Strenuous bard: A study of imagery in early Celtic poetry

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THE STRENUOUS BARD: A STUDY OF IMAGERY
IN EARLY CELTIC POETRY

by

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B.A., Swarthmore College, 1951

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

To Mrs. Mary Brennan Clapp, teacher of Irish Literature at Montana State University, for wresting from this student with merriest fortitude an articulate discovery, and to Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, Professor of Celtic at Edinburg University, for understanding an unscholarly excitement in the literatures which his foremost translations have given into English, this study is dedicated; two readers of the Celtic literatures who find it is pleasant to see the glittering of the sun upon a margin, "because it flickers so."

R. S. H.
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Describing a kind of poetry through the surroundings of the poet; relating it to a people: the Celtic; placing these people historically and geographically in their relation to other peoples (whose poetries are known).

Returning to the particular quality of the poetry: its sensuous imagery which comes from the poet's grasp of the life man lives.

Studying the poet's wielding of imagery in the seasonal poems:

a. to start with the least personal (in a sense) awarenesses;
b. to stress the poet's consciousness of life surrounding his own;
c. to establish that the poet selects his images to impart a discovery to the listener;
d. to establish a basis from which to speak of imagery.

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Emphasis through four prose passages on the powerful effect on the poetic mind of seeing in this way. (A statement is made to assure the reader that the reason for turning away from the poems themselves is to explore the imagery as the main poetic language of the time and land. A conscious connection in the Celtic poetic mind between selection of imagery and the human feelings about experience will be noted.)

Discussion of the dominant method of letting the images form the conclusion for the listener.
Demonstration of the sounds in Gaelic and Welsh through five poems in order to relate the unfolding of the imagery to the effects the sounds are having on the listener. This will be done by phonetic transliteration. The depth of feeling which survives the translations will be stressed so that the thesis should lead into:

### III. THE QUALITY OF THIS POETRY

Poems directly wrought from the experience of men. Experiences are selected for their increasing intensity of feeling—as the poet might come upon each experience in his own life's growing awareness.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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"Look before you to the north-east
at the glorious sea, home of creatures,
dwelling of seals; wanton and splendid
it has taken on flood-tide."

Incantation to the Reader
CHAPTER I

THE FINDING OF THIS POETRY

In early Celtic poetry there is a powerful relation of the experience of man's own being to the sensuous changes and wonders of the surrounding land and islanding sea. To discover the particular qualities which communicate this vital relation it is necessary for the listener, the reader, to proceed with a certain acknowledgment of human wonder; it is the nature of this body of poetry to speak of the rich and visible world within which the poet lives.

The imagery of early Celtic poetry is conceived out of a consciousness of human experience occurring within the natural world yet contrasting with the non-human events of that world. A discovery the poet has made is brought into the listener's experience through direct images from the listener's surroundings. Living on islands in the northern seas the poet and his listeners both knew intimately and almost solely the same reality; they were never removed from the seasons of the land, lights of storm or sun across the sea. The bounds which beauty and fear made around human ventures were shared by the poet and his listeners. The poet conceived of images from this reality that he knew could have the sharp power to convey his discovery to his
An imagery so specifically formed of this early exciting environment has the same intent as the imagery in a large portion of twentieth century poetry; the experience of the poet is to be felt acutely by the listener through sudden compelled touch with images from a known world. The more immediate the knowledge the listener has of the surroundings, the more swiftly the images form in his imagination to impart the experience of the poet. The poet of early Celtic lyrics knew these images to be a natural way of seeing. It was effective and specific to speak of his feeling and perceptions discerned through images of the natural world. It was not a calculation to bring the listener into a remote world in which the feeling must be experienced through the poet's images of an unshared attitude toward life. If the telling is to be done through images related one to the other the listener's compelled imagination is dependent upon a sensuous awareness of the world of those images. To discover how expressive and feelingly accurate poetry can be when the images rise naturally from a shared, bounded island world a listener can explore the early Celtic poetry.

This poetry is little known. It belongs to the oral tradition of the first peoples for whom an origin has been established, who inhabited what is now the British Isles. Their early lyric poetry which is extant in manuscript form
was sung from the sixth through the thirteenth century and composed in this island world.

The peoples who came to these islands, to Ireland, Scotland, Britain and the Isle of Man, were of the races in central and western Europe who were early termed \textit{Keltic} by the Greeks. \textit{Keltic} meant "inhabitants of the woods" to the Greeks. Moving with ease and naturalness through forested lands these people must have seemed an unusual race to the Greeks, who were "civilized" and established in cities along the Mediterranean. The word Celtic, used first to describe their manner of living, later became a term descriptive of their nature as a people. The Celts seemed to Alexander the Great, when he entered their camps, barbaric but proud and almost imperiously alive. He gives the impression that he felt they had an air of wholeness in their world, despite its relatively crude and unlettered state.\footnote{J. B. Bury, \textit{History of Greece} (London, 1920), p. 742.}

There must have been some quality of wildness about these people, the Celts, which impressed their southern European observers; but in the search for the poet among these peoples, the exuberance, rather than the savagery of this characteristic is of concern. A modern reader and listener might see them first through their contemporaries' eyes as a people who inhabited the woods, but might discover them through their poetry as a people who were constantly enjoying and contending with the sensuous realities of the earth.
The Celtic peoples adventurers across to the islands that now comprise the British Isles and Eire, either in the years of the late Bronze Age, around 900 B.C., or as late as the first century B.C.; the first conjecture is based on archeological evidence and the second on linguistic findings. The Celtic peoples came as a result of invasions from the north within Europe. It has been established that they brought with them a complete and organized culture.

Their languages until that time were termed "Ancient Gaulish" on the continent of Europe, but when they moved across to the islands they grouped in geographically separate areas which either sustained or developed language differentiations. Of the Cymric branch, the Cornish and Welsh were those who settled in Cornwall and Wales, while the Bretons among them remained in Brittany. Those of the other branch, those with the Gadhelic tongue, divided three ways: into Ireland, speaking Irish Gaelic, and later into Scotland where Scots Gaelic developed, and onto the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea, where they called their tongue Manx. In these island environments the people took to the ways of the sea, ate the rich wild foods of the land, raised large herds of cattle, and boasted lithe, swift horses. They lived self-sufficiently here, separated from the continent by their languages, and by the sea and the wildness of their cliff shores.

Early Celtic poetry began to be written down from an
oral tradition in the eighth century and continued to be composed and written down up into the thirteenth century. It has been kept from general readers and listeners (for whom upon discovery, it might be a new excellence of poetry) by the language barriers and the geographical and political separations. Because of the constant political conflict and the suppression of the Celtic peoples in the British Isles since the thirteenth century, attempts to overcome the language differences have been made only in the last hundred years and have taken the form of sporadic and partial translations of the available manuscripts. The body of poetry from which these few translations were made has not been eagerly sought out even though its existence has been written about by scholars and historians, and even though its elements are continually alluded to and used in later poetries in European languages. A poetry whose innate characteristic is a fierce avowal of life has been ignored as primitive or dismissed as "nature" poetry. Its expressive value in translation into English seems to be unrealised by readers of the English tongue.

