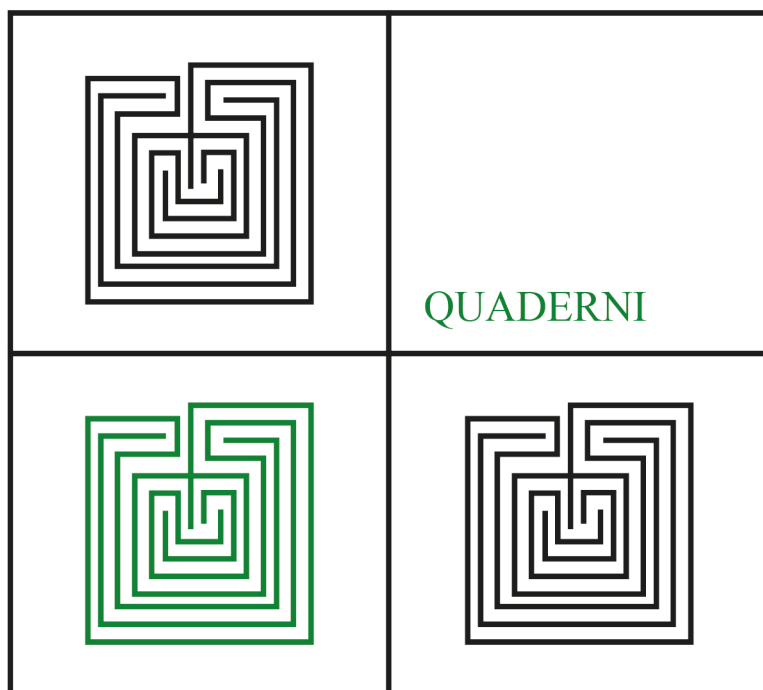

RIELABORAZIONI DEL MITO NEL FUMETTO CONTEMPORANEO

a cura di Chiara Polli e Andrea Binelli



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Università degli Studi di Trento
Dipartimento di Lettere e Filosofia

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ANDREA BINELLI

MYTH OF TÚAN MACCAIRILL AND NORTHERN IRISH CONFLICT
IN THE CIRCULATION OF A COMIC WORK

The object of analysis of this paper is the revival and intersemiotic translation of the mythological content in the circulation of a comic work, *Histoire de Tuan MacCairill*, by the artist Claude Auclair and the writer Alain Deschamps. The story was first published in 1983 on the 53rd issue of *À Suivre*, a Belgian monthly magazine run by the cult house of the *Bande Dessinée* scenario, Casterman, and it was made into a comic book of the Les Humanoïdes Associés series, with the same title, in 1985. Auclair and Deschamps had previously collaborated on another highly praised work, *Bran Ruz* (1981), which also dealt with Celtic mythology. Interestingly, in *Bran Ruz* they had weaved together strands of Breton myths and traditions in pretty much the same way as they handled Irish ones in *Histoire de Tuan MacCairill*.¹ On both occasions, they rallied particularly effective epic themes in order to express a heroics of resistance, one which was consistent with and nurtured by the subversive and utopian political climate of those years.

Arguably, the outcome of so assertive a creative process is only apparently naïve and unveils what Paul Ricoeur defined the «ethico-mythical nucleus» ideologically crafting nationalist narratives beyond the engaging and more tangible layer of «images and symbols which make up the[ir] cultural resources».² According to such cultural memory theorists as

¹ Hereinafter referred to as *Tuan*.

² P. Ricoeur, *Universal Civilization and National Cultures*, in *History and*

John Armstrong, Anthony D. Smyth and Jan Assmann, narratives of this kind are subservient to a precise «directional impulse», also called «mythomotor», through which mythical forms of remembrance and the relative semioticization of a people's identity and their past typically serve social and political purposes in the present.³ This is especially the case when societies, such as the Irish one at the time when the comics was published, have to «confront the prevailing sense of discontinuity, the absence of a coherent identity, the breakdown of inherited ideologies and beliefs, the insecurities of fragmentation».⁴

In particular, within the mythological framework developed by Auclair and Deschamps, memories seem to fulfil a «contrapresent» function, of which Assmann provided the following description:

I call the second function the “contrapresent” [...] This proceeds from deficiencies experienced in the present, and conjures up memories of a past that generally takes the form of a heroic age. Such tales shed a very different light on the present by emphasizing what has gone wrong, what has disappeared, or become lost or marginalized, and thus there is a deliberate break between then and now. Instead of being given a solid base, the present now finds itself dislocated or at the very least falling short of the great and glorious past.⁵

As observed by Assmann, in narratives of mythical memories which openly support and designedly circulate a «contrapresent» standpoint, the existing is sharply questioned, sometimes debased, and always defied by a dramatic call for radical – though often not immediate – change:

Truth, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1998, pp. 271-284.

