Maines have reported what they saw, the ships move in to shore. A brief cut back to the Conaire-strand then shows that one of his men, Mac Cécht, has already reached the Hostel: *In tan ro ngabsat na curaig tír, is and robuí Mac Cécht oc béim i mBruidin Da Derga* (‘When the boats landed, Mac Cécht was lighting [a fire] in Da Derga's Hostel’, lines 479–80).[57] The narrator here provides an explicit pointer to underscore the simultaneity of the two actions. At once he cuts back to the plunderers to reveal that the noise from the spark drives the boats out to sea: having been close enough to send out scouts, the two groups are now close enough to hear each other, so that what happens in one group has physical repercussions on the other. For the sons of Donn Désa, this noise makes it seem all the more likely that Conaire is nearby, and they express this fear in response to the third of a series of three explanations (lines 491–2).

(p.124) The same process is then repeated from the other perspective. Ingcél's boats put in to shore again, and the narrative cuts at once to the Hostel:

> A ṅgloim ro lásat na trí .lll. curach[58] oc tuidecht i tír for-rochrad Bruidean Dá Dergae[59] coná roibe gaí for ailching inte acht ro láiseat grith co mbátar for lár in tigi uili.[60]
>
> The noise which the three fifties of boats made coming in to land shook Da Derga's Hostel so that not a spear

> remained on the rack in there, but they all clattered and fell to the floor of the house.

Conaire and his men are still approaching the Hostel, but they too hear the ominous noise, and the men ask him what it means. Conaire offers his own triad of possible explanations, finishing with the unhappy possibility that his foster-brothers are on the warpath (lines 500–6).[61] A third noise-reaction sequence now ensues:

> Is and ránic Conaire co mbuí hi faichchi na Bruidne.
>
> In tan ron-chúala Mac Cécht in fothronn ata lais roptar óic táncatar co a muntir. La sodain for-ling a gaiscead dia chobair. Aidblithir leó bid torandchleas trí cét a chuicligi oc forlaimm a gaiscid.[62]
>
> Then Conaire arrived on the Hostel's green.
>
> When Mac Cécht heard the din, he thought warriors had set upon his people. With that, he leapt for[63] his weapons to help them. They thought his spring and leap for his weapons as mighty as the thunder-feat of three hundred.

By now the narrative interlace has made it apparent that both groups are operating at very close quarters—so close, in fact, that ambiguities creep into this third noise-reaction sequence. The *fothronn* (‘din’) to which Mac Cécht reacts could be the noise of the plunderers’ boats, or it could be the bustle of Conaire's very large company arriving outside—or both. It is also difficult to identify the ‘they’, implied in the word *leó*, who find Mac Cécht's leap so noisy: it is likely that these are Conaire and his men, standing outside the Hostel, but the plunderers could also have heard the noise. Again, both groups may be implied. The constant cutting back and forth in these few lines, combined with the emphasis on huge crashing sounds, dramatizes at once the proximity of the two groups and the scale of the approaching catastrophe. The very large numbers and formidable qualities of the converging groups are again underlined by the wording of the next two (p.125) events: Ingcél leads his five thousand men ashore *7 .x.c. in cach míli* (‘and ten hundred in every thousand’, lines 513–23),

while Da Derga welcomes Conaire and his men into the Hostel with the words *Cid formna fear nÉrind do-thaístis lat ros-mbiadfaindsea* (‘even though the bulk of the men of Ireland were to come with you, I would feed them’, lines 533–4).

The focus now remains for a time on Conaire's company in the Hostel, giving space for the king's encounter with the seeress Cailb and the fear it generates among his men.[64] But the plunderers continue to approach. In lines 580–1 the narrator cuts back to their landing, then brings them inland as far as Lecca Cind Ślébe. They are now close enough not only to hear the noises from the Hostel but also to see its firelight, thus causing the last of Conaire's *gessi* to be violated. The narrative then switches back to the Hostel-dwellers, but in a different manner from that of previous episodes. This passage begins as a narratorial intrusion, like an extended gloss, giving background information on the etymology of the word *bruiden* and on Conaire's usual custom of having a fire lit at night:

