

3. Skolvan, a penitent soul

Buhe Skolvan zo deut d'ar vro
D'an oll dud yowank d'he gano
Ha d'ar re goz neb he gouio

Neb he gouio, he gano bemdé
'No daou hant de pard'n gand Doué

E no daou hant devez pardon
Ha gand Doue e benedikcion.

– Piou 'zo aman poent-ma d'an noz
'Skoï var ma dorejed jerr't kloz?

– Me mamm baouer, ne spontet ket
Hoh mab Skolvan 'deuet d'ho kuelede.

– Ma e m' mab Skolvan deued aman
Me malloz a leskan gantan

Malloz e vreuded, e hoarezed
Malloz an oll inosanted

Malloz ar stered hag al loar
Malloz ar gliz 'goue d'an douar

Malloz ar stered hag an heol
Malloz an oll inosanted.

Na pe oa gand an hent honed
E dad peren 'na rankontret.

– Du e da varh ha du out-te
Peleh oh bet ha da bleh het?

– Deuz ar purgator dond a ran
Ha d'an ivern mond a ran
Gand malloz ma mamm pe meus 'nan.

The Life of Skolvan has come to these parts
For all the young people to sing
And for the old, anyone who knows it

Anyone who knows it and sings it each day
Will have two hundred days' pardon from God.

He shall have two hundred days' pardon
And from God His benediction.

– Who is there at this time of night
Knocking on doors that are safely locked?

– Mother dear, don't be frightened
Your son Skolvan has come to see you.

– If my son Skolvan has come here
I put my curse upon him:

The curse of his brothers, of his sisters
The curse of all the innocents

The curse of the stars and the moon
The curse of the dew falling on the ground

The curse of the stars and the sun
The curse of all the innocents.

As he was going along the road
He met his godfather.

– Black is your horse, you are black yourself
Where have you been, and where are you going?

I have come from purgatory
And I am going to hell
With my mother's curse upon me.

– O, ma fillor, deut war ho kiz
Me 'ha da houl vidoh eskuz

– O petra 'ta, komer ingrat
Hui na bardonet ket hoh mab?

O petra 'ta, a mamm dinatur
Pe na bardonet ket ho krouadur.

– N'e ket posib din e bardonin
N'eus groet med gwasan ma halle din

Violet 'neus seiz deus e hoarezed
Ha lazet o inosanted
N'e ket ze e vrasan pehed

Mond en iliz ha torri gwer
Laz' ar beleg deuz an ôter
N'e ket ze e vrasan pehed

Poahet 'neus din triveh anel korn
Or hraou, or harrdi, on ti-vorn
N'e ket ze e vrasan pehed

Laket an tan din bar me ed
Kaset hanon da glask ma boued
N'e ket ze e vrasan pehed

Me lewer bihan 'neus kollet
Oa skrivet gand gwad hom Zalver
O hez e e vrasan pehed.

– Ho lewer bi'n n'eo ket kollet
'Ma bar mor don triveh goured
E beg or pesk bi'n a vired

Neuz barz med teir feuill'n dianket
Eunan gand dour hag eun gand gwad
Eun gand dero ma daoulagad.

– O my god-child retrace your steps
I am going to ask forgiveness for you.

– O how is it, ungrateful woman,
You cannot forgive your son?

O how is it, unfeeling mother
You cannot forgive your child.

– I cannot possibly forgive him
He could not have done more to hurt me

He raped seven of sisters
And killed their innocent children
That was not his greatest sin

He went into church, smashed windows
Killed the priest at the altar
That was not his greatest sin

He set fire to eighteen cattle
A stable, a cart-house and a bake-house
That was not his greatest sin

He set the fire among my wheat
Sent me begging for my bread
That is not his greatest sin

He lost my little book
That was written with the blood of our Saviour
That is his greatest sin.

– Your little book is not lost
It is under the sea, eighteen fathoms deep
In the mouth of a fish, who guards it.

Only three pages are ruined
One with water, and one with blood
One with the tears from my eyes.

– Ma mamm baouer, ma bardonet
Me meus gret pinijenn galed

Me meus tremenet nozajo
'Tre treid ho kerzeg er parko

Didan an glao, an erh pe 're
Didan ar skorn pe rielle.

– Ma veh pardonet gand Doue
Ma mabig paour, me 'ra ive.

O pe oa gand an hent honed
E vamm b'eren 'neus rankontret.

– Gwenn e da varh ha gwenn out-te
Peleh oh et ha da bleh het?

