

THE ORDER OF BARDS OVATES & DRUIDS MOUNT
HAEMUS LECTURE FOR THE YEAR 2009

The Tenth Mount Haemus Lecture

What is a Bard?

by Dr. Andy Letcher

It may seem strange to be asking a roomful of Druids, ‘what is a Bard?’, for they of all people ought to know. Bardism – the quest for poetic or artistic inspiration – forms the foundation of the modern druidic path to self-knowledge and spiritual wisdom. That today’s Druids centralise bardism is evident in my original brief for this paper, an invitation by Philip Carr-Gomm to compare and contrast some bardic methods offered by Druid authors around the world. So why the question? Well, implicit in the invitation is an understanding that bardism may be done differently. If those differences are substantial then how are we to choose between them? Which method makes the better Bard? Or are the differences merely semantic, of style and not substance?

A further reason is that Druidry is currently undergoing a process of reflection and self-examination. Given that it professes to be a timely and necessary worldview, to offer practical solutions to some of the world’s problems, why isn’t it more widely recognised and appreciated? One possibility is that it has yet to adjust fully to life in a post-Hutton world. Much of what we assumed to be true about Druidry has been revealed as the wishful thinking of Romantic laudanum addicts, Edwardian anthropologists and other fantasists. If we are drawn to call ourselves Druids or Bards, how do we answer the challenge thrown to us by the new historicity? Upon what principles can we base our practice?

In addressing these questions, I hope Philip will forgive me for broadening my argument out somewhat from the original remit. As some of you will be aware, I am a singer, song-writer and folk musician who still carries the nick-name, ‘Andy the Bard’. I have also written a PhD thesis upon the subject, *The Role of the Bard in Contemporary Pagan Movements*. In other words, I have had plenty of time to think about the question and much to say on it! I have never published my thesis and it seems sensible to incorporate some of its findings here, though I speak today more as an insider than as an academic looking on. Bardism, and how we answer the question, matters to me. To that end I want to offer some suggestions as to how it might achieve a greater relevance. I want, in other words, to answer my own question and set out a possible direction bardism could take.

The Bard Today

Let me begin by précisising the various bardic courses I was given to review: The Grove of Dana’s Bardic Course Handbook; Yvonne Owen’s *Journey of the Bard*; Arthur Rowan’s *The Lore of the Bard*; Kevan Manwaring’s *The Bardic Handbook*; and the new CD version of the OBOD bardic grade. All of them share the notion of bardism as an ancient spiritual practice and set out the means by which self-development can be achieved. These include practical exercises, meditations, the study of myth and the esoteric concepts said to be contained therein.

Of the five, Jason Kirkey’s *Bardic Course Handbook*, for the Grove of Dana (New Order of Druids), has least to say about the nuts and bolts of practical bardism, that is, about

composition and performance. His aim is rather ‘to take people through a study in Celtic and Druidic spirituality, not to train people to serve these roles [of Bard, Ovate and Druid], as that takes many more years of study, practice, and experience than we can offer here’ (Kirkey 2008: 6-7). He does so with reference to Irish, rather than Welsh, mythology: for example, the four elements and directions are related to the four provinces of ancient Ireland: Ulster, north; Leinster, east; Munster, south; Connaught, west. In his cosmology there are three worlds: an underworld represented by the sea; a middle-world by the land; and an upper-world by the sky.

Readers are further treated to discussions about initiation, the wheel of the year, our relationship with the land and with the ancestors. There are meditations to perform and passages from Irish myth to study – for example, *The Second Battle of Magh Tuireadh* –, bolstered with his own detailed exegesis. There is little discussion of inspiration, but ‘service’ is encouraged and, especially, ecological activism. ‘When we look at the world with eyes that can see the sacred pulsing through everything, our heart opens’ (Kirkey 2008: 52).

Yvonne Owens regards Druids and Bards as the ‘interpreters of the magical realm for their communities’ who employed a developed metaphorical language ‘by which the divine could not only be communicated, but experienced’ (Owens 1997: 3). She uses the device of an ongoing story to take the reader through an ‘initiatory process’ by which the reader can grasp this language.

The narrative follows a Bard as he sets out from a sacred grove. Falling upon a castle, he is led down into the realms of the underworld and then back up again to those of the upper-world. At each stage of his journey he meets guardians, deities, elementals and archetypes who offer insights and spiritual wisdom. At the end, he returns to the grove, filled with self-knowledge and inspiration: ‘mustered all the song you’ve ever heard within you, you open your mouth and sing’ (Owens 1997: 162). But while Owens draws freely upon Irish and Welsh myth, and while elements of the story will be familiar to a druidic readership, it is fair to say that her cosmology is unique. Somewhat saccharine, it lacks the roughness and even menace of the myths from which it draws.