> Bithóbéla trá in Bruidin. Is aire at-berar bruidin dí, ar is cosmail fri beólu fir oc cor bruidne.[65]
>
> Ba mór in tene ad-suíthi oc Conaire cach n-aidchi .i. torc cailli. Seacht ndorais as. In tan don-iscide crand assa thaíb ba méit daig ṅdairthaigi cach tob no théiged for cach ndorus. Ro bátar .uii. carbait dég de chairptib Conaire fri cach ndorus don tig 7 ba hairecna don aes na deiccsin[66] in tsuillse mór sin tria asna drochu na carbut.
>
> ‘Samailti lat, a Ḟir Rogain,’ for Iñgcél. ‘Císí suillse mór sucut?’[67]
>
> The Hostel was always open. It was called a *bruiden* because it looked like the mouth of a man quarrelling.
>
> Great was the fire which used to be lit by Conaire each night,[68] that is, a wild boar. It had seven outlets. When a tree was drawn from its side, each spurt of flame issuing from each outlet was the size of an oratory on fire. There were seventeen of Conaire's chariots at every door of the house, and that great light was visible to the watchers through the chariots’ wheels.

> ‘Identify that, Fer Rogain,’ said Ingcél. ‘What is that great light there?’

(p.126) In this passage the dispassionate voice of the controlling narrator, standing outside the story, subtly shifts its stance so that it ends up in the thick of events. In an example of what narratologists call ‘embedded focalization’, the narrator's voice presents the Hostel from the viewpoint of the plunderers outside, in a movement which gravitates at last into direct speech and the charged dialogue of another identification-scene.[69] The turning-point in this shift is the simile likening the flames to *daig ṅdairthaigi* (‘an oratory on fire’), so reminiscent of ecclesiastical accounts of *díberg* and Viking raids.[70] Later in the saga, the plunderers will play out this simile by setting the Hostel on fire three times; for the moment, they are still gazing at it from a distance, and their moment of choice has not yet come. Placed where it is, this simile offers a narratorial comment on the plunderers’ dilemma: Conaire's foster-brothers cannot face the thought of dishonouring their pledge with Ingcél, but to kill their foster-brother and king would be a violation of sacred ties no less grave than destroying a church.

From the Hostel-dwellers looking fearfully out at Cailb, our viewpoint has now switched to that of the plunderers apprehensively looking in; we shall not return to the king's viewpoint until the battle itself.[71] The Hostel-dwellers’ mounting fear is now sustained by the sons of Donn Désa, who punctuate the next eight hundred lines with their own cries of grief. At the end of the passage just quoted, Ingcél forces Fer Rogain to admit that the great fire is probably Conaire's, and Fer Rogain resumes his earlier mantra: *Ní thuchtha Día and inocht in fer hísin. Is líach* (‘May God not bring that man there tonight! It is grievous’, line 594). Ingcél then pointedly asks him, *Cid ahé libse a flaithius ind ḟir sin i tír nÉrenn?* (‘What do you think of that man's reign in Ireland?’, line 595).[72] Fer Rogain's response, like the report made by the scout Maine Andoe, is lyrical and elaborate:

> ‘Is maith a flaith,’ ol Fer Rogain. ‘Ní taudchad nél tar gréin ó gabais flaith ó medón erraich co medón fogmair,

> 7 ní taudchaid banna drúchtae di ḟeór co medón laí, 7 ní fascnan gaemgaeth[73] cairchech cethrae co nónae, 7 ní foruích mac tibhri ina flaith tar ag fireand cacha indise ón chind mblíadnae co araill. 7 ataat .uii. meic thíri i ṅgiallnai fri raigid ina thigseom fri coimét in rechtai sin 7 atá cúlaitiri íarna cul .i. Macc Locc 7 is é taccair[74] tar a cend hi tig Conaire. Is ina flaith is combind la cach fer guth arailli 7 betis téta mendchrot ar febus na cána 7 in tñída 7 in chaínchomraic fil sethnu na Hérind. Is (p.127) ina flaith ataat na trí bairr for Érind .i. barr dés 7 barr scoth 7 barr measa.[75] Ní thuca Día and anocht in fearsin. Is líach.[76] Is muc reme-tuit mes.'[77]
>
> 'Good is his reign,' said Fer Rogain. 'Since he took the kingship, not a cloud has veiled the sun from the middle of spring to the middle of autumn, not a drop of dew has fallen from the grass before midday, no winter wind ruffles a cow's tail before noon, and in his reign no wolf harms more than one bull-calf in every byre from the end of one year to the end of the next. There are seven wolves held as hostages against the wall in his house to uphold that law, and there is a further surety behind them: Macc Locc. He is the one who pleads on their behalf in Conaire's house. It is in his reign that everyone finds each other's voice as sweet as harpstrings, because of the excellence of the law, peace, and goodwill which exist throughout Ireland. It is in his reign that Ireland enjoys the three crops: a crop of corn, a crop of flowers, and a crop of acorns. May God not bring that man there tonight! It is grievous. He is a pig who falls before the acorns fall.'