– Deuz purkator dond a ran
Ha d'ar baradoz mond a ran
Gand bennoz ma mamm pe meus 'nan

Bennoz m'breuded, me hoarezed
Bennoz an oll inosanted

Bennoz ar stered hag al loar
Bennoz ar gliz 'goue d'an douar

Bennoz ar stered hag an heol
Bennoz an daouzeg abostol.

Pa gan ar hog da hanternoz
'Gan an eled er baradoz

Pa gan ar hog da houlou de
Ha 'n Anaon paour dirag Doue
Me mamm baouer, me hei ive.

– My dear mother, forgive me
I have done hard penance:

I have spent entire nights
In the fields, between your horses' feet,

Under the rain and falling snow
Under the ice when it froze.

– Since God has pardoned you
My poor son, I do too.

As he was going along the road
He met his godmother.

– White your horse, you are white yourself
Where have you been, where are you going?

– I come from purgatory
And I am going to heaven
With my mother's blessing upon me

The blessing of my brothers, my sisters
The blessing of all the innocents

The blessing of the stars and the moon
The blessing of the dew falling on the ground

The blessing of the stars and the sun
The blessing of the twelve apostles.

When the cock sings at midnight
The angels sing in paradise

When the cock sings at daybreak
And the poor souls go before God
My mother dear, I shall go too.

Provenance:

Collected by Donatien Laurent from Jean-Louis Rolland, Trébrivan (Haute-Cornouaille), 1967. Published in Donatien Laurent, 'La gwerz de Skolan et la légende de Merlin', pp. 51–2.

CD:

Track 2. Collected by Claudine Mazéas from Marie-Josèphe Bertrand (née Martail), Plounévez-Quintin (Haute-Cornouaille), 1959. Published in *Tradition chantée de Bretagne. Les sources du Barzaz Breiz aujourd'hui*, CD track 7; and in *Marie-Josèphe Bertrand chanteuse du Centre Bretagne*, CD track 2.

This must be one of the most beautiful, most mysterious and most moving of all the Breton *gwerzioù*. The story of a penitential son returning, as a dead soul, to ask forgiveness from his mother for his horrendous crimes, it has the spacious quality of ballad narrative at its best. This version, collected by Donatien Laurent in 1967, is unusually finely structured, with its balancing imagery of darkness and light, cursing and blessing, black and white, coalescing around an intriguing central dialogue. It evokes the unseen but keenly sensed world of the *anaon* (souls), explored by Anatole Le Braz in his collection of popular stories, anecdotes and beliefs about the afterlife published as *La légende de la mort* in successive expanded editions from 1892.

The appeal of this *gwerz* may also have something to do with historical depth. It seems to be an old song, its many recorded versions and different branches suggesting deep roots in the tradition. It has attracted critical attention because of tantalising correspondences of plot, language and detail between certain versions (mostly, like this one, from Cornouaille) and an early medieval Welsh poem found only in one manuscript, the 13th-century *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin* (Black Book of Carmarthen). It seems likely that the 'Skolvan' (or more often 'Skolan') of the Breton ballads is a later version of a shadowy character from Welsh tradition called 'Ysgolan', who is remembered as a destroyer of books. The elements shared between the *gwerz* and the Welsh poem are striking, and include the close verbal echo of the lines about a black figure in a black horse ('Du e da varh ha du out-te'), the destruction of a church, the slaughter of cattle, the all-important 'drowning' of a book and, above all, a shared atmosphere of pain endured as strange penance. The poem, in the *englyn* form (compact three-line stanzas, which often appear in sequences) is even more enigmatic than the *gwerz*, and short enough to quote in full:

Dv dy uarch du dy capan
du dy pen du du hunan.
i adu ae ti yskolan.

Black is your horse, black your cape
Black your head, you are yourself black
[So then] are you Ysgolan?

Mi iscolan yscalheic
yscawin y puill iscodic.
guae ny baut a gaut guledic.

I am Ysgolan the cleric
Light in the head, flitting
Woe that he drowns not who offends the Lord

O losci ecluis. a llat buch iscol.
a llyvir rod y voti.
vy penhid. ys trum kynhi.

Creaudir y creadurev. perthidev muyhaw.
kyrraw de imi vy gev.
ath vradas te am tuyllas ynnev.

Bluytin llaun im rydoded.
ym bangor ar paul cored.
Edrich de poen imy gan mor pryued.

Bei ys cuypun ar vn. mor amluc guint.
y vlaen bric guit fallum.
ar a vvneuthum e bith nys gunaun.

