

The Braiding of Words

Ireland was one of the few civilised places of the ancient world not conquered by the Roman armies, and its indigenous culture thrived for a long time undisturbed on the western fringe of Europe.

Ireland has a long spiritual history. In prehistoric times large circles of standing stones bore witness to the ancient worship of the sun and the first attempts to punctuate time with a calendar of stone. Then around 400BC, Celtic tribes from the east settled, merging with the old culture: the Celtic priest absorbed the former megalithic spirituality without extinguishing the primal power of its mysteries. The druids, as the priests were known, had a strong hold on the population through their powers of magic and healing. Much of their training was undertaken in great secrecy and went on for twenty years and more.

The Druidic Training

To become poet, singer and harpist was the first stage on the path to Celtic priesthood — knowing the old stories and being able to make new ones. Poetry and song were considered much more than entertainment. The great stories united the people through the memory of a heroic past; they stirred up courage and rekindled hope. Tales also served as a means of healing, for the individual and the community. A bard was also priest, doctor, psychologist, political adviser.

The young bards would be apprenticed to a master singer, or minstrel, who they followed from place to place and court to court. Some minstrels had a whole school at their heels. Even as late as the sixth century, Christian–Irish monks underwent Bardic schooling, and Columba (d. 597), the great Irish saint and missionary, had many years of training. Ollam, one of the most famous of wandering bards, knew about three hundred and fifty songs by heart — each about the size of the *Odyssey*. The singers were loved for their gifts of story making and telling, but feared for their word magic.

Taliesin

Tales of the Welsh bard Taliesin (Merlin) testify to the poetic spirit of Celtic culture. His story begins with the sorceress Ceridwen and ugly and stupid son Morfan. In order to

address her son's disadvantages, the enchantress resolves to make him into a bard by her magic arts.

Ceridwen gathers herbs, boils them in a cauldron for a whole year, muttering incantations to create a brew that will yield inspiration to the first who tastes it. Her boy-servant Gwion tends the fire and stirs the brew. But on the last day of the work, three drops of the boiling liquid fall on his thumbs and when he puts his thumb into his mouth for relief, Gwion, instead of Morfan, receives the poetic gifts of the ages.

He runs away in fear. But the sorceress comes after him. Using his new magical powers, Gwion turns himself into a hare, but Ceridwen turns herself into a fierce greyhound. When he changes himself into a fish, she becomes an otter. When Gwion becomes a bird, she pursues him as a hawk. Finally Gwion turns into a grain of wheat, but Ceridwen changes into a hen and swallows the grain. Soon, Ceridwen falls pregnant, though she did not lie with any man. She realises that the baby is Gwion, and she and Morfan resolve to kill the babe as soon as it is born. But when the baby is born, he is so beautiful that Ceridwen saves him. She sews the child into a bag and sets him adrift on the sea.

Meanwhile, the unlucky lord Elphin is fishing for salmon at his father's weir. When he tries one last throw with his net, he finally catches something. It is a leather bag. Opening it, he beholds the beautiful child and cries out, 'A radiant brow!' ('tal iesin' in Welsh). 'Yes, Taliesin will be my name,' replied the baby ... 'How is it that a baby can talk?' marvelled Elphin.

And Taliesin, already a bard, replied in verse:

Once I was a handsome youth
Tutored in the hall of Ceridwen ...
Learned I grew in ancient laws
And in the speech before words.
For the wisdom I gained
I had to flee from her hall
From the anger of Ceridwen
Her terrible call of revenge
I fled and shifted my shape
Since then I have been a hare
And the shape of a crow
And a green frog
High I jumped with roe-bucks

Over the thickets barring my way
I have been a raven of prophetic speech
A cunning fox, a sure swift and
A squirrel hiding in vain.
I have been the red deer
And hot iron hammered in fire
I have been the keen edge of a sword
And the cry in the midst of battle
I have been a struggling bull, a bristling boar in a ravine
I have been a grain of wheat and was eaten and born again
Put in a bag I floated on the sea
I know I have come to light again.

Taliesin remembers all that he has been. A born poet and destined to become a druid, he remembers what others forget: his initial oneness with the world soul in his own soul. Before he was born he drank from the cauldron of Ceridwen: sorceress, a witch. But the hag mask merely hides the radiant face of the Celtic goddess of poetry and inspiration, Ceridwen. Through her initiations Taliesin has become a bard.

Exercise 1: The Cauldron of Ceridwen

Let us approach Ceridwen, goddess of wisdom and poetic inspiration. Let us drink from her cauldron of imagination and remember all that we have been before we were born. For example:

I have been falcons falling from the sky
I have been the first of lakes
I have been the bull before the world
I have been the hammer in the hand of gods
And bellows that fanned the sun ...