King and foster-brothers are unbearably close to collision, as has been underlined by the interlace techniques binding them ever closer together and the crushing momentum propelling them on. All this tension now erupts into an impassioned lyrical outburst, which strongly recalls the narrator's earlier eulogy of Conaire's reign (lines 182–91), likewise laden with images of fine weather, fertility, and happiness, down to the detail of the undisturbed cows' tails. Fer Rogain's eulogy not only repeats some of the formulae used in the earlier passage,

but—as is the way of such descriptions in this saga—amplifies them.

There are bitter ironies in the fact that this second eulogy is made by Fer Rogain. He echoes the narrator's phrase *imbet caínchomraic* (‘an abundance of goodwill’, lit. ‘of peaceful meetings’, line 186), but his own imminent meeting with Conaire will hardly be peaceful. He echoes the narrator's phrase *mes co ṅgluine* (‘acorns up to the knee’, line 184), but then transforms this abundance of acorns into a proverbial image of untimely death.[78] The presence of wolves in this vision of sovereignty likewise mixes in darker currents relating to the traditional wolvish associations of *díberg* discussed in the previous chapter. Even in this idealized state of peace and plenty, one bull-calf per byre will be harmed every year. Fer Rogain's description here recalls his own thieving narrated much earlier (just after the narrator's eulogy of Conaire's reign), when he and his foster-brothers had stolen three animals from a single farm each year, including one calf (lines 194–7). In Fer Rogain's eulogy, of course, Conaire is said to have the wolves under control:[79] their annual depredation (p.128) is committed as part of a legal agreement between Conaire and the wolves, whereas the thieving committed by the wolvish sons of Donn Désa had been committed in defiance of Conaire's rule.

Both eulogies of Conaire's peaceful reign occupy pivotal positions in the saga's structure. The narrator's eulogy comes just before Conaire makes his first mistake as king and just before we are shown that his interests are now in conflict with those of his foster-brothers; Fer Rogain's eulogy comes immediately after Conaire has violated the last of his *gessi* and just before the king and his foster-brothers meet again as enemies. The intervening episodes, in which Conaire's *fír flathemon* is inexorably destroyed, are thus sandwiched between identical, static images of perfect sovereignty which both hark back to the opening description of the beautiful Étaín and anticipate some of the content of Conaire's extended tableau in the second half. The direct recapitulation of all this imagery in Fer Rogain's eulogy gives it the function of a punctuation-mark in the narrative: the wheel has come full

circle, and it is time for the story to move to its destined conclusion. The plunderers' threefold formal decision to perpetrate an *orgain* upon the Hostel follows directly on from this passage (lines 620–68), and during this procedure Ingcél goes to spy on the Hostel through the very *drochu na carbat* ('chariots' wheels', line 644) which the narrator mentioned in his earlier description of the Hostel and its great fire. Plunderers and Hostel-dwellers have all but converged: the only way of getting closer than this is to attack the Hostel.

At this point, of course, Conaire's foster-brothers pull their final trick to stave off the inevitable, by insisting that Ingcél describe everyone inside the Hostel first (lines 660–1). The description-sequence opens, and the saga shifts into a very different narrative world. Yet this shift is not unprepared for. As we have seen in this chapter, the scene-changes have long been working away beneath the surface of the narrative, broadening the stylistic register to reintroduce the lyrical descriptive vein with which the saga had begun, increasing the proportion of direct speech, and compelling the audience to view events more and more through the eyes of the enemy. The description-sequence thus comes not as a surprise, but as the magnificent climax of several interwoven processes.