³ J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilizations. Writing, Remembrance and Political Imagination*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011, pp. 62-63.

⁴ R. Kearney, *Transitions. Narratives in Modern Irish Culture*, Manchester University Press, Manchester/New York 1988, p. 9.

⁵ Ivi, p. 62.

The past to which they refer appears not as an irrevocably lost heroic age but as a social and political Utopia toward which one can direct one's life and work. Thus memory turns into expectation, and the "mythomotored" time takes on a different character. The circle of eternal recurrence now becomes a straight line leading to a distant goal. Circular revolution (as the Earth revolves round the sun) turns into political revolution in the sense of overthrow, and such movements can be observed all over the world: ethnologists subsume them under names such as "messianism," or "millenarianism," or "chiliasm,"...⁶

Interestingly, Assmann's example of contexts where remembrance is mythomotored in a revolutionary sense recalls directly that of the comic work being examined in this essay: «[i]n cases of extreme deficiency, a contrapresent mythomotor may become subversive, for instance under foreign rule or oppression».⁷ In actual fact, *Tuan* sets out to portray the Irish struggle for independence from London, whose power is exposed as foreign and oppressive. The exploitation of Celtic mythology in identitarian terms by nationalists, home-rulers and secessionists in Ireland has been extensively explored.⁸ Likewise, diverse liberation movements worldwide have treasured the massive source of social energy and political legitimacy provided by supposedly ancient traditions, including invented ones,⁹ whenever these were thought to be capable of serving the goals and purposes of their particular projects. And

⁶ Ivi, p. 63.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ As for the Irish context, cfr. S. Deane, *The Literary Myths of the Revival: A Case for their Abandonment*, in J. Ronsley (ed.), *Myth and Reality in Irish Literature*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Waterloo (Ont.) 1977, pp. 317-329; D. Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland. The Literature of the Modern Nation*, Jonathan Cape, London 1995; G. Watson, *Celticism and the Annulment of History*, in S. Briggs, P. Hyland and N. Sammells (eds.), *Reviewing Ireland: Essays and Interviews from Irish Studies Review*, Sulis Press, Bath 1998; C. Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland. Identity, Theory, Culture*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2001; I. McBride (ed.), *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001.

⁹ E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1983.

there can hardly be any stronger and more cohesive tradition than that which presents itself as the trace of a mythical past, a residual strain surviving a miserable present. In other terms, through their projects and the relative myths, these «imagined communities»¹⁰ have aimed to grant a continuity between idealized ancestries and a most utopian future, thus joining mythopoetic and futurological impulses. These very impulses underlie Auclair and Deschamps's work and guide their selection of mythological content. How such content was exploited by the cartoonists and which ideological standpoint informed its deployment are worth a detailed exploration.

As it will hopefully be shown below, the original myth of *Túan MacCairill* revolves around archetypal dynamics similar to those described above: it deals with the origins of the Irish people, their survival through a fabulous lineage, the no less fabulous continuity between a remotest and dignified past and a most notable, marvellous exception to today's meanness. As anticipated, among several possible reactions to the paucity of the present, including grim fatalism, subdued acquiescence, pragmatic cynicism and consolatory escapism, Auclair and Deschamps's mythical contrapresent rather espoused a heroics of resistance, though of a mournful, passive kind, that eventually drove them to dangerously downplay complex and essential aspects of the Northern Irish conflict they were representing. Moreover, in both *Tuan* and *Bran Ruz* their revival of Celtic myths ushered in such contrapresent tensions as radical environmentalism, nostalgia for the eco-friendly commitment, the rejection of industrial progress, the mysticism and egalitarianism of primitive societies and the empowerment of minor cultures against hegemonic ones which, in turn, evoked the ghost of colonial, neo-colonial and global powers. It is worth mentioning here that Auclair also created a comic book on slavery and one of the very first western comics adopting the Native Americans' viewpoint (1971).

