FOR A POST-FOUCALDIAN LITERARY HISTORY:

A test-case from the Gaelic tradition[1]

Joep Leerssen
University of Amsterdam

for Ann Dooley

First of all, discourses are
objects of appropriation.[2]

One of the more general, diffuse influences of the work of Michel Foucault on subsequent scholarship has been the fact that we have a more balanced understanding of the various fields of writing which between them make up the discourse of a given cultural episteme. For one thing, Foucault himself has always been at pains to stress that neither at the level of the primary documentary record, nor at the secondary meta-level of our analytical understanding and categorization of our sources, a fixed scheme of different genres and their interrelations can be held to reign:

> Can we adopt wholesale the distinction between discursive types, forms or genres which differentiates between science, literature, philosophy, religion, history, fiction, etc., and turns these into some sort of major historical entities? We ourselves are not even sure nowadays as to the usage of these distinguishing labels within our own discursive environment. Worse so when it somes to analyzing corpuses of statements which, when they were first formulated, were grouped, classified and characterized in a wholly different way . . . neither "literature", nor "politics", nor indeed "philosophy" or "science" delineated the discursive field in the seventeenth and eighteenth century as they did in the nineteenth.[3]

This means, among other things, that we should reassess the mutual relations between literary history and cultural history, or rather: between literary history-writing and cultural history. As an endeavour, literary history-writing has traditionally been placed in the penumbra of literature proper, as an accompanying epiphenomenon, a seagull shrieking in the wake of the ship called

literary art. Its rise and development are related to developments in literary periodization, and literary history is considered to be a passive registring instrument tracing developments from a safe clinical distance, the way astronomers trace the progress of starts, planets and comets. These assumptions seem so self-evidently and obviously proper that their limitations are not immediately obvious; yet, my purpose is, precisely, to draw attention to their partiality.

To begin with, theoreticians in the wake of the Russian formalist school have gone some way towards sharpening our awareness of literary history-writing, even though their theoretical insights have not really had much consequence in historiographical practice. Thus, Felix Vodick · has drawn attention to the fact that literary history is twofold: it involves, not only the history of literary production - of authors succeeding each other in time and of texts accumulating in various interrelated, slowly changing reservoirs of canonicity - but also, crucially, a history of literary reception, of readers approaching this reservoir with a shifting set of values and pre-expectations and selecting or appropriating texts or authors according to their preference.[4] This second aspect need not necessarily follow the chronological order which rules the history of literary production. In their long-lasting canonical currency, Shakespeare and Dante go through cycles in the literary system as precursors, contemporaries and even reflections of Mann, Joyce or Goethe. The history of an author's reception, his or her fortunes among the various readerships he or she encounters, is a vastly more complex proces than the simple facts of his or her "life and work". For that reason, literary histories still tend to restrict themselves to the straightforward history of literary production.

This can lead to simplifications and distortions. I shall mention a few. The early-medieval fundamental texts of the various vernacular literatures of Europe are usually mentioned at the beginning of the literary histories in question. French literature kicks off with the *Chanson de Roland*, English literature with *Beowulf*. This is arguably distortive, since these texts had fallen into oblivion by the later middle ages, were to all intents and purposes non-existent for many centuries. When they were rediscovered in the opening decades of the nineteenth century, there was no way of telling how their ontological status differed from similar "old texts"

which were fabricated as well-intentioned falsifications or counterfeits around the same period: from Macpherson's *Ossian* to Lˆnrot's *Kalevala* and VillemarquÈ's *Barzaz Breizh*, or the Russian Song of Prince Igor. Indeed, the verdict is still pending as to the authenticity, or the degree of constructedness, of some of these texts; but what is quite obvious is that the early-medieval corpus of Europe's vernacular literatures (with some rare exceptions like the *Nibelungen*) was only brought into literary circulation in the nineteenth century and that these texts started to play an active role in the literary systems well after the demise of the Enlightenment. In a proper chronology of English literature, Beowulf should come somewhere between Wordsworth and Carlyle.[5]

Again, in most literary histories movements end with the death of the authors concerned. English romanticism is dead after the deaths of Byron, Shelley and Keats - as if people stopped reading the poetry of Byron, Shelley and Keats when the poets themselves were no longer around. The ongoing reverberations of romanticism throughout the nineteenth century are needlessly complicated by such an author-based perspective; as if Keats was not a living presence for the Preraphaelites.

This raises, more generally, the problematics of the importance attached to authors and authorship in literary history.

Again, Foucault's influence has been formative in this respect. Literary studies have in the last few decades foresworn the positivist/factualist approach grounded in the biographical incidents of an author's life and anchoring the text in the intentional purpose of "what the author meant to write". The "intentional fallacy" has fallen by the methodological wayside as part of the outmoded paradigm of "life and work"/ *la vie et l'oeuvre*, made obsolete by Roland Barthes' proclamation of "the death of the author" and by Jauss's provocatory hermeneutics placing critical emphasis on the reader of a given text rather than on its origin. The concept of "writing" (*Ècriture*) enjoys more status than that of "the literary work".

At the same time, this development, while it was a necessary corrective against the biographical essentialism and intentionalism of the older school of literary history, has its dangers. To reduce texts to mere "writing" and to concentrate exclusively on the

activation of texts by readers can lead to a critical subjectivism which in its worst form is wholly solipsistic and idiosyncratic, and heedless of historical contextualization to the point of wilful anachronism. Some examples of "poststructuralist" literary criticism have in past decades given sad proof of the real danger that one might throw away the historical baby with the historicist bathwater.

