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Inside Out... and Upside Down: Cú Chulainn and his *ríastrad*

Introduction: Of Bodies and Borders

Within the corpus of early Irish literature, there is no other figure who masters “playing the hero” quite as well as the Ulster warrior Cú Chulainn.¹ While he appears in various texts of the heroic Ulster Cycle tradition, his most famous exploits are those narrated in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (“The Cattle Raid of Cooley”, henceforth referred to as *TBC*).² Despite being the longest and most important medieval Irish prose-epic (Tristram 465-466), its narrative plot is quickly recounted as it corresponds to the group of tales referred to as *tána bó* (Sg. *táin bó*), which centre on the custom of “driving away” (i.e. stealing) cattle. In *TBC*, the army of the western province of Connacht, led by Queen Medb and King Ailill, invades the northern province of Ulster to drive away the *Donn Cúailnge* (“The brown bull of Cooley”). Ulster is left particularly vulnerable at this time because almost all of its adult warriors are suffering from a mysterious illness, the *ces noíden*, which renders them unable to fight. The defence of the province is therefore left entirely to the – still boyish – warrior Cú Chulainn, who thus proves the ultimate protector of land and people. For he strikes a deal with the Connacht army: he will face any of their warriors in single-combat and, if he is victorious, they will not advance further on that day. The resulting single-combat encounters provide ample opportunity to outline Cú Chulainn’s heroic character, as various ‘heroic traits’ (control of weapons, physical strength, noble conduct etc.) are foregrounded and explored in the individual fights. Needless to say, Cú Chulainn excels in all of them and successfully holds off the Connacht forces until the Ulstermen recover and come to his aid in the final climactic battle.

Yet while at first glance Cú Chulainn appears as the archetypical defender and saviour of his province and the text openly celebrates his martial heroism (Ó Cathasaigh, *Sister’s Son* 156), a

closer look at this unique heroic figure reveals a more complex picture. Of course, Cú Chulainn lives up to his name, “The Hound of Culann”, by assuming all the protective qualities usually assigned to guard dogs in early Irish literature.³ But because of this canine connection, he at times also appears as an exceptionally challenging figure which borders on the animalistic and evades total control. Nowhere is this more apparent than when he is in his *ríastrad*, a battle-frenzy which has most poignantly been called “a visual reflection of disorder” (Moore 158). When distorted, Cú Chulainn undergoes a spectacular bodily metamorphosis and begins to attack both friend and foe because he loses the ability to distinguish between them. At these times, he consequently poses a threat “to order on both an individual and a social level” (Lowe, *Kicking* 119) and shifts from stabilising his social network (by defending his province and his people) to threatening it from within. The detailed descriptions which *TBC* presents of Cú Chulainn and his heroic fury have led to diverging assessments of the hero. On the one hand, Alan Bruford has suggested that Cú Chulainn is “a forerunner of the comic book ‘Super-hero’” (202), an inflated figure reflecting the tendency of Irish literature to “exaggerate for effect” (203). On the other hand Jeremy Lowe has foregrounded the moments in which the hero becomes abject and consequently asks how a true hero can be “such a monster” (*Kicking* 121). The concept of the *ríastrad* clearly questions Cú Chulainn’s status as the archetypical and “pre-eminent hero of the tribe” (ibid. 121). Furthermore, it touches on even more complex concerns at various points in the text: It may incite reflection on the very concept of a hero, his relation to violence and his position in society by exploring the boundaries which (apparently) define these concepts.⁴

Based on these observations, the present paper aims to investigate how and why Cú Chulainn can pose such a challenge to the traditional

concept of heroism by examining a hitherto rather neglected subject in early Irish literature: the hero's body. Within Irish Studies, the concept that "[t]he body of the warrior hero is [...] itself a field of signs" (Dooley 34) and can therefore be 'read' by the modern researcher is a relatively recent one. In order to foreground Cú Chulainn's body, two separate issues will be discussed here in a contextualised close reading of *TBC*. Firstly, it will be examined how Cú Chulainn's excessive strength and particularly the control of this strength is a major challenge for him and his society. His uncontrolled aggression during the *ríastrad* may exemplify what happens when heroic strength is misdirected and suddenly causes destruction within the hero's own society. In discussing this topic, several references will also be made to Cú Chulainn's canine affiliations, as they may be relevant in understanding his inherent potential for conflict. Secondly, Cú Chulainn's appearance will be examined in light of the fact that early Irish literature appears to have a coherent and elaborate system of physical description which can express identity on various levels. These "Politics of Anatomy", Amy Mulligan argues in her study of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* ("The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel", *TBDD*), mean that certain physical features can express both the social standing and the moral disposition of a literary character. It is interesting to examine Cú Chulainn in light of these findings in order to determine to what extent his body fits within these categories or if he in fact challenges these boundaries. Both performative and descriptive bodily aspects are therefore discussed in order to explore this extraordinary hero who at times enforces, at times challenges and at times transgresses the cultural (and intra-textually social) perception of medieval Irish heroes.

Take a Walk on the Wild Side: The Hero's Body and the *ríastrad*

In order to express innate heroic identity, medieval texts often outline the youthful deeds of a future hero. In the case of Cú Chulainn, these exploits are narrated in the *macgnímrada* ("The Boyhood Deeds"), a sequence of short tales which appear as 'flash-backs' at the beginning of the main cattle-raid narrative of *TBC*. Of particular interest is the story of how Cú Chulainn receives his warrior name. As a boy, he approaches a feast held by Culann the Smith, at which the smith's guard dog has been released to protect the gathering. Because the dog cannot distinguish welcome (albeit delayed) from unwelcome visitor, it attacks the boy but is killed in the fight. Because he is able to kill the dog and

volunteers as its replacement, the boy Sétanta is given the name Cú Chulainn and henceforth guards Culann's land, replacing the canine protector until a new puppy is reared. The plot appears so straight-forward that the episode has been described by David Greene as a "simple well-told story" with apparently no deeper meaning (103). However, it may also be argued with Kim McCone that by killing the dog, Cú Chulainn "is [...] able to incorporate those same [martial] virtues in its stead and to fulfil its function as aggressive guardian of people and property from outside attack" (*Hounds* 11). The episode thus presents a necessary initiatory rite for the hero, who, having just gained a position in King Conchobar's retinue (and thus within Ulster society), now also proves his abilities outside the noble heroic fighting tradition and assumes his future role as protector.