Arthur Rowan’s *The Lore of the Bard* is an altogether more substantial volume: he seeks to marry both the spiritual and the practical sides of bardism. The reader is taken through the quest for inspiration, is guided to the otherworld, taught the use of Ogham and even enchantment, but is also encouraged to take up a musical instrument, to write poetry and to perform. ‘The bardic way cries out for musical expression. To be a bard actually compels you to develop some musical skill, if you do not already have it’ (Rowan 2003: 91). There is advice on choosing and playing a harp (seen as the prototypical bardic instrument) and tips for performing too. For Rowan, the Bard lives ‘in a healthy, active relationship’ with myth, but any inner development must be tempered with outer expression: both are necessary in the making of a bard.

Kevan Manwaring’s *The Bardic Handbook* goes further still. The book offers a twelve month training programme, at the end of which the reader is expected to be able to compose new material – poetry, stories and music – and to perform it. Manwaring, a storyteller, particularly fosters storytelling (just as Rowan, a folk musician, encourages folk music) but also suggests the would-be bard takes up the harp. Like Rowan, he stresses the three moods that a Bard must be able to evoke: Goltai, sorrow; Geantrai, joy; and Svantrai, sleep. He also centralises the quest for inspiration: ‘a Bardic Life is about being sensitive to the Awen at all times: in the way we speak, the way we act, the way we interact with others, the way we lead our lives’ (Manwaring 2006: 275). He provides practical exercises and meditations (including a rather literal way of ‘chewing over a problem’), all structured about the four elements, as well as detailed practical advice on how to perform, how to project one’s voice, and how to promote a gig. There is even a certificate at the end of the book, authenticating the reader as a

member of his Gorsedd of the Silver Branch.

Finally, the OBOD bardic grade should be familiar to most though not everyone will have encountered the newly revised audio version. The difference is principally one of tone: the original course was rather cerebral and tweedy while the new is breezy and accessible. Much of the same material is included – each gwers begins with an introduction by Philip, contains a core teaching, and ends with a triad, a poem and a practical exercise – but, like Manwaring’s course, it is now oriented about the story of Taliesin. The story from Welsh legend is seen both as containing hidden druidic knowledge and as describing the initiatory process of inner development which the would-be bard must undergo. There is an emphasis on performing, with special lessons on storytelling and poetry. Only Manwaring’s book comes remotely close to being able to rival the content of the OBOD course, but the latter has the advantage of being able to mix words and music in a way that is both detailed and uniquely engaging.

These, then, are the bardic courses. I want now to contextualise them in the light of the different meanings attributed to the word ‘bard.’

Bards, Ancient and Romantic

Many cultures, both oral and literate, have felt the need for, and sanctioned, a role we might call bardic. Whether in ancient Greece, Anglo-Saxon England or medieval Wales, in Senegal or even the former Yugoslavia, a similar cross-cultural role is found. The ‘Ancient Bard’ is a remembrancer, praise-poet, satirist and, most importantly, teller of epic. He or she is, in Albert Lord’s delightful phrase, ‘the Singer of Tales’. The prototypical figure is Homer. Were I such, I would begin this talk by improvising a panegyric to my patron, Philip Carr-Gomm. I would recite his lineage; praise his physical prowess – his tumbling locks, perhaps; I would extol his exploits and deeds and – no fool – his boundless generosity, especially to bards. Then I might satirize his enemies, or at least, cock a witty snook at other chosen chiefs. The key point is that for the Ancient Bard, singing, praising and telling constitute a profession. Typically the job is hereditary. To learn the material, to excel at improvisation within the particular cultural constraints of meter and mode, Ancient Bards begin their training as children (as with contemporary Rajasthani Bhopa folk musicians, who travel and perform as family units). Keeping it ‘in the family’ keeps the family in work and whether high status, as the medieval Welsh bards, or low, as with the Senegalese Griots, work depends on patronage. To succeed, Ancient Bards therefore have not only to be good at their job, they have to be the best. Bardism is, after all, a luxury.

I acquired a sense of this some years ago when I saw a group of Rajasthani folk musicians perform at the Bath International Music Festival. As a performer, I was surprised to see that the musicians directed only a part of their attention towards the paying audience; mostly, it went to one man, an aloof Indian with a drooping moustache. Each took a solo in turn, a blistering and showy display of musical prowess. One, with a lurid turban, a lived-in face and a mouthful of gold teeth, sang ever more intense songs. With each musical climax he would rise up from kneeling, slap his hands together forcibly, and jut his chin proudly towards the Indian. Another stood up, weaving his hands in front of him like snakes. Clacking a set of bones, he sliced time into a thousand fragments. It was as if they were all teasing and provoking their man. “Look what we can do” they seemed to be saying, “look how good we are. Our excellence reflects yours.” Only at the end did I realise that he was the tour promoter. He was, in effect, their patron.