As a term, "Celtic Literature" has survived in usage mostly under the misconceptions applied to it in the nineteenth century. Essayists, chiefly Matthew Arnold in "Celtic Literature," Ernest Renan in "The Poetry of the Celtic Races," and W. B. Yeats in "The Celtic Twilight," the ideas of which he, himself, later abandoned, have ascribed
qualities and moods to it that are not derived from reading the early poetry in the original or in recent accurate translations. It has been convenient for readers of literature, particularly English, to rely on the enthusiastic, sometimes patronizing, determination of these nineteenth and early twentieth century essayists who did not themselves read in any of the Celtic languages. For this reason it has seemed important to offer the translated poems themselves and to refer very briefly to their original form.

The naturalness of rejoicing in earth is a central force in these poems. But there is never a suggestion that the observer is turning away from ordinary pursuits to artificially revel in beauty. The shiftings and tumults of the world around intimately enclose the poet as he beholds through a wisdom of seasons the vibrant and thrashing evidences of life that are meaningful to him. As direct instances of color, sound, and movements of life are brought forward, the sense of these transforming the beholder with vigor is strong in the poetry. The dominant approach is to enumerate the sensuous events of a lively world, whereupon with little insistence, the observer who chants seems ready to burst with life. If a statement is held there—announcing a feeling—quick sensings of color, sound and movement follow the statement. A poem becomes an attentive discovery of the earth's immediate beauty.

Of the four seasons of the year an early Celtic poet is always ready to sing. Beginning here with poems of the
seasons it will be possible to discover the insistence of the poet, through imagery, that there is a distinguishing response of man to each time as it is known on these islands. The listener, himself a participant, responds to the vivid liveliness of a place.

The poet can visualize places through sounds that shape them. Through his alert hearing he recreates the aliveness by which that part of the land has its identity. The poet makes a poem to tell of:

Sliabh Cua, haunt of wolves, rugged and dark,
the wind wails about its glens,
wolves howl around its chasms;
the fierce brown deer bells
in Autumn around it,
the crane screams over its crags.  

This haunt of Sliabh Cua is seen in the sounds. The calls each animal gives occur where that animal would move:

wolves howl around its chasms;
the crane screams over its crags. . .

and the howls, the screams, deepen the chasms and rear and sharpen the crags for the listener. That the place is "rugged and dark" is told; and the deer who come here are fierce, brown creatures. But because these adjectives are given them within their haunt, Sliabh Cua, the description is more of their mood and their movements than of their physical appearance. These adjectives characterizing their movements, describe the utterances they make around the

chasms, within the glens. Fierce, craggy cries of all
fierce animals--wolves, the deer in Autumn, and the piercing,
circling cranes searching for prey.

Sliabh Cua, "moor above the sea," harbors these dark
swift creatures in a wild darkening season near to the sea.
The wind wails about its glens...

and wind in Autumn is another of these who pace and circle
here in fierceness and devouring motion, raising a lonely
voice. The wail is heard in words spoken aloud, not seeking
reply, not addressed to any of its kind; it hurls itself
upward in response to this land that forms with its glens,
its chasms, its crags, a haunt for the rugged and dark.
The experience of coming on this haunt, knowing it
exists, is the poet's. For him it is a permanent image of
Autumn, of retreat, of fierce feelings that hurl themselves
around dark, rugged places. He reveals this image with his
making of the poem. It is not necessary that he say this,
for the imagery is vivid enough to sustain both description
and deep, reflective acknowledgment of the feeling there.
A season on Sliabh Cua is known.

When blackness is ascribed to winter it is a color
acknowledging the season's fierceness--a color given it by
a beholder who means to endure it. The color applied in the
following poem, where the season of the winter has the whole
shore and cliffs under such lashing attack that it seems to
the poet he beholds "the expanse of the world," is a
resistance through a savagery of images. Teeth-clenched
defiances turn from one dark harsh movement to another until
the man endures with a dark lay what he feels the whole
island besieged by:

In the black season of a deep winter
a storm of waves is roused
along the expanse of the world.
Sad are the birds of every meadow-plain
(except the ravens that feed on crimson blood)
at the clamour of fierce winter;
it is rough, black, dark, misty.
Dogs are vicious in cracking bones;
the iron pot is put on the fire
after the dark black day.3

The terribly bitter wind that flails the cliffs from
across the north seas is not named here but the words which
stretch wide to describe a deep winter, (a winter that is
cold at every level), compel that impression of sweeping
force that is mighty beyond and before the horizon, that
towers above the sea and strikes everywhere. Winter as a
force of black bitterness moves across the land, overwhelm­
ing, now, those who inhabit the island. "Every meadow-plain"
is silent before winter and it is seen as it lies across the
land: "it is rough, black, dark, misty."

The blackness circles down upon the live creatures,
and still the bitterness of winter is the wind, for its roar
is described. The most vulnerable small birds know winter
through hearing it:

Sad are the birds of every meadow-plain. . .
at the clamour of fierce winter.

These creatures are made "sad" and an acceptance of winter's harshness is suddenly allowed. All gentleness of song and lilt is lost under the harsh, unceasing thrust of the wind of a black season. The poem spreads out away from the plight of the birds to the vicious protective images. Dark colors, and cruel movements return to the mood of fierceness. "The ravens that feed on crimson blood" are not sad and "dogs are vicious in cracking bones."

The cracking of bones following the "dark, misty" covering over the land describes a sudden concealment from the "fierce clamour," talks of warmth somewhere inside, out of the wind. Dogs with bones have the protection of a man's dwelling, an earthen floor and warmth of fire. Huddling over warmth intensifies the unceasing struggle in which the poet broods against cold and fierceness:

   the iron pot is put on the fire
   after the dark black day.

The images are blackened and reddened and in the quieter darkness of shelter, "after the dark black day," the storm and bitterness "along the expanse of the world" become greater. The poet nourishes himself with a dark determination to resist winter.

He has begun with wide images of storm and not flinched from their darkness as he narrowed down into the sounds and colors of his own dwelling; seizing upon the dark vicious images of winter, he has resisted the storming of "deep winter" with a fierceness of his own.
But need for resistance disappears with a warmer season:

The month of May, the ploughman is extravagant; every dyke is shelter to the destitute; joyful is the lightly clad old man; the wood is leafy, the wanton is glad; reconciliation is easy where there is love; tuneful are the cuckoo and the hound; not less soon in going to the market is the lamb's skin than the sheep's skin.

Here is a celebration of the easiness of everything—when there is warmth! Structured of an exuberant turning from one image of abandon to another the poem itself becomes extravagant and easy. The ploughman who may be stolid, who may turn the furrow until his inner awareness of the world turns as narrowly and blindly in the riches of his experience, can yet become extravagant. A great part of the delight of this poem is in the responses to May that come from man and wood and creature so rapidly, burstingly, that they are not distinct reactions according to the nature of each but a single celebration.

