

How Deirdre and the Sons of Uisneac Took the GPO: Parody in James Stephens's *Deirdre* (1923)

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Abstract:

This article looks at the parodical aspects of James Stephens's novel *Deirdre*, published in 1923. It uses Linda Hutcheon's theoretical framework on parody to analyse how Stephens both follows the medieval tradition and the Revivalists, and distances his work from their influence. He breathes life into the age-old narrative of Deirdre by adding dialogues, psychological insights and humour to the story, but also by implicitly comparing the Sons of Uisneac to the Irish Volunteers of 1916. This serves to glorify the rebels, whom he had portrayed in his witness account *The Insurrection in Dublin*, but the depiction of the fratricidal fight at the court of Emain Macha at the end of the Deirdre legend also acts as a critique of the Irish civil war.

Keywords: Deirdre, Irish Revival, James Stephens, Parody, 1916

In the 1920s, James Stephens set out to rewrite the great Irish epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge* in five volumes. The ancient narrative relates the war between Maeve of Connacht and Conachúr mac Nessa of Ulster¹, in which Cúchulinn achieved fame by single-handedly defending Ulster from the Connacht assailants. Stephens's ambitious endeavour never reached completion, but he thus produced *Deirdre* in 1923, an introductory novel to these events also known as "The Cattle-Raid of Cooley". The happenings of the *Táin* are recounted in several versions in eleventh- and twelfth-century manuscripts (O'Rahilly 1967) and the story of

¹ For the purposes of clarity, the spelling used in this article with regards to the Irish names of the characters is that used by Stephens himself. The names are however more commonly come across as follows: Maeve is the Anglicisation of Medbh, Conachúr mac Nessa is more common as Conchobhar mac Neasa, just like Fergus mac Roy is more often spelled Fergus mac Róich, when Cúchulinn is Cú Chulainn, and the lenition in "Uisneac" is generally indicated with a final "h" in standardised Irish.

Deirdre is to be found, unsurprisingly, in the same volumes (Hull 1949), since it constitutes a prefatory tale to the larger epic. It is known in the Irish storytelling tradition as “Longes mac n-Uislenn” for the older narratives and “Oided mac n-Uisnig” for early-modern texts, “the exile” or “the death of the sons of Uisneach”. There are indeed a number of versions of this story, ranging from Old Irish recensions to early-modern sources (Breatnach 1994, 99).

The medieval narrative purports to explain the presence of Fergus mac Roy, Conachúr’s stepfather, on Maeve’s side during the war. It is centred on the character of Deirdre, of whom it was predicted at her birth that she would bring destruction upon Ulster, hence her name, which means “troubler”, according to Stephens (1923, 8)², who makes repeated use of this etymology at key moments throughout the novel (D, 85, 113, 121, 176, 221). Destined to be married to the king, Deirdre sees a raven drinking a calf’s blood on the snow and vows to love only the man who has hair as black as the raven, skin as white as snow and lips as red as blood. Needless to say, this augury does not depict Conachúr, and tragedy ensues. Deirdre indeed falls in love with Naoise, son of Uisneac, and they escape with his two brothers from the king’s wrath to Scotland, where they remain in exile for seven years. When Conachúr welcomes them back to Ireland, it is only under Fergus’s protection that Deirdre and the Sons of Uisneac agree to return. The king’s betrayal and his attack on them upon their arrival at his court of Emain Macha brings about the death of the Sons of Uisneac, and prompts Fergus to rally Maeve’s army, therefore setting the scene for the great battle of the *Táin*.

James Stephens is the first to have adapted the Deirdre legend into novel form (Martin 1977, 140), since W.B. Yeats, George W. Russell (A.E.) and J.M. Synge rather chose to rewrite it for the stage. Stephens’s retelling appeared over a decade after the dramatic renditions of the Revival, since George W. Russell’s *Deirdre* was produced in 1903, Yeats’s *Deirdre* was published in 1907 and Synge’s *Deirdre of the Sorrows* appeared in 1910. In a letter to Frederick Eddy on 6 November 1923, Stephens writes that his “intention in writing *Deirdre* was to keep as closely as possible to the recorded facts; and while making the story as old as time to make it at the same moment as modern as tomorrow” (Finneran 1974, 295). As previously noticed by several researchers, Stephens’s main emphasis in the book is on the psychology of the characters, an innovative approach at the time.

This study offers to look at another aspect of the novelty of Stephens’s re-writing of the Deirdre legend: his portrayal of the sons of Uisneac, who share some of their traits with the 1916 rebels. Stephens parodies the age-old narrative, in Linda Hutcheon’s sense of the word, notably by putting the Easter

² All subsequent quotations from the novel are abbreviated to D, followed by the page number from this edition.

