

Where Does The Poetry Come From?
Aspects of Insular Poetics, Medieval and Modern

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H1

We were a people bred on legends,
Warming our hand at the red past.

Our kings died, or were slain
By the old treachery at the ford.
Our bards perished, driven from the halls
Of nobles by the thorn and bramble.

‘Welsh History’ R.S. Thomas, *Collected Poems* p. 36

H2

Yr wylan deg ar lanw dioer
Unlliw ag eiry neu wenlloer
Dilwch yw dy degwch di
Darn o haul, dyrnfol heli.

‘Y Wylan’ Dafydd ap Gwilym 14th cen.

H3

Hen le anial yw heno,
Anhardd friw ar wedd y fro;
Adeilad gwag, di-olau,
A hen Dŷ Cwrdd wedi cau.
Lle dinod, llwyd ei wyneb.
Iddo yn awr ni ddaw neb;
Annedd y saint yn ddi-sôn
A Bethel eu gobeithion.

Alun Cilie, Yr Hen Gapel, *Cerddi* p. 20

H4

The temptation is to go back,
To make tryst with the pale ghost
Of an earlier self...
:...there to renew
The lost poetry of our talk

Over the embers of that world
We built together...

R.S. Thomas, *Collected Poems* p. 73

H5

The philosophers had
done their work well, demolishing
proofs we never believed in.

We were drifting in space-
time, in touch with what we had
left and could not return to.

R.S. Thomas *Counterpoint* p. 44

H6:

The adjectives are tired,
the verbs indecisive...
vocabulary is no longer the ladder
angels descend and ascend
on. Is is flashed at us
too rapidly for us to cherish.

‘The greatest language’ R.S. Thomas, *Residues* p. 70

H7

Tá focail ann dá mb'eol dom iad	There are words if I could but find them
Folaithe i gceo na haimsire,	They are hidden in the blurr of time
Is táim ag cur a dtuairisc riamh	And I have long been seeking them
Ó chuir an ré an tsaint orm.	Ever since the moon induced my craving

From. ‘A Sheanfhlí, Múinidh Gom Glao’, *Scáthán Véarsaí* p. 16

H8:

Philologist, mudman,
I worm my way into words
My science is subterranean
I have forgotten what I need to know.

From ‘Sad Philologist’ DJ

H9:

'I'm not a gong for you to beat
A sickle, white of nail
A shiny fragment of something whole,
A croissant to butter up
Love's pupil dilating
A coin for you to pocket –
Leave me be.'

From *Stripsearch* DJ

H10:

Their ears are the colour of the stems
Of primroses: and their eyes –
Two halves of a nut.
But images
Like this are for sheer fancy
To play with. Seeing how Wales fares
Now, I will attend rather
To things as they are: to green grass
That is not ours: to visitors
Buying us up.

R.S. Thomas *Looking at Sheep* *Collected Poems* p. 151

<p>Bûm yn lliaws rhith cyn bûm disgyfrith bûm cleddyf culfrith bûm deigryn yn awyr bûm serwaw sÿr bûm gair yn llythyr bûm llyfr i'm prifder bûm llugyrn lleufer blwyddyn a hanner bûm pont ar driger ar drigain aber bûm hynt, bûm eryr bûm corwg ym mÿr bûm tant yn nhelyn lledrithawg naw blwyddyn yn nwfr yn ewyn bûm ysbwng yn nhân bûm gwÿdd yng ngwarthan.</p> <p>From Taliesin's, 'Kat Godeu' 6th century (?)</p>	<p>I existed in many forms before attaining a state of freedom I have been a sword, long and flecked, A tear in the sky For a time I observed the stars I have been a word in a letter In my prime I was a book A shining lantern For eighteen months I was a bridge built To span sixty estuaries I have been a road, an eagle A coracle in the seas I have been a harpstring For nine years reshapen In water, in spume I have been a spark in the fire A tree in the thicket.</p>
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H12

As I lie in bed tonight
The blindness of night in my eyes
I think with neither anger nor emotion
With never a tear on my cheeks
Of each light in my life which has been snuffed out
shaol
Each light ever lit snuffed out
By dire misfortune gusting
Like this wind in my ears.

Ag luí dhom im leaba anocht
Is daille na hoíche ar mo shúlibh
Smaoiním gan feirg an tocht,
Gan oiread is deoir ar mo ghruannaibh
Ar na soilse do múchadh im

Gach solas dar las ann do múchadh
Le tubaist dochreidte do shéid
Mar an ghaoth seo ag béicigh im chluasaibh

.....
But the dark is kind and soporific
.....
And the wind in its rage is no freer
Then he who is without light to lose.

.....
Ach tá an doircheacht codlatach séimh,
.....
Is ní saoire ina buile an ghaoth
Ná an té atá gan solas le múchadh.

S. Ó Ríordáin 'An Doircheacht' *Eireaball Spideoige* p. 42

H13

I came down from the mountain
where the tempter had offered me
in exchange for my poetry
the kingdom of the world.
my insanity saved me.

R.S. Thomas 'Legend', *Residues* p. 16

H14

'I who have been made free
by the tide's pendulum truth
that the heart which is low now
will be at the full tomorrow'

R.S. Thomas 'At the End' *No Truce with the Furies*, p.42

H15

There is not a madman
Where the mad congregate
Beside whom we should not sit
And keep society as long
As he carries on our behalf
Our sickness in his mind.