There is, in such a month as May, no stern reward for hard-working days, no retribution for idleness or poverty—nothing is to be earned but everything is to be had... generously. The ploughman must turn with open hands and "every dyke" be protective and gentle, a merry shelter of warm earth for those with nothing; those who have been righteous about others will forget or, better, concern

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themselves with their own abundance and take pleasure in it, for:

   the wood is leafy, the wanton is glad.

It is May, and the listener beholds extravagance in the same instant that he discovers the wood leafy in a wanton luxuriously and the wanton unashamed in a tossing green flourishing of gladness.

   Situations among men that could be the hardest and tightest to move in . . . expand . . . and are in health, are easy:

   reconciliation is easy where there is love.

Love and warmth flourish in a time when "joyful is the lightly clad old man" for out of sheer enjoyment, cold winds and harsh, iced cliffs are banished. Herdsmen are not even stingy but sell the young lambs along with the old sheep. The people, ready to spend with carelessness and merriment, no longer feel constricted by need. When even at market the new, the young, the most precious is not withheld it is surely a seasonable fair time for men (the season a time when "every dyke is a shelter to the destitute"). The most mournful and repetitious of sounds are pleasant:

   tuneful are the cuckoo and the hound;

Everything responsive, impulsive, blossoming yields to May, making all that has been stingy, barren, and unendurable belong to a laughable, escaped existence.

   The expanding heart of man is the wonder to which May directs this poet. Summer country is known here through the
image, the joyfully seised image whose existence is even more brief than the season which inspires it; man's spirit in the quickened, sudden moment of warm generosity. A good time when man and the earth are merrily reconciled in extravagance!

In a poem beginning "a good season is peaceful summer," images of a peaceful quality come quietly drifting down through the fingers of the absorbedly delighting observer. The eyes of the poet are here only in a deftness to touch and to feel the movement of each image of peacefulness that stirs before him. It is as if he sat in the thick new grass, leaning back with his arms braced behind him, and as if the warm earth beneath his hands let his eyes touch all they see:

A good season is peaceful summer;
luxuriant is the tall fine wood
which the whistle of the wind will not stir,
green is the plumage of the sheltering grove;
eddies swirl in the stream;
good is the warmth in the turf.5

Quietness that is vibrant, and so, peaceful, is a good on these islands where the sea wind is never far and the wilder seasons are most often in clamorous rule.

... luxuriant is the tall fine wood
which the whistle of the wind will not stir... With the peaceful summer buds can spread into heavy tangible green. Wind is not fierce enough in this "good season" to rummage with whistling and restlessness through the "tall fine wood." A peace of unfurling comes now to the wood and

5Ibid., p. 30.
and makes of it a posed, but unalarmed creature—\emph{even a bird}: "green is the plumage of the sheltering grove," spread over the resting poet.

A circular feeling conveys luxuriant quiet as the poet's gaze turns down from the tall green into the sheltered grove around him:

\begin{quote}
\emph{eddiéd swirl in the stream; \textbf{good is the warmth in the turf.}}
\end{quote}

The smooth running of the stream that is low in summer allows the back swirl of water around a rock or log, and the coursing pace is arrested in a sudden pleasurable circling. "Warmth in the turf" is a good to rejoice in; this poet, within the lulled vibrant moment of enjoying peaceful summer, is sheltered from other blustering, rending seasons.

The poet's eyes seem to have a touch with the earth that discovers to him the movement of abundance and quiet that encircle him. These images are at the fingertips of his eyes, are touched at the mere changing tilt of his head, and reveal their texture, their quiet shapes, a contrast of whirled water against gliding speeded water, and their heat from sun, a thickness of grass growing in earth that forms a turf beneath the luxuriant growth of green above. A tangible rich idleness is here with the warmth of summer.

The early Celtic poet: \emph{sounds that shape a place; colors that convey a season's mood; quickening movements of}
creatures through the land to hail a fair season; gentle encircling with the eyes of sights that become tangible—the vividness is all possible through a wielding, a progression of sensuous images. The listener is brought into the seeing of it this way (as when he sees through sounds the shapes of places), by the sense of having been shown fully what is there. Through this progression from the first highly selected image to the next, the listener sees a land upon which the sounds race wild animals and meet craggy obstacles, He is allowed to hear only the sounds that will accomplish sights. Yet each sound is given within the context of the not yet fully seen place, so that the intent of the imagery is neither obvious nor reiterative. The images then are sustained by the listener in his active discovery.
"The Celtic Literatures are about as little given to mysticism or sentimentality as it is possible to be; their most outstanding characteristic is rather their astonishing power of imagination."

Kenneth H. Jackson,  
Professor of Celtic,  
Edinburgh University
CHAPTER II

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS POETRY

To the early Celtic poetic mind imagery is natural because it most sharply relates experience to tangible surroundings and thus establishes the reality of the experience. Prose passages reveal this use of sharp imagery to be a whole way of seeing. Turning from the compelling reach that poems have, to prose, the reader continues to discover that vividness of imagery is the basis of expression for the Celtic mind. Even when the unspoken strength of urgency which a poem presses upon a listener is not there, the imagination of the reader-listener is still exacted. The prose relies upon imagery to interpret the significance of a scene, an incident, an emotion.

The following prose passages have that excellence of full description: there is demanded of a listener a whole comprehension of the described moment as a reality of human life. One of Professor Kenneth H. Jackson's three books of translations from the Celtic languages into English is *A Celtic Miscellany*. In a note to his translations of those prose passages and poems which reveal the descriptive nature of the early Celtic literatures, he stresses their imaginativeness. He refers specifically in his introduction to a
passage he has entitled "Froech in the Dark Pool," a passage which will be considered here. He remarks: "For a coloured picture in a few simple words it would be difficult to find a parallel in medieval literature, Froech with a berry branch in the dark pool." With particular mention of this passage Professor Jackson wishes to bear out his earlier statement that the imaginative force "... is linked with another feature which is characteristic of Celtic... that is, a very clear sense of colour." When the listener comes to know the passage for himself he sees the working of the color as it gives tangible forms to the imagination:

"Do not come out," said Ailill, "till you bring me a branch of that mountain-ash on the bank of the river. Beautiful I think its berries." He went away then and broke a spray from the tree, and carried it on his back through the water. [As Froech swims the branch would be held over his shoulder by one hand so that the red of its berries would cross beneath his white face and this is why as he drew nearer the sudden red would deepen the blue of his eye. That is how Findabhair saw him.] And this is what Findabhair used to say ever afterwards of any beautiful thing which she saw, that she thought it more beautiful to see Froech across the dark pool; the body so white and the hair so lovely, the face so shapely, the eye so blue, and he a tender youth without blemish, with face narrow below and broad above, and he straight and spotless, and the branch with the red berries between the throat and the white face. . . .2


2Ibid., p. 185.
In the dark pool such whiteness and dark red create an intensity of contrasts which is almost unbearably heightened by the movement of the youth through the water. A contrast between that which is instantly lovely and breathtaking and that which is unendingly remembered comes about as the listener watches. The fragile shocking beauty of youth is moving in the colors with Froech, beheld in graceful colored motion by Ailill, and creating a reality fiercely yet tenderly cherishable by Findabhair. The moment happens before the listener's eyes but the interpretative emotion is within Findabhair.