When contextualising the episode within early Irish literature, it becomes apparent that the linking of heroes with canine figures is in fact a rather common topos. Hounds may be seen as "the symbol of warrior values *par excellence* in early Ireland" (ibid. 13), because they embody virtues such as loyalty, strength, and unwavering fighting spirit. Yet because of their fighting spirit, both dog and warrior can also pose a considerable threat to society if their abilities are not used to protect society but instead turn destructive. McCone remarks that "[p]roper behaviour on the part of hound or warrior consists [...] in loyal defence of his own people and aggressive hostility towards their enemies, the two often coinciding" (ibid. 14). Elizabeth Moore's definition that the medieval "hero is [...] a practitioner of controlled violence" and excels in "protective actions that are not threatening to social order precisely because they are normally contained within a set of restraining rules" (157) further stresses the importance of directing heroic abilities solely towards stabilizing society. However, in the medieval Irish literary tradition there appears "a simultaneous awareness of [the] defensive and destructive potential" (McCone, *Hounds* 20) of warriors. In fact, McCone asserts that "early Irish tradition regarded the warrior as a potentially unstable combination of devotion and menace to his own people, in other words as a Jeekyll and Hyde figure, and that this ambivalence could be given literary expression in a number of different ways" (ibid. 20). This concern may be epitomized in Cú Chulainn, who in his *ríastrad* transgresses the boundaries of "proper heroic behaviour" by attacking both friend and foe. Problematically, this behaviour also removes him from the so highly esteemed idea of *fir fer*, the code of noble and fair fighting and instead

leads to *finjal*, “kin-slaying”, perhaps the most dishonourable action portrayed in early Irish literature.⁵ Although he proves his unwavering loyalty to his tribe at various points in *TBC* and elsewhere, during the *ríastrad* he appears unable to control his actions in accordance with his ideals and is subsequently “not utterly reliable as the defender and servant of his lord and community” (ibid. 16).⁶

The challenge of controlling innate heroic strength and violence in general is an issue with which *TBC* seems particularly concerned. It is perhaps surprising then that the question of whether Cú Chulainn is able to control these newly “embodied martial virtues” more than the dog had been able to appears never to have been raised. It is obvious that the guard dog, when released, is beyond human control and since it cannot distinguish between tardy friend and malignant attacker it poses a threat to the wrong people at times. However, even when it is not ‘on duty’, its power needs to be controlled to prevent undue destruction. In the case of dogs, this control is usually achieved by outside means such as chains and physical force, and this is no different with Culann’s dog: “There are three chains on him and three men holding each chain” (*TBC* I, ll. 572-573).⁷ It is made clear in the text that the *árchú* (“slaughter-hound”) can only be controlled with great difficulty and that if it is not controlled it will wreak havoc. As the challenge of fully controlling the canine protector is so explicitly indicated, it is at least possible that the challenge of controlling martial aggression may equally be found in Cú Chulainn, especially during his *ríastrad* when he lacks human reasoning.⁸ This temporary inability to apply reason is perhaps the most disquieting aspect in linking Cú Chulainn to dogs, as it collides with medieval ideas that man is separated from beast primarily by possessing reason. Joyce E. Salisbury in her study on animals in the Middle Ages ascertains that Ambrose, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas all saw the distinguishing factor between human and beast in that only the former are “rational creatures” (5). Yet if Cú Chulainn’s rationality suddenly fails, the line between human and beast is blurred and one wonders: what does the hero become?⁹

In exploring the suddenly unstable boundary between man and animal, *TBC* draws heavily on descriptions of the battle-frenzy. The first detailed portrayal of the *ríastrad* (found already in the *macgnímrada*) offers not only a poetic description of his changed appearance, it also hints at possible ways of making him come out of his frenzy: just like the dog, Cú Chulainn has to be

controlled from the outside and through his body. There is only one description of how he emerges from his distortion in *TBC*, and this appears in another initiatory scene - when Cú Chulainn takes up arms and goes on his first outing to kill enemies. On returning to the court, he for the first time appears in his battle-frenzy and the threat he can pose to the court becomes astonishingly clear as the Ulster watchman remarks: “He will shed the blood of every man in the fort unless heed be taken” (*TBC* I, l. 804).¹⁰ After the previous (apparently) occasional and sometimes accidental outbursts of heroic strength, the court is now faced with his full destructive power. Having proved himself within the court (against his peers), against an animal (Culann’s dog) and in enemy territory, the return of the hero is overshadowed by the difficult task of re-integrating him into society in his full warrior potential. As reasoning with a temporarily irrational warrior is no option, the way in which the Ulstermen achieve this re-integration is a very physical one: Cú Chulainn’s heroic heat, the corporeal expression of his heroic valour, is cooled by water.¹¹ First, the Ulster women bear their breasts at him and,

Then the warriors of Emain seized him and cast him into a tub of cold water. That tub burst about him. The second tub into which he was plunged boiled hands high therefrom. The third tub into which he went after that he warmed so that its heat and its cold were properly adjusted for him. Then he came out and the queen, Mugain, put on him a blue mantle with a silver brooch therein, and a hooded tunic, and he sat at Conchobor’s knee which was his resting place always after that. (*TBC* I, ll. 814-821)¹²

While after this brief ‘walk on the wild side’ the integration into courtly society is successful and Cú Chulainn assumes his rightful place at the knee of the king, a sense of eeriness lingers. For the first time it has become clear that although he is unparalleled in defending them, the boy could “be almost as much a danger to his own people as he is to his enemies” (Monette 195).