Nowadays the specialism of literary historiography is reconsidering its working assumptions in the light of this dilemma between historicism and anachronism. The historicity of literature, once taken for granted in a naive way, has to be renegotiated and understood in its problematical but ineluctable presence. It is in this sphere that the insights of Foucault may be of great value.

I refer in particular to Foucault's analysis, as laid down in his essay "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur", of the relationship between literature and authorship, after Barthes' proclamation of the death of the author and the liberation of *Ècriture*. Here, Foucault attempts to redefine the status of "authorship" with regards to texts and discourses which can not longer be seen as copyrighted "works". In the dilemma between intentional fallacy and biographist positivism on the one hand, and disembodied and decontextualized *Ècriture* on the other, Foucault attempts to redefine authorship as a discursive function - not as an extradiscursive legitimizing and coercive "authority" but as a textual presence mediating between a given discourse and its social environment. In the process, Foucault proposes an "author-function" whose presence is felt in the text and its dissemination. A named author has a deictic presence with an unmistakable classificatory and identificatory function.

> [...] an author's name is not simply an element in a discourse (capable of being either subject or object, of being replaced by a pronoun, and the like); it performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function. Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. In addition, it establishes a relationship among the texts. [...] the fact that several texts have been placed under the same name indicates that there has been established among them a relationship of homogeneity, filiation, authentification of some texts by the use of others, reciprocal explication, or concomitant utilization.

Thus, Foucault accords major importance to a text's "author-function": without falling into the trap that the author is a text's *onlie begetter*, he nevertheless concedes that the author's name "seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being". And by way of conclusion he sums up the idea of "author-function" by distinguishing it from authorship proper, as the historical anchorage of a given text or discourse:

> A private letter may well have a signer – it does not have an author; a contract may well have a guarantor – it does not have an author. An anonymous text posted on a wall probably has a writer – but not an author. The author-function is therefore characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society.[6]

Authorship, in the process, has been taken out of the text's ontology and redefined as part of the text's historicity. It is at this point that I would like to pay closer attention to the historicity of authorship. Because if it is not a timeless, ontological category defining the very identity of a given text, then it must have a datable beginning and presence. In other words, much as Barthes made it possible to contemplate the *death of the author*, so Foucault makes it possible to contemplate *the birth of the author*. He himself indicates this possibility in so many words at the beginning of his essay; but, alas, only by stating the issues which he is *not* addressing:

> [...] how the author became individualized in a culture like ours, what status he has been given, at what moment studies of authenticity and attribution began, in what kind of system of valorization the author was involved, at what point we began to recount the lives of authors rather than of heroes, and how this fundamental category of "the-man-and-his-work criticism" began.[7]

Even so, precisely these questions were placed on the agenda and have become relevant as a result of Foucault's investigations into the historical origins of Western rational individualism. The inference is obvious: literary history as pursued in present-day scholarship is part and parcel of an episteme which privileges the status of the author as a textual underwriting authority and vests

authorship with all the attendant connotations of discrete individuality, intellectual continence, deliberacy and self-contained control and reflection. That texts should be seen as the deliberate results of an authorial intention, nothing more or less, may be decried as "intentional fallacy" nowadays but is part of the implicit logic of a literary-historical vision which arises as part of Western rational individualism in the early-modern period.[8]

Nor is there any reason to be overly smug about this. If contemporary critics feel they can adopt a complacent one-upmanship vis-‡-vis the apparent partiality of such earlier attitudes, they should realize at the same time that this intentionalist and author-anchored view of literature is not just a limiting interpretation imposed on cultural praxis *post hoc* by purblind academics. On the contrary: as an outlook it was shared for three centuries by authors and critics alike; the romantic cult of the inspired, visionary author would have been unthinkable otherwise. Thus, the praxis of literary production and reception itself followed the same conditions which underlie the rise of literary history-writing.

All this leads me to a test-case. On the basis of the Foucaldian insights outlined above it is obvious how, owing to a number of tacit, fundamental assumptions, modern Western literary historiography seems insufficiently equipped to deal with non-European literatures, or pre-modern literatures, or non-written literatures. These are literary traditions and practices which do not lend themselves to a "historical" treatment, with a critical metanarrative structured along the chonological axis of textual production and formal development. There are literatures, for instance, which do not follow the innovatory historical vector which pre-inscribes an axiomatic notion of progress or experiment into virtually all our historical interpretations. How do we write the history, for instance, of a literary tradition which is based on emulation and conservation rather than innovation?[9]

One thought experiment which has brought out the enormous difficulties involved in "understanding" such literary practices can be found in Jorge Luis Borges' precious essay/story "El Busque de Averroes", which, after having reflected on how difficult it must

have been for the Islamic scholar Averroes to understand the Aristotelian notions of comedy, tragedy or even theatre, concludes by realizing how much more difficult it must be for one like Borges to understand Averroes' difficulties...