¹⁰ Cfr. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London/New York 2006.

The circles of readers who were mostly thrilled by Auclair's and similarly identitarian comics in 1980s' Italy were from the left-wing milieu and the same can also be argued of *Tuan* in the light of its circulation. Leftists, Third-Worldist movements, extra-parliamentary 'revolutionary' oppositions and the many informal communist and anarchist groups in Continental Europe took a keen interest in the Irish question. Presumably, the main reason for it was the emergence within the Irish Republicanism of the late Sixties and early Seventies of Marxist leaders – such as Cathal Goulding, last chief of staff of the old IRA – who began to express increasingly socialist concerns to the detriment of the traditional, irredentist claim. This shift inevitably brought to a clash between Catholic nationalists and socialist republicans, which caused several splits within the IRA and witnessed the establishment of new and radical paramilitary factions, including the Provisional IRA.¹¹ Such developments were followed with great attention throughout Europe and even more so in Italy.

In fact, links of solidarity between Italy and Ireland extended well beyond this political occasion and similarities of character between the relative cultures had already come to the fore in other periods. At all rates, such a special relationship can certainly not be accounted for by their mutual religion alone, even though the extremely wide range of exchanges historically operated in the two countries by Catholic institutions and community groups must not be overlooked. However, beside the stereotype depicting the Irish as a staunchly Catholic people, other stereotypes concerning their supposedly mystic, creative, stubborn and rebellious temperament were magnified in Italy at markedly different times and by groups with opposing political agendas. Arguably, what most of these groups shared was the anti-English feeling which made an alliance with the Irish – or better, with the most suitable version of 'the Irish' at any given

¹¹ E. Ó Broin, *Sinn Féin and the Politics of Left Republicanism*, Pluto, London/New York 2009. B. Hanley and S. Millar, *The Lost Revolution. The Story of the Official IRA and the Workers' Party*, Penguin, London 2010.

time – a golden opportunity despite the very different reasons for it. This was, for instance, the case of 1930s fascists who looked at Ireland as at a land of ideological conquest and praised it as a beacon of the fight against *la perfida Albione*.¹² All in all, though inspired by divergent views, left and right-wing Italians have often identified in Irishness, whatever this meant to them, and the ambiguity granted by mythological narratives has always encouraged such flexible identifications.

In the period when *Tuan* was published, the Northern Irish conflict and the Republicans' armed struggle drew the attention of the Italian left. The newspaper *Lotta Continua* kept a correspondent in Belfast from 1971 to 1973, who usually referred to the region as to the European Vietnam. And on 30 January 1972 in Derry, it was thanks to an Italian journalist from this very background, Fulvio Grimaldi, that the world could learn of the Bloody Sunday: Grimaldi marched through Creggan and the Bogside with the anti-Internment unarmed demonstrators and when the British paratroopers opened fire on them he bravely took pictures of their killings. The portion of the Free Derry Museum dedicated to the massacre still has several of his pictures on display. Other journalists and correspondents, including Silvia Calamati and Orsola Casagrande, subsequently moved to Belfast, from where they could report on the so-called Troubles, the Irish euphemism referring to the sectarian war between Loyalists and Republicans.

Considering the attention focused on Northern Ireland, it should not come out as a surprise that the Italian translation of *Tuan* was published immediately after the French original, on the 26th issue of *Totem*, in 1983.¹³ The comic work was introduced by the same reportage by Georges Baguet, entitled *Tragic Ireland*, which already featured in *À Suivre*.¹⁴ In Baguet's intro-

¹² C.M. Pellizzi, «Ibernia fabulosa»: per una storia delle immagini dell'Irlanda in Italia, «Studi Irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies», 1 (2011), pp. 29-119.

¹³ C. Auclair and A. Deschamps, *Storia di Tuan mac Cairill*, «Totem», 26 (1983), pp. 41-52.

