

Lyric and nature poetry

In the second part of this week's lecture I want to share some examples of how the natural world is depicted in lyric poetry, and discuss some recurring themes and some other things to look out for. I said last time that lyric poetry deals with aspects such as 'responses to the natural world, religion, love and personal loss', and in fact the poets were rather good at weaving such themes *together* for their own artistic purposes. A nature poem is rarely just a nature poem. So let's look at some examples. And I should say that the texts of the first two have been digitized by the library so you can get at them via the Leganto reading list, and there is a pdf on Moodle with a full text of the third one, 'Sadness in Springtime'.

So firstly (slide 2) we have an anonymous ninth-century Irish poem with the title 'May-Day'. And I should just mention that poem titles are often quite arbitrary and assigned by modern scholars, which seems to be the case here.

This is clearly a nature poem and a lyric poem, but it could also be regarded as a saga poem because it's part of the Finn Cycle, one of the four great cycles of Irish literature, which tells of the exploits of Finn mac Cumhaill and his *fian* or war-band. In the tales Finn is not only a great warrior and hunter but also a poet, and this poem is said to have been made by him 'to prove his poetic skill'.

The name of the actual author isn't known, but their own skill is evident (slide 3). The descriptive language is evocative with some delightful details. I've put the translation of the whole poem on two successive slides, with the Irish for the first three stanzas, which I won't try to read out as I couldn't do it justice. As a general point, though, do try to look at the original language of texts when you can, especially in the case of poetry, to get a feel for the language. You can see that there is a rhyme in each stanza between the second and fourth lines, as well as alliteration within the lines. In the second stanza the rhyme is of a type called generic rhyme or Irish rhyme, where the vowels match but the consonants differ, within particular categories.

Note the opening line referring to the season, or almost greeting or addressing the season – a common device which we'll come across again in our other poems. We'll hear the call of the cuckoo again as well. There's a general impression of pleasant activity and flourishing new life after the quiet and stillness of winter. I particularly like the intimate detail in the fifth stanza of the 'bees of small strength' carrying their bundles of blossom on their feet, and the contrast of the tininess of this with the vastness of the mountain carrying off the cattle – a reference to summer grazing on the uplands, presumably. Birds have a major role – the cuckoo appears in the ninth stanza as well as the second, and we also have blackbirds in the opening stanza, a corncrake and swallows in stanzas seven and eight, and some generic birds in stanza 12. The description of the corncrake as 'strenuous' in stanza seven probably relates to its call, which is loud but hardly melodious; by contrast, the melodious nature of the song of other birds is mentioned several times, and even a cataract of water sings for joy, again in stanza seven.

Nature certainly does take centre stage in this poem, but the human world is not absent. (Slide 4) The vigour of men, in the tenth stanza, reflects the new life and bounty of the season, and no doubt their, and Finn's, male gaze would linger on the woman walking by, in stanza 12. There is a hint of militarism too in the riding of horses and the serried host; these things are clearly all pleasant to the poet, in the persona of Finn, again reflecting the wakening activity of the May season after the quiescence of winter. Note the juxtaposition in the last stanza between the timidity of the frail man 'fearing loudness' and the constant man who 'sings with a heart'. This kind of general observation on human nature, similar in flavour to a proverb or maxim, is common in nature poetry. Poems where they're a major feature are sometimes called **gnomic poems**.

We can see something quite similar, (slide 5) but with a more complex interweaving of themes, in the 'Gorhoffedd' of the twelfth-century Welsh poet Gwalchmai ap Meilyr. In this case the title is found in the manuscript, but it's hard to translate. The word can mean 'boast', or 'high praise' or 'delight', or perhaps in this case a combination of all three. The title 'Exultation' that Joseph Clancy used for his translation is a good one, I think.

We know quite a lot about Gwalchmai – he lived in the time of Owain Gwynedd, held land on Anglesey, and came from a bardic family, his father and at least one of his sons also being poets. Gwalchmai himself was apparently a warrior as well as a poet. He might have been officially attached to his lord's war-band or retinue, though we don't know this for sure. Indeed, the fact that he praised patrons from Powys as well as his native Gwynedd suggests he had an interesting life story, especially as his wife also came from Powys.