Perhaps because to ordinary eyes, Ancient Bards were outside or unreachable, the role has always been subject to a certain amount of romanticisation. Think of how little we know about the corporeal Homer – even whether he was one person or many – compared with the

many stories that have accreted around the mythical Orpheus. The predominant idea of the bard that has come down to us is not, therefore, the Ancient Bard, locatable in place and time, but the equally ancient 'Romantic Bard', found in the imagination and myth, whether in the guise of wandering minstrel, storyteller, or blind, prophetic harper.

Though this imagined bard goes back at least to antiquity, with Orpheus and the mystery cult that sprung up in his name, we owe our present configuration to the Romantic movement. In the hands of the Romantics, artisans became artists, privileged individuals outside the humdrum, driven to create by the divine inspiration that raged within. Additionally, the Romantics bequeathed us a reinvigorated notion of the Celts – for which they meant the now subdued peoples of Scotland, Ireland and Wales – as cultural primitives, but possessing canny humour, the gift of the gab, and what Yeats enticingly called 'dreaming wisdom'. The bard was now inextricably bound up with celticity and Romantic longing, an answer to urban disenchantment and ennui. We need think only of Macpherson's Ossian, Thomas Gray's The Bard, or the laudanum forgeries of our own, dear, Iolo Morgannwg.

The prototypical Romantic Bard is not Homer, therefore, but Taliesin, the inspired child of Welsh legend, whose inadvertent draught from the cauldron of Ceridwen – those three drops of potion licked from the thumb – spirals him into gnosis and the possession of prophetic powers.

Clearly it is the Romantic Bard, with its promises of access to ancient wisdom and beautiful inner states of inspiration, that has triggered the current revival. To answer my original question, the difference between the varying bardic courses is slight, to do with colour and tone, rather than substance, for each centralises the Romantic Bard and only reaches out towards the Ancient Bard in as much as learning to perform supports the inner journey. That the poetic bard of romance is challenged, if not undermined, by the prosaic Ancient Bard of Huttonian fact presents the revival with a problem. The solution has been to turn to the theories of Carl Gustav Jung. Rowan provides an eloquent summary of a position held, as far as I can determine, universally within Bardism. 'The way of the bard is an ancient quest to understand the soul and bring about its growth. The great psychologist Carl Jung might have called bardry [sic] the most artistic attempt to individuate the psyche – to reunite the shattered soul to realize the potential of the self' (Rowan 2003: 1).

Taliesin has therefore been reconfigured as archetypal, a figure who resides within the collective unconscious (for which we can equate the otherworld), and who is reachable through the use of active imagination. Being a bard means reawakening this forgotten inner force through meditation, visualisation, ritual, and play, and especially through an inner engagement with myth. Archetypes find outer expression in myth so, conversely, myth allows us access to the archetypes. The romanticisation of the bard, of Taliesin, is legitimated precisely because the language of myth is playful, alogical, irrational, symbolic, fantastical. Rational analysis kills myth, which wriggles away from the intellect like a salmon through the fingers. Playfully awakened, the inner bard grants us access to awen, an endlessly bountiful inspiration with which to make creative work.

The Jungian solution is extremely powerful. Mystical, intoxicating even, it is nothing if not egalitarian. For while there are individuals within Druidry, skilled performers of poetry, story and song who are regarded as 'Bards', the Jungian solution preserves bardism as a universal spiritual technique that is accessible to all.

And here we have reached the crux of the dilemma facing modern bardism. For though the Jungian solution purports to be of universal significance, it nevertheless produces a limited art that, while it may speak to many, speaks primarily (and possibly exclusively) to insiders: that is, to professed spiritual seekers. If bardism genuinely desires wider relevance (and granted, it may not), then I want to argue that a better solution would be for it to return to the

model of the Ancient Bard. To understand why, we need to examine a problem with the notion of inspiration itself.

Inspiration

Inspiration is a word commonly used within druidic discourse, though it has two senses which are often confused. Typically, when people use ‘inspiration’ they mean ‘motivation’. When they say ‘I was inspired by such and such to write this poem’ they mean ‘I was moved or motivated by such and such to write this poem’.

This meaning of ‘inspiration’ stems from its Latin etymology, inspiration as the drawing in of breath, in spirare. Utterance (for the most part) requires out-breath. This is so normal, so natural, that we take it quite for granted. But the limits set by the biological imperative to respire impose a fundamental rhythm upon utterance that shapes the length of sentences, poetic lines, and even musical phrases. Set within the heartbeat pulse of rhythm, poetry, writing and music all breathe. Sometimes our need to utter is so great, the motivation so intense that we gasp inwards. We are literally in-spired, caught in stasis before finding the means with which to express ourselves. Inspiration, in this sense, is a response to the world. Then there is a second, more abstract meaning. Here it is not breath that fills us, but a divine force or afflatus that, seizing us in something akin to a frenzy, insists upon expression. The druidic term for this is awen (occasionally, imbas), flowing spirit, three rays of light falling from heaven. The idea is old, going back to antiquity (who but the imaginative Greeks could have given us the Muses?) but gained its current popularity thanks to the poet, Robert Graves. An Orphic figure himself – he loved nothing more than being emotionally dismembered by his maenad women-folk –, Graves devoted his life to the muse, his ‘White Goddess.’ Terrible, cruel, forever at one remove, she was capable of tenderness, blessing her chosen poet with holy inspiration. Graves wrote his treatise on bardism, *The White Goddess*, in a few short weeks, gripped by just such a poetic fury. It was, of course, a fantasy, but given credibility by his haughty style, and, arriving in paperback in the early 60s, was received by an eager readership as historical fact. His complex portrayal of the divinely inspired Bard proved deeply attractive, and helped give a new pagan impetus to the on-going druidic revival.

