

“Where does the poetry come from?”
Aspects of insular poetics, medieval and modern

In 2008, I was invited to spend time at the Cove Park centre for artists in Argyle, Scotland. My stay there resulted in a body of work, entitled *Another Language*, samples of which I would like to present to the School, with a view to informing an exploration of aspects of the poetics which underpin verse in the broader Celtic tradition, in particular, together with my own, that of R.S. Thomas (1912-2000) and Seán Ó Ríordáin (1917-1977).

R.S Thomas lived from 1913 till the year 2000. He spent all his life in Wales, and was educated there. For over half a century he published steadily, his extant work amounting to a body of almost one thousand poems. In his early work, he wrote much about Welsh identity. In his later work, he turned to metaphysical questions. Another theme he explores is the dehumanisation of man by machine. He was a vicar of the Anglican church.

Seán Ó Ríordáin lived from 1917 until 1977. He suffered from tuberculosis all his adult life. As a result, he often felt himself close to death, and distanced from the living, elaborating as a consequence a dialogue with mortality, and developing a heightened sensitivity to manifestations of vitality, sensual and abstract, things he expressed through his own distinctive idiom. Themes in his work also include cultural identity in Ireland, principally as vehicled by the Irish language. His poetic output was relatively small, and runs to about 130 pieces, some several pages long. For some years, he wrote a popular weekly column in Irish in *The Irish Times*.

Another Language is written in Irish, English, and Welsh. All the poems in Irish, some fifty, derive from the period 2005 to 2008, that is after the publication in 2004 of *Súil Saoir (The Trained Eye)*. The English poems, also fifty or so in number, span a longer period, beginning in the late nineties, though certain of them were written earlier. The poems in Welsh, just a handful, belong to the years 2003-2006 during which time I worked at the Mercator Centre, University of Wales, Aberystwyth. The collection also includes twenty translations in English of poems in Gaelic by Seán Ó Ríordáin, and a brace of poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins translated into Irish. Various of all these have appeared in the pages of *An Guth*, *Stoney Thursday*, *Fortnight*, *Transcript* and *The Cork Literary Review*. None have as yet been anthologised. I hope to have the collection printed soon in Poznań.

These introductory remarks complete, I wish to proceed to a discussion of our topic under the following seven headings: 1 Medieval Roots: Rupture and Continuum; 2 Idiom and Lyricism; 3 Initiation; 4 Discourse; 5 Resonance; 6 Revelation; 7 Time.

1 Medieval Roots: Rupture and Continuum

In 'Welsh History', R. S. Thomas writes (H1):

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

He continues:

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.

These lines tell of the presence of history in Wales. In Welsh culture, this history is continuously evoked in several ways. One, for example, is toponymy. Llanddewibrefi is the place St David preached his last sermon, possibly in 589. Other six century clerics gave their names in to places such as Tregaron, Cilgerran, and Llandysul, and in the medieval romances, the Mabinogi, Culhwch ac Olwen, for example, we find elusion to places we can visit today, among them Nanhyfer, Nant y Moch, Harlech, Cwm Cych and Ynys Gwalia.

Another way in which history is evoked is through literary form. Codified in the 14th century from metres already centuries old at that time, *cynghanedd* in Wales has been practiced with little interruption since the birth of Chaucer, the Battle of Crécy, and the Black Plague. About 1370, Dafydd ap Gwilym writes (H2):

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

And in the latter half of the 20th century, in the same county, Ceredigion, members of the local farming community continue compose in *cynghanedd*: (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

In the Gaelic tradition too, the tradition spans many centuries, and song and legend over half a millenium old have remained part of the vernacular until today. This cultural continuum from medieval until modern times is poetent and engaging, and, in a world of ephemerae, there is much comfort in an to be derived from subscribing to it. The poet's task however is not to reiterate past certitudes.

R.S. Thomas writes in 'Temptation of a Poet' (CP 73) (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...

Writing in the Celtic tradition, therefore, while the heart is occupied by the myth and symbolism of pre-modern times, the ideologies of post-medieval times will in their turn occupy the mind, while. Therefore, despite having educated ourselves to disbelieve in chaos and to doubt providence, we find ourselves continuing to be a part of the narrative related by our language, a resilient narrative spanning over a millenium.