Gwalchmai's surviving poems are unusually lyrical and varied, in comparison with his contemporaries who concentrated mainly on praise poems.

This is a long poem (slide 6) but I've just put the first part or *caniad* – which means 'a singing' – on the slide. This one I *will* read out, to give you a flavour of the language. Notice the sustained end-rhyme, the frequent alliteration within lines, and the internal rhymes in the second line, *Maws llafar adar, mygr hear hin*. Did Gwalchmai make this line particularly melodious because he's describing sweet birdsong? Notice too the use of alliteration to link together the beginnings of lines – the first four starting with *m*, the next five with *g*. This is an instance of a kind of linking-device called *cymeriad*.

So I'll read this first *caniad* and will try to do it justice.

5 Mochddwyreawg huan haf dyffestin,
 Maws llafar adar, mygr hear hin.
 Mi ydwyf eurddeiddf ddiogfn yn nhrin,
 Mi ydwyf llew rhag llu, lluch fy ngorddin.
 Gorwyliais nosau yn achadw ffiin,
 Gorloes rydiau dyfr Dygen Freiddin.
 Gorlas gwellt didryf, dwfr neud iesin,
 Gorddyar eaws awdl gynefin.
 Gwylain yn gware ar wely lliant,

- 10 Lleithrion eu pluawr pleidiau edrin.
 Pellynnig fy nghof yng nghyntefin
 Yn ethryb caru caerwys febin.
 Pell o Fôn fain yd fydd twythwal werin,
 Esmwyth ysydd irni aserw gyfrin.
- 15 Ydd endewais enau yn echlysur gwir,
 Ar lleferydd gwar gwry eddëin,
 Ac ar lles Owain hael hual dilyn
 Dychysgogan, Lloegr, rhag fy lläin!

Like the anonymous Irish poet, Gwalchmai exults in the approach of summer, the beauty of the natural world and his own skill in describing it. In his poem the man whose vigour reflects that of the natural world is himself. Mostly he boasts of, or exults in, his prowess in battle and how well he serves his lord, Owain Gwynedd, but he also lets us know how much he is adored by women. There is an apparently genuine love theme in the poem too, as he speaks of a particular woman named Genilles whom we know was his wife, or became his wife, perhaps quite soon after this poem was composed. There are also reminiscences of past battles, and, as in this opening *caniad*, keeping guard on the border.

Themes introduced in the first part of the poem are revisited in later sections, and there is a resolution at the end as the wandering warrior-poet is rewarded by being reunited with his sweetheart, or bride, Genilles. You can have a look at the rest of the poem for yourselves but for now let's focus on the use of nature imagery.

(Slide 7) So, as in the anonymous 'May-Day' poem of the Finn Cycle, we have an opening reference to the approach of summer, and a similar one at the start of the final *caniad*. This is another kind of linking device, binding the different parts of the poem together, and you'll notice others as you read the poem.

Again, as in the 'May-Day' poem, we have birdsong, melodious and with an implicit comparison, probably, to the poets' craft. Note the personal touch, in Gwalchmai's assertion that he loves a small bird, or the nightingale specifically. And again, we have melodiously flowing water, Gwalchmai's foaming fords having a further significance since a ford had strategic importance and was often the scene of fighting.

(Slide 8) Also echoing the first poem we looked at are signs of the productive nature of the landscape – apple blossoms and fresh grass.

One area where Gwalchmai's poem differs, by contrast, is its depiction of the sea. The Irish 'May-Day' poem refers to the smooth course of the ocean and the sea being sent to sleep, but for Gwalchmai the sea waves are foaming and tumultuous. The foam serves – like the apple-blossom – as a metaphor for his lady's pale skin, whilst the breaking waves suggest his turmoil and longing when he is away from her. The sight and sound of waves do evoke strong feelings in general – they are at once transient and eternal. And the sea could also be thought of as connecting far-flung places. I think Gwalchmai is tapping in to those feelings here.