But in practice the idea is problematic. We talk of awen as something capricious, a gift bestowed, something that descends unbidden like lightning. And yet we treat it as something that can be dialled up like a pizza. We chant the awen, wear its symbol like a rune, invoke it, summon it up. Either it is capricious or it is not, and if we act as if the latter were the case then surely we strip it of all power and meaning, reducing the bolt from the blue to the predictable tug of an AA battery.

I have reluctantly reached the conclusion that the quest for inspiration, in this second, Gravesian sense, is a distraction. I have been writing songs and tunes now for approaching twenty years and yet I can count on one hand the number of times I have been thusly ‘inspired’. No amount of imploring or special pleading seems to work. When it comes, it is a gift.

Once, after a mean four years in which I struggled to write a single song, my mandolin propped and unplayed, I awoke with a tune and a chorus galloping through my head. I rushed out of bed, sleepily uncoordinated, scrabbling about in a myopic quest for pen, paper, anything with which to jot the words down. And out they tumbled, dropping into the framework of rhythm and rhyme like magic Tetris pieces, an experience so intense that I wept. By breakfast the song was done. How different from the usual labour, the hours spent noodling to find a new chord sequence, or staring at a blank lyric sheet.

But ‘inspiration’ only presents a problem for a Druidry that constructs itself upon the ideal of

the Romantic Bard. There is another ideal, remember, the Ancient Bard, upon which we could fashion a quite different approach. To that end, I want to suggest that rather than worrying about awen – which, surely, remains beyond volition – we should work to make ourselves better or more worthy vessels with which to contain it when it arrives. In other words, like Ancient Bards we should be concerned not so much with inspiration but with craft.

Craft

According to historical sources, medieval Welsh bards referred to themselves as *seiri cerdd*, which translates as ‘carpenters of song.’ In cases of artistic plagiarism they would call upon offenders to ‘cut their own timber’ (West 2007: 39). The metaphor is a good one. There is something as satisfying about a good song, poem or tune – an elegance of line, an economy of form – as there is with a well made piece of furniture. Like cabinet-makers, tunesmiths, poets and song-writers can rightly take pride in a piece well made, in a piece well crafted. Craft is not something talked about much in modern Druidry, and with good reason. For if we privilege craft then surely we reintroduce the idea of the craftsman as privileged, thereby cutting against the grain of our egalitarian times. The point of modern, Jungian Druidry is to make ‘the Bard’ accessible to all and not just the privileged few.

In her bestselling self-help book, *The Artist’s Way*, Julia Cameron laments the damage caused by such an exclusive view of ‘the artist’. Though we spend much of our childhood making, painting, scribbling, daubing, cutting out and sticking down, our artistic urges are crushed as we approach teenage years. We are taught to believe that artists are born, not made, that genius is something others have, that art is difficult or beyond us, that art is a luxury, an indulgence. We feel hurt, disenfranchised. Cameron’s rebuttal is that we are all artists in one way or another, that creative expression is necessary to our health and well-being and that it can be found by channelling artistic inspiration. This ‘spiritual electricity’ is a gift of the universe and is unequivocally available to all. To be artists we simply have to access it. To be great artists we must learn to become adept at doing so.

That Cameron has hit upon a nerve is evidenced by her book sales. But while agreeing wholeheartedly with her critique of the way art and music are taught and stifled, I nevertheless think that her remedy does us a disservice. Wouldn’t we feel so much better about ourselves if we learned to do things well? Wouldn’t we feel more ‘empowered’ by mastering a craft?

I have often dreamed strange and beautiful instruments, heard their exotic strains in the borders between sleep and wakefulness, and yet, lacking anything resembling woodworking skill, I can no more make them than I could construct a ladder to the moon. Why should it be any different with art, poetry or song-writing? With her focus upon the self – the fear being that any criticism might harm, impede or damage this supposedly fragile, fledgling thing – Cameron is very much of her time. But I see no reason why we can’t have an accessible means of self-expression that also privileges craft. Craft can be taught. It can be acquired. My own story is instructive. I left school with a burning desire to play music and the conviction that I had not a scrap of musical ability – my teachers told me as much, warned my parents that they were wasting their money giving me lessons. Fighting those voices, I bought myself the humblest instrument I could find – a tin whistle. I taught myself a few tunes and started playing in folk sessions, where I found other musicians to be nothing but encouraging. My confidence grew. I bought a mandolin and was given my first set of bagpipes. I have never looked back.