> I remembered Averroes, who, enclosed within the sphere of Islam, could not know the meaning of the words *tragedy* and *comedy*. [...] I realized that Averroes, in trying to imagine what a drama is without having a notion as to what a theatre is, was no more absurd than I am, trying to imagine Averroes without any sources other than a few scraps of Renan, Lane and AsÌn Palacios.[10]

Yet, even such cultural relativism may obscure matters by turning a problem of historiographical methodology into one of epistemology and exoticism. What I would like to offer by way of a test-case is, therefore, some material of European provenance, from the post-medieval period, yet alien to the presuppositions of author-based individualism; I am referring to a set of eighteenth-century poems in the Irish-Gaelic language.[11] In particular I want to adduce these (anonymous) texts in order to prove that their anonymity is problematic, and that, for all that these texts stand outside the modern-western paradigm of authorizing individualism, the absence of a clearly-identified author-function gives them a certain bothersome intractability, which in turn generates fruitless but unceasing speculation as to their genesis and "original" meaning.

Irish literature in Gaelic is, and is not, part of European literature at large. It is rooted in a dual vernacular-cum-Latin medieval heritage, coloured by Western Christianity, influenced by the attitudes of *amour courtois*, and implicated in European currents and conflicts such as Reformation and Counter-reformation. Yet on the other hand, there are some glaring discrepancies. Gaelic literature, owing to the English colonial system imposed on Ireland, never really made the transition from a manuscript literature to a printed literature; it never developed drama; it never spawned a metaliterary activity linked to the development of the universities; although it did come to incorporate some baroque elements into its style there was never any classicist recourse to ancient Greece or

Rome, or Aristotelian poetics; its historiographical practice stuck to the medieval patterns of annalistic chronicling and mythography.[12]

While Gaelic was a vigorous cultural medium carried by its own social elite (that is to say, until ca. 1600), the status of the poet was a hieratic, tribal one and his main activity was almost that of a chief herald. With the demise of this Gaelic clan culture in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, its archaic and aristocratic "official" literature likewise disappears and a more demotic and lyrical form of poetry comes to the fore. What we encounter in the later MSS are lyrical poems which voice political discontent or amorous frustration, often in interesting conjunction: the unattainable beloved is often ambiguously either a real person or a personification of political freedom. The result is a sort of erotic messianism, which feeds into the strong Jacobite feeling that prevailed until long after 1745.[13]

This demotic, popular tradition died out in the first half of the nineteenth century, when the Gaelic-speaking underclass of Ireland was finally completely pauperized into illiteracy. With the devastating famines of the years 1845-1848, Gaelic all but disappeared from Ireland. It was only then that a metropolitan, English-speaking elite in Ireland developed a strong antiquarian or historical interest in this culture, that its ancient MSS were retrieved and that its history was written. Thus, the first histories of Gaelic literature were written in English and for a non-Gaelic audience; they avoided, however, the register of exoticism because these activities took place the basis of a strong national identification and out of a sense of recuperation of a lost cultural heritage.

In this process, the later lyrical poetry was usually as a form of transcribed folklore, an intermediary stage between the older literary tradition and present-day orality. Amidst the material that was taken up and canonized by these late-nineteenth-century literary antiquarians and historians were the more obviously Jacobite, anti-English poems (in which Anglo-Irish cultural nationalists recognized their own separatist ideals), and a body of love poetry (all of it anonymous) which appealed because of its folkloristic freshness. Most importantly there was a set of amorous complaints in which the lyrical subject (the focalizer, if you like)

voiced a female point of view. The most famous of these quickly became *Domhnall ″g*, "Young Donal". I here give the first and most famous translation, by Lady Gregory:[14]

O Donall Oge, if you go across the sea,
Bring myself with you and do not forget it;
And you will have a sweetheart for fair days and market days
And the daughter of the King of Greece beside you at night.

It is late last night the dog was speaking of you;
The snipe was speaking of you in her deep marsh.
It is you are the lonely bird through the woods;
And that you may be without a mate until you find me.

You promised me, and you said a lie to me,
That you would be before me where the sheep are flocked;
I gave a whistle and three hundred cries to you,
And I found nothing there but a bleating lamb.

You promised me a thing that was hard for you,
A ship of gold under a silver mast;
Twelve towns with a market in all of them,
And a fine white court by the side of the sea.

You promised me a things that is not possible,
That you would give me gloves of the skin of a fish;
That you would give me shoes of the skin of a bird;
And a suit of the dearest silk in Ireland.

O Donall Oge, it is I would be better to you
Than a high, proud, spendthrift lady:
I would milk the cow; I would bring help to you;
And if you were hard pressed, I would strike a blow for you.

O, ochone, and it's not with hunger
Or with wanting food, or drink, or sleep,
That I am growing thin, and my life is shortened;
But it is the love of a young man has withered me away.

It is early in the morning that I saw him coming,
Going along the road on the back of a horse;
He did not come to me; he made nothing of me;
And it is on my way home that I cried my fill.

When I go by myself to the Well of Loneliness,

I sit down and I go through my trouble
When I see the world and I do not see my boy,
He that has an amber shade in his hair.

It was on that Sunday I gave my love to you;
The Sunday that is last before Easter Sunday.
And myself on my knees reading the Passion;
And my two eyes giving love to you for ever.

O aya! my mother, give myself to him;
And give him all that you have in the world;
Get out yourself to ask for alms,
And do not come back and forward looking for me.

My mother said to me not to be talking with you to-day,
Or tomorrow, or on Sunday;
It was a bad time she took for telling me that;
It was shutting the door after the house was robbed.

My heart is as black as the blackness of the sloe,
Or as the black coal that is on the smith's forge;
Or as the sole of a shoe left in white halls;
It was you put that darkness over my life.