The interweaving of the different themes can seem disjointed, (slide 9) but notice how one leads in to another. A description of the apple-blossom of the land of Efyrynwy leads on to the general statement 'each man's mind where he loves'. This has the flavour of a proverb or maxim, like the statements we saw at the end of the 'May-Day' poem. Gwalchmai then turns his own particular thoughts to his sweetheart. The whiteness of the blossom has called her to his mind. And we have a similar connection in the next *caniad* as Gwalchmai speaks of fighting 'for a fair one's favour, snow's hue on trees'.

Again, in a later *caniad* we move from apple-blossom, again, to another bright, white thing, namely the foaming of a wave. And the foaming of the wave leads on to a thing that is tumultuous like a wave, namely the dreams of a lover. And again, a gnomic statement introduces the poet's own dreams of his lady.

This poem is more personal than the 'May-Day' poem and tells us more about the poet's life and his character... or does it? Gwalchmai the poet may have been the author of this poem about Gwalchmai-the-warrior or Gwalchmai-the-lover, but even here there is a persona involved. Gwalchmai is probably giving his audience an exaggerated version of himself, and might even be laughing at himself here and there. At least, I like to think so.

In both of the poems we've looked at so far, the onset of summer and the flourishing of the natural world are associated with positive emotions such as joy or delight – albeit tinged with longing for his distant love, in Gwalchmai's case.

Let's look at a third poem (slide 10) where there's a very different feeling, though its beginning has a familiar ring. This is another Welsh poem, and perhaps from about the same period as Gwalchmai's, or a little earlier.

Here yet again we have the opening reference or greeting to the start of summer, with birdsong and flourishing plant life. And we have the plough and the ox representing productive activity. But the cuckoo's song evokes sadness rather than exultation, and the anonymous poet tells us of his grief for family members he has lost. In this case we don't know either who the poet is, or whether he is speaking as himself or in the persona of someone else. The remainder of the poem continues on a religious theme, and you can read more on a pdf which I've put on Moodle. But sticking with the nature theme for now, you can see how very similar imagery could be used by the poets for very different artistic purposes.

(Slide 11) As a fourth example I'll quote just a few stanzas from Llywarch Hen's lament on old age. You can read about the poem, and see further extracts, in Dafydd Johnston's book, on the reading list. This is from one of the Welsh cycles of saga poetry that I mentioned briefly in the first half of this week's lecture, along with the Heledd Cycle, which Dafydd also discusses.

Llywarch Hen was supposedly a prince of the 'Old North' of Britain who had twenty-four sons who all died before him, in part because he goaded them on to fight according to the old heroic ideal requiring death before dishonour. Though he has sometimes been thought of as a genuine early Welsh poet, today the Llywarch Hen poems are generally regarded as

anonymous, and spoken in the voice of Llywarch, just as the Irish ‘May-day’ poem is spoken in the voice of Finn. And in both these cases, there’s no need to suppose that the persona had very much to do with the poet’s own experience, necessarily.

So anyway, in the extract that I’ve put on the slide, we find the poet, in the persona of Llywarch, going through the seasons with a lament appropriate for each one. It is significant I think that he starts with autumn, and that, as a result, summer forms the climax of the sequence. Just as summer provides the height of joy for a man in the prime of life, so it provokes the deepest despair for the self-pitying and remorseful Llywarch as he contemplates all that he has lost.

Each stanza is addressed to the wooden crook or *baglan bren*, which serves to link the stanzas together – a poetic device known as incremental repetition. The repetition lends structure and gives a sense of drive and continuity, and the reiterated appeals to the *wooden crook*, specifically, also serve to emphasize Llywarch’s loneliness. Is his wooden crook – perhaps a walking stick or even a crutch – the only companion he has, or at least the only one who will patiently hear him? This is an example of personification, of course – assigning human attributes to something not human, and in this case not even alive.

