

QUESTION, ANSWER AND THE
TRANSMISSION OF WISDOM
IN CELTIC AND DRUIDIC TRADITION

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THE ORDER OF BARDS OVATES & DRUIDS
MOUNT HAEMUS LECTURE FOR THE YEAR 2004

THE MOUNT HAEMUS AWARD

There was already the Bond or circle of Druid fellowship between them, called the Caw, and companions of these several bodies founded the present-day Mount Haemus Grove in 1245.

Now Mount Haemus is a real mountain in the Balkans, and either this or another of the same name was the classical prison of the winds. ... The Aeolian isles off Sicily are also, however, given for this windy prison. It was, whatever the location, the allegorical name for powerful inspiration which lurked beneath the surface.

Ross Nichols, *The Book of Druidry*

As for the Mount Haemus Grove of 1245, I am simply baffled. The only historical connection between Druidry and Mount Haemus that I can discover comes from the mid-eighteenth century, when William Stukeley wrote letters describing himself as 'a Druid of the Grove of Mount Haemus'. All that he meant by this was that he was one of a group of friends who met at his house on a hill in the Highgate area near London which, because of its windy position, was nicknamed by them after the mountain in Greek mythology which was the home of the winds. His letters were published in the nineteenth century, and may somehow have become the basis for a myth involving the Middle Ages and John Aubrey.

Ronald Hutton, First Mt Haemus Lecture

Recognising the vital part that history plays within Druidry, and thanks to the generosity of the Order's patroness, the Order is now able to grant a substantial award for original research in Druidism, with particular emphasis on historical research. We have called this scholarship the Mount Haemus Award, after the apocryphal Druid grove of Mt Haemus that was said to have been established near Oxford in 1245.

Philip Carr-Gomm

Chosen Chief

The Order of Bards Ovates & Druids

Alban Eilir 2005

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‘Do not depart

For want of questioning.’

Ymddiddian Merlin i Gwenddydd

'Vísvakarman, the World-Maker, created and set in order and knows all forms, all worlds, who all alone gave names to the gods, he is the one to whom all other creatures come to ask questions.'

Rig Veda

AN ORAL HERITAGE

The asking of questions and the giving of answers remains one of the most primal means of teaching and of learning knowledge. Questions arise from the place of our dark, needful ignorance: answers shed the relief of light into that darkness. Darkness and light, ignorance and knowledge, are the eternal poles of our forgetfulness and our recollection.

Socrates, in Plato's *Phaedo*, tells us: 'What we call learning is really just recollection...what we recollect now we must have learned at some time before, which is impossible unless our souls existed somewhere before they entered human shape' When asked about how that theory is proved, Socrates cites what happens when people are asked questions. 'If the question is put in the right way they can give a perfectly correct answer, which they could not possibly do unless they had some knowledge and a proper grasp of the subject. (1.)

The major tool for the recovery of knowledge is the question. Questions fire across the synaptic gap, creating a pathway down which knowledge can be recovered and transmitted. I believe that this is why the Celtic traditions, in common with many other

spiritual paths, honours the question so highly as the tool of all learning. It is my contention that druidic training used the question and answer as the primary means of learning and that all oral transmission came through this route.

The central importance of orality in the druidic tradition is a strong argument in favour of the question and answer as a primary learning tool. We know that the druids could read, write and speak in other languages, but that they chose not to write down their own teachings. Writing of the Gaulish druids, Caesar writes,

'The Druids believe that their religion forbids them to commit their teachings to writing, although for most other purposes, such as public and private accounts, the Gauls use the Greek alphabet. But I imagine that this rule was originally establish for other reasons - because they did not want their doctrine to become public property, and in order to prevent their pupils from relying on the written word and neglecting to train their memories.' (2.) Archaeological evidence northern Italy and Spain demonstrate that the continental Celts also used Etruscan and Latin letters as well.

Caesar imputes a proprietorial jealousy to the druids in the guarding of their knowledge, as well as suggesting a common Classical ambivalence of the orator to reliance upon the written word. We see this in Plato's *Phaedrus*, where we find the story of Egyptian king Thamus who was approached by Thoth, god of geometry, mathematics, astronomy and writing and offered the gift of writing by which Thamus might benefit his people. After due consideration, Thamus concluded that his people would be better off without it and he refused, saying, 'If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks.' (3.)