You have taken the east from me; you have taken the west
from me;
You have taken what is before me and what is behind me;
You have taken the moon, you have taken the sun from me;
And my fear is great that you have taken God from me!

This is, of course, a very rich poem; it should be added that in the Gaelic original the richness is also of a formal quality, because the text adheres to a very elaborate rhyme-scheme, involving a multitude of vowels assoncances and consonant alliterations, unreproducable in English but close to something from Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Yet for all its individual richness, the poem is hard to place or to contextualize. The most recent anthology of Irish literature classes it with an amorphous section, without date or authorship, called “folk poetry”, yet the editors comment that the poem may well be from before 1600, given its great dissemination and popularity all over Ireland and Gaelic Scotland.

For one, thing, then, what we have here it a disembodied text without fixed provenance. There is no name given as to its author, and no dates as to its incipience. One thing that it certain is that it is not an official "bardic" poem since it avoids the prosody of that lofty genre and sticks to the formal conventions known as *amhr·n* or "song". The references indicate an agricultural background, peasantry, possibly minor tenants rather than day labourers, and the speaking persona is, of course, a lovesick woman. Ironically, the femininity of the central persona dovetails with the anonimity of the poem. In all these aspects – folkish collectivity, anonimity, femininity – this poem lacks the individuation of a known, named subject who "authors" or authorizes the text; and also lacks the historical datability which would place the genesis in a precise moment in historical time. Numerous are therefore the interpretations which place such poetical activity, despite its obvious lyrical and formal refinement, in the context of household activity, work-songs or waulking-songs, chanted rhythmically to give scansion to repetitive chores.

There have, to be sure, been critics who have attempted to break through this miasma of imprecision and lyrical vagueness; Seɴ O Tuama, for instance, has traced a number of topoi from this type of poem back to the stylistic register of French *amour courtois* poetry, and has suggested that such amorous lyricism entered Ireland with the Hiberno-Norman nobility of the Middle Ages, had in the intervening centuries percolated to folk culture.[15] It should be added that women poets were by no means unknown in eighteenth-century Gaelic Ireland[16] - yet on the other hand one should be careful to infer, automatically, from the fact that this poem is spoken by the lyrical persona of a woman, that it should therefore also be written by a woman. There are poems on record which voice the frustration and longing of women but known to have been written by men. Still, the prima facie evidence such as it presents itself argues overwhelmingly for female authorship from a peasant background. A recent critic has phrased it like this:

> The majority were composed by women and transmitted in a predominantly female environment: more than one strain in the tradition seems to derive from an exclusively female sub-culture not necessarily connected with work - accompaniment to dance is a possibility. Indeed,

> their strong, almost hypnotic rhythms give the impression of belonging to an ecstatic ceremony. Their poetry unfolds, not in a smooth linear movement, but unevenly, with quite unpredictable changes in focus. But however disconcerting this may at times be, it is precisely these abrupt transitions from image to image, governed only by the nature of the situation expressed in the poem, that release the creative energy. These songs use language according to a principle which is at the farthest extreme from that of a logical, ordered sequence of prose.[17]

The accumulation of irrationality and femininity is perhaps overstated. If poems like *Domhnall "g* have an arresting feature in their sudden shift of mood and diction from stanza to stanza, then this is perhaps not exclusively to be explained from the dionysian, wild Celtic earth-goddess-character of its author. On the contrary, such a view seems merely to perpetuate a sentimental, romantic or Victorian attitude which constructs the Celtic soul as feminine, pagan and emotional. It is not for nothing that *Domhnall "g* was among Yeats's cheriched poems, because it was a native Irish justification for his own symbolism. Its exaggerated imagery (golden ships, gloves made of the leather of tanned fishskins) would appeal to Yeats's own phantasmagoric imagination, and its final stanza, reaching in its lovesickness to a startling atheism, would bolster his own fond notion that his (Yeats's) own fin-de-siËcle post-Christian paganism was a natural extension of the persistence of pre-Christian paganism in Irish folk culture.

It has been rightly pointed out that the danger of stereotypes is not so much that they should all be necessarily wrong, but rather that they prevent us from seeing different possible truths. So it is here. An interpretation of *Domhnall "g* in terms of the Victorian stereotypes concerning female and Celtic sensibility (and the Celts were considered "an especially feminine race", as Matthew Arnold phrased it) may not be completely wrong but in its familiarity it is limiting. I would like to offer some possible alternative counter-interpretations, mainly in oder to demonstrate that, while predictable stereotype may be true it it certainly not the whole possibly truth. These counter-interpretations will also attempt to give a more historical contextualization of the text and of the attitudes it voices, as opposed to the stereotyped timelessness which the accepted reading appears to impose - the timeless passion of the

eternal Celt, the unchanging ways of the folk, the never-changing story of girls who love not wisely but too well... Most importantly, my aim is to indicate that the meaning which by such interpretations is located within the text, in originating spirit and the mentality which gave rise to it (in other words: the text's genesis or genotype), should perhaps rather be sought in the text's wider social or discursive context or in its historical transmission.