Druid and Nature

The name Taliesin signifies more than a single individual. Like Arthur, Merlin or Gawain, it points to a rank or office, and dates back to the first bearers of those names. Each generation had its Arthur and Taliesin.

When baby Taliesin tells Elphin all he has been — hare, fish, crow, frog, roebuck, the raven of prophetic speech — it testifies to the druid’s ability to merge with nature and become one with its beings and elements. A striking example of this close relationship with nature in all its manifestations is preserved in the old Irish Rann of Amergin. Read it out loud and imagine how it would feel to be all the things.

The Rann of Amergin

I am the wind that blows over the sea, Ah-ro-he!
I am the wave of the sea, Ah-ro-he!
I am the sound the sea makes, Ah-ro-he!
I am the ox of the seven combats, Ah-ro-he!
I am the vulture upon the rock, Ah-ro-he!
I am the ray of the sun, Ah-ro-he!
I am the fairest of plants, Ah-ro-he!
I am the wild boar, Ah-ro-he!
I am the salmon in the water, Ah-ro-he!
I am the lake in the plain, Ah-ro-he!
I am the word of knowledge, Ah-ro-he!
I am the spear-point of battle, Ah-ro-he!
I am the god who kindles fire in the head, Ah-ro-he!
Who makes wise the company on the mountain?
Who makes known the ages of the moon?
Who knows the secret resting place of the sun?
Ah-ro-he!

Both bard and druid experienced these states of oneness. While Taliesin remembered all that he had been, this writer merges with the here and now of wind and wave, vulture and rock. ‘I am’ rather than ‘I have been’. Repeating ‘I am’ at each line gives a mantric quality that is further strengthened by the Ah-ro-he until the poem acts like an invocation. We feel as if the bard becomes the very things he describes: he braids himself into the fabric of nature by means of word magic.

Exercise 2: An Ancient Rann

Let us braid ourself into the fabric of nature. Write a piece where each line starts with ‘I am’ and ends with ‘Ah-ro-he!’ or some other exclamation. Feel how the repetition carries you and how each line asserts your oneness with all the beings that surround you.

Ancient Rune by Nandi Chinna

I am the dark night — shhhhh
I am the city sleeping in its bed — shhhhh
I am the humming of electrical wires — shhhh
I am the whirring of white goods on standby — shhhh
I am the somnambulist walking through quiet rooms — shhhh
I am the hissing of wheels on tarmac — shhhh
I am the wind whistling through car windows — shhhhh
I am the journey at dawn through wet streets — shhhh
I am the rustling of dawn birds — shhhh
I am the leaves of trees absorbing the sunlight — shhhh
I am shards of grasses shedding their seeds — shhhh
I am germinating underground and reaching for light — shhhh
I am water seeping down through the earth — shhhh
I am the footsteps walking through wet grass — shhhh
I am the taste of water trickling over stones in a creekbed — shhhh
I am the inhalation — shhh
I am the exhalation — shhh

The Song of the Wind

Taliesin’s Song of the Wind attains its intimacy, its closeness — by a careful, long and loving consideration of all the manifestation of the being that is wind. The Taliesin who so carefully considers the wind is perhaps a later carrier of the great name.

Taliesin’s Song of the Wind

Discover thou what is
The strong creature from before the flood,
Without flesh, without bone,
Without vein, without blood,
Without head, without feet;
It will neither be older nor younger
Than at the beginning ...
Great are its gusts
When it comes from the south;
Great are its evaporations
When it strikes on coasts.
It is in the field, it is in the wood,

Without hand and without foot,
Without signs of old age,
Though it be co-eval
With the five ages or periods;
And older still,
Though they be numberless years.
It is also so wide;
As the surface of the earth;
And it was not born ...
It neither sees, nor is seen.
Its course is devious
And will not come when desired
On land and on sea
It is indispensable.
It is without an equal,
It is four-sided;
It is not confined,
It is incomparable;
It comes from four quarters;
It will not be advised,
It will not be without advice ...
It is sonorous, it is dumb,
It is mild ...

How thoroughly the bard knew the wind, how intimately observed and experienced it.

Exercise 3: Song of the Elements

Choose an element of nature — air, earth; clouds, mountains, a tree, a patch of land — and give it the treatment Taliesin gave wind. Avoid modern abstraction and scientific explanation. Stay with immediate experience; sense the ‘being’ of your element.