¹⁴ G. Baguet, *Tragica Irlanda*, «Totem», 26 (1983), pp. 35-40.

duction, one can read a genuine attempt at explaining the historical roots and sociological effects of the conflict. Likewise, a dossier written by the Board for International affairs of the Centro Popolare Autogestito Firenze Sud¹⁵ and entitled *La lotta di liberazione irlandese* (the Irish struggle for liberation) also introduces a booklet containing Totem's translation of *Tuan* and circulated by the same squat in the autumn of 1995. The dossier introducing the comic work consists of a preface by the squat's political collective, an interview to Paul O'Connor of the Pat Finucane Centre,¹⁶ leaflets on the Irish question distributed by the squat through the years and related articles (mostly signed by Orsola Casagrande) from the communist newspaper *Il Manifesto*. The CPA Fi-Sud's booklet amounts to a total of fifty black-and-white pages and it is thanks to it that I learnt of Auclair's comics.

As far as the mythical source of the comics is concerned, this comes from *Scél Túain maic Cairill do Fhinén Maige Bile* (*The story of Túan, son of Cairill, to Finnian of Moville*) and is found in the oldest extant manuscript in Irish language: *Lebor na hUidre* (*The Book of the Dun Cow*). Written before 1106, *Lebor na hUidre* is one of the foundational manuscripts in Gaelic literature and, therefore, in Irish mythology. It contains numerous heroic tales including *Tain Bo Cualnge* (*The Cattle-Raid of Cooley*), also known as the Ulster Cycle, which is regarded as the most important saga in Ireland. It is meaningful how consistently Túan MacCairill was mentioned by Séathrún Céitinn (Geoffrey Keating) five centuries later, in his *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* (*Compendium of the Historical Knowledge of Ireland*), a milestone in Irish historiography in that it inaugurated a proto-nationalist viewpoint on Irish identity, traditions and foreign affairs. Through his study, Céitinn angrily reacted to the appallingly racist stereotypes first portrayed in Giraldus Cambrensis's ethnographical report, *Topographia Hibernica* (1188), and op-

¹⁵ An historical squat in Florence. Hereinafter referred to as CPA Fi-Sud.

¹⁶ Human rights advocacy institution working for a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

portunistically reinforced by the Tudors' imperial rhetoric at the time of their settlement policy in Ireland in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Defined by Declan Kiberd as «the Edward Said of his era»,¹⁷ C itinn worked from within the Catholic Counter-Reformation so as to contrast – and sometimes reverse – the misinformation spread by the English propaganda. In the preface to his seminal work, he complained that historical truth must not be reduced to the interests of few, well read and powerful people and should instead bring together the wisdom of all the parties involved. In a postcolonial understanding, his decision to write, for the first time, a history of Ireland from the perspective of the Irish people heralded the dawn of a cultural and political decolonization process and it is not by chance that therein C itinn laid heavy emphasis on T uan's story.

A widely known and most authoritative contemporary rewriting of the myth of T uan was provided by James Stephens in 1920 and translated by Melita Cataldi into Italian in 1987 as part of a collection of fairy tales.¹⁸ In Stephens's version, the account of T uan's marvelous deeds turns into a magical chronicle of human settlements on the Emerald Isle. Intriguingly, the pattern of events in such chronicle recalls that of another foundational manuscript in Gaelic mythology, *Lebor Gabala  renn* (*The Book of the Taking of Ireland*, commonly known as *The Book of Invasions*), whose poems and prose narratives were compiled by an anonymous scribe in early Modern Irish between the eleventh and twelfth century.

According to Stephens's rewriting, T uan arrived in Ireland with Partholon – Noah's grandson – and his tribe soon after the Great Flood. Partholon's was the first of five invasions.¹⁹ After a

¹⁷ D. Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, p. 14.

¹⁸ J. Stephens, *Irish Fairy Tales*, Cavalier, Los Angeles 2015; J. Stephens, *Fiabe irlandesi*, Rizzoli, Milano 1987.

¹⁹ This number is also consistent with the legend told in *Lebor Gabala  renn* which also mentions a previous 'invasion' (for a total of six) by the people of Cessair. In these sources one can hardly single out the mythical and charming from the historical, as its primary aim was arguably to make up a written history for the Irish, to make the different tribes feel part of a cohesive