In view of this, I would argue that Cú Chulainn is by no means the “ideal type of youth [and] of fighter” or the typical “hero within the tribe”, as Sjoestedt (59) has proposed.¹³ Instead of reflecting his society’s values, he appears “never entirely comfortable in the traces” (Lowe, *Kicking* 119) of that society and at times clearly challenges its boundaries. Rather than being firmly ‘within’ his society he appears to be ‘too big’ for their shoes and his occasional *ríastrad* is the epitomic expression of this problem: It is,

in essence, a temporary ‘too much’ of heroism. For readers unfamiliar with Cú Chulainn it should now be outlined how the frenzy manifests itself:

For it was usual with him that when his hero's flame sprang forth his feet would turn to the back and his hams turn to the front and the round muscles of his calves would come on to his shins, while one eye sank into his head and the other protruded. A man's head would go into his mouth. Every hair on him would be as sharp as a spike of hawthorn and there would be a drop of blood on every hair. He would recognise neither comrades nor friends. He would attack alike before him and behind him. Hence the men of Connacht named Cú Chulainn the Distorted One. (*TBC* I, ll. 1651-1657)¹⁴

The portrayal evokes the picture of a fearsome, scarcely human hero. Helmut Birkhan has rightly suggested that the individual metamorphic elements of this description are of various provenances, yet they effectively combine to represent irrational and uncontrolled martial energy (29).

In exploring the issue of control, it should be remarked that both animalistic metamorphosis and irrational behaviour might place Cú Chulainn “in a liminal moral state” (Larsen 172), but it is not a flaw of character which leads to this assessment since Cú Chulainn apparently cannot prevent his distortion. The very term *ríastrad* suggests a loss of control on various levels. Sayers has pointed out that it derives from a root *reig- with a basic meaning “to twist” and that the corresponding verb (*ríastraid*) is used as an impersonal passive in connection with the preposition *imm-* (*Battlefield Spirits* 53). Sayers sees this as evidence that the transformation is “not a willed action (*Feats* 53) but rather “imposed externally without the hero's volition” (*Battlefield Spirits* 53). Even if he does at times become destructive, Cú Chulainn, just like the many slaughter-hounds described in early Irish texts, does not appear as the source of the malfunction but rather as a passive subject suffering from greater forces (Moore 161).

Could it therefore be that Cú Chulainn does not merely represent a single hero but that through his figure – and body – more general concerns about the challenge of integrating violence into society are explored? The liberty to create such a fluid and challenging heroic figure may lie in the cultural context of the ambivalent warrior-figure of early Irish texts and it is in this context that Cú Chulainn should be understood. Jeremy Lowe reaches a similar conclusion when discussing violence in *TBC*. He remarks that Cú Chulainn

„embodies a contradiction inherent in the warrior figure... suggesting a culture aware of the ambivalence of the heroic ethos and the fact that war-like action remains difficult for any society to assimilate” (*Contagious Violence* 88). J. N. Radner argues that *TBC* in fact aims at showing the negative effects of war and explores what happens when societal values break down (Radner 47, 55). Moore, arguing in an even broader context sees here an exploration of what happens in times of chaos, when sovereignty fails and order breaks down (155). For her, the frenzy is “a visual reflection of disorder, a display that indicates an imbalance within the *túath* [tribe] itself” (ibid. 158). Thus, where she perceives “a destructive fickleness intrinsic in Cú Chulainn's character and heroic role” (ibid. 154), it may be not an individual fickleness but a metaphor for more far-reaching concerns about violence within society. Cú Chulainn's *ríastrad* then quasi embodies that challenge and shows that if a single hero and, in extension, society, fails to control violence, protection turns into destruction. That it is however by no means the only challenge associated with Cú Chulainn can be argued by giving the hero's body a closer look.

Break on through to the ‘Other-Side’: Cú Chulainn and his Appearance(s)

In the past, Cú Chulainn's metamorphosis has been contextualised mostly in reference to international heroic phenomena or the pan-Celtic and Scandinavian tradition.¹⁵ Most poignantly, P. L. Henry has seen in it a “*possession* of the warrior by a martial fury so intense as to change his whole form” (235). In short, Cú Chulainn's *furor heroicus* includes bodily changes which Helmut Birkhan has summarised as „Tremor, Verdrehungskunststück, das Anschwellen der Muskeln, *cúrach cera* in Bezug auf das Auge und den Mund, der Feuerstrom aus dem Mund, der Herzschlag, die „Haaraufstellung“, der *lúan láith* [und] der Blutstrahl aus dem Scheitel” (29). Readers familiar with medieval literature may have noted that other heroes share certain of these traits in their own *furor heroicus* (such as Dietrich von Bern, who when enraged also breaths fire) yet no other hero seems to undergo quite such a radical change. Given the extraordinary descriptions of this change, it is surprising that more culturally specific readings of his metamorphic body have hitherto been neglected. On a broader level, it can of course be argued that Cú Chulainn quite literally *embodies* the “Powers of Horror” which Julia Kristeva has called abject: something which “disturbs identity, system and order” by “not respecting borders, positions and rules” (4). However, if one acknowledges that Cú

Chulainn's body during battle-frenzy expresses an idea of the abject, it appears especially interesting to examine how a body can express this idea in the cultural-specific context of early Irish literature. It therefore remains to be asked what exactly Cú Chulainn's body turns into, how his 'Other-Side' is given physical form and how the individual changes could have held meaning within the cultural matrix of *TBC*, i.e. why his heroic fury was expressed by these bodily traits in particular. In order to do this, it is vital to refer back to two ideas introduced briefly above.