S. Ó Ríordáin 'Ní Ceadmhach Neamhshuim' *Línte Liombó* p. 40

H16

You enrage me, and not without reason;
Your stuffy remarks
Your forthright opinions
Your endorsement of your own trivial society
Represent the injustice
Which the strong inflict on the weak
.....
I'll fight you to the death,
Though you be my friends,
Because I hear your words
Echoing loudly through the corridors of history,
Wreaking havoc,
Bulldozing.

SÓR *Línte Liombó* p. 4

H17

Come to Wales
To be buried; the undertaker
Will arrange it for you. We have
The sites and a long line
Of clients...
We can always raise
Some mourners, and the amens
Are ready. This is what
Chapels are for; their varnsh
Wears well and will go with most coffins.

RST 'Welcome to Wales' *Collected Poems* p.197

H18

We speak another language
Time has made it smooth
As the river makes the stone smooth
We speak another language
It is a language teeming with light
And when we speak
Skylarks fly off the tongue
The sounds are purple berries.

'Another Language' DJ

H19

'Reality is composed of waves and particles...
We must not despair.
To pray, perhaps,
Is to have a part
In an infinitesimal deflection'

RST 'Nuance' *Collected Late Poems* p. 269

H20

'Sloig an aigne, a abhainn,' arsa an duine.
Shloiig sin
Chuaigh an abhainn thar maol ina tuile.
'Sloig an duine,' arsa an aigne leis an abhainn.
Shloig sin:
An fionnuisce rinne dubhach
D'fhuaigh an sruth.
black
Sin mar a chuaigh mianach cine
I gcion ar an úr.

The man spoke to the river
'Consume the mind,' he said.
The river did
And, in full flood, broke its banks.
Now the mind spoke:
'River,' it said, 'consume the man.'
The river did and the limpid waters grew

So one species leaves its mark
On the untouched.

From *River*, DJ

H21

Simple in your designs,
infinite in your variations
upon them: the leaf's veins,
the shell's helix, the stars themselves
gyring down to a point
in the mind...

...we soar
in hope to arrive at the still
centre, where love operates
on all those frequencies
that are set up by the spinning
of two minds, the one on the other.

'Cones', R.S. Thomas, *Collected Poems 1945-1990* p. 478

H22

I will make you a flute
flute on the windy mountain
And when the limpid winter melts
by the lark-eyed juniper bush
The flute will fill your cup
with shadows and with wine.

From 'Flute' DJ

H23

A man stands on a bridge
In deference to none who pass
He voices his quiet song.

I take his singing to heart
A singing destined for none
But as I listen
Hunger stirs inside me.

From 'Singing' DJ

H24

I bought an axe with a lark's egg
(the axe will sing, the little axe will sing)
And to the wood, into the wood
I went to learn the axe's tongue
to learn the tongue the axe speaks.
The axe sang there with a lark's tongue
a lark-tongued axe
lark in the empty skies.

From 'Axe' DJ

H25

nine moonless graves
beneath the unfenced sea:
the nine months of a cold priest's grief
the nine grieving apples at his angel's feet
the nine unborn songs to sing in his tree.

From 'Cold Priest and Angels', *Another Language*, DJ.

H26

...a robin flew deftly and unperturbed through the white calm.
..and sat above the grave.

I write my stunted, limping rhymes
I wish to catch a robin by the tail...
I wish to set out, in sorrow, for the end of day.

SÓR 'Adhlacadh mo Mháthar' *Eireaball Spideoige* p. 56

H27:

. Winged God
approve that in a world
that has appropriated flight
to itself there are still people
like us, who believe
in the ability of the heart
to migrate, if only momentarily,
between the quotidian and the sublime.

RST 'Bird Watching' *No Truce with the Furies* p. 61

H28

Soon I found the river,
rising, not from the fissured rock,
in rapture or in revelation,
but slow and indignant
under the hooded mountain.
There I lived a while,
eating small berries,
until I had forgotten my own name.

CV DJ

H29

Is fada mé ag ól mo pháip
Blianta 's mo chuisle sámh;
Ní rabhas ach ag ól mo pháip
Mar óltar páip de ghnáth.

Long I have smoked my pipe
For years, my pulse unquickened
I was simply smoking my pipe
As a pipe is smoked habitually.

Ach tharla anois is arís dom
Gur chorráigh an chuisle shámh
Mar bhí blas líne obann filíochta
Chuir tochas go smior na gcnámh.

But from time to time it so happened
That the slow pulse quickened
As a sudden flash of poetry
Set the bone tingling to the very marrow.

SÓR 'Filíocht an Pháip', *Eireaball Spideoige* p. 30

H30

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had
the treasure in it. I realise now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it.

R.S. Thomas 'The Bright Field', *Collected Poems* p. 302

H 31

Ours is a continent of sheets
The chair is but a vague memory
But in days of walking long ago
Before we became a plain
We were once as tall as a window.

SÓR 'Fiabhras', *Brosna* p. 26

H32

Now in the small hours of belief
the one eloquence to master
is that of the bowed head, the bent knee,
waiting, as at the end of a hard winter
for one flower to open on the mind's tree of thorns

R.S. Thomas 'Waiting', *Collected Poems* p. 376

H33

I would still go there
if only to await
the once-in-a-lifetime
opening of truth's flower

if only to escape such bought freedom, and live,
prisoner of the keyless sea,
on the mind's bread and water.

R.S. Thomas, 'Island', *No Truth With the Furies* p. 79.