Spinifex by Nandi Chinna

I am spinifex
I am fluorescent green laughter
I am the warm blanket
that is spread on sand
it snuggles down warm

is held together
my roots are tunnels of life
they spread like veins and arteries
beneath red deserts
they deliver into the cool
fault lines in rock
they are the strong limbs
of my thorny crown
I am god and the Devil
I appear soft and inviting
like the most delicious rest
but touch me and you will
cry out in alarm
chaplets of blood will tattoo your skin
blades of pain behind your eyes
Ha! I am the chameleon
the joker the jester the clown
I hold down the world
like a net without me
the earth would blow away
a hundred million sand particles
drifting into space
forming lonely galaxies
in the orbits of stars
I am a home
I draw circles in spirals
in the sand around me
imitating the tracks of snakes
tiny animals huddle beneath me
if not for my benevolence
they would burn and fry
evaporate into the deepest blue sky
their souls longing for the cool caverns
of my stems and roots
Oh! I can be cruel
I can pierce the jaw bones
of lost sheep who perish
of hunger and thirst

I can slice the pads of
foraging wallabies lame and bleeding
Ha! I will stop the walker in their tracks
you can't get through here
a barbed gate protects the sacred places
I am also the healer
the balm the helper
at night I am trampled by tired kangaroos
who curl up in my wiry windless warmth
I keep the soil moist
so that others can germinate and grow
I am baskets I am fish traps
I am the weaver of the world.

Two Christianities

Consciousness of this relationship with nature survived longer in Ireland than in any other part of the Western world. For many centuries it co-existed and even merged with the Christian impulse.

St Patrick is often credited with bringing Christianity to Ireland, but in fact Christianity existed in Ireland long before, finding expression in the many legends woven around St Brigid, in which Christian and pagan elements merge seamlessly. Like the Celtic goddess Brigantia, St Brigid hung her wet cloth on a sunbeam to dry and like Christ she turned water into ale, healed the sick and made the dumb speak.

This first impulse of Irish Christianity focussed on the goodness in human beings and worshipped Christ as Lord of the Elements, present in every part of nature. The close connection of Irish spirituality with the Palestine story appears too in the legend that St Bride (who lived five hundred years after Christ) was the midwife of the Virgin Mary and Godmother of Jesus.

St Patrick was, however, the first to establish the Roman Catholic Church on Irish ground, a form of Christianity which emphasised the hierarchically organised church, the sinfulness of the human being and the fallen state of nature. For the Roman Catholic Church the cross stood mainly for death: the Irish monks added the circle or sun sign, balancing death with the symbol of resurrection: the circle representing the omnipresence of Christ in nature and in the human being.

To the early Irish monks the division between a heaven above and a nature below that was devoid of spiritual beings was utterly alien. They lived, breathed and prayed in a world permeated by nature spirits and angels, and ruled by the resurrected Christ.

Gathered in monastic settlements, monks formed brotherhoods and sisterhoods of equals dedicated to the spiritual quest. Couples and families often formed part of the community and celibacy was voluntary rather than enforced.

In many of these Irish monasteries, learning and culture were kept alive for centuries while the rest of Europe fell into a state of barbarism after the fall of the Roman Empire. The Book of Kells illuminates the artistry and skills of monks who dedicated their lives to the creation of manuscripts. Some of the larger monasteries had choirs of up to three hundred voices, and singing went on continuously, day and night.

In this atmosphere of religious devotion arose poetry in praise of god and nature. The extract from the benediction below bears witness to the powerful merging of Christian belief with the worship of nature. It is radiant with the verdant, fresh green of Ireland itself.

Praised be the rain and dew
Praised be all spirits
Praised be the nights and days
Praised be darkness and light
Praised be cold and heat
Praised be frost and snow
Praised be the lightning and the clouds ...

Exercise 4: Praise

Write a piece which braids the love of nature with enthusiasm for the divinity. Start each line with the words ‘praised be’ and add as many benedictions as your heart will yield. Note the subtle ecstasy that takes hold of your soul in such a feast of praise.

Praised be the rain on the rooves
Praised be the recycling bin
Praised be the mice who do not enter the house
Praised be the tilt of the roof
Praised be the passive solar house
Praised be the architects of all sound houses
Praised be the clean clouds filing in from the Indian Ocean
Praised be my friend’s life and death
Praised be my son’s breath

Folk Prayers

Inevitably the Irish form of Christianity was overcome by Roman Catholicism, and later the highly developed culture of Ireland was destroyed by invading Germanic hordes. The Bardic impulse maintained by the Irish monks went underground, to continue in the vast heritage of prayers, blessings, hymns, incantation, wishes and spells preserved by peasant folk and carefully passed from generation to generation.

Thanks to the research of Alexander Carmichael in the Outer Hebrides, a portion of this heritage has been preserved. The charm of the poetic prayers he recorded lies again in the harmonious merging of pagan and Christian elements. The wish charm below is a good example of a pagan wishing spell, loosely tied to the Christian 'Our Father'.

Good Wish

Wisdom of serpent be thine,
Wisdom of raven be thine,
Wisdom of valiant eagle

Voice of swan be thine,
Voice of honey be thine,
Voice of the son of the stars.

Bounty of sea be thine,
Bounty of land be thine,
Bounty of the Father of heaven.