Thus, one moment, we hope, along with others, Austrian philosopher Karl Popper for example, that rationality and humanism can break the cycle of war that has marked human history for millennia, and in the next moment we long for the stability and intimacy of the tribal aesthetic, seeing it as the only alternative we have known to the isolation of man from his fellow man in the techno-consumerist age.

In *Counterpoint* (p. 44), R.S. Thomas writes (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.

2. Idiom, Lyricism

In these lines, R.S. acknowledges the fact that a period has reached its end. Failure to decamp now will lead to stagnation and to nostalgia, this in turn to hostility towards innovation, and to a preoccupation with the icons of times past, thus favouring a climate of polarisation from which intolerance will eventually emerge. To move on is to discard accumulated redundant paraphanelia, and, ultimately, to reduce the risk of intolerance. The poet moves on in idiom, and consequently in discourse.

In ‘The greatest language’, the final text in *Residues*, his sole post-humous collection, R.S. Thomas writes (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

Some retrospection is of course inevitable. Seán Ó Ríordáin beseeches tradition in ‘Poets Of Old, Teach Me To Sing’ (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

An infatuation with words and their meaning can however lead to frustration (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

Lyricism too seems redundant. In *Another Language*, the moon speaks the following lines regarding the redundancy of the metaphor. She says (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*

In *Looking at Sheep*, R.S. Thomas writes (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.

3. Initiation

Before turning to a brief discussion of discourse, let us first investigate the notion of initiation. Much of the time, in thought and in design, the human world quotes itself as it has come to know itself, each generation acting as a shell in which voices from the past may resound.

But once the poet has become aware of tradition, its appeal and limitations, and of inherited idiom, its usefulness as a resource, and the dangers of stagnation that it holds, a process of initiation may begin by virtue of which the poet undertakes a journey towards an ability to draw and to express distinctions between things primary and things secondary.

In the text *Kat Godeu*, *The Battle of the Trees*, a Welsh text from the book of Taliesin, a 6th century British poet, we find a passage that contains nothing less than a rapturous description of the experience of initiation, in which the poet explains how he existed first as many things before achieving emancipation (H11):

Bûm yn lliaws rhith cyn bûm disgyfrith bûm cleddyf culfrith bûm deigr yn awyr bûm serwaw sŷr 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 mŷr bûm tant yn nhelyn lledrithawg naw blwyddyn yn nwfr yn ewyn bûm ysbwng yn nhân bûm gwŷdd yng ngwarthan.	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.
Taliesin, Kat Godeu 6th century (?)	

Initiation sometimes entails suffering, as in the case of Seán Ó Ríordáin. Ó Ríordáin suffered from tuberculosis all his life, and lived in the shadow of death from his teenage years on. In his poem *An Doircheacht* 'The Dark' he writes (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.

R.S. Thomas records comments on emancipation in several poems, for example 'Legend' (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.

'Legend', *Residues* p. 16

And in *At the End*, he writes (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'

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

4. Discourse

Initiation, and the emancipation that ensues, will in general lead to confidence of expression and to clarity of ideas. These ideas cristalise and ring out with conviction. In Seán Ó Ríordáin's later work, two good examples are 'Ní Ceadmhach Neamhshuim 'Do Not Tolerate Apathy', and 'Dom' Chairde 'For My Friends. In the former he writes (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.

And in the latter (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(DJ LL 1986:41

R.S. Thomas' experience of Wales and its culture culminates in expressions of clear discourse. One such is the poem 'Welcome to Wales', where irony also plays its role (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.

Other statements may be less strident. The title poem of our collection *Another Language* reads (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.

Here lyricism has returned to aid discourse, and is used as a means rather than as an end.

5. Resonance

We have described various stages in the education of the poet. An awareness of tradition. A realisation of tradition's real but limited relevance. A seeking of alternatives. Initial frustration. Initiation into a state of clearer understanding.. And emancipation as a consequence. But once emancipation has been achieved, what is in store? Once in flight, where will the arrow land? Rhetoric alone as in 'Do Not Tolerate Apathy' and 'Welcome to Wales' will retain its vitality only for a short time. When we shout too loud, nobody will listen.