First, the concept of the "Politics of Anatomy" needs to be presented in greater detail. It is a term coined by Amy Mulligan who recognized that in the 11th-century Irish text *Togail Bruidne Da Derga (TBDD)*, the countless descriptions of bodies (two hundred and seventy seven, to be precise) may be read as a semiotic code. Medieval Irish texts, Mulligan argues, "occupy a position within a cultural tradition that placed great value on the way that one's body appeared to others" (*Politics* 4). As such, she acknowledges "that physical appearance is a language [and] that the body is a text that can be read if one knows the lingo [...]" *ibid.* 6). This reading, she concludes, reveals a "systematic link between status and appearance" (*ibid.* 7). Of particular interest for the present paper is the distinction she sees between noble heroes and villains. The former, Mulligan argues, are praised for their beauty, which is expressed in striking colour contrasts, bright, fair skin, blond hair as well as clear and often blue eyes. The appearance of social outsiders in contrast is ugly and often extreme, based on deformities and physical abnormalities as it aligns social with physical malformation. In a wider context, the system also proposes that bodies can signify not just social status but also a position inside or outside society, within the (noble) human or the monstrous realm. In addition to Mulligan's study of *TBDD*, Damian McManus has recently also drawn attention to the fact that there may "have been a regulatory system governing the description of personal, and, given the genre [early Irish saga], for the most part male, beauty" (57). His assessment of the physical features signifying beauty closely echoes the "Politics of Anatomy" and as McManus works with a much larger (and chronologically wider) corpus it appears likely that these studies reveal prevalent cultural ideas of favourable or unfavourable appearance(s). Applying these ideas to *TBC* and examining if and how they are reflected in Cú Chulainn is therefore a valuable further step in studying bodies in early Irish literature.

Secondly, my on-going PhD research suggests that there is a fluid and transgressive element not just to Cú Chulainn's character but also to his body. Regarding the former, Cú Chulainn's divine origin together with his strong canine associations have prompted Erik Larsen to suggest that "the writers [of *TBC*] delivered a hero as tripartite" (173), i.e. a hero incorporating man, god and animal. Damian McManus also stresses the extensive list of possible oppositions inherent in the hero when he asks: "Is he god or man, hound or human, Ulsterman or outsider, child or adult? To these questions we might add: is he a handsome hero or a distorted freak [...]" (69). This "enigmatic duality" (McManus 71), these countless possible opposites inherent in the hero mean that Cú Chulainn often seems to defile the very categories which modern research have enlisted to define him.¹⁶ But perhaps looking at the hero's metamorphosis and his shifting appearance could tempt one to turn the question around for a more inclusive assessment of his figure: he is *all* of the above at *some point or another*. In acknowledging his polysemy, it can be fully appreciated that he often appears to shift between categories: the social system (Ulster court) and the antisocial (his behaviour during the *riastrad*), the noble warrior (*fir fer*) and the villain (*fingal*), the human and the animal, the man and the monster. He never fully belongs to one category, there are always hints and remnants of his 'otherness' also – he is the abject in the middle of society. If one follows this approach, Cú Chulainn appears truly polyvalent and this may help to explain the "element of restlessness in his character" and the "continual movement between transgression and recuperation" which he seems to be subjected to (Lowe, *Kicking* 119).

In acknowledging the challenge Cú Chulainn poses to strict heroic categories, it is indeed not surprising that this polyvalent and fluid nature of the hero is given its most striking expression in a polysemous body. Tomás Ó Cathasaigh has recently drawn attention to the fact that while Cú Chulainn has "only one body, [...]" [he] has at least two very different forms" (*The Body* 145): a beautiful and an ugly one. A closer analysis suggests that he incorporates (and in times of metamorphosis quite literally switches between) several different 'bodies' or bodily categories, each reflecting a particular aspect of his complex character.¹⁷ Furthermore, it will also be argued that his body may serve a "reflective function" (Moore 170) to correspond to his momentary inner state: beautiful and manly within society, ugly and non-human when he

stands outside. Yet before a look at his 'looks' exemplifies all this, the matter of controlling the body needs to be raised again.

In touching on the challenging issue of controlling the body – or at least its perception by others – it is remarkable that Cú Chulainn exhibits 'self-awareness' of his appearance and the social implications it entails, a "sensitivity to public assessment of his appearance" (O'Leary 42). There are plenty of other instances which could be cited here but the most striking one is his concern that his distorted body might lead others to conclude that he is not a 'proper' hero but a 'demonic apparition'. On the most basic level he tries to contain his body to prevent distortion, and this effort to control the mind by controlling the body is slightly reminiscent of his cooling in vats of water. However, here the hero himself takes control when girding himself for battle: "Of that battle-array which he [Cú Chulainn] put on were the twenty-seven shirts, waxed, board-like, compact, which used to be bound with strings and ropes and thongs next to his fair body that his mind and understanding might not be deranged whenever his rage should come upon him" (*TBC* I, ll. 2215-2219).¹⁸ Despite this action, Connell Monette could not see any "genuine shame or regret" by the hero about his distorted self and argued that he "seems content with being who (and what) he is" (196).¹⁹ I would however argue that if he seeks to restrict his body in shirts reminiscent of modern straight-jackets to prevent the metamorphosis, he is *painfully* aware of his own change and, as Birkhan has also suggested, certainly does not like it (28). Just as the threat to the Ulster court does not always come from without, Cú Chulainn does not always fight other men but, at times, his own body.