This account seems to express a dilemma that was doubtless experienced right along the ridge of time where orality met writing throughout history. At a recent conference where I was sharing the platform with the African teacher, Malidoma Somé, I was struck by what he himself said about writing and speaking. He was born in Burkina Faso in West Africa in a tribe that still follows traditional ways and which, at his birth, had no form of writing. He told us that he was speaking without notes or without any ideas of what he would speak to us about. Because the conference was on the ancestors, he merely stood and aligned himself with his ancestors and let them speak. This, he said, was where he derived his authority to speak. It was an interesting reminder of the true power of orality.

Returning to the druids: those who live by the power of the word must be more diligent in guarding its usages, more scrupulous in disseminating the teachings that speech transmits and which memory guards, not only because the nature of the knowledge itself, but because of its power to change things. Once oral wisdom is written, it begins to ossify and the spirit goes out of it.

The *Senchus Mor*, literally, 'the Great Ancient ,' is a collection of the Irish law tracts, parts of which are exceedingly ancient indeed, since they embody the *brehon* laws, still in use in Ireland until the reign of James I, when they were superceded. It speaks of two traditions, *recht aicnid* and *recht litre*, or natural or oral law and the written or scriptural law. These two rights of law still obtain in this country, which recognizes what is called 'common law,' (which is accepted through right of ordinary custom) as well as the law which is established by right of statute.

An Irish triad tells us that of the three candles that illumine every darkness: truth, nature and knowledge. Nature is our guide to the common law; knowledge is our guide to the reservoir of received law; but truth must be the discriminating force by which everyone illumines dark places. It is here that I believe we come to the core of the druidic oral tradition: that it is based squarely upon the utterance of the truth. Not just the literal truth but the spirit of truth. For the professional classes of druids, *brehons*, prophets and poets, the power of the word was not a metaphorical one but an actual power to create and to regenerate, to curse and to destroy, to heal and to mend, to make visible what was invisible, to command the very elements themselves.

When teachings are given and received orally, they must be served by certain routines and customs: a teacher must recite from memory and the student must chant back and chant over to gain remembrance. The old Irish word for 'teaching' or 'instruction,' *forcital* and the word for 'teacher' *forcetlaid*, are both derived from *for-cain*, which means 'singing by rote.' We may conclude that druidic teaching was originally chanted. This is borne out by the metrical arrangement of some texts in four-line stanzas, making recitation easier. The manner of examining a student must primarily be a form of catechism and that involves the use of the question. I believe that echoes of these challenge-songs may be discerned throughout British and Irish folk-song, where two individuals have a dialogue where one caps the other: songs like *The False Knight on the Road*, *The Two Magicians* and others.

Traces of this system of learning by question and answer are found throughout the insular Celtic texts. (4.) To some degree, after Druidry was replaced by Christianity, the sacred role of intercessor between the Otherworld and this world was taken by the *filidh*. A *filidh* or vision poet was not just a poet but a person versed in many genealogies, legal precedents, historical and mythic narratives, prophetic, sacred and visionary lore. His training took at least twelve years.

The question and answer of oral tuition are clearly visible in *Auraicept na N'Eces*, The Golden Kist of Knowledge, usually translated as the Scholar's Primer, is a mysterious grammar intended for the *filidh*, the vision poet, and is completely written in questions and answers. The initial text (from the 14th century transcription in the *Book of Ballymote*, and ascribed to Cenn Faelad, a 7th century poet of the Uí Neill clan) deals with linguistic origins which are mythically traced back to the Biblical story of Nimrod's Tower of Babel, as well as with the mysteries of *ogam*, its kennings and the *trefhocal* or satire.(5) Its primary purpose is: 'to bring the ignorant to knowledge.' Here are a few of its questions:

'A question: What is this primer a beginning to? Not hard. To the selection that was made of Gaelic from...every obscure sound that existed in every speech and language by Fenius.'

'Question: Why is Gaelic more comprehensive than any speech? Not hard. Because it was the first speech that was brought from the Tower (of Babel).'

'Question: What are the names of the 72 races from which the many languages were learnt? Not hard: Bithynians, Scythians, Scots, Germans, Medes, Sicilians, etc.'. (6.)

This form of catechism, beginning with '*Ceist*' or 'Question,' and always answered by the response '*Ní ansa*,' or 'not hard,' seems to be a remnant of an earlier druidic transmission and examination, since it appears throughout the Irish material. In the opinion of the Breton scholar, Christian Guyonvarc'h,

' The give-and-take (of question and answer) conforms to the use of certain questions within well-determined circumstances and follows specific rules and criteria, most of which escape us but which are very definitely the consequence of a structured and organized teaching, with such and such a question obligatorily calling for such and such a response, all with a very narrow margin for freedom. In the medieval Irish concept of teaching, an ignorant person, or someone whose training is incomplete, is normally reduced to silence with such questions.' (7.)