For burning a church and killing a school cow
And drowning a given book
My penance is heavy suffering.

Creator of creation, greatest in marvels
Forgive me my wrong
He who betrayed you cheated me too.

A full year I was put
In wattle on the pole in the weir
Look how the sea things hurt me.

If I had known what I know – how keen the
wind
In the tips of the [bare] trees
I would never have done what I did.¹

Though the relationship between the Breton song and the Welsh poem, recorded hundreds of years apart, is clear, the significance of the connection is much harder to grasp. The two pieces undoubtedly illuminate each other, yet they do not fully ‘explain’ each other’s narrative world. There is no reason to think, for example, that the unnamed interlocutor in the Welsh poem must correspond to the godfather on the road in the *gwerz*. Nor – though the emotional atmosphere is remarkably similar – need the guilt noted by Oliver Padel as a persistent feature of the elusive and elliptical *englynion* sequences in middle Welsh derive from the same sources as that of the Catholic penitential world of the *gwerziou*. Nevertheless, as Donatien Laurent has shown, the elements of guilt, of exile in wild places and the drowning of the book can also be found in the Irish legend of *Buile Shuibhne*, and evidently form some kind of broader narrative cluster across the Celtic-speaking cultures. And the much tighter correspondence between the Welsh and Breton versions of the Skolan/Ysgolan story does raise interesting questions about transmission across the southern Brittonic-speaking world (Brittany, Cornwall, Wales) in the Middle Ages. Once again, one would give a great deal to know more about the stories, songs and legends that must have circulated in the Cornish language before its demise.

As with ‘Saint Henori’ (no. 2), the *gwerz* has a strong Christian dimension, and promises its singers and listeners spiritual grace; in some versions Skolvan is described as the ‘bishop of Léon’ doing penance for his crimes in a forest. The importance of the written word as sacred object is emphasised in the crime that forms the culmination of a long and dramatic list, the loss of a ‘little

1 Welsh text of ‘Ysgolan’ from A. O. H. Jarman (ed.), *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin*, p. 55. Our translation.

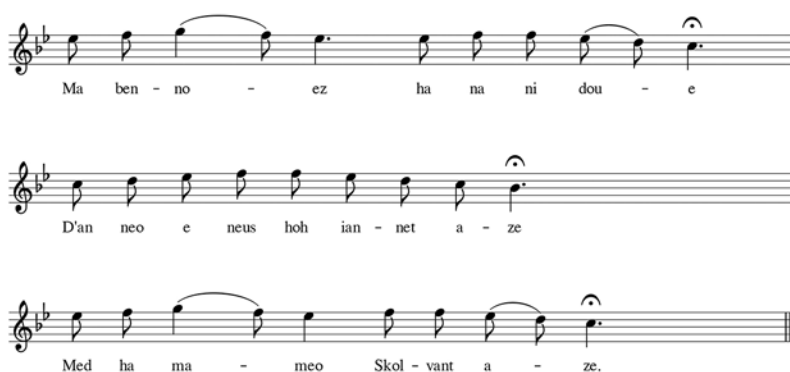
book' written with the blood of Christ. But the purgatorial world of this song, in which Skolvan spends his nights shivering in the fields between the horses' hooves, is a long way from orthodoxy.

The most distinctive versions of this ballad come from central Brittany, such as the 1959 recording by the singer Marie-Josèphe Bertrand, a 73-year-old clog-maker from Plounévez-Quintin (CD track 2). In her version the wanderings of Skolvan in search of absolution are described as a quest that has already lasted several years:

Ya, seizh vle zo 'c'h on war 'n henchoù
E treso ma gwall basajoù.

Yes, I have been on the roads for seven years
In reparation for my misdeeds.

Besides their poetic words, the Haute-Cornouaille versions are also notable for their tunes, which have a tercet structure and display characteristics of an older musical tradition. Marie-Josèphe Bertrand's version alternates lines of two and three syllables:



Her style is remarkable, and her interpretation of 'Skolvan' has gained an almost mythic status among subsequent generations of singers of *gwerziou*.

Studies:

Donatien Laurent, 'La gwerz de Skolan et la légende de Merlin'. Republished in Donatien Laurent, *Parcours d'un ethnologue en Bretagne*, pp. 111–88.

Mary-Ann Constantine, *Breton Ballads*, pp. 66–70.

A. O. H. Jarman, 'Cerdd Ysgolan'.

Oliver Padel, 'Legendary poetry in *englyn* metre'.