Take, for instance, that famous last stanza which seems to imply a pitch of passion that blots out even the most forceful ideology in all of European history: Christianity. A stanza like that has often been placed alongside other Gaelic poems harking back to pre-Christian traditions (one poet speaks ca. 1700 of his patron as one "whose forefathers were served by my forefathers before the birth of Christ"), and placed in a context which allows for a persistence of archaic pagan attitudes surviving the Christian Middle Ages, and read in that light it would make for a most powerful closure to this remarkable text. Indeed there are reasons to assume the existence of folk belief as attested by eighteenth-century poetry, definitely outside the Pale of what was condoned by Roman Catholicism. But I fear that such an interpretation by itself is limiting, and that one has to take into account the parallel, more innocuous meaning which is, at least on the surface, wholly compatible with post-Tridentine Catholic doctrine. If the woman in the poem has had sex with Young Donal, she has placed herself into a condition of martal sin; she may no longer participate in the sacraments of the Catholic church and has placed herself outside the community of those who can worship and earn their salvation through their observance of rites and duties; and in this sense, too, young Donal has taken God away from the lovelorn girl. It is not that one interpretation invalidates the other, but neither should be allowed to push the other under the carpet. To be sure, a further investigation would be required to let the two interpretations of the last stanza hit off each other; and that would necessitate research into the extent to which Catholic doctrine was being taught to, and was interiorized by, the peasantry of eighteenth-century Ireland; it would have to take into account the status of Catholic education in a society dominated by intolerant Protestant system and, in other

words, would allow us to delve far deeper into the historical context and *mentalitÈ* than the stereotype alone would allow us to do.

Moreover, the poem need not be completely and exclusively centered on the lovesickness of a young woman; but that there is at least an connotative intertext of political symbolism. Jacobite poetry of the later eighteenth century[18] (which is by politically necessity coded and indirect in its political allusions) is suffused with references to the absent true prince across the water, and the bereft misery of his people who are pining for his return is very often couched in the terminology of *amour courtois*: lovesickness as a pining, wasting disease. Keats's *La belle dame sans merci* was pre-echoed hundreds of times throughout the eighteenth century in Gaelic poetry, both in Ireland and in Scotland, but always with a definite political allegory implied. Frequently, the choice whether or not a given poem is meant as a political, Jacobite allegory or straightforwardly as a love song is hair-triggered and would depend on subtle markers within the text or of a contextual or intertextual nature. A poem that was to be song to the tune of *An cnÛta bˇn* or "The White Cockade" would by that marker alone announce its Jacobite symbolism. A poem in praise of women with particular names such as RoisÌn Dubh ("dark Rosaleen") or CaitlÌn NÌ UallachaÌn would be immediately recognizable as a subversive anti-English allegory, while other dedicatees with similar-sounding names like MÛirin NÌ Luineach in would play on the connection. Worse still, one and the same poem could be minute shifts in diction shift status and meaning. A seventeenth-century love poem to a woman called CaitlÌn Tiriall (Kathleen Tyrrell) has come down to us in later MSS (and even a printed broadsheet) as addressing CaitlÌn Trˇill (Kathleen the Thrall, or Kathleen the Slave), obviously a personification of Ireland.

Given this extreme intertwined and hair-triggered ambiguity between lovesickness and political messianism, we must be open to the possibility that at least some of the stanzas of *Domhnall "g* are either political or else draw on the rhetorical force of political symbolism, making an implicit connection between Young Donal who has forsaken his woman, and the Stuart Pretender who has forsaken his realm, and likewise makeing a similar connection

between the personal plight of a grieving individual and the collective plight of an oppressed society.

The final point I want to make is the most complex and moves from the problem of historical authorship and origin to the problem of textual integrity - or not. The above-cited critic, John MacInnes, has drawn attention to the remarkable feature in poems like these, namely their unexpected shifts in diction and mood from stanza to stanza. The effect is certainly very powerful and, in a very literal and fundamental sense of the term, *moving*. The shifting modes of entreaty, despair and reproach, the images which are developed then suddenly dropped in favour of description or different imagery, makes for a reading experience like an emotional rollercoaster. However, it may be too easy to see here some wild, ecstatic feminine or Celtic trespass beyond the bounds of linearity and prosaic regularity. One of the reasons for this moving effect may indeed be quite mundane: that the poems as it stands is a rather haphazard collection of individual stanzas, some of which also form part of other poems, some of which may have drifted into this particular poems from other sources, with variants and different versions giving alternative numbers of stanzas, altenrative stanzas of a different order of stanzas. There is, for instance, a poem called *D· dtÈinnse siar* (If I travelled West), which includes the penultimate stanza of *Domhnall "g* and which by some is considered part of what we might call "*Domhnall "g* - the director's cut" - an outtake, to put it into cinematographic parlance.

In other words: *Domhnall "g* is not a well-circumscribed text at all; it is variable, can be encountered in different shapes, formats and forms.

This is a condition which is, of course, central to a manuscript literature. It means that each text, as an variable cumulative encrustation of variants upon a core substance, is undatable in terms of its "genesis", certainly if we want to see the genesis of a text in romantic terms. For our historical understanding, texts emerge almost as if in a Big Bang, are delivered in definitive form by the author to the public. To be sure, that view betrays its simplistic nature on closer scrutiny: the various versions of Goethe's *Faust* and of Wordsworth's *Prelude* are obvious cases in point, and

the recent furore about a chimerical "definitive" edition of Joyce's *Ulysses* likewise complicates the issue. But these are only pale shadows of the complexity that we encounter in non-print culture, for instance in manuscript traditions. At least Goethe, Wordsworth and Joyce stopped tampering with their work (*their* work) at some point, and that provides a closure to textual variability. In manuscript traditions, the variants and variations do not stop on the death of the author. Every transcription provides a fresh occasion for new changes.