From the instant of Ailill's single request the colors move across the passage with Findabhair's feeling bearing them all in their relation to "the tender youth without blemish." Ailill does not know what his words will bring about in the quiet dark of the pool until it is before them. There is a rending eloquence in the shift from the completed movement of the youth to the scene recurring "ever afterwards" in Finabhair's experience. And to the listener comes the awareness of a meaning for Findabhair which makes of breaking and bearing the spray from the tree a sudden fulfillment of colors into what is more beautiful than "any beautiful thing which she saw." Froech's beauty is unblemished, shapely youth carrying the deep red next to the very quickness of "the body so white," "between the throat and the white face" when there is darkness surrounding him.
Across the dark pool from Findabhair and her father, Ailill, Froech's youth reaches to them and is part of them in his response, in his motion, and in the color of his eye. The deep blue of Froech's eye seen within the cherishing tone of Findabhair's description brings an increasing intensity of color to the scene and at the same time discovers the lad's increasing nearness to them. The full meaning of this beauty deepens in its color before them. Froech is youth and to Findabhair is "afterwards of any beautiful thing . . . more beautiful." The fearfully vulnerable tapering face, the deep violent red of the berries moving across the dark with the response of the youth, who is soon to come out of the water, image what is not possible to be worded, what is too much a sensed reality of human experience to be less starkly known than through Findabhair's perception.

A second prose passage which works out the discovery of a feeling through sustained imagery is known by Professor Jackson, in his translation, as Morning Sun:

One summer morning they were in their bed, and he at the outer edge; and Enid was awake in the glass-windowed room, and the sun was shining on the bed and the clothes had slipped down as he slept. She gazed at the marvellous beauty of the sight, and said, "Alas," she said, "that it is through me that these arms and breast are losing all the fame and valour that was theirs?" And with that she wept a flood of tears, so that they fell on his breast. . .

The morning sun is this poem. This way of seeing the sun

3Ibid., p. 191.
happens for Enid because she has been accused by Gerwaint's followers of detaining Gerwaint with her love. Sun touches with a terrible gentleness of brilliance a form lovely to the girl. In a moment when his full known cherishableness is illuminated for Enid, the sun becomes the direct image for her of the glory in which he should be seen. She is seeing what was intimate and her own now exposed to a brilliance not of her own love. That is what the listener knows with the first awareness of this "beauty" causing sorrow in Enid. The light becomes what she with her love has hidden him from: 
"'Alas,' she said, 'that it is through me. . . .'

Throughout the passage the morning sun, while it is interpreted by Enid's emotion, remains simply and powerfully morning sun, coming in through "the glass-windowed room." There will be the hours of the day after this, when Gerwaint, too, awakens, a sharing of familiar natural events from which the power of the morning sun will have vanished. The listener remains aware of this as he begins to see what Enid sees. The passage does not state that the sun was shining on Gerwaint: "The sun was shining on the bed and the clothes had slipped down from his breast and arms as he slept." "The sun shining on the bed" must be seen and felt by the listener to be shining upon the beloved, within the context of their belonging together--"One summer morning they were in their bed and he at the outer edge." When Enid "gazed at the marvellous beauty of the sight," she is seeing what the listener has already felt; but she is speaking
beyond the sight of her own feeling caused by the glowing sun on the sleeping, bared, loved body.

The girl, Enid, who has raised herself from their bed, contends with the truth of this image by making unrelinquishable the shame of what she cannot help. The realization of what she does is sorrowful to her, but the feeling which overwhelms her is that this must be; her joy and naturalness of love hide him from the enhancing sun. "A flood of tears" unites her to him for they suddenly cover him from the sun—the sun whose glory had separated them by imaging discarded "fame and valour." "She wept a flood of tears so that they fell on his breast..." and the overwhelming feeling which she reveals has its own brilliance, driving back even the real sun, the flood-tide of light on "one summer morning." But for the listener the intensity of meaning has become as great as that of the morning sun. The completely human feeling is discovered, transfixed and made unbearable in its reality through the presence of the morning sun.

After an imagery of sun to convey an emotion which the sun itself evoked, it is sheer wonder to turn to a passage which attempts to describe another human state through this natural vivid way of seeing. The teller of the following prose passage is intently conscious that the receptive startled imagination of a listener will conceive of a human state of being through images of physical balance and speed. The youth Culwch sets out for Arthur's court:
Off went the boy on a steed with light-grey head, four winters old, with well-knit fork, shell-hooved, a gold tubular bridle-bit in its mouth. . . A battle ax . . . (which) would draw blood from the wind; it would be swifter than the swiftest dewdrop from the stalk to the ground, when the dew would be heaviest in the month of June. . . Four cloths, the four hooves of his steed would cut, like four swallows in the air over his head, now before him, now behind him. . . Never a hair-tip stirred upon him, so exceeding light his steed's center under him, on his way to the gate of Arthur's court.

The lad rides straight, enhanced with fitting outer attributes. But even as it has been his bearing which has defined the splendor of his possessions, his shining inner excellence has been suggested through them. The imagery moves no less swiftly than the remarkable steed to accomplish this.

When the steed is so handsome that it commends the rider, the rider may well sit the saddle with pride. Youthful excellence radiates from the first enumeration: "... on a steed with light-grey head, four winters old, with well-knit fork, shell-hooved, a gold tubular bridle-bit in its mouth. . . . The lad, Culwch, is already moving in the first instant he is seen and the telling in these lines proceeds by indicating motion. The horse is seen in his movements: the tossing head, the strength of a four-year old, slim driving legs that fork at a muscled chest, well-formed hooves to strike the ground, the bridle-bit directing him the way the boy would go. Every described excellence is

a point of physical movement.

"The battle ax . . . (which) would draw blood from the wind" would have the swiftest force; it would descend with remorseless aim in the hand of the youth, and much honor must accompany the wielder of such an ax. The idea of swiftness is again associated with the youth, but a feeling of balance is there as well—a direct, unerring power is implied for the fall of this ax "would be swifter than the swiftest dewdrop from the stalk to the ground, when the dew would be heaviest in the month of June. . . ." The sense of movement is intensified through the listener's compelled imagination which links delicate, fresh dew to a deadly blow of ax because both balance in air and fall unerringly upon their mark. (It is carefully specified that the dew would be at its heaviest, so that the likeness seems already established.)

Speed is visualized through what it brings about in the fresh clear air and not by comparison to other swift-nesses. It goes almost before the lad, yet some force of it seems nearly brought about by him; speed and balanced objects moving through the air are the image of something within the boy. "Four clods, the four hooves of his steed would cut, like four swallows in the air over his head. . . ." Clods in such a flight occur in a swift up-reach from the ground so that the appearance of hoof-shaped clods in the air seems independent from the hooves biting deep into the earth, quickly lifted and struck down again. So swifly
does he go that the clods seem quickened and are likened to
swallows "now before him, now behind him." Their balance
about him in their regular flight is the result of the
steed's own pace. And there is a sense of the youth's being
imperiously unsurprised by this that is natural to a youth
and to one so excellently borne forward.