Rising Volunteers in the footsteps of Naoise and his brothers. In doing so, he glorifies the rebels of his time, revives the heroes of the Irish mythological past and criticises the civil war taking place in his city of Dublin.

1. *Stephens's Parodical Approach to the Irish Tradition*

Parody is at the heart of Stephens's prose writings, as exemplified by *Deirdre*. It has been noted that Stephens was the "first of the Irish writers to treat the Celtic gods and heroes irreverently and is thus the fore-runner of a burlesque tradition in Irish fiction that later includes Joyce, Eimar O'Duffy and Flann O'Brien" (Martin 1977, 42). However, it should be emphasised that what is meant by "parody" here, as in Linda Hutcheon's work,

[...] is *not* the ridiculing imitation of the standard theories and definitions that are rooted in eighteenth-century theories of wit. The collective weight of parodic practice suggests a redefinition of parody as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity. (1988, 26)

The process is one through which the artist emulates models at the same time as s/he is distancing themselves from these predecessors. Unlike the ridiculing type of parody dismissed by Hutcheon, "this parody paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity [...]" (*ibidem*, 26). It is built on an intertwining of past and present, old models and new artists, tradition and creation. It acknowledges the authority of past literary works and inscribes itself in the continuity of this tradition, while subverting it. Giovanna Tallone remarked that "The saga material in James Stephens's *Deirdre* leads directly backwards in time. [...] Above all, the old legends come out as a continuum whose heroic dimension does not belong to the past only, but takes a new life in the shaping of Irish nationalism" (Tallone 1990, 75). In rewriting the story of Deirdre and of the Sons of Uisneac, Stephens follows in the footsteps of the *seanachai* of old, as well as of the Revivalist leaders, quietly claiming his work to be cut from the same cloth as theirs. But he also twists the tale for nationalistic purposes. Referring to previous texts confers the legitimacy to then subvert them: "but all of their parodic transgressions remain legitimized, authorized by their very act of inscribing the backgrounded parodied text, albeit with critical distancing of various degrees" (Hutcheon 2000, 83). The parodical deference with difference is not necessarily avant-gardist, but can be seen as conservative, since by using the work of their predecessors, it further etches them in the canon (*ibidem*, 101). But parody rests on the challenge made to the touchstones of the (literary) past. It is thus a process of both emulation and emancipation, through which past and present enter in a dialogue. At the heart of parody is an "act to preserve the very forms that it attacks" (Dentith 2000, 37).

By rewriting the great Irish myths and legends, Stephens is challenging the Irish literary heritage, but he is also inscribing his own writing in the continuity of the old Irish storytelling tradition. He updates and makes the story “as modern as tomorrow”, to take up his words quoted earlier, in a number of ways. Using the novel form allows him to develop the psychology of his characters, as has been noted by critics such as Augustine Martin and Hilary Pyle (Pyle 1965, 98; Martin 1977, 140). For example, Stephens took liberties with the old narrative when he decided to include in *Deirdre* the episode of Maeve leaving Conachúr, to whom she had been married against her will:

It happened at last that Maeve came to the decision which for a long time had been forming in her mind. She decided that she would not remain with the King of Ulster any longer, and, having so decided and faced all its implications, she was not long finding an opportunity to get away from him. [...] But matrimony had been poisoned for them at the very fountain, and a dear, detestable memory for Maeve was that her husband had outraged her before he married her, and that he had taken her then and thereafter in her own despite. (D, 22-24)

Her affront to his kingly pride makes Deirdre’s escape with the sons of Uisneac all the more loaded with consequences: the king certainly cannot tolerate another woman leaving him if he hopes to retain some of his regal honour. His vengeful wrath thus becomes much more understandable, though no less unacceptable. This inclusion is a “bold stroke” on Stephens’s part, for Patricia McFate (1979, 75), since it allows Stephens to draw a parallel between the two women, making Conachúr’s character more human thanks to the psychological insight into the humiliated king’s mind. McFate also notices that Deirdre herself gets a more modern and human side: because of a series of changes from the original versions, Stephens softens the aspect of treason. For instance, Deirdre’s marriage to the king is not settled at her birth in Stephens’s version, unlike the ancient texts (*ibidem*, 92): so, in falling in love with Naoise in the novel, Deirdre is not transgressing a royal decree yet.