Despite his best efforts, it is obvious that the beast wants out and the struggle to restrict his body by mechanical means fails miserably. Luckily, there is another way in which Cú Chulainn can exercise some control over his body, or at least other people's reading of his body: by quite literally 'staging' his appearance. Before the most detailed description of the battle-frenzy metamorphosis in *TBC*, it is said that Cú Chulainn consciously parades himself in front of the Connacht army to display his good looks:

Cú Chulainn came on the morrow to survey the host and to display his gentle, beautiful appearance to women and girls and maidens, to poets and men of art, for he held not as honour or dignity the dark form of wizardry in which he had appeared to them the previous night. Therefore he came on that day to display his

gentle, beautiful appearance. Beautiful indeed was the youth who came thus to display his form to the hosts, Cú Chulainn mac Sualtair. (*TBC* II, ll. 2338-2345)²⁰

It is evident that the narrative stresses the host's favourable reaction as much as it does the hero's active parading. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the dual bodily concepts are enforced by juxtaposing the now beautiful appearance with the dark form of wizardry the host had seen the night before (and which, tellingly, the hero himself sees neither as honourable nor dignified). Cú Chulainn's beautiful appearance is a clear contrast to his ugly one, yet it is the former the hero wants people to associate with him.

In this observation could lie an important clue how to contextualise this episode, because the description of his beauty which follows does not enforce his handsome appearance at length. Its main descriptive points are the three colours of his hair (dark, red and golden), four dimples (each of a different colour), seven pupils, seven fingers and seven toes. The description itself appears rather meagre and this is also the case with the three other descriptions of his beauty in *TBC*. The looks described here do not comfortably fit Mulligan's or McManus' patterns of extended portrayals of beauty – and neither do any other descriptions of Cú Chulainn either in *TBC* or in other texts.²¹ Cú Chulainn does not appear as particularly fair or blond or have blue eyes; in fact, the only features which are developed (again to the extreme) is the colour contrast which Mulligan sees "typical of Irish codes of beauty [...]" (*Politics* 7). Most disturbing in this regard are the additional pupils, fingers and toes. It may be argued that these again reflect a "too much of everything", an "over the top" theme inherent in Cú Chulainn even if the surplus is, as Ó Cathasaigh rightly concludes, "in a technical sense grotesque" (*The Body* 147). His body is again straining the boundaries of categories: he does not fit comfortably within the "Politics of Anatomy" or ordinary human physiognomy just as he does not fit comfortably within other systems of his society, either.

In this respect it is worth observing that although the ugly body is described at length, his beautiful appearance is not developed descriptively but rather through the reaction of the Connacht host and the comments in the text.²² Appearing beautiful and having his looks acknowledged and approved by the Connacht army is apparently enough to place Cú Chulainn within the discourse of the noble, courtly warrior. Having him *appear* as a hero and not a demonic monster is nevertheless vital in ascertaining his

status within this society. Cú Chulainn's eagerness to display his beautiful body may thus be a conscious decision by the hero to quite literally counteract any other assessments of his character based on his distorted appearance. Supporting this argument is the placement of the descriptions of beauty in *TBC*: they all appear at points in the text where they consciously juxtapose – or oppose – descriptions of his distorted appearance. Both the structure of the text and the hero himself direct the gaze of others and with it the assessment they wish to be made of the hero's body.

This is a vital enterprise, because when looking at the descriptions of Cú Chulainn's distorted body, there emerges an entirely different – and very problematic – picture. The changed features are described at length at various points in the text and, remarkably, in *TBC* I only in sections which “scholars have identified as interpolated passages in *LU* [the manuscript]” (Moore 174), making a conscious engagement with them more likely.²³ As the description quoted above contains all physical changes it is necessary to refer back to it to see how the specific features can be read. Regrettably, these individual features (and their possible meaning) have received comparatively little attention in academic circles and have seldom been contextualised with other bodies (human or animal) in early Irish literature. An exception is Elizabeth Moore's study on the first Recension *riastrad* in which she places great emphasis on the many animal-references some descriptions contain. She argues that by linking Cú Chulainn with lions, bears, cranes and the likes, he is actively associated with the (martial) meaning these creatures were thought to hold and thus somehow incorporates some of that meaning into him. In addition, my PhD research includes a comparison with descriptions of dogs – and frenzied dogs in specific – in early Irish texts, as they commonly also exhibit standing, bristly hair and open, gaping mouths. These animalistic features are integral in blurring the human animal divide on a corporeal level and could equally be discussed in the present paper. Instead, the focus here lies on the distorted human features and the blurring of *social* boundaries which they may signify. For it is possible that if one seeks to read the distorted body within the cultural matrix which produced it, it may move away from the simply grotesque and also reveal meaning.

Considering this fact two more human figures will be discussed with whom Cú Chulainn shares some of these distinct features. Tellingly, both are outsiders to their societies and are nega-

tively evaluated within the narratives. Furthermore, their appearance is often openly connoted as ugly, either by remarks within the narrative or by other protagonists (Sayers, *Deployment* 158). The figures in question are the Antichrist of Irish Apocryphal texts and the sovereignty goddess. The sovereignty goddess of early Irish literature is especially interesting, as she also undergoes metamorphic changes. Leonie Duignan sees a “significant characteristic of the woman/goddess of sovereignty in the literature [in] that she may appear in various forms and [...] undergo certain transformations [...]: from ugly hag in rags to a beautiful lady in fine clothes [...]” (112). An exemplary description of such a sovereignty figure is found in *Echtrae mac nEchach Mugmedóin* (“The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Muigmedóin”):

Thus was the hag: every joint and limb of her, from the top of her head to the earth, was as black as coal. Like the tail of a wild horse was the grey bristly mane that came through the upper part of her head-crown. The green branch of an oak in bearing would be severed by the sickle of green teeth that lay in her head and reached to her ears. Dark smoky eyes she had: a nose crooked and hollow. She had a middle fibrous, spotted with pustules, diseased, and shins distorted and awry. Her ankles were thick, her shoulderblades were broad, her knees were big, and her nails were green. Loathsome in sooth was the hag's appearance. (Stokes 196-197)²⁴

It becomes apparent that with the ugly manifestation of the sovereignty goddess Cú Chulainn shares the large, gaping (or one-sided) mouth, the superhuman size, the malformed limbs (including the distorted and awry shins) and the unruly hair, although not all of these features are always present in the many descriptions of these hags. Mulligan convincingly argues that the descriptions of the ugly sovereignty goddess may have been influenced by the observation of leprous bodies and she also observed that in them quite often the “lines between human and beast are blurred” (*Sovereignty* 1025). The parallels with Cú Chulainn are striking, and the same ideas can be observed in the following analysis also.