A particular sense of something noble in Culwch is
acclaimed by the boast of the final line: "Never a hair-tip
stirred upon him, so exceeding light his steed's center under
him. . ." The balance of it! The passage slackening not at
all in creating swiftness, daringly bears the discovery that
balance speeds him—swiftness allowed by a fixed taut center
describes out of a sensitive physical relationship a shining
state of being in the youth. He rides so straight and nobly
in bearing that his own resolve is felt to be the center in
him, directing him as surely as the heaviest dewdrop from
the stalk to the ground to feats of bravery. Culwch is
destined to a triumph speeded by his keen and weighted
nobleness.

This quickened way of seeing the surrounding world in
early Celtic poetry is not always inspired by the marvellous;
it is there whenever the sharp feeling is to be imparted.
Beneath the impression of a terse comment, the full meaning
of the following passage develops:

It is no wonder (to get) in Crunnnaal's slender-
wattled house salt on bread without butter: 'tis
evident the flesh of his family has shrunk as
Crunnsnael's guest has commented on much. He has not been received with wine and fresh joints and he seems in the way of bringing satire upon his host for he assails the very limbs of the house of Crunnsnael, the family itself. The unity of an image working here, however, lets conflict two feelings—the spiteful sense of "'tis no wonder" with the sympathetic, if begrudging line which concludes that more generous repast is simply not to be had: "The flesh of his family has shrunk."

"Crunnsnael's slender-wattled house" refers to the father's providing and building around his family a humble shelter. Under woven branches, a roof made of young pliable withes, a family should feel secure. But when the guest likens the family's condition, "salt on bread without butter," to the shrinking bark of a tree, the image of Crunnsnael as a tree with his family dependent and about him, overtakes the salt bitter remark that first seemed to be criticizing his lack of generosity. All that should be well in a "slender-wattled" house is not, for the life within it, its strength, "has shrunk as shrinks the bark around a tree."

The image is brought about because reference is to "the flesh of his family" rather than to their being hungry as the guest is hungry. The teller lets the reality of

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hunger in this house exist in Crunnsnael's awareness of his family and their state because of him. The experience of hunger and ill-fortune is known for those who live it through the statement of an outsider. And the outsider is a guest in this house. The reality of this experience for the reader comes not because he is told the family suffers; instead they have been likened to what should not be, under a man's roof or in the bark of a tree. Because the "no wonder" is heard in terms of the treatment of a guest, it retains its taste of bitterness, of salt. The real bitterness is understood in the image of a tree visible in the prose comment of a guest whose repast was unsweetened with butter.

The significance which imagery has been able to convey in each passage above is a discovery for the listener which must be found not far from the moments themselves. Each scene, incident or state of being is arresting because it is revealed to be human experience expressed through surrounding, tangible realities of life on these islands.
"When once he'd opened his mouth, the poet had a jut on his jaw to send his voice out... ready and willing to waste a bit of his life explaining it to me, even if the plough-team were waiting for him in the furrow."

Tomas O’Crohan, The Islandman
The Old French word "lai" was of Celtic origin. An early Celtic poet who had a thought to make a lay, who had a certain vehemence—"a jut on his jaw to send his voice out"—was aware of immediate listeners. If the imaginative conceptions of his lyrics were to survive, it was to be through the way his voice sent them out. When a few of the poems are heard in the language in which they were composed, they reveal the poet, externally, but as vividly as he must have sounded to the listener he detained.

The early poets were anonymous because many of the poems had come down through generations in an oral tradition before they were first written down in the eighth century. (The earliest surviving manuscripts were written in the eleventh century, copied from earlier manuscripts.) Sometimes heroes of the tales, in which the poems occur as lays sung within the prose-telling, were named as the poets by the scribes who copied the poems; some of the later poems, written after the coming of letters, were sung by hermits; often the scribes were poets themselves. The only real knowledge about the poets as individual men must be found in the lyrics. These are written by men who saw poetry in their world and who learned to send it out in poems.

The metrical forms of early Celtic poems are described by Myles Dillon in his work, Early Irish Literature. The following excerpt is from his description of the Irish. It

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Myles Dillon, Early Irish Literature (Chicago, 1948), pp. xvi-xvii.
serves as a general description of the Welsh and Scots and Manx, as well. (It covers the poems which are discussed in the original languages in this study.)

The earliest surviving poems are, then, mere alliterative groups without rhyme or rhythm and date from the sixth century. Then rhyme appears toward the end of the sixth century, but there is still no fixed number of stresses or syllables. The fragments that have come down to us in these earliest forms are largely historical or encomiastic and not of great literary value, although there are some lively satires. Then in the seventh century regular rhythm appears, combined with rhyme in many metrical varieties. And a lyric note comes into poetry... Finally, perhaps in the eighth century, the syllabic count becomes dominant, and there is no regular accent, the word-accent serving only for alliteration and rhyme; and this system in many meters, was maintained into the seventeenth century.7

These poems were sung out in the distinctive Gaelic voice and the sounds of that language brought the images before the listener. The particular lilt that is in the Celtic languages of these islands is expressive beyond song in its communicativeness. The sounds of the words themselves are pronounced with an emphasis of feeling and of listening to the surrounding world of which they tell. In the simple inflection there is all that has gone into making the poem and all that is known from the saying of the poem. In The Western Island by Robin Flower it is told of the island poet of a short twenty years ago: "He never forgot anything that he had heard once, and he had travelled the

7 Ibid., p. 152.
A rhythmic presentation of the images results when these words are sent out. A rise and fall, especially expressive of feeling, is natural to the language. This is the impression a student of the translated early poetry receives when he studies the Gaelic language at the same time. Even though he gains adequate vocabulary and can put his tongue around the individual sounds, he still may not be intelligible to the born Gaelic speaker. As in every language, there is an emphasis, the gliding from one word into another, regardless of meaning. But in the Gaelic, particularly, the student must make a strong rhythmic connection between his separate words. If the student pronounces the following statement correctly:

Na bithidh tarruing m' chois!

[ŋə bpeay  taran  mə  cəʃ]

he will still be unintelligible to the born Gaelic speaker unless he swings the syllables against each other somewhat in the direction of the lines above. And the impulse for this correct rhythmic balancing from one word into the next seems to coincide with the meaning in the lines. In this sentence the speaker's warning laughter lengths his syllables and pitches his voice into: "Don't be pulling m'leg!"

If the student has the "deep" Gaelic his pronunciation will in large part bring about this connecting rhythm.

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"Deep" Gaelic is a description for the Gaelic born speaker of getting the tongue around the r's and ch's (which requires real endeavor for the English born tongue.) A specific recognizable rhythm is produced by this accomplishment. With his mouth in the required position around a syllable, the born Gaelic speaker will come down swiftly, then up, releasing the sound rapidly in nearly every word. *Bhe*, the verb, is pronounced phonetically */və*. In this way a one syllable word seems to have almost an unvoiced second syllable. The up-swing of the suggested silent syllable brings the voice right into the word to follow; the speaker seems to have a lively control over the words he uses. When the meaning of these related sounds begins to come through to the student, he imagines the speaker's voice itself to have a part in creating the moment or incident described.