In considering the questions, we must briefly mention an important text, *Immacalam in dá Thúarad*, The Colloquy of the Two Ploughings, usually translated as the Colloquy of the Two Sages. Christian Guyonvarc'h rightly accords this text a unique place as being the only one which 'clearly relates to the teaching, the knowledge and hierarchies of the priestly class.' (8.)

It concerns the dialogue between Nede, the son of Adne, the chief poet of Ulster who returns home after his father's death to claim his position. Making himself a beard of grass, to give himself a few more years than he actually possesses, he seats himself in the poet's chair and is there challenged by Ferchertne, an elder poet, to whom the cloak of Adne had been awarded. (This is the same Fercertne who is said to be one of the authors of the *Auraicept!*) It is, on the surface of it, a poem concerning rival claimants to the post of chief poet of Ulster, but underneath something more interesting is going on.

Let us look at the names of the protagonists, where we will find clues to what is going on in this story. The dead chief poet is called Adna which signifies 'age.' His young son's name, Nede, is an anagram of his father's and probably derives from nade, an interrogative expression meaning 'is it?' The name of Ferchertne, the elder poet, translates as 'The Right Man,' as well as meaning 'man of the poetic gifts.' So we have a verbal contest between a youth whose name is a question-mark and a skilled poet who is marked down as the rightful candidate. Who will win, you may wonder? Let's see their question and answer in action.

On my right side, Ferchertne, wise, venerable and undefeated champion poet of Connacht, and on my left side, Nede, prodigious pupil of Eochu Echbel of Alba, son of the late and much-mourned chief poet of Ulster, Adne of Connacht. We join the fight in the seventh round:

FERCERTNE: 'A question, O boy of teaching, whose son are you?

NEDE: 'Not difficult.

I am the son of Poetry,

Poetry, daughter of Scrutiny,

Scrutiny, son of Meditation,

Meditation, daughter of Great Knowing,

Great Knowing, son of Seeking,

Seeking, daughter of Investigation,

Investigation, daughter of Great Knowing ,
Great Knowing, son of Great Good Sense,
Great Good Sense, son of Comprehension,
Comprehension, daughter of Wisdom,
Wisdom, daughter of the three gods of Dana.
'And you, O my elder, whose son are you?'

So Nede, with little track-record of his own, jumps back with the poetic genealogy manoeuvre, calling upon his recent graduation from pupil to poet, and claiming kinship with the Goddess of Inspiration, Brighid herself, and the primordial spiritual founders of the Irish race. Not a bad move: how will Fercertne come back?

FERCERTNE: 'Not difficult.
I am the man who has been and who was not born,
Who was shrouded in the breast of his mother,
Who was baptised after his death,
Who was bound to die from the moment he first appeared,
And who is the first spoken words of every living being,
And the cry of every dead being:
The A whose name is most high. (9.)

Fercertne counters with the 'I'm both older and younger than that' manoeuvre, popular this year among the Connacht *filidh*. For the uninitiated listener, Fercertne is making a joke about the sound of 'A' which is both the wailing cry of a newborn and the expiring sigh of the dying. Clever man! Meanwhile, back to the studio....

Of course, druidic tradition is not the only one to transmit wisdom by this oral means. We have only to look at medieval disputation, and the oral recitation and repetition of sacred text such as we still see in the teaching of the Holy Koran within our own country. We can see traces of such question and answer within the *viva voce*, still in use our university system where, in a formal interrogative session, professors and examiners question students on the depth of their grasp and understanding of their subject.

Whenever you regard an Irish text, it soon becomes apparent that the text itself is surrounded by glosses and commentaries of earlier and later students as well of other authorities informing the text. There is a sense that more than one person is involved in the

transcription, that different traditions, sources and intelligences have been gathered together and made to bear upon the text in question. Is this evidence of other voices who give their own answers?