The second figure to consider is the Antichrist as he appears in the Irish apocryphal tradition. Of course, portrayals of the Antichrist appear widely in medieval texts but the descriptions in question are seen by McNamara as particularly Irish and independent of Eastern sources, which makes a comparison possible (*Apocalyptic* 90). Two portrayals are extant, one in Avranches,

Bibliothèque municipale, MS 108, the other in the Book of Lismore (McNamara 91). For reasons of brevity, only the former will be quoted:

His stature will be nine cubits. He will have black hair pulled up [?] like an iron chain. In his forehead he will have one eye shining like the dawn. His lower lips will be large, he will have no upper lips. On his hand the little finger will be the longer; his left foot will be wider. His stance will be similar. (qtd. in McNamara 91)²⁵

The shared features here are the erect hair, grotesquely enlarged or unformed members, the large gaping and deformed mouth, having one eye, rising vapours from his face and the reversed shins. It appears that what all three figures have in common are bodies which are deformed, grotesquely un-proportional, asymmetrical, open (through the mouth) and often almost inverted (shins) – upside down and inside out bodies, so to speak.

Although a detailed study of the possible meaning of the individual features cannot be undertaken in the space of this article, contextualizing the features with other descriptions in early Irish literature suggests that these are physical traits which in the medieval Irish mind signified the luridly monstrous, abnormal, ugly and distorted, but in the case of the sovereignty goddess also the changing, fluid and metamorphic. Furthermore, both the sovereignty goddess and the Antichrist may also be classified as ‘social’ outsiders, either as reclusive deific figures (perhaps with leprous traits, which may also enforce the outsider position) or as excluded even from the most important of societies, the Christian *familia*. Cú Chulainn’s change from protector of society to possible menace is therefore reflected on his very body, his liminal status enforced through the imagery of change and instability and his fleeting standing outside the social rules of combat expressed by – temporarily! – giving him the appearance of an evil outsider. Yet it is imperative to note that Cú Chulainn again does not actively pass these boundaries but that the changes he undergoes during his warp-spasms threaten him from within: They are specifically said to be a contortion “under his skin”, seemingly erupting from the very bottom of his body. The longest description in Recension I clearly emphasises not just his ugly appearance but also the idea of change and instability:

Then a great distortion came upon Cú Chulainn so that he became horrible, many-shaped, strange and unrecognizable. All the flesh of his body quivered like a tree in a current or like a

bulrush in a stream, every limb and every joint, every end and every member of him from head to foot. He performed a wild feat of contortion with his body inside his skin. (*TBC I*, ll.2245-2249)²⁶

Lowe sees here “a conflict between the normal boundaries of human physiognomy and these destabilizing forces” (*Kicking* 122): The hero is quite literally stretching the boundaries of his body. To categorize this ‘new self’ which he turns into poses a major challenge not just to the society he inhabits but also to the text and, in extension, to the modern researcher. For he does not simply ‘switch’ bodies, exchange one for the other. It is a metamorphosis, a concept which held considerable interest in the 12th century, which transforms him into something different yet not *entirely* ‘Other’ – same but different, as the modern mind puts it. If one looks at the international context, it appears that in 12th century Europe there emerged a fascination with transformations in many areas, including “appearance, illusion and transformation, metamorphosis and hybrid” (Walker Bynum 18). Walker Bynum argued that “two images in particular, hybrid and metamorphosis [...] were sites of these competing and changing understandings” and helped to explore new, more fluid, categories (21, 78). It is at least possible that the fluid body of Cú Chulainn can be seen as an engagement with these prevalent interests.²⁷ It is nevertheless remarkable that in the case of Cú Chulainn the body does not merely change form, it is quite literally inverted: His legs are twisted as the shins move to the calves, his lungs and liver move upwards to his throat and the interior of his body is visible through the open mouth, blurring the boundary between in- and outside. This again enforces the challenge to boundaries as “everything that is normally stable is rearranged or entirely dislocated in an explosion of misdirected energy” (Lowe, *Kicking* 122). Just as the hero’s function as protector is inverted and turned around, so is his body – the social ‘upside down’ and ‘inside out’ is so complete, it quite literally incorporates the hero’s body.

What Manner of Man...: An Attempt at Concluding

It has been argued that Cú Chulainn is an exceptionally complex heroic figure who, rather than enforcing the concept of the pre-eminent hero of the tribe by reflecting their values and rules instead serves to exemplify the challenges which heroic figures can embody. For one, he instigates thinking about what happens when a hero in his state of mind transgresses the boundaries

of heroic behaviour (fair fighting, attacking only enemies): Does he then also transgress the social boundaries of the tribe? And if so, is he then still ‘their’ hero or does he, as Lowe has suggested, turn into a monster? And, perhaps most poignantly, where does man end and monstrous Other begin? As such, Cú Chulainn not only presents a challenge to his society in terms of controlling him – and his body –, he also challenges their way of thinking about various categories such as (self-aware) man, hero, villain, animal, monster and more.