The five poems which will follow are printed in the original Gaelic and Welsh. Each is represented phonetically in an attempt to reconstruct the original sounds enough to determine their excellence for bearing the emotional fibre of the voice as it responds and changes with the unfolding of the imagery. The transliterations will be of a working nature, based on the General American Dialect of the English pronunciations of vowels and consonants. Strict use of the International Phonetic Alphabet has not seemed desirable for the brief purpose of revealing approximately the original sounds through which the images of the early Celtic poetries were conveyed to listeners. Since the main study here is
the poetry, and the poet's conception of how a poetry of articulate feeling is achieved, this approach seems valuable, if expedient.

The two languages presented in the five poems here are Scots-Gaelic and Welsh, the first of the Gadhelic, the second of the Cymric branches of the Celtic. The guides to pronunciation which follow are for the Gaelic language. The Welsh pronunciations are much less complicated and strange, and are taken up as they are needed in the specific poems. International Phonetic symbols are used only for the vowel and consonant sounds that are not in the English pronunciation. If the guides which follow in the next paragraphs are considered by the reader before he comes to the poems, the phonetic renderings may seem adequate.

In the Gaelic alphabet there are five vowels a o u e i and twelve consonants b c d f g l m n p r s t. There is, as well, the "breathing" or aspirate h. The vowel sounds in these poems will be based on the following "Key to Phonetic Vowel Sounds" from James MacLaren's Gaelic Self-Taught. The phonetic symbols will always be placed in brackets:

\[
\begin{align*}
[a] & \text{ represents } a \text{ in far } [\hat{f}a] \\
[a] & \text{ " } a \text{ " fat } [\hat{f}at] \\
[a] & \text{ " } a \text{ " fate } [\hat{f}at] \\
[au] & \text{ " } au \text{ " Paul } \\
[\varepsilon] & \text{ " } e \text{ " hammer } [\hat{h}am\varepsilon]\end{align*}
\]

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9Claude Kantner and Robert West, Phonetics (New York, 1936), p. 197
Of the Gaelic consonants \( r \) is probably the most difficult to pronounce, with no real equivalent sound in the English tongue. The phonetic symbol \([\mathbf{3}^\prime]\) represents the general American English \( r \) that is heard in the words early and better. The American sound is that of a high central vowel in which the tongue is arched down at a mid point in the mouth and sound is emitted centrally.\(^{11}\) Two of the forms of the Scots Gaelic \( r \) can be reached from the American \( r \). The first can be formed in the word bar by a slight aspirate glide into the American \([3']\). The second Gaelic \( r \) glides from the American \([3']\) into a slight vibration. This second Gaelic \( r \) can be pronounced in the \( r \) of rob. \([\mathbf{3}^\prime \mathbf{b}]\) The phonetic symbol for both these \( r \)'s is \([\mathbf{r}]\). For the third Gaelic \( r \)

\(^{10}\)James MacLauren, *Gaelic Self-Taught* (Glasgow, Scotland, 1944), pp. 9-10.

\(^{11}\)Kantner and West, *op. cit.*, p. 182.
the symbol is used. It is a rolled or trilled r that can be applied in word [wɔr'd] and hard [hɔr'd]. The fourth Gaelic r, [R], has a one tap trill that is audibly uvular. The word grape [ɡræp] can be pronounced with the Gaelic[R].

The consonant group ch has the symbol [x] but is rendered with a guttural sound for which there is no English equivalent. (For instance, the Gaelic reìbach is written [Rəbəx].)

The Gaelic d becomes [j] before a "small" vowel (i or e) with a slight d sound remaining in the [j] pronunciation. (An example is the Gaelic orìde: [kər'də]. Before a "broad" vowel (a, o, u), d has almost the same sound as t: [d̪].)

In Gaelic, when n comes after a g or t sounds, it is pronounced like r nasal. Cno becomes [knə].

There are two Gaelic l's: one is pronounced as the English [l]; and the other is called a "dark" l with the symbol [ɾ], and is pronounced as l in the English million.

The Gaelic g preceded by or between small vowels, is pronounced [k]; féigìd becomes [fək ɾ d̪].

After broad vowels, the Gaelic g is pronounced [chk]; phonetically, bòc becomes [b̪əch].

The Gaelic t before broad vowels is [tt], pronounced as in matter. Beside small vowels, t is [ch] as in English, cheer, but retaining a light sound of t, cait [kaɾt]. When

12 This discussion is based on a table, "X phoneme," in Kantner and West, op. cit., p. 197.

13 All the consonant sounds demonstrated after r are based on MacLaren, op. cit., pp. 12-14.
t is aspirated to \( \text{th} \), as in the middle of a word or at the end, it is generally silent; however, poem "A" which follows was composed before the ninth century and retains the sounding of \([\text{th}]\), aspirated.\(^\text{14}\)

When the Gaelic \( b \) comes at the beginning or end of a word it is often aspirated to \( \text{bh} \) which is phonetically \([v]\).

This occurs when the \( b \)-sound would come harshly against another consonant. (\( \text{Mebd} \) becomes \([\text{m}又能\]).)

\( h \), a consonant in English is \([h]\) in Gaelic, a sign of aspiration only. MacLaren's explanation of its use is quoted here:

\[ \ldots \text{the aspirant, } [h], \text{ is so managed as to silence or euphonise the consonants wherever their initial sound would injure the easy flow or graceful cadence of a word, a verse, or sentence. } \ldots \text{ Aspiration may take place at the beginning, middle, or end of a word. This change is caused either by the natural sound of the word in which any aspirated or mutable consonants enter, requiring it by their position in a sentence; by their relation or connection with other words which have an influence on their sound. } \ldots \] \(^\text{15}\)

There may be some pleasure for the reader as he attempts the Gaelic of the following poems. It is a most expressive language for either energy or gentleness of

\(^\text{14}\)Kuno Meyer, in his "Miscellanea Hibernica," op. cit., p. 14, made a study entitled "The Alliteration and Pronunciation of \( \text{th} \)." He states: "The period when \( th \) ceased to be pronounced as a dental spirant, and took the pronunciation of \( h \), which it has in the modern language . . . first occurs in the second half of the tenth century . . . and was an accomplished fact by the end of that century."

\(^\text{15}\)MacLaren, op. cit., pp. 2-3.
feeling and is structured for the effect it has on the ear.

The reader should keep MacLaren's description in mind:

Gaelic is a soft, vocalic, and mellifluous language, in which harsh and hard linguistic sounds are avoided, softened, or assimilated. This general assimilation is a mutual smoothing down not only of an initial consonant, but also of the terminal consonant of the preceding word. (See examples that are given above.)

The sound of the words is not harsh or hard; the violence of sound or motion that may be in a poem comes through the imagery. Following are five poems in the languages in which they were originally heard and handed down.