Rhetoric, reason, and idiom, when combined and handled with skill, and when expressed with conviction, may prove sufficient to promote a given discourse. But there is no formula to make the words resonate. And all the ingredients alluded to above in the dispassionate language of the literary critic are ultimately mere conceit if the poet does not sing, and think.

R.S. Thomas, though prepared to employ rhetoric, is by no means restricted to it. He extracts an idiom from the quarry of contemporary thought, and, deviously, bolsters faith with the language of empiricism. Thus, in 'Nuance' we read (H19):

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

(CLP 269).

In *Another Language*, the theme of man and his environment is dealt with allegorically (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.
Shloiig sin:
An fionnuisce rinne dubhach
man.'
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
The river did and the limpid waters grew
black
So one species leaves its mark
On the untouched.

From *River*, DJ

In 'Cones', R.S. marries mathematics with theology, returning to the heart of a question studied by French philosopher Blaise Pascal in the 17th century. This poem represents a culmination of idiom. Of 'Cones' he writes (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...

The poem ends:

...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.

From 'Cones', R.S. Thomas, *Collected Poems 1945-1990* p. 478, Phoenix 1993

Here, the 'two minds' are crucial. Together they create dialogue. In his column in *The Irish Times* on January 1st 1972, Seán Ó Ríordáin describes the experience of learning of the death of people who were his contemporaries. Ar dhaoine a bhíonn smaointe dírithe. Má imíonn na daoine sin go hobann go brách cá ndíreoir iad? Táthar dom theanntú. Táim ag fáil bháis duine ar dhuine, cara ar chara, námhaid ar námhaid. *Thoughts are directed at people. If these people suddenly disappear for ever, where then can they be directed? I am being trapped. I am dying person by person, friend by friend, foe by foe.*

Both poets, reputedly asocial, and perhaps rightly so, make it clear that the resonance in their lives, and consequently, no doubt, in their work, is derived, amongst other things, from their interaction with their peers and fellows. This being so, the importance of dialogue becomes apparent, dialogue supposing mutual listening and response, rather than the reciting of parallel monologues by two uninitiated voices.

In *Another Language*, as Ó Ríordáin would have it, 'thoughts are directed at people', in as R.S. Thomas would have it, 'the spinning of two minds, the one on the other. In the poem 'Flute' for example we read (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.

And in the poem 'Singing', to the man on the bridge (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.

Here, we are reminded of a definition of understanding offered by 20th century philosopher Gadamer, a self-projection, he says, whereby the knower negates the temporal distance between himself and the object of his knowledge thus becoming contemporaneous with it. This definition is profound in its implications. We can no longer be spectators. We must become, as Taliesin sang in 6th century Britain, the shining lantern, the road, the eagle, the coracle in the seas, the harpstring, the spark in the fire, the tree in the thicket. Hearing the man sing on the bridge, we must become the song.

Reading *Poèmes de Czernotwitz*, (Teper, Paris 2008), an anthology of work by twelve Jewish poets between the wars, we find the following description of the poem. Alfred Sperber said: "Un poème n'est qu'un propos sur quelque chose qui jamais ne fut, un espoir en la réalisation de quelque chose qui ne peut être réalisé et la révélation d'un secret arraché à l'écho d'un puits de silence." Alfred Sperber, *Poèmes de Czernotwitz*, (Teper, Paris 2008). '*A poem is nothing more than an utterance regarding something that has never existed, the hope of bringing about something that cannot be brought about, and the revelation of a secret wrenched from the echo of a well of silence.*'

Taken from *Another Language*, the poem 'Axe' is such an utterance regarding things that may never have existed, but the significance – and resonance of which – remain nonetheless indicative of the experience of the world which provoked it (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.

Another such example of echoes from Sperber's well of silence is the following, line taken from a series of short poems in *Another Language* entitled 'Cold Priests and Angels'. There are (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.

6 Revelation

In July, I visited my grandmother. She read some of my poems. When she had read them, she asked me: 'Where does the poetry come from?' 'I don't know,' I answered, feeling that an attempt to answer the question would have led us into the detached world of the thesis. Today too, I avoid thesis, an appeal to the intellect whose austerity menaces the charm of the resonant word, and prefer to seek insight in metaphor.