Controlling the body in how it acts but also in how it is read by others to express identity appear two particularly challenging enterprises for the hero in *TBC* and these issues are closely connected to his *ríastrad*. Cú Chulainn exemplifies the problem of what happens when the threat to society (or to the hero himself) does not come from hostile outside forces but from within. Yet perhaps most astonishingly, his body during the *ríastrad* can be seen to question the strict boundaries between inside and outside, rearranging not just physical features but questioning the very notions of stableness. “The contradictions and incongruities that he embodies”, Jeremy Lowe concludes, “provoke reflection upon apparently stable notions such as heroism and the heroic tradition” and in turn invite to “probe these categories” (Lowe, *Kicking* 121). Perhaps the biggest challenge then is the one he poses to certainties and categorizations: Cú Chulainn is ultimately a threat to “structure, to order, and even to meaning” (ibid. 123). In switching between social insider and outsider, hero and anti-hero and man and animal he invites reflection on the definition of those categories and draws attention to the often fluid boundaries which (apparently) separate these categories. In blurring those boundaries, Cú Chulainn also reminds us that, as Julia Kristeva has argued, the subject is both defiantly Other and disquietingly close.

In order to explore these issues, it has been vital to understand both the hero and his heroic body within his cultural context and particularly the ambivalent picture of the warrior in early Irish literature. In terms of his behaviour it has emerged that the control of his actions and a prevention of distortion are a major concern for both the hero and his society. The topic of controlling the body and its perception by society has also been raised in discussing his appearance. It has emerged that on his body, his Otherness and his heroic inversion are plainly visible, although he does not fit entirely within pre-set structures such as the “Politics of Anatomy”. This also leads

to the last challenge which the hero embodies: that to posterity. For whereas *TBC* compellingly illustrates the challenges the hero presents to his society, himself, established notions of identity and social boundaries, Cú Chulainn has also proved quite a task for modern scholars seeking to understand the concept of heroism. This is because he, being so polyvalent and ambivalent, does not fit any patterns assumed to be pre-made or stable (ibid. 120). This makes him exciting to research but it demands critical assessments of the very concepts which are said to construct (or deconstruct) heroes in literary texts. The present paper aimed to give a glimpse of the complexity of Cú Chulainn’s character and offer one possible reading of the hero’s body; a reading, I hope, which pays tribute to his many sides. It is, however, only one amongst many and King Ailill’s question in Recension I, *Innas fir [...] in Cú...* (“What manner of man [...] is this hound?” (*TBC* I l. 374)) will, in all likelihood, elude a definite answer.

- 1 The term “early Irish” refers to the vernacular literature of Ireland from the earliest times to the Norman invasion and linguistically includes both Old and Middle Irish texts. The phrase “playing the hero” is taken from Ann Dooley, *Playing the Hero: Reading the Irish Saga Táin Bó Cúailnge*, which offers insights into the performativity of heroism. The findings presented in this article are part of my on-going PhD research on bodies and mediality in early Irish literature, undertaken at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. I would like to thank my supervisors, Prof. Jürg Glauser and Dr. Geraldine Parsons, as well as the anonymous peer-reviewer of this article for their generous advice and kind support.
- 2 All references to *TBC* as well as quotations and translations are taken from Cecile O’Rahilly’s standard editions and translations (see bibliography). The text is extant in three Recensions yet only Recension I and II will be quoted in this paper and the term *TBC* will be used where no clear distinction is necessary. Recension I, a conflation of two 9th-century versions, is found in a manuscript referred to as *Lebor na hUidre (LU)*. It is also found in Egerton 1782 (W) and in the *Yellow Book of Lecan (YBL)*, yet none of these manuscripts offer a complete text. Recension II is the version contained in the *Book of Leinster (LL)*, which preserves it almost completely. Recension III is preserved in much later manuscripts and only in fragmentary form. It is to be found in Egerton 93 and H 2. 17. For further discussion see Cecile O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* from the *Book of Leinster* (xiv-xvi) and Thurneysen (99-117). For a full analysis of the manuscript tradition see Hildegard L.C. Tristram, “Die handschriftliche Überlieferung des altirischen Prosaepos über den ‚Rinderraub von Cuailnge‘ (Táin Bó Cuailnge)”.
- 3 It should be noted that the English “dog” in the present study refers exclusively to the Old Irish *árchú* (slaughter-hound). These guard dogs were “bred and trained to kill” (Fergus Kelly 117) and may not be equated with the hunting dogs portrayed in medieval Irish literature, as the latter are of a very different character.