A

\[-/ /\text{Fégaid úaib}
\quad [f\text{e} \text{k\text{"a}d } \text{o} \text{oyf}]
\/- /\text{sair fo thuaid}
\quad [s\text{\text{"a}r } f\text{\text{"o}} \text{ thoo} \text{yf}]
\/- /\text{in muir múaid}
\quad [\text{\text{"i}n } \text{moo} \text{y} \text{r } \text{moo} \text{yf}]
/- /\text{mílaich:}
\quad [\text{m\text{"i}l\text{\text{"a}x} }]
\/- /\text{adba rón}
\quad [\text{\text{"a}dv \text{"a} \text{\text{"o}n} }]
\/- /\text{rebach ran}
\quad [\text{\text{"r}eb\text{"a}x } \text{\text{"r}an}]
\/- /\text{ro gab lán,}
\quad [\text{\text{"r}o } \text{g\text{"a}v } \text{x\text{"a}n}]
/- /\text{linath.17}
\quad [\text{x\text{"\text{"y}n\text{"u\text{"\text{"\text{"n}t}h} }]

Artfully rhymed alliteration here combines with a

16 Ibid., p. 5.

17 The Gaelic of this poem and its scansion are taken from Myles Dillon, Early Irish Literature, op. cit., p. 153.

18 The translation is from K. H. Jackson's A Celtic Miscellany, p. 139.

Look before you to the north-east at the glorious sea, home of creatures, dwelling of seals; wanton and splendid, it has taken on flood-tide.
strike-slide-strike meter of excitement on beholding the immense world of ocean; yet the mellifluous progression of sounds sustains a quiet marvelling. Rhyme and alliteration are characteristics by which this poem is judged to be of the seventh, eighth, or ninth century.

B

\[\text{Cride } \]
\[\text{daire } \]
\[\text{ocean } \]
\[\text{pocean do.} \]

He is a heart, an acorn from the oakwood: he is young, a kiss for him!\textsuperscript{19}

In this love poem of the same period there is the same meter of excitement as in A, but with the suddenness of one thought following the next swiftly with the exuberance of the last prompted by the first. The stressed syllables of the third and last lines return the image in the first but are even more energetic. The alliteration and the sounds that the mouth shapes vigorously but produces as gentle utterances, sing an endearment through the whole poem.

C

Och, a luin, is buide duit
\[\text{cait so muine a fuil do net:} \]
\[\text{Och, a luin, is buide duit}\]
\[\text{cait so muine a fuil do net:} \]

\textsuperscript{19}The Gaelic, scansion, and translation of this poem are taken from \textit{Kyles Bilton, pp. 155.}
Ah, blackbird, it is well
for you where your nest is
in the bushes; a hermit clangs
no bell; sweet, soft, and
peaceful is your call.²¹

In this poem which is of the eleventh or twelfth
century, the internal rhyming of syllables becomes dominant,
lessening the importance of the word accent so that an
unaccented syllable may be found rhyming with an accented
syllable as **boc** with **cloc**. The rhythm evolves from the
meaning of the words and from their pronunciation, until
there comes with the stressed syllables of the last line
an insistence that the listener hear a repeated melodious
pattern.

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**Eil gweith ym rithat**

[Tail gwaith im ryhad]

**bun glas gleissat** ²²

[Boom glahs glaisad]

*Once more transformed,*

*I was a blue salmon,*

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²²**These Welsh renderings into approximate English
pronunciation would be much more reliable if it had been pos-
sible to obtain S. Jones' **Welsh Phonetic Reader**, (London).
I was dog, I was stag,
a roebuck in the mountains,
I was a stock and a spade,
I was a drill in a smithy,
for a year and a half.
I was a speckled white cock,
desirous of hens.24

A poem from the Welsh in dimeter rhyming couplets
written down between the eighth and eleventh centuries. The
rhythm of alliteration and the reiteration of the verb of
being, *bum*, bear the listener with increasing swiftness
through the poet's stages of mysterious transformation (cf.
Keats' "negative capability" of becoming what he sees) until
the poet was the lively object or creature vividly enough to
have known the lasting power of a drill, and the desire of a
handsome cock.

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23[λ], the Welsh *ll*, nearest sound in English to this
being the *tl* in little, when *tl* is pronounced with a violent
expulsion of breath. (See Jackson, *Celtic Miscellany*, p. 351.)

24The Welsh and the translation are from Gwyn Wil-
29-30.

25Ibid.
Fair supple Welsh girl of the hall in the valley,
like the light of dawn when day's course begins,
colour of whitest snow on Gorwydd Epynt... 

Virginal exquisite queen of long gentle thinking,
the colour of breaking day on a deserted sea.

The Welsh word is always accented on the penult. In this poem the accents and alliteration create a slow rhythm of pleading. It is an admiring invocation to the girl to hear the poet. The end rhymes suggest that the sureness of the girl's beauty is reached newly at the end of each descriptive phrase. This heightens the meaning borne by the musical, two-syllable words of which the poem is largely wrought, proclaiming the girl's own nature to be as lovely in her as the dawn's white color in the newness of day.

Hearing the early Celtic poems in the original languages, a listener discovers the strength of this poetry

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26 The Welsh and the translation are from Gwyn Williams' Introduction to Welsh Poetry, op. cit., p. 27.
27 Ibid.
28 According to K. H. Jackson, op. cit., p. 351.
within the study of its translations. The poet is aware of his listener beginning to see as he hears. Yet the listener does not cease to hear the rhythm of what he begins to see. This is the heart of the early Celtic poetry: it sings images of the surrounding world. In its original language the rhythms are of the speech of that world. But because the real poetry of these early Celtic lyrics comes from the lively wielding of images, there is a singing strength beneath the language which bears the images before the listener . . . the poet's imagination.

It is the experience of this student that even though the singing language is changed, the images are sustained and related in the listener's mind to bring about the poet's discovery. In the first meaning of the imagination:

. . . being the power to form mental images of objects not present to the senses, especially of those never perceived in their entirety; hence, mental synthesis of new ideas from elements experienced separately. . . .29

there is the description of a buoyant combining force. The singing out of the words sustains images; sounds that have shaped the images stay them strongly. When each is sustained beside the vividness of more images, there is created a feeling. This feeling is produced by the recognition of the senses but is "not present to the senses." If the poem is good, with the images "working," the imagination will hold those images in suspension in the listener's consciousness.

29 Definition taken from Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, Massachusetts, 1949), p. 414.
as the lilting words have held them. But it will do more; the imagination will compel the listener to hold the images together in order to make the discovery toward which the sudden relation of certain images bears him.

Quickened sights of the world are buoyantly sustained beside each other to bring about the imaginative conception of poetry. The "meaning" of a poem, what is "happening" comes through a challenging movement of images before the understanding. One central image may widen out through the poem rhythmically until it becomes a complete experience. It bears and stills and speeds the listener within its circle of enlarging. If, instead, the movement is from one image to another to a third that may contain both of those that went before, again there is the melody. When the listener's imagination is articulate within the hearing of the poem, the images are sustained with an increased intensity.

The music which the listener feels is that of tersely expressed emotion, and this music, conveyed through the poet's imagination in the poem is so deep that it is not stillled by a change of language.
LATER TATESHIN (1137 A.D.)