Hilary Pyle highlights what she has called Stephens’s interest in the “psychological cause of the tragedy” (1965, 98), which is also visible in Deirdre’s escape from Emain Macha. Her flight from the court when she discovers that she is due to marry a king twice her age whom she regards with a childlike awe is no longer seen as a teenage elopement. By depicting the relationship between Deirdre and her foster mother Lavarcham and the girl’s secluded education, Stephens portrays the heroine in much more depths than the medieval narratives have done. Her cloistered childhood is painted with innocent and idyllic colours:

Thus she grew in gentleness and peace, hearing no voice less sweet than the voice of the birds that sang in the sunshine, or the friendly calling of the wind she played

with; seeing nothing more uncomely than the gracious outline of far hills, the many-coloured sky that fled and was never gone, the creatures that lived unmolested in the trees about the castle, and the wild deer that grew tame in nearby brakes. (D, 17-18)

Furthermore, Lavarcham teaches her every information about Conachúr, although “its inevitable effect was to stamp the unseen king with a seal of time, so that, although Lavarcham insisted that he was only thirty-five years of age, the young girl’s mind regarded him as one who could have been father and grandfather to a hill” (D, 20). Her horror, when told that she is to wed him, then becomes understandable, if not predictable. The emphasis on the characters’ psychology allows Stephens to show them under another light. For many critics, the modernity of Stephens’s version therefore lies in “the humanizing of the saga figures by explanations of their emotions” (McFate 1979, 81). By leaving aside the blood-thirsty raven of the older versions, Stephens subverts them and gives an insight into the young Deirdre’s development as a young woman: she does not fall in love with Naoise because of a prophecy but because of his qualities.

The tragic dimension of the narrative is nevertheless underlined right from the start, at Deirdre’s birth when it is predicted that she will bring ruin to Ulster (D, 7). The king, who can decide on the child’s death so as to prevent the unfolding catastrophe, sets the tragic tone: “It is not soldierly, nor the act of a prince to evade fate. [...] Therefore, all that can happen will happen, and we shall bear all that is to be borne” (D, 8). Even before the prophecy is uttered, three forebodings are mentioned, indicating that something evil is coming his way: three comets had blazed in the sky as they were making their way to their lodgings for the night, the king’s horse had broken its leg and one of his men had taken ill (D, 6). Later comments in the novel hint at the tragedy about to happen as well. When Deirdre is escaping her secluded palace to reach the camp-fire of the sons of Uisneac, the narrator comments: “So she marched towards destiny” (D, 66). There is also an ominous foreboding in the words of Naoise’s brother Ainnle that announces the battle to come between Naoise and his brothers on the one hand and Conachúr and his army on the other: “It would be a queer thing [...] if a boy were to fight with his own foster-father” (D, 75). This tragic aspect is further put into relief by the absence of colours in the narrative: from the moment Deirdre flees with the Sons of Uisneac, everything is described in shades of darkness, since the only tones mentioned are that of silver, ebony and jet. Deirdre is linked to the moon (D, 65-66), while the latter turns everything “silvery to the view” (D, 94). Indeed, “at times, when there was neither light nor dark, a world of grey and purple [...] enclosed her in” and “grey moths” are as “dim as ghosts” (D, 95-96).

To relieve this tragic tension building up as the novel unfolds, Stephens added dialogues and humorous comments in his retelling. Just as the narrator has listed the sombre premonitions outlined above, comic details are

added to relieve the tension the auguries carry: “one of his attendants had been taken with mortal vomitings, and it did not seem that he would finish until he had emptied his body of his soul” (D, 6). These remarks lighten up an otherwise tragic narrative, considered in Irish tradition one of the “three sorrows of storytelling”, as the narrator points out when portraying the ill-fated family: “Uisneac, who had married one of Cathfa’s three daughters, and for whose little son Naoise the queens of Ireland would weep so long as Ireland had a memory” (D, 5). In the words of McFate, *Deirdre* is noted for the “addition of colour and humour to the darker tales of treachery and murder and the addition of dialogue which is comprehensible to the modern reader” (1979, 81). A humorous tone is indeed adopted right from the first page, when the relation between Conachúr and his queen is described in a chiasmus: “Maeve had the knack of annoying him more than anyone else was able to [...] for he was always trying to get the better of her, and was seldom without the feeling that she was getting or had just got the best of him” (D, 3). It is indeed often the king and his whereabouts which bring about an ironical or funny comment: “Meantime, night was at hand, and one must sleep, and it is vexatious to sleep alone” (D, 3-4), remarks that put the “salt of everyday life” in the legend, to reuse Jacqueline Genet’s words (1990, 9).

As a number of critics have noted, Stephens thus takes up an age-old story and rewrites it in novel form, adding humour and dialogue to a tragic narrative. In doing so, the modern writer is trying to make sense of the old narratives to his contemporary readers. The author also challenges the older texts in this implicit statement that they are no longer up-to-date in their style, though not in their theme. He is distancing himself from the tradition in that he is writing it differently, in the form of a novel, with extra details or emphases, but at the same time Stephens is inscribing his work within the tradition because he is striving to bring it closer to his contemporaries. In Hutcheon’s words, the process “both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies” (1988, 11). Stephens’s stepping in the footsteps of the old Irish storytellers who recounted the Deirdre legend evidences his reverence towards the tradition, while his rewriting emphasises the novelty he is bringing to the story. This parodical retelling paradoxically thus both brings him closer and apart from the medieval narratives.