I feel passionately that anyone can learn an instrument, sing, perform – that this is indeed our birthright –, but that what separates the player from the dabbler is not genius, or proficiency

at channelling divine inspiration, but patience and determination. Good players have all worked to get there, have all put in the hours and hours and yet more hours required to master their craft.

In the States they call practising ‘woodshedding’, another term borrowed from carpentry. When we begin an instrument it is as if we are roughly carving a block of wood. As our proficiency increases we add detail. An outline appears, then features, graceful lines, made with an increasingly precise coordination. Gradually, by training ear and hand, we learn to narrow the gap between our musical imagination and outer expression, effectively making the instrument an extension of the body. Now we can make the most intricate sculptures in sound.

Approached in the right way, physical practice can be a spiritual practice, a form of meditation if you will. As demanding as any martial art it requires patience and humility. But done well, the rewards come quickly. I’m not sure I can quite express the thrill of having passed a musical goal post. Actual and measurable, the satisfaction it brings is immense. These days I teach whistle and bagpipes and people often come to me looking for the magic fairy dust that will propel their playing from the mundane to the sublime. But there is no fairy dust. Practise, I tell them, and then do more practice and after that, practise some more.

Listen to the great players, copy them. Never stop striving.

Here I think, the tale of Taliesin – or rather the way we habitually interpret it – is unhelpful. If creativity were as simple as gulping a draught of magic potion, from where would we derive our satisfaction? If it really were that easy why make anything at all? Why climb Mount Snowdon when you can catch a train to the top? Surely those three drops are drops of perspiration not inspiration!

To craft, then, we need three things. We need inspiration, but in the original sense of the word, the motivation to say something. We need perspiration, the sweat of the hard work needed to say it well. And we need aspiration, the striving always to say it better, to be a better vessel. In that way, when the divine afflatus falls upon us we will not waste it, not a single drop.

Form

Can the Ancient Bard really provide us with a working model of bardism for our times? Does it really meet modern needs? Anyone who has heard recordings of epic singers from the former Yugoslavia, accompanied by the waspish strains of the gusle spiked fiddle, will know that ‘authentic’ bardic performance can sound harsh and austere. Our sound worlds have diverged so much that, to modern ears, Homer reciting the Odyssey would probably sound unpalatably monotonous. What’s more, literacy has created a decisive break with the oral past. Cinema and the novel fill the niche that epic performance once did; television, not the hearth, provides the focus of domestic life. We are so inculcated with modern conventions of dramatic narrative that the sudden lurches of epic can appear terse, baffling, unsatisfying. What then should we be learning to craft? What is the appropriate bardic form for today? Well, perhaps the one we already have. I investigated whether there was an emerging bardic form for my PhD research, compiling lists of everything I had seen and heard over many eisteddfodau. However, I found that there wasn’t anything particularly distinctive about bardic performance that could separate it off from extra-druidic poetry and music making. Songs were based upon the same Anglo-American folk, pop, rock and blues influences, and if any instrument predominated it was the guitar not the harp. Verse was free, or used the urban metres and rhyming schemes of slam (itself derived from rap).

What bards were doing, in other words, was employing forms with which they were already familiar and adapting them to druidic themes. It was the themes and not the form that made

bardism distinctive. By contrast with Ancient bardism, those themes did not include panegyrics, satires, genealogies or epic (though epic was touched upon or alluded to). By contrast with other religious music, those themes did not include hymns or devotional songs. Rather they tended to consist of retellings of myths and legends of central significance to the modern Druid, told usually from the first person. So, songs and poems about the Green Man and the Horned God mingled with episodes from The Mabinogion, The Tain and the extensive recensions of Arthurian legend. The story of Taliesin also featured highly. Though there is nothing wrong with this state of affairs it does have the effect of making bardism impenetrable to the uninitiated. Being largely to do with the performance of identity, bardic music has little relevance to those outside Neo-Paganism. Its themes, which may indeed be universal in a Jungian sense, are largely unknown in wider contemporary culture and so end up being exclusionary. You have to be ‘in on the story’, in other words. Surely this is unsatisfactory. And if bardism is what we claim it to be, namely an important indigenous art form in need of revival, oughtn’t we be able to point to it as a thing, as a distinctive genre in and of itself?

To that end, therefore, I want to offer my definition of bardism, my suggestions for what it ought to be. To my mind, bardism is the performance of poetry, story and song, but reaches its perfection in the combination of all three. The bardic art is to blend melody, lyric and narrative in such a way as to express a truth, and to perform it in such a way that that truth can be heard. The form it takes should be rooted in tradition and should express a ‘bardic spirit.’