Were the senses, mente-fotd,
would scarce and would

с. "V
CHAPTER III

THE QUALITY OF THIS POETRY

Jubilant, fearful world of the sea in flood . . . though its tide ebbs, the immensity of its flood is remembered pounding and brilliant beneath the cliffs. A thunder of sea through moment upon moment of living quickens a human sense—the sense of a life that is articulate of recurrent moods. The sea's rise and fall in response to wind and space is aliveness to a human mind which hears its own emotions respond to human encounters. The sea and the man have forces to contend with.

_Elegy to Gruffyd ap Cynan_

After the green waves topped with foam
The ambling stallions carry the armour
Kicking up elods in their submission.
Woe to him who trusts the treacherous world.

After being on the crest of the challenging world, where it was natural for this warrior to be, (as natural for him as the colors of deep water and foam are for the sea running high) he survives only in defeat. What were swiftest about him have broken a proud, onrushing stride, free only to resent the natural betrayal of reaching shore.

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There is the treachery of madness, of knowing only the heights and depths on all sides, that mocks a human being. Remembering somehow an islanded steady footing, safe from the terrible brilliance of lurching uncertainty, a man sees clearly the acutely sensed hardships of his banishment:

Gloomy is this life
to be without a soft bed,
a cold frosty dwelling,
harshness of snowy wind.

Cold icy wind,
faint shadows of a feeble sun,
the shelter of a single tree
on the top of a level moor.

Enduring the shower,
stepping along deer-paths,
traversing greenswards
on a morning of raw frost. 2

To lament, comprehending the naturalness of what is unbearable, is to look across an increasing expanse of the sea:

LAMENT

Dear to me were the three sides
Which I hope not to revisit again:
the side of Tara, the side of Teltown
and the side of Áed son of Ainmire. 3

The hard rock which the wife of Áed presses against now, with a deep unquiet restraint has taken from around her all she loved. She does not seek a lovely returning tumult, for dead is the king whom she loved and their days of feasting in a famed hall.

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3 Dillon, (tr.) op. cit., p. 154.
Flood-tide returning . . . its pounding brilliance of life is heard. In its unceasing return, a wrenching emotion overpowers a human life until the life becomes aware of itself more tangibly than of the surrounding world.

Liadain, Seeking Cuirithir

Joyless,
The bargain I have made!
The heart of him I loved I wrung.

'Twas madness
Not to do his pleasure,
Were there not the fear of Heaven's King.

'Twas a trifle
That wrung Cuirithir's heart against me;
To him great was my gentleness.

A short while I was
In the company of Cuirithir;
Sweet was my intimacy with him.

The music of the forest
Would sing to me when with Cuirithir,
Together with the voice of the purple sea.

Would that
Nothing of all I have done
Should have wrung his heart against me!

Conceal it not!
He was my heart's love,
Whatever else I might love.

A roaring flame
Has dissolved this heart of mine—
Without him for certain it cannot live.4

It happened to Liadain that she had forsaken her lover to enter a convent. When he entered the convent to be with her, their torturous existence caused him to be sent away

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from her to a monastery. In each incoming rise of her longing, her heart's image of him is seen more closely. But underneath the increasingly aching sounds breaking against the immovable sorrow she has done to him, her quickened sensing of her own nature thunders fiercely. Worse than any wrath of heaven which she had feared is a damnation of her own causing, consuming her—she has lost Cuirithir. That perception reverberates long from under the incoming, overwhelming flood-time of sorrow.

EBB-TIDE

Ebb-tide to me as of the sea!
Old age causes me reproach.
Though I may grieve thereat—
Happiness comes out of fat.

My arms when they are seen
Are bony and thin;
Once they would fondle,
They would be round glorious kings.

The maidens rejoice
When May-day comes to them:
For me sorrow is meeter,
For I am wretched, I am an old hag.

The wave of the great sea talks aloud,
Winter has arisen;
Fermuid the son of Nugh today
I do not expect on a visit.

Youth's summer in which we were
I have spent with its autumn:
Winter-age which overwhelms all men,
To me has come its beginning.

A happy isle of the great sea
Which the flood reaches after the ebb!
As for me, I do not expect
Flood after ebb to come to me.

There is scarce a little place today
That I can recognise:
What was on flood
The strength of ways of the sea is that of human emotions in their immensity, in their coursing. But for each man that splendor ends. The poet will behold the sea return to the flood, when he can return, no longer, when he must remain at ebb.

... But after the lively gift of poetry
My wretched tongue is struck with silence... holds the bitterness of ending. His is a life that had become aware of itself and of the sea, "wanton and splendid" with sending out lays.

Yet endlessly the wonder over the sea's returning will sweep back in for the poet. He sends out his voice with:
"Look beyond you to the north-east... Fégaid uaib."

Before the great sound and expanse of the islanding sea, he encounters the ever-returning emotion of his human world. He rises on those five senses of his natural surroundings and from there runs steadily with these other deeply conscious senses he was born to quicken into perceptiveness; born of the sources of poetry and molded by acute awareness, he reaches out senses to which the emotions are tangible. Then the poet is himself of the whiteness of the ninth wave's foam yet as swiftly colored with the island's bloom.

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5 Translated by Kuno Meyer, Ancient Irish Poetry; translation edited in Myles Dillon, Early Irish Literature, pp. 169-170.

6 Translated by Gwyn Williams, Introduction to Welsh Poetry, p. 73.
Neither mother nor father
was my maker;
My source and my mould
were the senses, nine-fold,
springing from fruits,
the fruit of God's roots,
primroses and hill bloom,
of tree and shrub blossom,
to earth and of clay,
on my birth day,
of nettle bloom,
and the ninth wave's foam.7

Compelled by a blue height of space and clean warmth
of sun, the poet's senses take knowledge of his people and
himself living simultaneously with this land through the
seasons, a people who encounter youth and age in a nurturing demanding arc of earth. The early Celtic poet lived in
this island world with an awareness that was natural and
discerning; he speaks simply and acutely of his natural
world because he discerns that man does not exist apart
from it. This world was formed of cries of birds, and
roughness of crags, of colors of seasons, rich odors of
bearing trees, and cool nourishment of clear streams. The
natural life of this land is as alive to the poet's way of
seeing as are his own human responses to its wonders and
changes.

Through listening to the poetry of these early Celtic
lyrics the twentieth century reader makes this discovery:
the poet had senses for what is tangible in human emotions
because he experienced vividly the natural surroundings of

7Ibid.
the world in which these emotions were experienced. His poems rejoicing in the beauty of earth rise into poems of greater intensity in which man finds himself in contrast to the natural motion of his surroundings by means of his own human experiences. Poetry sung in this land is an understanding; it is a feeling newly-learned with each awareness of a moment happening to a man on an island in the sea. In the perceptive lyrics of the early Celtic poet, poetry "has taken on flood-tide." Its imagery, being conceived out of a consciousness of human life occurring within the like yet contrasting events of the natural world, has created a high intensity of feeling. The listener's imagination has been compelled to the poet's understanding by a sensuous awareness of the world shared with the poet. It is a discovery to behold an expressive and emotionally accurate body of poetry created as its images rise naturally from a shared, bounded island world.


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