period of peace, «there came a sickness [...] and on the seventh day all of the race of Partholon were dead, save one man only»²⁰. And several centuries later, Túan MacCairill told Finnian (the Abbot of Moville, who had come to visit him) to his utter astonishment: «And I am that man».²¹ As the old man's tale goes on, Finnian learns that, after the death of his people, Túan found himself alone, exhausted and tracked by hungry wolves. He took refuge in a cave in Ulster where he fell asleep and dreamt of turning into a stag, before waking up transformed into one: «I awoke from my dream and I was that which I had dreamed».²² This formula is repeated, largely unchanged, several times in Túan's tale, signaling as many reincarnations: into a wild boar, an eagle, a salmon, and finally a man again. As a stag, Túan knew delight and strength, and proudly fought all the other animals, thus taking the lead of a herd, and, as anticipated, witnessing the arrival of other populations. And when his body grew old and weak, magic repeated: while asleep in the same cave in Ulster, the dying stag turned into a young, strong wild boar: again a leader, again wild and cruel. On the other hand, when the metamorphosis transformed him into an eagle first and a salmon afterwards, Túan learnt to have joy, peace and fullness of life. Eventually, after being fished by King MacCairill and eaten by his wife, he was born again into a man of great wisdom who is still living today, at least according to Stephens's rewriting, and «watching all things, and remembering them for the glory of God and the honour of Ireland».²³

So, who is Túan MacCairill? Or better, what does his old body's capacity to eternally regenerate into a young one

society while legitimating the dynasties in power at the time and to weaken paganism. However, attempts to track down these migrations and distinguish the ethnic groups involved have been made and can be read about in T.F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology*, Institute for Advanced Studies, Dublin 1946.

²⁰ J. Stephens, *Irish Fairy Tales*, p. 6.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ivi*, p. 8.

²³ *Ivi*, p. 15.

epitomise? I presume he epitomizes the immortality of a people and the polymorph versatility of their soul, which in turn are granted by a narrative mythological device winning biological death and enabling the Irish people to hand down their knowledge and memory. In this respect, it is necessary to observe how far the original myth is from reflecting a besieged fortress mentality. In contrast, any time a new population landed in Ireland – after Partholon’s tribes, there came those led by Nemed, from Spain; then the Firlbolgs; followed by the Tuatha de Danaan, who were from the North; and eventually the Milesians, also known as Goidelic and Gaelic, who were again from Spain – Túan was magnetically attracted to them, as a bittersweet yearning overcame him: «[A]t times I drew near, delicately, standing among thick leaves or crouched in long grown grasses, and I stared and mourned as I looked on men».²⁴ This was the only occasion when Túan dismissed its usually bellicose attitude: «I challenged all that moved. All creatures but one. For men had again come to Ireland ... Often I would go, drawn by my memoried heart. To look at them».²⁵ No matter who came to Ireland, his heart always welcomed the newcomers, regardless of their origin. Absorption of the foreign – what will be called cultural assimilation in ethnography – is taken for granted in manuscripts produced during the Middle Ages and this is a most important and sociologically emblematic feature of the myth which will resurface again in much modern and contemporary literature. Suffice it to mention how insistently Irish cultural commentators have reported Norman invaders and settlers sent by the crown over to Ireland to become «Hiberniores Hibernis ipsis», more Irish than the Irish themselves in a short matter of time.²⁶ This feature crucially

²⁴ Ivi, p. 9.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 10.

²⁶ The adage is to be found everywhere in Irish cultural history and is still commonly employed with reference to today’s immigrants. It was probably first written down by John Lynch in *Cambrensis Eversus* (published in 1662 but composed earlier) and was famously quoted by Johnathan Swift, the Young Irelanders, Francis Plowden and Seán O’Faoláin even though the same

goes lost in Auclair's comics, presumably owing to political motives – and the relative mythomotor – which are worth being discussed in the following pages.

Auclair's adaptation departs from the myth, in the first place, as it is not focused on a people's origins, and even less so with the dawn of humanity. When compared to the myth, the comic work is set in relatively recent times, i.e. during «the eight hundred years of crime»,²⁷ which refer to the English occupation of Ireland. This is recorded in a vein that Céitinn would have appreciated, i.e. by offering an intrinsically Irish view and, particularly if regarded as a rewriting dealing with cultural memory, by employing a dynamic and exegetic approach – as opposed to a conservative one based on repetition and ritual coherence – that is accordingly meant to relate to the present time.