Exercise 5: Irish Wishing Spell

Create a wishing spell, using the same structural pattern as the above: 3 times 3 lines, each triad starting with the same word. For example:

Blessing by Janet Blagg

Stone of the peach be thine
Stone of the river too
Stone singing in the heart of the fire, for thee.

Ocean of emerald be thine
Ocean of naked joy
Ocean sighing, lapping all night at thy shore.

Song of the sea in thy heart
Song of the earth in thy breast
Song of the wind in thy bones, in thy mouth, in thy breath.

The Braiding of Words

Present in all Irish prayers and blessings is the weaving of spiritual reality into the everyday. The division of above and below; elevated spiritual beings and lowly matter, does not exist in the Celtic conception. The saints, angels and even Christ can be artfully braided into the fabric of the world with words and poetic incantations. In this milking song from the Outer Hebrides, the familiarity of the maker's relationship with both saints and cow adds much to its charm.

Come, Mary, and milk my cow,
Come, Bride, and encompass her,
Come, Columba the benign,
And twine thine arms around my cow.
Ho my heifer, ho my gentle heifer,
Ho my heifer, ho my gentle heifer,
Ho my heifer, ho my gentle heifer,
My heifer dear, generous and kind,
For the sake of the High King take to thy calf.

Come, Mary Virgin, to my cow,
Come, great Bride, the beautiful,
Come, thou milkmaid of Jesus Christ,
And place thine arms beneath my cow ...

My black cow, my black cow,
A like sorrow afflicts me and thee,
Thou grieving for thy lovely calf
I for my beloved son under the sea,
My beloved only son under the sea.

Exercise 6: Song

Write a piece that weaves the spiritual and the mundane. A beloved tree, a favourite piece of furniture, a dear old fridge or trusty washing machine could be the focus of your incantation.

irish prayer by Morgan Yasbincek

three tools i carry with me,
shovel, pitchfork, trowel —
tools to find a way through earth
and season, may you each
be blessed with discrimination

when the bassendean grey, water
resistant and bland as salt turns
up dry, take to my hands
with confidence and let our humility
secure the blessing of the earth, the trust
of the seedlings

work the earth with me, speak to the worms
make compost from muck and let us not forget
the turn of life as we move

three tools I carry with me,
shovel, pitchfork, trowel —
tools to find my way through earth and season
may you be blessed by the smaller spirits
with the way to a garden.

The Tale of the Bard

The inheritance of the bard is never forgotten. Merging with Christianity it continued in the folklore of prayers and spell. Through the tale of the young Taliesin echoes the power of the Celtic nature initiation and its journey into the spaciousness of the world soul. Stories of the later Taliesin reflect the new light and its ability to illumine the stream of time. This new layer surfaces when Elphin is imprisoned for boasting that his bard surpassed all others, and Taliesin comes to the rescue and proves the boast true:

Primary chief poet am I to Elphin. And my native country is the place of the Summer Stars. John the Divine called me Merlin, but all future kings shall call me Taliesin. I was nine full months in the womb of Ceridwen. Before that I was Gwion, but now I am Taliesin. I was with my king In the heavens When Lucifer fell into the deepest hell. I carried the banner before Alexander. I know the names of the stars from the North to the South ... I was in the ark with Noah and Alpha I witnessed the destruction Of Sodom and Gomorrah. I was in Africa before the building of Rome. I came here to the remnant of Troy. I was with the Lord in the manger of the ass. I upheld Moses through the water of Jordan. I was at the Cross with Mary Magdalene ...

I was instructor to the whole universe. I shall be until the judgement on the face of the Earth ...

Taliesin reveals the depth of his Bardic initiation, which accessed the whole biography of humanity as a personal experience. Such claims might seem boastful or strange, but to students of the word they sound a familiar note. By means of our poetic imagination we have travelled on a similar journey. We too were present at the fall of Lucifer, at the flood; and have given voice to Mary Magdalene ...

Exercise 7: The Tale of Taliesin

Boldly testify as to who you are as a poet. Recall your poetic biography; the places you have been, the situations you have inhabited with your imagination. Use themes that have spoken to you in this book; themes that have shaped your poetic self. Start with: ‘I am’ or ‘I was.’

The Tale of Taliesin by Janet Blagg

I was there with Cassandra in the dark temple when the treacherous Apollo spat in her mouth. I was with Joan when the king’s men and churchmen lit the faggots beneath her and I was with Socrates, laughing at the first performance of bitter Irony. I wept with Eve when she was cast from her beloved garden. I was in the tomb with Antigone, mourning the end of honour, and with Inanna I waited at the gate of the dark sister. I sat down in the desert with Gnostics, men and women who knew that they too were God.

I was there, O beloved, at every point at which History stopped, if only for a moment, and just stared.