In this chapter I have set out a number of different directional and focalizing techniques by which the momentum of the *Togail* is built up in its first half. Its chronological tightening, its obsessive re-delineation of the two groups' trajectories, and its interlaced representation of the convergence of these two groups all combine to produce an inexorable sense of onward movement towards an inevitable end-point. The tragic and catastrophic nature of that end-point, however, is most effectively conveyed by two further devices to be examined in the next chapter: omens and prophecies. These devices are particularly important to the architecture of the *Togail*, partly because they occur within the diegesis or narrative world of the saga and thus contribute directly to the protagonists' rising sense of fear and tension. Moreover, they offer a vital source of imagery (often riddling and densely layered) with which both we and the protagonists of the saga are invited to interpret the significance of what is happening.

Notes:

([1]) This trajectory has been discussed in relation to encounters with one-eyed men by Borsje, ‘Approaching Danger’, pp. 86–7.

([2]) Y's reading is not intelligible, and Knott emended with reference to D's *fanacbat* (‘they leave him’, MS, fol. 79v). The latter is also the reading of A (MS, fol. 5r) and (with orthographic variation) E (MS, fol. 18v).

([3]) This link is not merely a literary-critical construct: the narrator signals it immediately after the foster-brothers’ exile by inserting the flash-forward describing their fatal pact with Ingcél (lines 219–28) as a direct consequence of their exile. See also Knott, *Togail*, p. 76.

([4]) On the Leinster connections see Charles-Edwards, ‘*Geis*’, pp. 42–3.

([5]) The battle does not, as William Sayers suggests (‘Charting Conceptual Space’, p. 47), last for three days.

([6]) This sense of acceleration has been noted by McCone, *Pagan Past*, p. 117.

([7]) H2 (MS, p. 478), has *ing* (‘hardly’) instead of *ingnad* (‘strange’), but *ing* makes no sense and the scribe may have omitted the *-nad* because of seeing the next word, *mad*.

([8]) The word *bróntech*, like *brónach*, derives from the root *brón* (‘sorrow’). In ‘An Edition’, p. 790, West points out that the word is unattested elsewhere and discusses how *bróntech* could be an adjective formed from *brón*, but instead proposes an alternative interpretation, splitting the word up into *brón* and *tech* (‘house’). The phrase is Ingcél's: he also uses the adjective *brónach* to describe those listening to the weeping of Conaire's son Lé Fer Flaith (line 1122). Conaire uses the same word to describe his attackers’ state of mind in his lay: *bróncha fíanna* (‘sorrowful *fían*-warriors’, line 1053).

([9]) E (MS, fol. 20r) here lacks *innocht*, but it is present in Y, D, U, and H2.

([10]) On this figure, see Próinséas Ní Chatháin, ‘Swineherds, Seers, and Druids’, *Studia Celtica*, 14–15 (1979–80), 200–11; West, ‘An Edition’, pp. 73–4.

([11]) The words from *roborficba* to *bachlach* are supplied from U (lines 6834–5). They are not in Y (line 368), D (MS, fol. 80v), or E (MS, fol. 20r), as discussed by West (‘An Edition’, p. 741). The resulting syntax, with its dangling *ar* (‘for’), does not make sense. It seems likely that a scribe at an earlier period during the text's transmission omitted some words here because of the resemblance between *roborficba* and *roticfa*: U's version may represent the original (its preservation of *roborficba* suggests this), but it is possibly a creative intervention designed to restore the sense (as is the case with the version in Recension III, discussed in ibid.).

([12]) U has a first person plural form, *rotficbam* (‘we will come to you’, line 6835).

([13]) Lines 361–9. Manuscript-texts: Y (MS, cols. 721–2); U, lines 6829–36; D (MS, fols. 80r–80v); E (MS, fol. 20r); H2 (MS, p. 478, ending at *fáilti* ‘welcomes’).

([14]) Conaire is referring to himself in the third person (West, ‘An Edition’, p. 741).

([15]) At *co ndecha m’aídidecht* (‘until hospitality is given me’, line 568), U (line 6987 n.) has a gloss explaining the meaning of *co ndecha*. H2 (MS, p. 479) follows the four-word phrase with the words *a norcuinich* (or *anorcuinich*), which is obscure to me but may perhaps be related to the words *onóir* (‘honour’) or *orgain* (‘destruction’). D renders this phrase *co tomliur m’oigidecht latsa* (‘until my hospitality from you is consumed’, MS, fol. 81r). The basic meaning is the same: the woman demands immediate hospitality. See Knott, *Togail*, p. 82; West, ‘An Edition’, p. 753; and chapter 5, note 48, below.