Another striking difference from the original myth, one which is somewhat related to the former and therefore to the comic book's engagement with history, is that it does not feature a plurality of invasions: just one arrival, that of the English army, is represented in it, and this is unsurprisingly shown by putting the spotlight on its tragic relevance to the experience of the Irish people. Another paradigmatic feature and essential isotopy which hardly appears in the comics, and this is quite a weird negligence one would not expect from such a committed environmentalist as Auclair, is Túan's embodied pantheism. The anthropological core of the myth is exactly a form of pantheism which, in typically Irish terms, results from the blending of magic and landscape, of marvellous past and social identity. The seduction exerted by nature, the inspiring sense of place, the conflation of territorial semantics, mythical antiquity and self-representation are tenets of Irish culture and literature; they are so deep-seated in the Irish people's mind that they have prompt-

point about the English moving to Ireland and forgetting their language, religion and traditions is already made in the *Statutes of Kilkenny* (1366).

²⁷ C. Auclair and A. Deschamps, *Storia di Tuan mac Cairill*, p. 42. The phrase is actually taken from *The H-Block Song* penned by Francie Brolly and inspired by the Republicans' prison protests which lead to the hunger strike.

ed psychological, epistemological and cultural developments of historical consequence in different epochs. Túan's allegory, like the folk-tales on the Tuatha de Dananns – who, once dispossessed of their land, turned into the night-time, magical inhabitants of the woods and underworld of Ireland, still claiming ownership on it – lend themselves to postcolonial readings and shape into the prototype of a population who, despite being defeated, will never be subdued.

Whereas this last point also informs the core message of Auclair's comics, the pantheist strain and nature's symbolism almost go unnoticed on the verbal level and are overshadowed by a predominantly urban setting on the visual level. Moreover, only three reincarnations are shown, in place of the five experienced by Túan in the mythical tale, as the stages when he transforms into a hawk and a wild boar are neglected. More importantly, all three transformations displayed narcotize a fundamental aspect of his mythical characterization: Túan always turned into a bold, vigorous and more often instinctively aggressive animal. For instance, when portrayed as a stag, he impulsively defied and chased deer from other herds and all other animals, «I met all that came», killing them cold-blooded, with no regret and sometimes even taking pleasure from it. And once become a boar, he emerged from the cave where he had hidden, thus taking the wolves aback as they were eagerly waiting for an old deer and its tasty flesh. Here follows Stephen's depiction of him at this very moment:

And I, with joyful heart [...] that red fierce eye, the wolves fled yelping, tumbling over each other, frantic with terror; and I behind them. A wild cat for leaping, a giant for strength, a devil for ferocity, a madness and gladness of lusty, unsparing life; a killer, a champion, a boar who could not be defied.²⁸

Biological fierceness and Túan's wild and cruel behaviour are completely eradicated from his multimodal portrayal in the comics. Actually, his inner feelings upon turning into a deer are

²⁸ Ivi, p. 10.

even reversed, from those of a strong and challenging animal to those of a frail and fearful creature, as the relative caption clearly shows:

One night I fell asleep at the foot of a tree and when I woke up I bear the countenance of a deer. I was young again and took pleasure in it. Long horns grew out of my head. Then I fled, running from hill to hill and staying clear of wolves and the English for years and years.²⁹

Before questioning Auclair's most bewildering change in his actualization of the mythical narrative, one should bear in mind that the addressee of Túan's account in *Lebor na hUidre* is Finnian, a Catholic bishop, whose reaction to such sketches of violence and pride is one of fascination: Finnian repeatedly calls Túan «my beloved»³⁰ and eventually baptizes him «into the family of the Living God»,³¹ the Catholic church.³²

The co-occurrence of Celtic pantheism, supernatural forces, overbearing *hybris* and a Christian sensibility does not surprise those who are familiar with the Irish literature of the Middle Ages, i.e. when the religious shift took place. This once again witnesses the shrewd realism and malleability of the Roman Catholic church when it has come to penetrating utterly diverse cultures. Thus, Christian values apparently happily co-existed with the superstitions, encoded violence and archaic hooliganism described by Túan and epitomized by Cuchulainn and the Fianna warriors in the Gaelic mythological cycles.³³ As Ka-

²⁹ C. Auclair and A. Deschamps, *Storia di Tuan mac Cairill*, p. 43. English translation by the author of this essay.

³⁰ J. Stephens, *Irish Fairy Tales*, pp. 5-7.

³¹ Ivi, p. 15.