In this respect we can consider a completely different tradition which has both an oral and written component: the Jewish study of the Talmud with its many commentaries. Open a Talmud and you will see a patch of text in the centre starting with the *Mishnah* in Hebrew. To the left is 11th century French commentary in Aramaic by Rashi. On the right are the 13th century references of Tosafot. And in a narrow fourth column, vertically stacked, are 4 different commentaries on commentaries, spanning centuries of dialogue. Professor Mel Alexenberg writes, 'We who study Talmud today give life and continuity to a dialogue that began millennia ago not only by engaging with the hundreds of voices talking across its folio pages, but also by active dialogue with a learning partner. The two learners - a *hevrutah*, enter a page and move around within it while arguing with each other and calling upon all the scholars before for support. They can begin their learning on any 5,894 pages.' (10.)

I contend that even today druids in OBOD and in other orders may be continuing a dialogue which spans generations. While the oral teachings have been lost to us, leaving us a fragmented body of transcribed texts, we are not entirely adrift from the direct sources of wisdom that reside in the universe. Transmission does not always need an unbroken oral tradition: but it does need questions. Where might we find such questions?

THE RHETORICAL COSMIC QUESTION

Celtic poetry is riddled with what seem to be series of rhetorical questions. We see these in the works of Taliesin, Aneirin, and Llywarch Hen in the British corpus, and in the poetry of Amairgen and numerous other unnamed poets of the Irish. My sense is that many of these supposedly rhetorical questions are really cosmological or philosophical questions that formed the central curriculum of druidic teaching. I would like to present two examples: the first is a 14th century Welsh transcription, clearly Christian in origin, which has been attributed to Taliesin. This is a completely new translation of *Kygarchaf yn reu* from Llyfr Thaliesin.

The large body of poetry is attributed to Taliesin, shows a unique curiosity and understanding of the macrocosm and its relationship to the microcosm. Throughout these poems, Taliesin reveals a professional obsession with Awen or Inspiration. For the

poets of Britain and Ireland, inspiration was not the abstract quality we understand today, but rather the personification or spirit of inspiration itself, something far nearer akin to the muse or daimon. Awen was a demanding mistress: a being nearer to a Vedic emanation and goddess than anything else. For Taliesin, the origins of Awen are closely associated with the initiatory cauldron and with Ceridwen herself; according to a bardic triad, she is the bringer of grain and of bees - both grain and honey are used in the fermentation of alcohol in British tradition, making beer and mead. (See lines 57-8 below) This boiling up, fermentation, heat of inspiration seem inextricably connected in Taliesin's mind with Awen.

What is most interesting in the context of this new translation is the way that Taliesin sees the soul. In many of his poems, we hear how he has lived through or been present at different times of history in a way that reveals a close understanding of the druidic doctrine of metempsychosis - the process by which the soul passes from body to body. These boasts which begin 'I have been...' are lists of states of being, creatures, objects, personages from whose standpoint he has animistically experienced life.

The poem is full of questions: some of which are posed and never answered. Some of the questions are riddles, enigmas too great for the human mind. See if you can answer any of them as you listen:

THE YOUTHFUL WORDS OF TALIESIN trans. Caitlín Matthews

I will ask the Lord
To be mindful of the Awen. (the spirit of inspiration)
What brought necessity
Before the time of Ceridwen?
Originally in my life
I knew need.
Powerful monks,
Why will they not tell me?
Why will they not relieve my need,
One hour since my pursuit? 10

Why does smoke rise?
Why is evil spoken?
Why does the fountain rise

Above the secret darkness?
When the reed is bright,
When the moon lights night,
When there was no other candle,
It was shaken out.
When anger grips
The crashing waves upon the shore, 20
The vengeance of Dylan. [The divinity who was thrown into the sea as a baby.]

A day will dawn for them
When a stone will be so heavy,
When a thorn will be so sharp.
Do you know what is best -
A spear or a lancet?
Who caused the separation
Between man and misfortune? [Death]
Who has the sharpest death -
The young or the old? 30

Do you know what you are
When you are sleeping?
A body or a soul,
Or a hidden light?
The lying singer,
Why does he not tell me?
Do you know the hiding place
Of night before day's end?
Do you know the sign?
How many leaves are there? 40
Who raised the mountains
Before the elements froze?
Who supports the enclosure
Of the earth's dwelling?

Who can speak for the soul?
Who has seen it, who knows it?
I wonder in books
That the learned doubt
What the soul is, where it lives,
What shape are its limbs, 50
Through what part it issues,
What air it breathes?

A vexatious war,
An endangered sinner,
A wonder suitable for a satire,
These were the [soul's] dregs.
What is the best intoxicant -
Mead or braggart? [malted beer]
Who accomplishes their fate best
[Is the one who] seizes the God of the Trinity. 60

Why do I discourse in treatises,
Except in your praise?
Who coined the likeness [Who imprinted matter?]
Upon silver's gift?
Whence does it keep running, [The vehicle of the body?]
This tenacious vehicle?