Philologists have long seen this as a problem. They of all people, academic practioners of print culture, felt the urge to bring these different redactions into discrete form, into focus, and wanted to distill the *Urtext*, the core substance of the text in its canonical identity, cleansed from corruptions and impurities. It led to the diplomatic editions of *opera omnia*, to textual criticism and to the intractable problems facing the "definitive" edition of *Ulysses*, and takes it origin, of course, in biblical scholarship. The word of God, of all texts, needed to be given in its pure, original, authentic form, which in turn had to be reconstructed from different MSS redactions. Thus we see that the printed book *par excellence* in Western culture, the Bible, marks the transition to an overriding concern with authenic textual identity, the pure and certain text. It is a development which runs concurrently with the invention of the "author" as the ultimate, genetic anchoring point of the text, the central validating point of origin. To reconstruct the real text means to reconstruct it as it would have left the hands of the author. These two developments coincide with the rise of print culture and the rise of individualism.[19]

These deep-seated presuppositions concerning texts and their very ontology are uncongenial to a MSS culture. In MSS traditions, texts have what the Celtologist Hildegard Tristram has called *Zeittiefe*, depth-in-time; they continue to change shape, status and meaning from generation to generation, and each successive transcription testifies to a new reception of the text at the hands of a new readership.[20] For that reason, scholars have recently begun to query the philologist's endeavour to distill an indeal-typical text from various MSS forms; this, they feel, is imposing false print-culture presuppositions on a different cultural praxis, and they

plead therefore for a positive appreciation of MSS divergences and differences.[21]

Indeed, a more germane approach would deal more usefully with such variable texts by applying the typological structuralism of folk tale research rather than the typocentric presuppositions of print culture. I am thinking here in particular of the departure made by Roman Jakobson and Pyotr Bogatyrev when they analysed, in a structuralist *langue-parole* mode, folktales and their tellings and re-telling.[22] They argued that the various concrete forms in which a story is encountered in the field may be seen as the speech acts, the *paroles*, from which it might be possible to infer an ideal-typical narrative matrix, the *langue*, the story-in-the-abstract. Something similar might be usefully said of the different redactions of a given text in MSS transmission: the text-as-such, the ideal-typical Urtext, can be seen only as an abstract extrapolation from its various concrete actualizations. That would allow us a more sympathetic and less reductive appreciation of the variants which can be encountered. What is more, as opposed to folktales, these variants are encountered in a diachronic filiation, stretch over time and history, each redaction being datable according to the MS where it occurs and open to historical contextualization from case to case.

The sample-case of *Domhnall ″g* presents a text whose anonymity, and lack of a properly demarcated author-function, has presented an ongoing provocation to its Western, modern readers. The many actualizations and reception-instances of this text, in the anthologizing proces and the critical commentary it has attracted, have invariably been motivated by the attempt to fill the black void of its anonymity by *ersatz* provenance; to make sense of this text by explaining it in terms of "where it came from", what its genesis or genotype was, which shaping sensibility or character made it what it is. In criticizing some earlier interpretations, I have tried to show that the factors which have made *Domhnall ″g* "what it is" are not matters of sensibility and shaping genius, matters of origin or genesis, but factors of transmission and ongoing reception, the track record of a variable text on its wayward path across centuries and manuscripts.

Taking for my starting point the case of the long-standing and well-documented Gaelic MSS tradition, I would further suggest that the accumulation of different redactions and transcriptions are in fact so many samples of texts as they are moving through a centuries-long process of reception - almost as if one can witness all the theatrical productions and stagings of a play by Shakespeare in the four centuries since its first night. Irish MSS, interestingly, are not often grouped by author. Many of the more important medieval MSS are family albums, including poems in praise of a given family made by many different passing poets. The primary organizing criterion is that of *destinataire* rather than author. Indeed, one poem can be often attributed to widely different authors, and, owing to the great conservatism of Gaelic poetical form, such attributions can offer differ by centuries. That is not just a problem for the philologist. It may be our ingrained desire to find out "Who wrote this? Was it fourteenth-century Tadhg ″g ″ hUiginn or sixteenth-century Tadhg Dall ″ hUiginn? Was it a man or a woman?" - but instead, it might be more useful to inquire why such-and-such a MS form chould choose to include this poem, at this point in the collection, and attributed to this or that author or associated to such-and-such a melody; and, what variations occur in the text in this given setting vis-‡-vis other redactions.

This might be a useful thought experiment at least, and bring us one step closer to a literary history which is concerned at least as importantly with the reception of texts as with their production. One immediate side effect would be that we recognize in its true historical importance the ongoing literary praxis of *anthologizing*. From the Greek anthology to Herder's *Stimmen der V^lker in Liedern* and present-day feminist anthologies, the collection and re-ordering and updating of older texts in a new selection has been one of the prime mechanisms of literary perpetuation and dissemination, and has taken up a major (but largely unrecognized) role alongside the history of authors' development, rise to fame and canonicity.[23] It is also the most important literary practice to have survived from MSS culture into print culture.