³² The «rhetorical contrast» between a Christian and a mercenary soldier, «which frequently turns into a fruitful dialogue between the saint and the man of violence» and results in the conversion of the latter, is a «staple of Irish hagiography and secular saga». Cfr. A. Dooley and H. Roe (eds.), *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999, p. XIII.

³³ And yet, one should not forget that the sagas we have access to nowadays were mainly transcribed by Catholic monks and these were likely to understate the pagan motives which did not meet the requirements of their faith and culture. G. Agrati and M.L. Magini, (eds.), *La saga irlandese di Cu*

vanagh acutely observed in the 1940s, «Catholicism in Ireland never made a captive of the Celtic imagination».

But times are always changing and Kavanagh's statement may no longer prove true. In this respect, the comic book under scrutiny here speaks volumes. The French cartoonists were, to say the least, at pains when framing this major constituent of Irishness. Actually, the stereotype of the 'fighting Irish' is still kicking and alive in contemporary Irish literary writing and cinema, but often goes unnoticed and is sometimes even silenced by foreign observers, including translators of Irish texts, to the advantage of other, more exotic clichés such as creativity, mysticism, rudeness, rural authenticity, and lunacy. It is undeniable that the Irish republicans are portrayed as rebellious in the comic book, riots and clashes in the streets being recurrent throughout it, but the focus is on the English army's cruel repression rather than on any active, military retaliation. Emblematically, Republicans with balaclava are characteristically drawn while throwing stones and waving Irish flags in front of tanks and heavily armed battalions. Moreover, images, drawings on the walls and dialogues, including screams and war cries, show isotopies which organize their relevance and coherence around such classemes as /monstrous/, /evil/, /devilish/, and /deadly/ whenever referring to the English. Actually, in the comics these are more often called «Protestants», or «damned Protestants», disregarding Bernadette Devlin's warning that the Northern-Irish issue should never be tackled as a religious dispute, Ireland's problems being «economic and social». ³⁴ Following her, Ciarán de Baróid poignantly argued: «To describe the Irish war as a conflict between Catholics and Protestants is about as honest as portraying the Vietnam war as a conflict between Christians and Buddhists». ³⁵

Chulainn, Mondadori, Milano 1982, p. xix. Cfr. Thomas Cahill, *How The Irish Saved Civilization. The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe*, Random, New York 1995.

³⁴ B. Devlin, *The Price of My Soul*, Pan, London 1969, p. 88.

³⁵ C. de Baróid, *Ballymurphy and the Irish War*, Pluto Press, London 2000, p. xxi.

Regardless of one's idea about the true nature of the Troubles, the interpolation of a religious opposition is certainly at odds with Túan's myth, a change which adds to the missing pantheism, the erasure of mythological *hybris*, the trivialization of a narrative pattern based on more invasions into one based on a single invasion, with the consequent alteration of the indigenous' open, inclusive attitude into the closed attitude of those who feel hemmed in by evil enemies. But there is another major manipulation in the comic rewriting that arguably accounts for the above-mentioned changes and motivates them as the outcome of the re-functionalisation of mythology into historical engagement: it is the identification of the Irish people as victims. The myth of Túan is in fact re-framed by Auclair and Deschamps in the light of the motives of self-sacrifice and martyrdom. This is consistent with both a Catholic understanding of Irish history and the «mythological cult of sacrifice», which is «deeply-rooted in the Irish national psyche».³⁶ In bringing these two traditions together the cartoonists thus adapted to the nationalist rhetoric which has been predominant in Ireland ever since the 1916 Easter Rising, as it can be found in the narratives by Patrick Pearse, Constance Markievicz, W.B. Yeats and, more recently, Bobby Sands and the Republican hunger strikers who died in prison.

According to Richard Kearney:

there also exists a hidden mythic dimension, ignored by most contemporary commentators, which has played a formative role in what might be described as the 'ideological unconscious' of the militant nationalist tradition in Ireland.³⁷

Kearney's controversial statement points directly at the abstract crossroads where ideology cuts across mythology, each feeding the other, and, as far as the comics version of Túan is concerned, it may explain the gradual, 'ideological' replacement of the supernatural, barbarian and amoral gigantism typical of

³⁶ R. Kearney, *Transitions*, p. 216.

³⁷ Ivi, p. 223.

Celtic mythology with the glorification of martyrdom by nationalists and the passive acquiescence and victimhood stemming from the tenets of the Catholic doctrine.