2. *The Sons of Uisneac and the 1916 Rising*

In his rewriting of the story, Stephens added an extended description of the final battle, which differs from the original texts, in a romanticized section: “The passage [...] presents the sons of Uisneac in much fuller detail than they appear in the legends. Here, Stephens seizes an opportunity to present Naoise as a chivalrous warrior and a brilliant commander of his hopelessly outnumbered forces” (McFate 1969, 92-93). Another aspect of Stephens’s parodying of the legend of Deirdre is indeed his likening of the 1916 Volun-

teers to the Sons of Uisneac, an aspect hardly commented upon in previous studies of his works. Stephens, who was registrar at the National Gallery in 1916, was a first-hand witness of the Easter Rising in Dublin and described his experience in a short, journalistic essay simply entitled *The Insurrection in Dublin* and published in the latter half of 1916³.

The similarities between his portrayal of Naoise and his brothers Ainnle and Ardan in *Deirdre* on the one hand and the Irish Volunteers in *The Insurrection in Dublin* on the other hand are striking. Stephens describes the Sons of Uisneac ensnared in the Red Branch building at the court of Emain Macha and besieged by Conachúr's men in a fashion which is not without reminding the readers of the rebels trapped in the General Post Office, St Stephen's Green or Jacob's Biscuit Factory in 1916 (D, 229-286). When the Ulster warriors eventually return from exile upon the invitation of the king who promised not to exact revenge, Deirdre, Naoise and his brothers make their way back to Emain Macha under the protection of Fergus mac Roy and his sons. When Fergus is treacherously held back, his sons are left to provide assistance to Deirdre, Naoise, Ainnle and Ardan, against whom the king's vengeance is unleashed. They take refuge in the Red Branch building, in the same way that the Volunteers barricaded themselves in the GPO and other buildings around Dublin.

The element of surprise is an important aspect of Stephens's description in his essay on the Rising, put forward right at the start: "This has taken everyone by surprise. It is possible, that, with the exception of their Staff, it has taken the Volunteers themselves by surprise [...]" (I, 1). Similarly, the captain of the king's troops at Emain Macha complains to Conachúr that "this work has been thrown on us at a moment's notice, and we are not prepared for it. I can get them out in a day, but not in a night" (D, 247).

On the first day of the Easter Rebellion, Stephens witnessed the comings and goings of the Volunteers in Dublin city centre:

As I drew near the Green rifle fire began like sharply-cracking whips. It was from the further side. I saw that the Gates were closed and men were standing inside with guns on their shoulders. I passed a house, the windows of which were smashed in. As I went by, a man in civilian clothes slipped through the Park gates, which instantly closed behind him. He ran towards me, and I halted. He was carrying two small packets in his hand. He passed me hurriedly, and, placing his leg inside the broken window of the house behind me, he disappeared. Almost immediately another man in civilian clothes appeared from the broken window of another house. He also had something (I don't know what) in his hand. He ran urgently towards the gates, which opened, admitted him, and closed again. (I, 7-8)

³ Stephens 2000 [1916]. All subsequent quotations from it are abbreviated to I followed by the page number, from this edition.

The personification of the gates of St Stephens' Green points out the fact that the narrator witnesses the scene from the outside, curious of what is going on within these fences. Hence the emphasis on sounds at the start of the paragraph, with the plosive consonants of the onomatopoeic "sharply-cracking whips" of the bullets: Stephens can only describe what he hears and the little that he sees, and guess what else might be happening in the Green. On the contrary, in *Deirdre*, the focalisation of the novel is on the side of the warriors, inside the Red Branch building, which is reflected in the absence of personification of the doors of the house. Naoise's instructions to his brothers however strongly echo Stephens's first experience of the Rising:

You will slip out by this door, and will run, and fight as you run. Range where you please, but run always. In five minutes – do not delay, Ainnle – make for yonder door. This one will be shut, and the slingsmen will be inside that door to cover your retreat. It is understood? [...] The instant you are in, Ainnle, fly to this door again, while we close the other behind you. Open all the bolts but one; Buinne will help and I and Iolann will dart out for five minutes. (D, 242-243)

The dialogue between Naoise and his small troop give a further emphasis on the insider's view the reader is getting of the battle. The tactics employed by the Sons of Uisneac trapped in the Red Branch are similar to those Stephens witnessed the rebels use in 1916: one man darts out of cover unexpectedly while another comes back a different way as quickly as possible. It is the constant and quick ins and outs of the Volunteers that Naoise and his brothers replicate in their last stand at the Red Branch. This fighting technique gives them the advantage of unexpectedness, as the officer in command of the king's men has quickly understood:

'A fortress with six doors. They leap in and out of these doors the way frogs leap in a pool. While we are using the ram on this door, any door – and they are the devil's own fighters! We don't know where to expect them, and any one of those within is equal of ten of our men in fighting, and the superior of them all in tricks. I am to have them out before morning – it is the king's orders, but I don't know how it is to be done.' [...]