([16]) Lines 568–71. Manuscript-texts: Y (col. 725), and U, D, H2 as above.

([17]) See Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes*, pp. 47–56; Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, pp. 89–94. ‘Samain’ is also first among the additional names of Cailb (line 556).

([18]) D (MS, fol. 81r) has *ni faigfimis ni inocht damtis iat* (‘we would not fear anything tonight that they endured’). The syntax here is obscure.

([19]) *Batar* may be an error for the future form *bat* in the archetype; it may alternatively be translated as a modal past, on which see E. G. Quin, ‘The Irish Modal Preterite’, *Hermathena*, 117 (Summer 1974), 43–62. I here follow Borsje, *The Celtic Evil Eye*, p. 297.

([20]) Further foreboding references to *innocht* recur at lines 1127 and 1174, besides those already cited.

([21]) In U, this ‘final’ sentence is followed by three further sentences about the cairn (lines 8001–4).

([22]) D, E, and H2 all have *no*, which I here use to interpret Y's reading *nać*. Knott prints *no*.

([23]) Following Knott, I read *ardu* as a variant on *árdó* (from *ad-doí*, ‘lights’; Knott, *Togail*, p. 78). U has the possibly synonymous *co n-árlór* (see *DIL*, s.v. *-árlór*). D, E, and H2 have variants on the synonymous Middle Irish form *co n-atar*. On these variants see West, ‘An Edition’, p. 727.

([24]) Lines 285–6. Manuscript-texts: Y (MS, col. 720); U, line 6777; D (MS, fol. 80r); E (MS, fol. 19v); H2 (MS, p. 478). Mac Cécht's direction is doubly emphasized in H2, with the additional preposition *riut* (‘before you’) after *tíagsa*.

([25]) For *téit co téit* (‘it goes until it goes’), D and E have the later form *dotaet* (‘it comes’).

([26]) U amplifies this sentence by adding the words *is crich a tribe chuci* at the beginning, making the first part of the sentence (up to *taí*) mean ‘the road you are on [going] towards him is the boundary of his establishment’). Knott prints the last word *[t]sligi*.

([27]) The significance of this statement seems to be reflected in H2, which places Mac Cécht's sentence just quoted at the start of a new line, with a large majuscule **IN** set well back

into the left-hand margin. For a mythological interpretation of the roads in the *Togail*, see Bondarenko, ‘Дороги и знание’; *idem*, ‘Roads and Knowledge’.

([28]) It is indeed marked as an episode proper in H2 (MS, p. 478), which has a subheading here: *Tocim na tri derg* (‘The Progress of the Three Reds’). U does not signal the beginning of the episode, but concludes it with a similar remark in the text (lines 6817–18).

([29]) Lines 287–9. H2 (MS, p. 478) emphasizes the fact that the riders are heading for the Hall by having *na bruidne* (‘the Hostel’) instead of *in tigi* (‘the house’), and having an additional *dochum na bruidne* (‘towards the Hostel’) after *Chúaland*. The other texts are Y, U, D, and E.

([30]) The reason Conaire gives for this statement, *hua ro-essa indarboe in tríar sin* (line 340) is one of the more puzzling passages in this saga: *ro-essa* is obscure, and Knott may have been correct to suggest that the passage could have been ‘partly illegible’ in the archetype (*Togail*, p. 79 n. 340). West follows Knott (ibid.) in proposing that *ro-essa* derives from *at-roí* (‘fails’), which would yield a literal meaning of ‘since repelling has failed those three’ (Máire West, pers. comm., slightly altering her suggested translation). *Indarboe* can also be translated ‘banishment’, and later (lines 1331–6) we learn that the three riders have already been banished in a sense (condemned to be destroyed as punishment for committing a falsehood in the *síd*-mounds).

([31]) Again the destination is further emphasized in H2, which has *na bruidne* (‘the Hostel’ (MS, p. 478)) instead of *in tigi* (‘the house’).

([32]) Here H2 (MS, p. 478) has the additional phrase *eter ges 7 nemgeis* (‘both *geis* and not-*geis* [to Conaire]’).

([33]) Lines 341–2.

([34]) In lines 1331–6 Fer Rogain reveals that these three red horsemen have come to fulfil their own destruction as well as Conaire's.

([35]) Lines 344–6. Manuscript-texts as in note 13 above.