- 4 Any reference to 'society' made here refers solely to the intra-textual one depicted in TBC and should not be equated with medieval Irish society outside literary texts.
- 5 For an introduction to the idea of *fir fer* see O'Leary and for the concept of *fin gal* (and its importance in early Irish Law) see Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Law*. That Cú Chulainn can usually control his body to the extreme can be supported by William Sayers "Martial Feats" which lists an impressive number of heroic feats which he is able to perform.
- 6 The fact that he takes the loyalty of defending his tribe to the extreme is exemplified in TBC in the climactic yet tragic fight with his foster-brother Fer Diad, in which he poetically laments having to kill his beloved foster-brother.
- 7 *[t]ri slabrada fair 7 triar cacha slabraide* (TBC I, ll. 572-573.)
- 8 The point is made in exemplary fashion by Salisbury (5), who examines medieval ideas about the man-animal division and concludes that reason is often the defining boundary between the two categories. That Cú Chulainn is not the only hero in early Irish literature to undergo such distortion is argued by Patricia Kelly (74), yet he certainly is the only one on which the motif is developed to such an extent.
- 9 It has been suggested by Phillip Bernhardt-House that Cú Chulainn "in all of his liminal qualities and ambivalent glory, can be thought of as a werewolf [...]" (173). Of course, because werewolves are humans turned temporarily into animals the parallel is inviting, yet I would argue that Cú Chulainn does not fully fit this category, either. For even the werewolf often appears as a "rational soul within an animal body" (Walker Bynum 95). Cú Chulainn, in contrast, is a (temporarily) irrational soul in a distorted and inverted body.
- 10 *Ardáilfe fuil laiss cach dune fil isind lis mani foichlither [...]* (TBC I, l. 804).
- 11 In Celtic languages, many terms for heroes reflect an understanding of the hero as "the ardent one, as one who overflows with energy and life" (Sjoestedt 58) and etymologically include concepts such as "fury, ardour, tumescence and speed" (ibid. 59). The episode may present an almost comic stance this aspect of heroic identity by physically cooling the excessive heat.
- 12 *[l]a sodain atnethat láith gaile Emna 7 focherdar i ndabaig n-úarusci. Maitti immi-seom in dabach hísín. In dabach aile dano in ro lád, fichis dornaib de. In tress dabach i ndeochaid iar sudiu, fosngert-side combo chuimsi dó a tess 7 a fuacht. Dotháeth ass íarom 7 dobeir ind rígan iar sudiu .i. Mugain, bratt ngorm n-imbi 7 delg n-agit n-and 7 léne chulpatach. Ocus suidid fo glún Chonchobair íarom, 7 ba sí sin a lepaid do grés iar sudiu.* (TBC I, ll. 814-821)
- 13 Sjoestedt has suggested that Cú Chulainn is firmly situated in the world of the Ulster court and that this should automatically lead to him being a full part of this society at all times. Her rigid dichotomy has been expanded most recently by Jeremy Lowe, *Kicking*.
- 14 *Ar bá bés dó-som in tan no linged a lón láith ind, imréditis a t[h]raighi iarma 7 a escata remi 7 muil a orcan fora lurgnib, 7 indala súil ina chend 7 araili fria chend anechtair. Docoised ferchend fora beólu. Nach findae bíd fair ba háthithir delc sciach 7 banna fola for cach finnu. Ní aithgnéad cóemu ná cairdiu. Cumma no slaided ríam 7 iarma. Is de sin doratsat Fir Ól nÉcmacht in ríastartha do an-maim do C[h]Join C[h]ulaind.* (TBC I, ll. 1651-1657)
- 15 For the latter two see Sjoestedt (62).
- 16 For this see Lowe, *Kicking*.
- 17 The idea should be briefly introduced here although the findings are only preliminary at this stage. The main dichotomy in Cú Chulainn's body may be seen as that of a "good" (i.e. beautiful and controlled) versus a distorted (ugly and uncontrolled) body. Yet the hero also appears as beardless, a feature with which he continuously struggles as he is repeatedly referred to as a "mere boy". He also appears as excessively wounded at two points in the narrative, and this triggers the very human assessment that the hero is weary, wounded and (psychologically) downcast. While all these corporeal aspects are stressed at different points in TBC, they in their entirety form a unique hero who is defined but also hindered by his body.
- 18 *Bá don c[h]atherred catha sin 7 chomraic 7 chomlaid ro gab-som immi secht cneslénti fichet ciártha clártha comdlúta bíttis bá thétaib 7 rothaib 7 refedaib hi custul fri[a] gelaic[h]nes dó amacha ndec[h]rad a chond nach a chiall ó doficed a lúth láthair.* (TBC I, ll. 2215-2219)
- 19 An early hint at possible feelings of shame is made in the *macgnímrada* during the re-integration into the court: "His comely appearance was restored, and he blushed crimson from head to foot" (TBC II, p. 171.). His blushing could perhaps be seen as a sense of shame at what just happened, at his immodest transgression. Sjoestedt has reached a similar conclusion in discussing the bearing of female breasts in this episode (Sjoestedt 66).
- 20 *Dotháet Cú Chulaind amabáarach do thaidbriud in tslóig 7 do thasbénad a chrotha álgín álaind do mnáib 7 bantrochtaib 7 andrib 7 ingenaib 7 fíledaib 7 áes dána, uair nír miad ná mais leis in dúaburdelb druídechta tárfás dóib [fair] in adaig sin ríam reme. Is aire sin dano tánic do thasselbad a chrotha álgín álaind in lá sin. Álaind éim in mac tánic and sin do thasselbad a chrotha dona slúagaib .i. Cú Chulaind mac Sualtaim.* (TBC II, ll. 2338-2345)
- 21 Even these more unusual features can be found in connection with other characters in early Irish literature, although they clearly stand without the general system proposed by Mulligan and McManus.
- 22 In other texts, this is also convincingly expressed in his ability to seduce other men's wives. (McManus 69-74).
- 23 See also O'Rahilly, TBC from the Book of Leinster (xvii) and Thurneysen (235-241).
- 24 *[s] amlaid bui in chaillech, co mba duibithir gual cech n-alt 7 cach n-aigi di o muliach co talmáin. Ba samalta fri herboll fiadeich in mong glas gaisidech bai tria cleithi a cheandmullaich. Consealgad glasgeg darach fo brith dia corran gleisfiacra bai 'na cind co roichead a hou. Suli duba dethaige le, sron cham chuasach. Medon fethche breabaindech ingalair le, 7 luirgni fiara fochama siad, ad-bronnach leathansluaistech si, glunmar glaisingnech. Ba grain tra a tuarascbail na cailigi.* (Stokes 196 & 197)
- 25 *Similia tenebatur status eius cuitorum novem. Habet capillum nigrum in tortorio sicut catena ferrea. In medio frontem habet oculum unum et lucebit sicut aurora. Labia subteriores grande habet, superiores non habet. In manus eius digitus minor longior erit. Pedes sinistro latior erit. Status eius in similitudinem.* (qtd. in McNamara 91)
- 26 *Is and so cétríastartha im Choin Culaind co nderna úathbásach n-ilrechtach n-ingantach n-anaichnid de. Crithnaisget a charini imbi imar crand re sruth nó imar bocsimin fri sruth cach mball 7 cach n-alt 7 cach n-ind 7 cach n-áge de ó mulluch co talmáin. Ro láe saébgles díberge dá churp i mmedón a chrocind.* (TBC I, ll.2245-2249)
- 27 It was suggested by Rudolf Thurneysen and is now commonly held opinion that at least some of the detailed descriptions of the *riastrad* were added later to the text, which would strongly favour the argument of a conscious engagement with them and perhaps even with a poet fascination

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