To illustrate what I mean let me discuss an example of what I consider to be a bardic song, One in a Million, written by storyteller Hugh Lupton and folk musician Chris Wood. It won the BBC Folk Award for Best Song in 2006. I hope you will forgive a brief and inelegant summary.

The story is set in a fish ‘n chip shop somewhere on the coast. The owner’s daughter, Peggy Sue, spurns an offer of marriage from her dependable co-worker, Billy. Affronted by what she thinks is a cheap engagement ring – in fact Billy has saved for it over several years and it is worth thousands – she throws it into the sea. Some months later, as she is gutting fish and day-dreaming of yet-to-materialise lottery winnings, she is startled by something shiny falling to the floor. The ring has returned! In a generous act of love Billy tells her to sell it and keep the money, but, realising she has fallen for him, she keeps it and stays.

If you don’t know the song then you will have to take it on trust that the narrative, lyrics and melody fit together perfectly, like a ring to a finger. The music exactly mirrors the tension and release of the story. There is not a wasted note or a wasted line. It is beautifully crafted. But what makes it so clever, and so bardic, is that it takes a hoary old trope from folk tales around the world – that of the discarded ring, magically returned – and places it in a context with which we can all easily identify: the chippy, and more abstractly, the ‘will-they-won’t-they’ of Rom-Com. In doing so it expresses truth, a truth about the ups and downs of love, certainly, but also a truth about how easily we are blinded by fantasy and celebrity to the genuine riches in front of us. They have made the story of the returned ring a fable for our times.

Modern bardism rests on the Jungian assumption that myth contains a timeless, universal and essential truth. Be that as it may, I think myth becomes so much more powerful and accessible when used as a storehouse from which to draw metaphorical truth. Literal retelling ultimately takes us nowhere because it presupposes an original, originary myth of which all other versions are degenerate. This is and never was the case.

Myth – our culturally-received body of significant stories – is, rather, like a many-coloured hawser that connects us with the past. Telling and re-telling are its warp and weft. By teasing out its strands and weaving our own interpretations back in we make it stronger. We have

something substantial to pass on to the next generation, something that bears our mark as well as the imprint of everyone who has ever handled it.

Storytellers conceive this another way. When you tell a story, you imagine the person who taught it you standing behind. Beyond them, the person they learned it from, and so on and so on, a whole chain of ghosts. If you tell the story exactly as you heard it, you may be alarmed by the sound of snoring. If you take too many liberties you can expect a sharp jab in the ribs. Thus we are bound to, not bound by, tradition. Like coral, it grows outwards, building on what went before.

Where do we find those ghosts? In the absence of an unbroken bardic tradition, I think we should look less to Anglo-American pop and rock, with its roots in African rhythm and Classical harmony, and more to indigenous folk music, just as Wood and Lupton do. Here at least is a tradition that is rooted in the peoples of these islands and which is traceable back at least as far as the Middle Ages. Folk seems the obvious stock upon which to graft a newly re-grown bardic scion. (Indeed, while writing this essay I discovered that Iolo Morgannwg was not only a flute player but a prolific collector of folk tunes. This is surely an un-mined seam that bardism could legitimately exploit.) As for poetic form, I would not seek to go down the prescriptive route of the National Eisteddfodau, imposing strict metres or internal rhymes. Rather, I think the folk ballad could provide a basis from which more complex bardic forms might emerge and evolve.

In my definition, bardism is not just about the creation of work but about its skilful performance, and herein lies another problem. For, along with parachute jumping, free-diving and rock-climbing, standing and performing in front of others is regarded as one of the more terrifying things we can do. Again, school memories rise up, the horror of being asked a question to which day-dreaming precludes an answer, of being asked to recite our times-tables to the general derision of the class. We are mortified by the thought of public embarrassment. I see no easy way round this, though, like learning an instrument, performance is a craft that can be learned and acquired through practice. The distance between audience and stage is undeniably huge but it narrows as soon as we take that first tremulous step.

Chris Wood is undoubtedly a consummate performer. I first saw him a few years back, playing with the English Acoustic Collective in Oxford's Holywell Music Rooms. It was an electrifying experience. From the very first note I knew we were in capable hands. The band played as if every note mattered. And when Wood sang *One in a Million* I guessed the ending and knew I would weep. I wasn't alone. He sang as though the story was his, revealing something of himself through its telling. It was a revelation to know that folk music could be so moving, so transporting. You could say it was inspirational.

Performing is undoubtedly tempering. It necessitates honest introspection, a thorough self-examination of one's limitations and motivations, one that is forcibly imposed during those lean periods of creative stagnation. The demon of self-doubt is never far away. One misconception about the word 'performance' is that it implies pretence or make-believe, and yet the opposite is true. The very act of standing up in front of others is willingly to place oneself in the stocks, to be pelted with projections and fantasies, desires and jealousies. In turn, the temptation is for the performer to project his own needs and vulnerabilities onto the audience. It takes courage and self-knowledge to stand firm, buffeted on all sides by these pushes and pulls.