A reception-oriented literary history would shed many unwarranted presuppositions about the identity of literary texts and see them in their historical variability and social context. This would

allow, more generally, for a fertile cross-fertilization between literary history and what I feel to be its most congenial neighbouring discipline: cultural history. To have literature, and even the verbal substance of literary texts, recognized as a uniquely valuable corpus for cultural historians would be (I feel) a fitting way to conduct cultural history after Foucault.

Comment: C.V. (den korte version):
Født 1972
1993 stud.mag i Litteraturhistorie, AU
1995- i redaktionen af Passage - tidsskrift for litteratur og kritik
1998 cand.phil. i Litteraturhistorie
1998-99 amanuensis og undervisningsassistent
2000-03 ph.d.-stipendiat

C.V.: Joep Leerssen is Professor of Modern European Literature at the University of Amsterdam. He works on national stereotyping and national identity in literary and cultural history; his most recent books are "Remembrance and Imagination" (Cork University Press, 1996) and "Nationaal Denken" (Amsterdam Unievrsity Press, 1999).

[1] Originally published in *Configurations*, 7 (1999): 227-245.

[2] Michel Foucault, "What is an author?", in *Textual strategies: Perspectives in post-structuralist criticism*, ed. J. Harari (Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press, 1979), 141-60, 148.

[3] Michel Foucault, *L'archÈologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 32-33, my translation. In the original: "Peut-on admettre, telles quelles, la distinction des grands types de discours, ou celle des formes ou des genres qui opposent les unes aux autres science, littÈrature, philosophie, religion, histoire, fiction, etc., et qui en font des sortes de grandes individualitÈs historiques? Nous ne sommes pas s˚rs nous-mÍmes de l'usage de ces distinctions dans le monde de discours qui est le nÙtre. A plus forte raison lorsqu'il s'agit d'analyser des ensembles d'ÈnoncÈs qui Ètaient, ‡ l'Èpoque de leur formulation, distribuÈs, rÈpartis et caractÈrisÈs d'une toute autre maniËre [...] ni la littÈrature, ni la politique, ni non plus la philosophie et les sciences n'articulaient le champ du discours, au XVIIe ou au XVIIIe siËcle, comme elles l'ont articulÈ au XIXe siËcle."

[4] Felix Vodick·, *Die Struktur der literarischen Entwicklung* (M¸nchen: Fink, 1976), esp. "Die Literaturgeschichte, ihre Probleme und Aufgaben" (1942), 30-86.

[5] A similar "delayed impact" can be traced with regard to the publication of Snorri Sturlusson's *Heimskringla* (written ca. 1225, first printed in 1697), with its effect on the Enlightenment taste for primitivism and "original genius"; or indeed Tacitus' *De origine et situ germanorum*, which was discovered and printed in 1477 and triggered the Renaissance cult of North-European love of liberty. But such cases are less egregious in that literary historians have always allowed the chronology of reception to stand alongside the chronology of production.

[6] Michel Foucault, "What is an author?", in *Textual strategies: Perspectives in post-structuralist criticism*, ed. J. Harari (Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press, 1979), 141-60, 147-148.

[7] Michel Foucault, "What is an author?", in *Textual strategies: Perspectives in post-structuralist criticism*, ed. J. Harari (Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press, 1979), 141-60.

[8] Interesting light on this development is thrown by Michael Mascuch, *Origins of the individualist self. Autobiography and self-identity in England, 1591-1791.* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).

[9] Yuri Lotman, *Die Struktur literarischer Texte* (M¸nchen: Fink, 1972) has made

an influential distinction between the (conventional) poetics of identity, and the (innovation-oriented) poetics of opposition. The latter is dominant in written European literature since the onset of Romanticism, the former is the dominant mode of Classicism and of folklore. As I hope to show in the later parts of this article, the "poetics of identity" also govern most of pre-1850 Gaelic literature. See Wolfgang Zach, "Das Stereotyp als literarische Norm. Zum dominanten Denkmodell des Klassizismus", in *Erstarrtes Denken. Studien zu Klischee, Stereotyp und Vorurteil in englischsprachiger Literatur*, ed. G. Blaicher (T¸bingen: Narr, 1987), 97-113 and Lionel Gossman, *Between history and literature* (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1990), 14

[10] My translation. In the original: "RecordÈ a Averroes, que encerrado en el ·mbito del Islam, nunca pudo saber el significado de las voces tragedia y comedia. [...] SentÌ que Averroes, queriendo imaginar lo que es un drama sin haber sospechado lo que es un teatro, no era m·s absurdo que yo, queriendo imaginar a Averroes, sin otro material que unos adarmes de Renan, de Lane y de AsÌn Palacios." Jorge Luis Borges, "La busca de Averroes", in *Prosa Completa* (Barcelona: Bruguera, 1985), 2:303-10.

[11] In what follows I make use of some points raised in Joep Leerssen, "Faoi thuairim na deorantachta", in *Nua-LÈamha. GnÈithe de chult¨r, stair agus polaitÌocht na h…ireann c.1600-c.1900*, ed. M. NÌ Dhonnchadha (Baile ¡tha Cliath [Dublin]: ClÛchomhar, 1996), 41-56.

[12] Cf. Tadhg ” D¨shl·ine, *An Eoraip agus litrÌocht na Gaeilge 1600-1650. GnÈithe den bharÛchas Eorpach i litrÌocht na Gaeilge* (Baile ¡tha Cliath [Dublin]: ClÛchomhar, 1987).