The metaphor I choose is that of the bird in flight. We might put the bird in a cage to observe it. But once deprived of the sky, the bird becomes flightless. Seán Ó Ríordáin's best known work, first published in 1952, is called *Eireaball Spideoige*, 'Robin's Tail'. The motif occurs in the poem *Adhlacadh mo Mháthar* 'My Mother's Funeral'. As the coffin is lowered into the grave (H26):

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

As the funeral ceremony ends, Ó Ríordáin continues:

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/DJ)

The catching of the robin by the tail implies a paradox. This paradox involves confusion between two things: capturing the essence of a thing – a poem, a bird, a phenomenon – and *depriving* that phenomenon of its essence. By capturing the bird, we succeed not in capturing its essence, but simply in depriving it of flight, a gift which sets it apart from other forms of life.

For much of his life, R.S. Thomas was an avid birdwatcher, and in his poetry he derives many ideas from this pursuit. In *No Truce with the Furies* (Bloddaxe Books, 1995, p. 61), in a poem entitled *Bird Watching*, he writes (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.

Therefore, rather than perceiving poetry as something that comes, and as something that comes from a particular place, as if other places lay outside its fold, let us consider poetry to be a state, the state of vitality of the world by which we are surrounded and in which we participate at all times. When this state and its vitality is revealed, the poet perceives the resonances that bring the world to life. His or her task is then to express this vitality and resonance.

Revelation need not be dramatic. In *Another Language*, in a text entitled 'CV', the following lines give a sense of gradual enlightenment, and of the darkness that precedes it (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.

In the poem *Filíocht an Phíopa*, 'Pipe Poetry', Seán Ó Ríordáin offers the following playful metaphor for revelation (H29):

Is fada mé ag ól mo phíopa Blianta 's mo chuisle sámh; Ní rabhas ach ag ól mo phíopa Mar óltar píopa 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 chorraigh 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.

In *The Bright Field* R.S. Thomas states his experience as follows (H 30):

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.

7. Time

Time itself is as indispensable an ingredient as any in the confection of articles of value. Given time, a culture may evolve. Without its luxury, life is mere survival. Also, the creative cycle is longer than the cycle of civic, domestic and economic life. The artist is often compelled to withdraw from daily society, temporarily at least, in order for his or her work to avail of time in its fullness. (Scholars will appreciate this state of affairs, as their own cycle of creation sometimes necessitates similar sabbatical absences.)

Seán Ó Ríordáin, as we mentioned earlier, suffered from tuberculosis. As a result, he worked only occasionally, and, when strong enough to write, was equipped with ideas that had taken form unhurriedly. He describes the delirium of his sickness in *Fiabhras* 'Fever' (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.

R.S. Thomas, as a minister of the church, enjoyed the favour of time, and unlike Ó Ríordáin, the blessing of good health. He spent his mornings reading and writing, his afternoons walking and birdwatching, his evenings visiting parishioners. His work evolved without haste. In *Waiting* (CP 376) he writes (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'.

And in the poem, 'Island', he again evokes the waiting which precedes the fulfillment of a wish (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.

To conclude this talk, two things remain to be done.

First, we remind ourselves that, rather than defend a particular thesis regarding the tradition, or to exclude points of view we may hold or choose to entertain at other times, the purpose of today's paper has been to share observations on poetry in the broader Celtic tradition as made evident by a reading of the poetry itself.

We suggest that the poem and its source are ultimately indissociable, as is the poem and that which criticism would sometimes have us call its 'meaning'. Seeing the bird in flight, we rejoice. We do not ask: what does the bird mean? Seeing the mountain loom in the distance, we feel elated. We do not ask: what does the mountain mean?

The second thing that remains to be done is for me to thank the school for the time it has afforded me to devote to my work. Moving to Poznań has been a good thing in many ways, not least because of the opportunity I have here to further my linguistic, artistic and academic pursuits. I hope, some time in the future, to think and to write more about the subject I have presented today, and other subjects, and look forward to sharing future meetings with you.

DJ Poznań 10.09