A shout arose, but it was multiplied from every side by the roaring soldiery, and one could not tell from which direction danger came. 'They have popped out somewhere,' said the captain. 'In about two minutes they will pop in again, somewhere – they know but we don't, – and in those two minutes we will lose five men or twenty'. (D, 247-248)

The officer's point of view is that of the outsider, echoing Stephens in *The Insurrection in Dublin*, therefore also implicitly underlining to the reader the advantage they have on Conachúr's men by being privy to Naoise's stratagem. An obvious feature of these tactics is the sharp shouts of the fighters

consequently followed by the opening of gates or doors and the rushing in or out of one of them. Ardan runs back in as soon as he hears his brothers' call in the Red Branch for instance (D, 241). This parallels what Stephens saw on the Green:

I came to the barricade. As I reached it and stood by the Shelbourne Hotel, which it faced, a loud cry came from the Park. The gates opened and three men ran out. Two of them held rifles with fixed bayonets. The third gripped a heavy revolver in his fist. They ran towards a motor car which had just turned the corner, and halted it. (I, 8)

Here again hearing is the most important of the senses, since sight does not provide much information for Stephens, who seems to have drawn from this experience to depict the final struggle in the Red Branch. The prominence of sounds in the description of the fights also echoes the cry which is at the start of Deirdre's story in the old texts, though it has become a "thin wail" in Stephens's retelling of the story (D, 6). The earliest versions have it that the unborn Deirdre shrieked so loudly that the whole house heard it, an ominous sound that announces the troubles to come through its contrast with the bustling banquet, as Cornelius Buttimer details (1994-1995, 2-9). Giovanna Tallone further remarks that "The original story of Deirdre is, so to speak, very verbal: it starts with a non-natural sound, Deirdre's scream from her mother's womb, which is expanded in the prophecy on Deirdre's life and death and the destruction she will cause" (1990, 75).

The efficiency of the Sons of Uisneac's way of fighting lies also in its simplicity, as the captain remarks to the king: "There is nothing to get, majesty. Their plan is the simplest. They have six doors: they choose one to come out by and one to get in by. That is the whole plan" (D, 263). Stephens puts into relief the lack of complexity of the tactics in both cases. In *The Insurrection in Dublin*, he writes:

There is much talk about the extraordinary organising powers displayed in the insurrection, but in truth there was nothing extraordinary in it. The real essence and singularity of the rising exists in its simplicity, and, saving for the courage which carried it out, the word extraordinary is misplaced in this context. The tactics of the Volunteers as they began to emerge were reduced to the very skeleton of 'strategy'. (I, 79)

In both cases, the stratagem used by the besieged fighters is built on its clarity, on the courage of the combatants and on their hopes. The Sons of Uisneac are ready to be besieged until the morning, when they are expecting reinforcements from Fergus's men, since they are under his protection and he will not tolerate such a betrayal on Conachúr's part (D, 231). Naoise and his brothers are thus awaiting relief from their kinsmen in the same way as

the Volunteers were said to be expecting forces from down the country and from Germany. A couple of days after the Rising and the executions were over, Stephens wrote: "There is no doubt that they expected the country to rise with them [...] It is quite likely that they hoped for German aid, possibly some thousands of men, who would enable them to prolong the row [...]" (I, 80-81). Even though, as Stephens recognises, the German support may have been only a rumour at the time, the situation in which both the Ulster warriors and the 1916 rebels find themselves are strikingly comparable.

Indeed, the Red Branch is set on fire by the king's men to lead the Sons of Uisneac out: "A ruddy glare could be seen by each window," writes Stephens of the building at Emain Macha (D, 271). He uses the same term to describe the fire on what is now O'Connell Street: "During the night the firing was heavy from almost every direction; and in the direction of Sackville Street a red glare told again of fire" (I, 61). The previous day, the writer had already glimpsed the fire at the GPO: "From my window I saw a red flare that crept to the sky, and stole over it and remained there glaring; the smoke reached from the ground to the clouds, and I could see great red sparks go soaring to enormous heights [...]" (I, 53). The fire at the Red Branch, which acts as an allegory for Conachúr's anger, is likewise insidious and once more puts forward both sight and sounds:

A huge golden flame licked screaming through the window, wavered hither and thither like some blindly savage tongue, and roared out again [...] for the voice of the fire was like the steady rage and roar of the sea, and through every window monstrous sheets of flame were leaping and crashing. (D, 272-273)

As discussed previously, the black and white of the seven years of exile for Deirdre and the Sons of Uisneac are prominent tones in the novel, along with the sanguine hue of the Red Branch in flames. These are the colours of the blood-drinking raven in the prophecy that Stephens has chosen not to include in his retelling, as Patricia McFate notes (1969, 92), and they seem to be an inherent, though unspoken, characteristic of the Deirdre legend. The water imagery used to depict the fire, as seen in the excerpt quoted above, is however absent from *The Insurrection in Dublin*. It acts as a subtle foreboding of the magical drowning of the Sons of Uisneac at the end of *Deirdre*. The running evocation of the sea anticipates the last and only trick that can stop Naoise and his brothers: their grandfather's magic that created a sea of water around them, making them vulnerable and unable to move forward quickly, so that the king's soldiers were able and unafraid to catch up with them (D, 280-281). The combat at the Red Branch is thus compared to a choppy ocean: "The uproar without had been terrific, but now it redoubled, and at times a long scream topped the noise as spray tops a wave", and "into the middle of these [Ainnle] went diving like a fish" (D, 244). The king himself

is paralleled with a merman, “alone amid the chop and shudder of his dismal waters” (D, 275). Enemies of the Sons of Uisneac are likened to natural elements, whether sea or fire, in order to emphasise the tragic aspect of their fight: there is no winning against nature, Naoise and his brothers are doomed.

Stephens also highlights the internecine nature of the fight in both *Deirdre* and *The Insurrection in Dublin*: “‘Which are our men and which are theirs?’ said the captain. ‘Ours don’t know in this light which is friend and which is enemy. *They* know,’ he said bitterly; ‘but we are killing one another’” (D, 248-249), the repetition of the question word highlighting the uncertainty in the soldier’s voice. The magician Cathfa, who casts the final, fatal spell on the Sons of Uisneac upon the king’s order also points out to the latter that they are his own grandsons as well as Conachúr’s nephews and foster sons (D, 277), which makes the king’s betrayal an even more despicable one. However, it is the fate of Fergus’s sons, Buinne and Iolann, which best illustrates the fratricidal conflict at hand: the brothers end up fighting against one another, when Buinne accepts the king’s reward as he leaves the Red Branch, while Iolann continues to combat on the Sons of Uisneac’s side, keeping his word, according to his role as a surety of Fergus’s protection (D, 259). As during the Easter Rising, Irishmen are fighting against fellow Irishmen, according to Stephens in the final pages of *The Insurrection in Dublin*:

It was hard enough that our men in the English armies should be slain for causes which no amount of explanation will ever render less foreign to us, or even intelligible; but that our men who were left should be killed in Ireland fighting against the same England that their brothers are fighting for ties the question into such knots of contradiction as we may give up trying to unravel. (I, 88)

Not only are the tactics and the situations of the men involved similar, but the very nature of both the attack on the Red Branch and the 1916 rebellion mirror each other in Stephens’s narratives.

Besides, both represent youth repressed by monarchy, since the young men of 1916 were rebelling against the English crown and the Sons of Uisneac are fighting the king of Ulster. The writer emphasises the youth of the protagonists in both books: he describes a Volunteer as “no more than a boy, not more certainly than twenty years of age” (I, 10), while Deirdre is herself twenty-three in Book Two at the time of the siege of the Red Branch and Ardan, the youngest brother, is twenty-one when they come back to Ulster (D, 166). At the start of their story, the main characteristics of the sons of Uisneac are youth, carelessness and laughter. Deirdre indeed watches them and listens, unbeknownst of Naoise and his brothers, “to the babel of laughter which sped between them. Back and forth it went, endless, tireless. Youth calling and answering to youth; catching a facile fire from each other, and tossing it back as carelessly” (D, 98). Stephens similarly portrays one of the

1916 leaders, O’Rahilly, as “a man of unceasing ideas and unceasing speech, and laughter accompanied every sound made by his lips” (I, 90) and further stresses: “in my definition they were good men” (I, 89), as if to indicate his implicit disapproval of such an assault on these youths, as well as to highlight their courage.