([36]) West, ‘Genesis’, pp. 428–32. Nettlau (‘On the Irish Text’, pp. 454–5) also considered this passage to be a doublet.

([37]) Lines 620–2.

([38]) I discuss this question in my forthcoming article, ‘Compilation as Creative Artistry’.

([39]) *DIL*, s.v. *athchor*. In the lines quoted, Knott prints *Romboísom*, following D (fol. 80v).

([40]) Borsje (‘Approaching Danger’, p. 87) mentions the dramatic function of this particular repetition.

([41]) Lines 227–8. Manuscript-texts: Y, U, D, E, H2.

([42]) Lines 399–402. Manuscript-texts: Y, U, D, E.

([43]) In U (lines 6881–2) this account also includes information about Ingcél's *fingal* in Britain and adds *amal ro ráidsem reond* (‘as we mentioned earlier’).

([44]) West, ‘Genesis’, pp. 431–2.

([45]) Compare the analysis of repetition as a narrative technique by Dorothy Dilts Swartz, ‘Stylistic Parallels between the Middle Irish Epic *Táin Bó Cúalnge* in the Book of Leinster and in Twelfth-Century Neo-Classical Rhetoric with an Excursus upon the Personality of the Redactor’, Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1983, pp. 71–104; Mac Cana, ‘An Instance’; *idem*, ‘Notes on Structure and Syntax’.

([46]) On Ingcél's monstrous appearance, see chapter 5.

([47]) John Leyerle, ‘The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*’, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 37 (1967), 1–13, reprinted in R. D. Fulk, ed., *Interpretations of Beowulf: A Critical Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 146–67; Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance*, pp. 68–98; Carol J. Clover, *The Medieval Saga* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

([48]) On flashback in other Irish texts, see Tristram, ‘Mimesis and Diegesis’, pp. 267–8.

([49]) Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga* (Reykjavik: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1954), p. 220 (chapter 89).

([50]) Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980); see also Tristram, ‘Mimesis and Diegesis’. U is a partial exception to the pattern mentioned here, but it still contains markedly few external pointers by comparison with the *Lebor na hUidre* text of the *Táin*.

([51]) Y (MS, col. 723) is alone in having *comardu* (‘on a level with’, literally ‘as high as’). The other texts all have variants of *comardae* (‘alongside’): U, line 6887, D (MS, fol. 80v), E (MS, fol. 20v). See West, ‘An Edition’, p. 744.

([52]) Note the use of the verbs *do-icc* and *do-téit* (‘comes’) to describe both Conaire's and his foster-brothers’ movements. Unlike *téit* (‘goes’), these verbs presuppose a narrative viewpoint towards which both groups are approaching, a viewpoint equated with Da Derga's Hall in line 430. Not only does this usage enhance the momentum, but it implies that both groups are approaching each other. Zimmer (‘Keltische Studien 5’, pp. 577–8) interpreted this and other extra-diegetic ‘pointers’ as evidence that the author was switching from one source to another.

([53]) For *a chéle* (‘said his companion’), D and E have *ar Maine Andoe* (‘said Maine Andoe’).

([54]) Y and U have *femendae* (‘eager’); D and E have *ceinindae* and *cindfindai* respectively, which may mean ‘white-headed’.

([55]) Lines 447–61 and 467–70, which I have partly lineated as verse. Manuscript-texts: Y (MS, col. 723); D (MS, fol. 80v); U, lines 6898–6915; E (MS, fol. 20v).

([56]) Eichhorn-Mulligan, ‘*Togail Bruidne Da Derga*’, p. 1.

([57]) Y (MS, col. 723) lacks the reference to a fire, probably by mistaken omission. The other texts (U and D) have *béim tened* (‘lighting a fire’), which Knott silently adopted.

([58]) Instead of *trí .lll. curach* (‘three fifties of boats’), D has simply *na barcu* (‘the boats’).

([59]) Instead of the words from *oc* to *Dergae*, D has *dochum thire rola in bruiden uile i cor 7 i crichnagad* (‘[coming] to land put the whole Hall into *cor* [overthrowing?] and *críchnugad* [settling?]’).

([60]) Lines 496–9. Manuscript-texts: Y (MS, col. 724); U, lines 6934–7; D (MS, fol. 81r). D has *Bruidne Da Dergae* instead of the final words *in tigi uili* (‘all […] of the house’).