Good performance requires integrity and honesty. What is it about someone like Chris Wood that when they walk on stage we fall into an expectant hush? Confidence, certainly. Presence, yes. But also humility, a humility born of honesty. Bards work to be more honest, to be more faithful to themselves and the tradition, so that the truth can be heard.

I think, too, that we need to relearn how to receive bardic performance, how to be a bardic

audience. We are habituated by television to think that someone or something will entertain us, and that if they do not then we can simply flip channels, turn over, choose another. We are indoctrinated by the consumer model, take performers somewhat for granted, have forgotten how to listen. And yet, something magic happens when we do. Contrary to what we are told, listening is not passive but active; it requires us to bestow one of the greatest gifts at our disposal, our attention. When we do so an extraordinary synergy is created between stage and audience in which we give to the performer who, in turn, gives back to us. We have all been to the legendary gig but quite what it is that made it so defies analysis. The best academia can do is to call it a mysterious ‘something that happens’.

And what of the ‘bardic spirit’? You will notice that throughout this essay I have tried to avoid the C-word. In part this is because scholars have so thoroughly deconstructed ‘the Celts’ that I no longer know who they were, who they are, or what the word could usefully refer to. In part I have avoided the term because it is unhelpfully restrictive. If we define bardism as an exclusively Celtic thing (as most of the bardic courses do) then we keep it as something remote, something that belongs to other peoples, other times, other places. There is also a political reason for not doing so.

I am English, by which I mean that I am a native and monoglot English speaker: how, then, can I make any sort of claim upon ‘the Celtic’? As English becomes the globally dominant language we should remember that there are people on these islands who regard its steady encroachment as intrusion, and who resist, angrily in some cases, any English appropriation of their culture. The word ‘Welsh’, after all, is a Middle English word that means, literally, ‘foreigner’.

The Cymraeg folk musician, Ceri Rhys Matthews, touches upon this fraught question of identity on his album, *Yscolan*, with a recording of Diarmuid Johnson’s poem, *Another Language*. Matthews asked his neighbour, Beverley Evans, to read it. She is neither a musician nor a poet and you can hear from her delivery that English is not her native tongue. The words come clumsily, catching in her throat like fish bones. ‘I speak another language’ she reads, ‘it is a language teeming with light...when we speak, skylarks fly off the tongue...’ How different from our usual caricature of Welsh as a kind of inchoate, vowel-less spluttering.

I raise this not so we engage in politically-correct breast-beating, nor to impose artificial boundaries about what words, phrases, literature and other sources we might or might not use (though perhaps we should do so with more care). Rather, I want to get away from the idea that we lack something that can only be filled by plundering other, romanticised, ‘Celtic’ cultures. If we cannot find what we are looking for at home then I am not sure we can find it at all.

And, of course, I believe passionately that we can. The bardic spirit is as present in the works of the Anglo-Saxon scop, in *Beowulf*, *Widsith* and other Old English poems as it is in *The Tain* or *The Mabinogion*. To restrict bardism to some mysterious celticity possessed only by the Welsh, Scots, Cornish and Irish is unnecessarily to cut off a great root down into the poetic bedrock of these islands.

Wherever it is found, the bardic spirit unites a love of the world with a love of language; it expresses a love of the way words sound, the way they can be bent and hammered and folded into shape to forge meaning. Bardic language is thick, imbued with natural imagery, as hard and as rounded as granite. It sends skylarks from the tongue. Bardic language eschews cliché, striving always to name things better, to narrow the gap between the word and the world. Bardic language captures and invokes.

The bardic spirit has to be lived-in, like a pair of old boots: if we only know the easy mile, how can we speak of the hard? The bardic spirit gives praise where praise is due, but does not flinch from satire. The bardic spirit is playful, witty. It boasts of its word-ward and delights

in badinage. In Wood & Lupton's song, the chorus comes with a knowing wink: her beauty, the ring, his love for her, the chances of it all working out, are all 'one in a million.'

Perhaps, at this stage, you may be wondering why, if what I am suggesting is already to be found in folk, I don't just make my home there? That is a fair point, but though folk overlaps with bardism and though some folk artists like Wood and Matthews certainly express a bardic spirit, I would argue that bardism is not catered for in folk. Tellingly, neither Wood nor Matthews (to my knowledge) think of themselves as bards and given Wood's avowed atheism, he would probably prove hostile to the idea. Bardism is a genre in its own right. It needs nurturing. But just as folk has gone through a process of increasing professionalisation over the last twenty years (and with that, increasing popularity) my hope is that bardism will do the same.