The bravery of the Sons of Uisneac echoes that of the Volunteers. An attempt is made to parley, but Naoise, who incidentally bears the same name as Stephens’s son, ignores it and does not surrender (D, 259), fighting until death for his honour and for the love of his brothers and his wife Deirdre. The main difference between the Volunteers and the Sons of Uisneac in the novel is in fact that the former eventually surrendered, when the latter never do. Naoise and his brothers thus embody the spirit of resistance. Even though the 1916 rebels surrendered after nearly a week of rebellion, Stephens also applauds their pugnacity, in lines already quoted by McFate:

Bravery, courage, lightheartedness – the essential qualities in battle of Naoise, Ardan, and Ainnle – are the attributes Stephens cites for the rebels of 1916. Those who fought in the Uprising faced impossible odds, displayed selfless concern for others, and refused to surrender to their enemies. Stephens told one of the stories about the Volunteers in his first account of the Uprising: an Irish garrison refused to surrender to the English officer in command because “they were not there to surrender. They were there to be killed. The garrison consisted of fifty men, and the story said that fifty were killed”. (1979, 76 quoting I, 30-31)

In what is the only critical analysis (briefly) linking *Deirdre* with the Easter Rising, she further remarks that in this lengthy and detailed depiction of the siege of the Red Branch and the combat against Conachúr’s men, Stephens departs from the previous retellings of the Deirdre legend, thus putting into relief the courage and bravery of the Sons of Uisneac. He follows the inclination of his times, since, as Máire Herbert notes, “The Irish Revival of the late nineteenth century sought to redefine the country’s present by recalling a past world of nobility and bravery” (1991, 13). Stephens puts the emphasis on heroic resistance with this long portrayal of the final battle. That the prophecy at Deirdre’s birth is less detailed in Stephens’s retelling than in the medieval versions also puts more emphasis on the courage of Naoise and his brothers, than on the tragic aspect of their story. It is a conscious choice from Stephens who preferred to highlight heroic fight.

3. *For the Honour of Ireland*

Whereas the other works of the Revival used Deirdre as the allegory of Ireland to stir a patriotic movement, Stephens’s rewriting of Deirdre came over ten years later, a few years after the Rising. *Deirdre* was published in

1923, during the Civil War, a year after Ireland gained her independence. In 1921, Stephens noted: “The nation that has a mythology is blessed beyond expression. She has but to bathe again in her own fountains to be refreshed from whatever travail, and Ireland is returning to her fountains” (McFate, 1983, 180). Like the other artists of the Irish Revival, Stephens reused the heroes of old in his writings, even though the height of the Revival preceded him by about two decades. He too found inspiration in the legend of Deirdre. McFate remarks that

Stephens’s versions of the same story are found in his first three novels. In each work a beautiful woman, representing Ireland, is championed by an Irishman who is in turn a young patriot, a Gaelic deity, and an angel with an Irish name. Many of Stephens’ works reflect his dedication to the literary reawakening of Ireland. (*Ibidem*, 12)

The character of Deirdre is indeed to be paralleled with Caitilin in *The Crock of Gold* (1912) and the Marys of *The Charwoman’s Daughter* (1912) and *The Demi-Gods* (1914). In *Deirdre*, the eponymous infant heroine is implicitly paralleled with Ireland when the king says that she places herself under his protection and the warrior Bricriu mutters under his breath that “Ulster is under [the king’s] protection” (D, 7-8).

So, like Yeats and Synge, Stephens idealises Ireland through the heroine, but he also glorifies the 1916 leaders through the figure of Naoise and his brothers. By using the characters of the Sons of Uisneac as metaphors for the Irish Volunteers, Stephens is thus equating the former with the latter. In his essay entitled “First Aid to Storytellers”, he advised that “what is happening is your theme” (undated MS, f. 17). It is no wonder then that he used the contemporary events of 1916 as material for his novel. John A. Murphy, in the introduction to *The Insurrection in Dublin*, writes that Stephens “devoted his energies to the imaginative recovery of Ireland’s poetic and mythological past. There can be little doubt that the impact of the military and political upheaval provided him with a fresh inspiration and pointed the new direction that he had been hoping for” (I, xx-xxi). *Deirdre* is the result of Stephens’s interests in both the contemporary affairs of his time and Ireland’s legendary past and ancient literature. Martin writes of *The Insurrection in Dublin* that “this is history as seen through the prism of national myth” (1977, 109), but this could also apply to *Deirdre*, since by setting the Volunteers in the footsteps of Naoise, Ardan, and Ainnle, Stephens is feeding into the process of idealisation of the 1916 rebels, which has been at work ever since.