([61]) The ominous significance of these noises is discussed in the next chapter.

([62]) Lines 507–12. D (MS, fol. 81r) has *gabais* (‘seized’) and *a gabail* (‘his seizing [of]’) instead of *for-ling* (‘leapt [for]’) and the final *oc forlaimm* (‘his leap [for]’). U contains an additional comment at the end: *Ní baí báa di sodain de sin* (‘Nothing came of that’, lines 6946–7).

([63]) Literally, ‘leapt upon’. According to Knott (*Togail*, p. 82), the weapons (*gaisced*) were originally the subject and did the leaping themselves: on this motif, see Jacqueline Borsje, ‘Omens, Ordeals and Oracles: On Demons and Weapons in Early Irish Texts’, *Peritia*, 13 (1999), 224–48, pp. 229–31.

([64]) See the discussion in chapter 5.

([65]) U also offers an alternative etymology (lines 6998–9): *no bruden .i. bruthen .i. en bruthe inte* (‘or *bruiden*, that is, *bruthen*, that is, “water of brewing” [broth] in it’), discussed by West (‘An Edition’, p. 754).

([66]) U gives the additional information that the plunderers were watching *ona long* or *ona longaib* (‘from their ships’, line 7004 and n.), suggesting that the plunderers have now gone

back out to sea again. There is no suggestion of this retreat in the other texts.

([67]) Lines 582–92. Manuscript-texts: Y (MS, col. 725), U (lines 6997–7006), D (MS, fol. 81r), H2 (MS, p. 479).

([68]) West (‘Genesis’, p. 418) takes this sentence as implying that Conaire stayed in Da Derga's Hall for more than one night, resulting in a narrative inconsistency, but the imperfect tense of *ad-suíthi* makes it more likely that this sentence (like its neighbours) is providing background information about the kind of fire Conaire was accustomed to (in Tara or wherever he might be) in order to explain why such a great light was visible on this particular night. See my forthcoming article, ‘Compilation as Creative Artistry’. See Hildegard L. C. Tristram, *Tense and Time in Early Irish Narrative* (Innsbruck: Institut für Sprachwissenschaft der Universität Innsbruck, 1983), p. 13.

([69]) On embedded focalization in epic narrative, see Irene J. F. de Jong, *Narrators and Focalizers: The Presentation of the Story in the* Iliad (Amsterdam: Grüner, 1987), pp. 107–10; René Nünlist, ‘The Homeric Scholia on Focalization’, *Mnemosyne*, series 4, 56 (2003), 61–71.

([70]) See chapter 3, pp. 84–5.

([71]) Apart from two of the tableaux in the description-sequence which contain direct speech by Conaire—but these, too, are focalized through Ingcél and reported in his speeches.

([72]) H2 has the following version of this sentence: *Cisi turcurta flatha ind fir sin?* (‘What is the prosperity of that man's reign?’ (MS, p. 479)).

([73]) With Knott (*Togail*, p. 83 n. 600), I read *gaemgaeth* as a variant of *gamgaeth* (‘winter wind’); Knott suggested that this reading could simply be an error. It is unique to Y and is probably not original: D, U, and H2 all have *gaeth* (‘wind’).

([74]) D has *tacras a dal* (‘who pleads their case’).

([75]) In U the order of the two sentences beginning *Is ina flaith* (‘It is in his reign [that]’) is reversed.

([76]) U has *Is líach a orgain* (‘Grievous is his destruction’).

([77]) Lines 597–611. Manuscript-texts: Y (MS, col. 725); U, lines 7009–22; D (MS, fols. 81r–81v); H2 (MS, p. 479).

([78]) The acorn-crop was important to farmers, being used to fatten up pigs, so that a pig who died before the acorns fell from the trees was symbolic of lost opportunity: see Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming: A Study Based Mainly on the Law-texts of the 7th and 8th Centuries AD* (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1997), p. 83.

([79]) As noted by West (‘Aspects of *díberg*’, p. 962): ‘Conaire may have had the wolves under control but not the wolf-emulators’. In ‘OIr. *Olc*’, pp. 173–4, Kim McCone has suggested that the term *meic thíri* (lit. ‘sons of the earth’, here translated ‘wolves’) itself originally denoted outlaws or *díbergaig*. See also Carey, ‘Werewolves’, pp. 68–70.