[13] Cf. Breand·n ” Buachalla, *Aisling ghÈar. Na StÌobhartaigh agus an taos lÈinn* (Baile ¡tha Cliath [Dublin]: ClÛchomhar, 1997) and Joep Leerssen, *Mere Irish and FÌor-Ghael. Studies in the idea of Irish nationality, its development and literary expression prior to the nineteenth century* (2nd ed.; Cork: Cork University Press, 1996).

[14] I quote Gregory's much-anthologized version ("Donall Oge: Grief of a girl's heart") from Kathleen Hoagland, *1000 years of Irish poetry* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1947), 238-240. The original Gaelic version, with an alternative translation, can be found in Se·n ” Tuama, & Thomas Kinsella, eds, *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the dispossessed* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1981), 288-292.

[15] Se·n ” Tuama, *An gr· in amhr·in na ndaoine* (Baile ¡tha Cliath [Dublin]: ClÛchomhar, 1960). Also, MÌche·l Mac Craith, *Lorg na hiasachta ar na D·nta Gr·* (Baile ¡tha Cliath [Dublin]: ClÛchomhar, 1989).

[16] Witness M·ire BhuÌ NÌ Laoghaire or, more importantly, EibhlÌn Dhubh NÌ ChÛnaill, author of one of the most important poems of late Gaelic literature, the lament for her husband Art O'Leary. On women poets in the Irish tradition, see the excellent recent book M·irÌn Nic Eoin, *B'ait leo bean. GnÈithe den idÈeolaÌocht inscne i dtraidisi¨n liteartha na Gaeilge* (Baile ¡tha Cliath [Dublin]:

ClÛchomhar, 1998). The sizeable body of feminist criticism dealing with women's complaint poetry, or, more generally, with women in Gaelic culture and literature, is well represented in Nic Eoin's bibliography.

[17] John MacInnes in a 1986 article quoted by M·irÌn Nic Eoin, *B'ait leo bean. GnÈithe den idÈ-eolaÌocht inscne i dtraidisi¨n liteartha na Gaeilge* (Baile ¡tha Cliath [Dublin]: ClÛchomhar, 1998), 282.

[18] Cf. generally Murray Pittock, *Poetry and Jacobite politics in eighteenth-century Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[19] Cf. also Aron Gurevic, *The origins of European individualism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

[20] Hildegard J.C. Tristram, ed. *Text und Zeittiefe* (T¸bingen: Narr, 1994). The MS transmission of texts is here studied on the basis of older material, classical and Indian; the general problematics are placed in the polarity between "M¸ndlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit" - cf. Tristram's "Einleitung", 15-28.

[21] A succinct but eloquent case has been made by Bernard Cerquiglini, *Eloge de la variante. Histoire critique de la philologie* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

[22] Roman Jakobson, & Pyotr Bogatyrev, "Die Folklore als eine besondere Form des Schaffens", in *Donum natalicium Schrijnen. Verzameling van opstellen door oud-leerlingen en bevriende vakgenooten opgedragen aan mgr. prof. dr. Jos. Schrijnen bij gelegenheid van zijn zestigsten verjaardag 3 mei 1929* (Nijmegen & Utrecht: Dekker & Van de Vegt, 1929), 900-13. For a brilliant elaboration of this insight, see Lionel Gossman, *Between history and literature* (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1990), chapter 1 ("Literary Education and Democracy"), 9-54. The value of Gossman's comment lies in the fact that he extends the case, and argues that Bogatyrev/Jakobson's model is not restricted to oral, anonymous folklore material: "even the fixity of the written work, which is usually contrasted with the unstable oral tradition, cannot be simply taken for granted" (17-18). Without going so far as structuralists like Mukarovsky (who would see every reading act as an actualization of the text-as-nexus-of-potential-readings, and thus places each reading act in a parole/langue-relation to the text), it is obvious that in the case of a MS transmission, each written version, in all its textual variability vis-‡-vis other versions, is a separate enactment or actualization of the text-in-abstracto. As Gossman himself points out, such a structural parole/langue-relationship excludes the possibility of a fixed, author-based and definitive textual identity.

[23] See my "Women authors and literary history" (paper presented at a workshop held by the Dutch Royal Academy of Sciences, September 1998, in press). Also, as I have argued elsewhere, the rediscovery of Gaelic texts in the modern Irish literary system has crucially depended on an ongoing, centuries-long practice of recycling and anthologizing: see Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and imagination. Patterns in the historical and literary representation of Ireland in the nineteenth century* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 173-178.

Abstract: In this article Joep Leerssen puts some implicit assumptions in present-day literary-historical consciousness to the test: the idea that literary history is primarily organized along lines of textual production and author-based periodization. In order to provide a literary-historical thought experiment looking, not at authorial production but at textuality and its reception-dissemination, Leerssen takes the case of an anonymous poem from Gaelic literature and its successive readings by different readerships.

Resumé: I denne artikel udfordrer Joep Leerssen nogle implicitte antagelser i samtidig litteraturhistorisk bevidsthed: ideen om at litteraturhistorie primært er formet omkring tekstproduktion og forfatter-baseret periodisering. For at kunne bidrage med et litteraturhistorisk tankeeksperiment, som ikke ser på forfatteres produktion, men på tekstualitet, reception og udbredelse, bruger Leerssen som eksempel et anonymt digt fra gælisk litteratur og forskellige senere læsninger af det.