Yet, in *The Insurrection in Dublin* he wrote: “It is not my intention to idealize any of the men who were concerned in this rebellion. Their country will, some few years hence, do that as adequately as she has done it for those who went before them” (I, 88-89). Stephens was indeed visionary and understood

the Irish imagination perfectly when he wrote during the week of the Rising: "All this, I said to myself, will be finished in a few days, and they will be finished; life here will recommence exactly where it left off, and except for some newly-filled graves, all will be as it had been until they become a tradition and enter the imagination of their race" (I, 44-45). Even though he refuted the idea of romanticising the rebels in his 1916 essay, the writer published in the same year a poetry collection entitled *Green Branches*, which features the following lines from the poem "Spring 1916": "But gather buds, and with them greenery / Of slender branches taken from a tree / Well bannered by the spring that saw them fall / [...] Green be their graves and green their memory" (Stephens 1916, 13-14). Stephens, who knew one of the 1916 leaders, Thomas MacDonagh (McFate 1979, 6), was a fervent supporter of the founder of Sinn Féin, Arthur Griffith, and had written a pamphlet in praise of the latter, comparing Griffith to Cúchullin the year before *Deirdre* was published (Stephens 1922). He also succumbed to the process of eulogizing the 1916 Volunteers in *Deirdre*, since, as Sean Kinsella argues, "The real importance lies in placing the individual act in the context of tradition. It is the mythic Ireland that determines the act and it is within that context that historical acts acquire their significance and validation" (1994, 22). In placing the 1916 rebels alongside the Irish heroes of the Ulster Cycle, Stephens implicitly validates and glorifies the Volunteers. The book is indeed dedicated in Irish to "the glory of God and the honour of Ireland", *Do chum glóire Dé agus onóra na h-Eireann*. These are the words which conclude the Irish Constitution and have been used throughout the years in various contexts, from Irish war memorials to portal inscriptions, at the Irish college in Leuven for example.

But the context of the publication of Stephens's novel is also revealing. The book, which describes the fratricidal battle of the Sons of Uisneac and their allies against the forces of Conachúr mac Nessa, echoes the Irish civil war going on at the time. The internecine fights waged in the book amongst Ulstermen quite tellingly translate the historical context and provide an implicit critique of the political situation of Ireland at the time, even though, as Werner Huber remarks, "political content has rarely been associated with Stephens's writing", except regarding Irish nationalism (1995, 95-96). Stephens would have witnessed the combats between pro- and anti-Treaty forces in Dublin during the civil war, although he did not write a book about it this time. His ironical and disheartened comments in a 1923 letter to his patron and friend W.T.H. Howe nevertheless highlight his disapproval of the plight of Ireland: "Things here are much as they were. Guns go off every night, and bombs are thrown, or, which is a newer delight, land-mines are exploded. It has all come to seem meaningless, and I expect it will stop shortly" (McFate 1983, 134). This led him and his family to move to London in 1925 to escape the incessant Irish guerrilla war. Choosing Ulstermen to represent the 1916 Volunteers is also significant at the time of the civil war, when the partition of Northern Ireland

from the Irish Free State was the main cause of the armed struggle going on country-wide. *Deirdre*, which portrays the 1916 rebels as embodiments of the Sons of Uisneac, is an implied condemnation of the civil war which will be at the heart of the epic it prefaces, the *Táin*, and which pens in the 1923 novel.

Stephens thus rewrites both the legend of Deirdre and the story of 1916. He parodies the Irish heroes with their embodiment in the rebels. The “repetition with critical distance” which is at the core of parody is clearly seen at work in *Deirdre*: Stephens emulates the ancient tradition by taking up an old epic, but also sets his novel in the footsteps of both the Revivalists and the 1916 ideals; yet he also moves away from the legendary material by adding humour and dialogues, to refashion it for modern audiences. The author’s critical distance is also expressed in his choice of the Sons of Uisneac as embodiment of the spirit of 1916, rather than Patrick Pearse’s Cuchullin. Through the parodical process, not only does he put his work in the line of the ancient storytellers, but he also implicitly argues that the 1916 rebels are the heirs of the great Irish warriors. In the same way that the Sons of Uisneac died but achieved everlasting fame for their bravery, so will the Irish Volunteers. Stephens’s retelling of the Deirdre legend is indeed a first step to this end.

James Stephens produced in 1923 a literary work which stemmed both from its troubled contemporary times and from the ancient Irish storytelling tradition. A book of the late Irish Revival which was awarded the prize at the Aonach Tailteann Festival in 1924 for best work of fiction in the previous three years (Finneran 1978, 16), *Deirdre* sets out to recount the story of the eponymous heroine, but above all of the three Sons of Uisneac who stood alongside her, against Conachúr mac Nessa, king of Ulster. The aim of the novel is triple: to set Stephens’s writings in the tradition of both the old Irish sagas and the Irish Revival, to glorify the 1916 Volunteers, and to implicitly condemn the civil war during which it was published. Like his predecessors of the Irish Renaissance, Stephens idealises Ireland in the figure of Deirdre, but he also romanticises the 1916 rebels by identifying them with Naoise and his brothers. Through the parodical process he employs, the author sets his own work in line with the Irish literary tradition, while departing from it at the same time in this rewriting of the Irish heroes as Volunteers.

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