To that end, I think the most exciting thing to have happened in modern bardism is the emergence of bardic Chairs in Bath, Glastonbury, Winchester and other towns and cities, inspired in large part by the late Tim Sebastian and his Secular Order of Druids. Of the bardic guides available, Kevan Manwaring's particularly encourages the founding of chairs, while he was Bard of Bath himself in 1998.

If the idea of a public bardic competition rings egalitarian alarm bells then it is worth remembering that the root of the word, competition, is the Latin *competere*, 'to strive for (something) together with another'. It is this striving together, as much as any public endorsement, that will drive the craft of bardism forward.

But popular as they are, these public competitions still speak only to a relatively small number of people. Bardism has yet to achieve the kind of position within wider culture that folk has, and that we suppose it once had in Iron Age Britain. It has yet to achieve relevance, which is unfortunate because I believe it offers guidance and succour in the face of the biggest question of them all.

The Hwyl and the Hiraeth

If I may, I want to borrow two Cymraeg words to illustrate my final point – *hwyl* and *hiraeth* – which are, I am told, untranslatable. They approximate to something like 'joy' and 'longing/sorrow.'

The human condition is undeniably tragic. It ends in *hiraeth*. But precisely because of its finitude, because it ends in sorrow, we are able to find joy and meaning – *hwyl* – in the limited time we have. *Hwyl* and *hiraeth* are bound together like fundamental particles. They ache for one another. In moments of extreme grief or ecstatic joy, they touch, and in that precious moment we are blessed by the knowledge that we are alive. *Hwyl* and *hiraeth* are the blood and bones of bardism. It is the gift of the bard – no, our duty – to express them. The hawser of myth is ever our guide. There can be no definite or final answer to our existential condition. But we have the stories left behind by those who squared up to it before; or, as Chris Wood puts it, all the manifold ways that ordinary people have tried to unriddle the universe. I find this notion incredibly comforting. As we face the lonely terror of our impermanence the hawser reminds us that we are not quite alone. It offers us a lifeline. And this is why I think bardism still has something to say. That there is a crying out for its return is evident in the popularity of OBOD and in the number of bardic handbooks that Philip originally asked me to read. We cannot wholly go back to the Ancient Bard, not entirely. The modern world is too fractured from the past such that we would be reviving something for the sake of it. Nor does the Jungian solution quite answer the Huttonian challenge thrown against the bard of Romance. But by privileging craft over inspiration, by addressing themes of *hwyl* and *hiraeth* that have universal and not limited appeal, I think we

can create a bardism that is true to the old but speaks to the new; a bardism that has widespread appeal and which is worthy of the name; a bardism that is relevant. The choice is ours.

Bibliography

Kirkey, Jason 2006 *The Grove of Dana, Bardic Course Handbook*. Privately Published by The New Order of Druids.

Letcher, Andy. 2001. *The Role of the Bard in Contemporary Pagan Movements*. PhD Thesis: King Alfred's College, Winchester.

Manwaring, Kevan 2006. *The Bardic Handbook. The Complete Manual for the Twenty-First Century Bard*. Gothic Image Publications: Glastonbury.

Matthews, Ceri Rhys and Beverley Evans 2005. *Yscolan*. Disgyfrith: CD01.

Owens, Yvonne 1997. *Journey of the Bard. Celtic Initiatory Magic*. Horned Owl Publishing: Victoria, Canada.

Rowan, Arthur 2003. *The Lore of the Bard. A Guide to the Celtic and Druid Mysteries*. Llewellyn Publications: St Pauls, Minnesota.

West, Martin Litchfield. 2007. *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Wood, Chris 2005. *The Lark Descending*. Ruf Records: RUFCD10.

The Author

Andy Letcher is a writer, lecturer, musician and bard. He is Associate Lecturer in the Study of Religion and Culture at Oxford Brookes University, having completed his PhD on 'The Role of the Bard in Contemporary Paganism' in 2001, under the supervision of Dr Graham Harvey. He is the author of *Shroom: A Cultural History of the Magic Mushroom*, fronts weirdlore band *Telling the Bees*, and plays English bagpipes in Wod, a trio for Brythonic dancing. A solitary pagan, his personal quest to unriddle the universe has led him through Witchcraft, Druidry, Tai Chi, Neo-Platonism, psychedelia, philosophy, cultural theory and English magic. The universe remains delightfully unriddled.

Listen to Andy presenting his lecture at the Mt.Haemus Day in Salisbury 2012 on *Druidcast* the Order's [Podcast episode 67](#)

This lecture is available in printed form in *The Mount Haemus Lectures - Volume II* available through the Order's bookshop at Druidry.org.

*Copyright retained by the authors
Published by The Order of Bards Ovates & Druids
PO Box 1333, Lewes, East Sussex, BN7 1DX England*

*Tel/Fax 01273 470888 Email office@druidry.org
www.druidry.org*