In each three-line stanza the second line relates to nature or some other aspect of the wider world that is characteristic of the season, and the third expresses the poet’s own wretched state. Notice how the second and third lines relate to one another. In the first stanza on the slide (the fourth of the actual poem) there is perhaps an implicit comparison between the stubble – the poor remnants remaining, after a crop is harvested – and Llywarch, who has lost so much and considers himself sadly diminished in old age. In the second stanza there is of course a contrast between the men enjoying a long convivial winter evening and the poet’s own loneliness. In the third, the voice of the unseen cuckoo, preceding Llywarch’s complaint about being ‘disregarded by a girl’, might reflect the frequent references to birdsong in love poetry. And it might have a further, bitter significance relating to the association of the cuckoo with deceit in relationships. In the final, Maytime stanza we have ploughing again, as a sign of seasonal activity, and the sprouting shoots signifying new life, both of which Llywarch feels to be in stark, painful contrast to his own stage of life.

(Slide 12) For our final poem, let’s look at a more positive depiction of a figure who is set apart from society like Llywarch, but seems quite content with his lot and at home in the natural world. This is another Irish poem that forms part of a prose saga, in this case about Suibne or ‘Sweeney’, a ‘wild man’ figure who, like the Welsh Merlin – or one guise of Merlin, at least – was driven mad in a great battle and lived afterwards in the forest. Here we see his close affinity with the trees. Notice how he addresses them, and the stag, just as Llywarch addressed his wooden crook or crutch. He talks to them as if they were human, appreciating the fact that the alder, in the fourth stanza, is ‘not spiteful’, because it doesn’t scratch him as the hawthorn does, and, in the last stanza on the slide, reproaching the briar with tearing his skin, being greedy for his blood and not granting ‘fair terms’, as if it were a military commander.

Suibne also praises the beauty of the trees, though, referring to the alder's lovely colour and the rowan's attractive bloom. As in other poems we've looked at there is pleasant music in nature too, in this case that of the stag in the first stanza whose lowing is sweet and melodious.

Suibne is well aware of the sustenance that the tree and other plants provide, as we'd expect given his wild existence. So we have the hazel bush 'sweet-smelling with hazel-nuts', and cress and strawberries, as well as the apples we can imagine being shaken from the tree in the last stanza but one on the slide.

If we look at more of the poem though (slide 13) we see that the aggressiveness of the briar seems to lead Suibne's thoughts on to memories of his troubled past. The yew is associated with graveyards, and this, like the holly and ivy mentioned next, is evergreen, carrying winter connotations perhaps. The sheltering role of the holly would certainly have been most valuable in winter. And then we have the ash tree, whose wood was traditionally very much prized for making spear-shafts. The birch mentioned next seems innocuous enough, but then we have the aspen and its sound that evokes the noise of battle.

The poem suggests an appreciation of and affinity with nature that may well be genuine on the part of the anonymous poet, even though he is speaking in the persona of another. It's interesting that this is another poem where the poet seems to be moving between the seasons in his mind. Not in such an ordered way as we saw in the Llywarch Hen poem, but we certainly seem to be seeing evocations of winter as well as summer.

To conclude (slide 14), let's just summarize some recurring themes we've seen and some other things to look out for in lyric and nature .

Recurring themes in relation to Maytime/summer:

- birdsong and other melodious things, e.g. running water
- idea of new life and the productivity of the landscape
- bustling human activity (farming, military ...)
- association of spring/summer with love
- a general sense of pleasure and delight (or the opposite, sometimes, where the speaker of the poem is sad or lonely)

(Slide 15) Turning to stylistic features and poetic devices, we have:

- 'gnomic' statements
- associating features of the natural world with human feelings (general or specific, or the one leading to the other)
- use of rhyme and alliteration; sometimes poets may make a line more (or less) ornate to provide emphasis or for some other artistic purpose

- linking devices at the beginning of successive lines or at the start of successive (short) stanzas or (longer) *caniadau*.

- personification, ascribing human characteristics to, for example, a wooden crook or a tree.

- notice how themes are interwoven and recur, and how one idea leads to another.

So that's all for now. I hope you've enjoyed this taste of the lyric and nature poetry and that it's been a helpful introduction to the breadth and complexity of the material you'll come across in your further reading. And see you next week.