The foundation of death
Underlies every country.
Death hangs over our head:
Broad is its veil, 70
Over the vault of heaven's kneading trough.
Man is oldest when he is born;
Growing younger all the time.

Why then be anxious
 About the state of things?
 After our [life's] wealth
 Why is our robe not short-lived? [garment of flesh]
 Banish our laurels
 [In] the repose of the grave
 The Lord has care of us, 80
 From the supreme country.
 May he be our God and bring us
 To him at the end (11)

This poem seems to take its narrative stance from the moment one hour after the birth of Taliesin from Ceridwen. The major theme of the poem is the grip of Necessity upon human life, its origins, how it shapes life experience and expectancy and its close connection with Death. These may seem strange thoughts for even a prodigious baby such as Taliesin to think, but he is immediately engaged in a disquisition about the nature of life from the moment of his rebirth. He has the new-born curiosity that we find in every child, but his questions are not those an ordinary child might ask. Throughout, he seems aware of other arguments and theological opinions, notably those of book-learned clerics who dispute about the nature of the soul and rich monks who can afford not to consider the burden of necessity.

In stanza ii, line 21, Taliesin seems to associate himself with Dylan eil Ton, the divinity of the sea who threw himself into the ocean as a mere baby, taking to his own element with joy and gladness. The baby Taliesin was himself cast into the sea. This sea is a wider ocean of consciousness, of life's experience. For the Celtic peoples, the sea was the source from which life came; for poets, inspiration was found at the margins of the sea and shore, at the edge of water courses. Dylan is the inadvertent son of Arianrhod, a figure who seems to share a number of characteristics with Ceridwen: she is angry, hostile, tenacious of her gifts, behaving like an enchantress. In the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogion, when Arianrhod applies for the position of virgin foot-holder to King Math of Gwynedd, she is asked to step over his magical wand as a test of her qualifying virginity, only to be instantly beset with the pains of childbirth. Dylan is the child to whom she gives birth in a very public way.

Stanza iii uncompromisingly speaks of the onset of death. Whether we die in battle under the enemy's spear or whether we die under the lancet of the surgeon, death is sharp as a thorn. But it is death that removes humanity from suffering.

Stanzas iv and v of this poem speak beautifully of the druidic concept of the soul. When we sleep, are we a body, a soul or a hidden light? This question is juxtaposed with a series of questions about where things originate.

In stanza vii Taliesin asks who imprinted matter with its specific characteristics? How does the vehicle of the body keep operational?

In stanza viii, the answers to some of the questions he has asked are revealed. Death rules in every country: it is both below and above us. The image of death as a veil that covers the kneading trough of heaven is a very interesting one. The kneading of dough is such a primal image of creation. Like Ceridwen's cauldron in which ingredients stew together to create the sum of wisdom, the kneading trough is the place where the components of life are mixed together.

The second of our cosmological examples is a much older Irish poem, from *Lebor Gabala Erenn*. When Amairgen Glúngel, the poet of the Milesian invaders of Ireland, steps foot upon Ireland for the first time, he makes his great and famous invocation, which begins:

'I am a wind in the sea,
I am a sea-wave upon the land .' (12)

As with the personalized invocations of Taliesin, Amairgin's words seem to express an identification with 'the stag of seven combats,' or 'the hawk on a cliff,' but it would appear that something else is going on in this poem.

Many explanations have been offered to interpret this invocation, including Robert Graves' poetic and cosmological interpretation in his *The White Goddess*. My own sense is that, in many ways, this poem is an evocation or possibly divination of the qualities of Ireland which Amairgen is himself experiencing by placing his foot upon the soil of a new land. But it includes some important questions:

1. 'Who explains the stones of the mountain?
2. Who invokes the ages of the moon?
3. Where lies the setting of the sun?
4. Who bears cattle from the house of Tethra?
5. Who are the cattle of Tethra who laugh?

6. What man, what god forms weapons?' (13.)

These rhetorical questions are not answered but leave Amairgen's mouth to shimmer on the air. These are not easy questions to answer, and my belief is that they are addressed to the land of Ireland, whose triple goddesses, Banba, Fóitla and Eriu, with whom Amairgen subsequently strikes a deal for the occupation of the land by his companions. In asking these questions, he is telling the sovereign goddesses of Ireland, that he himself is a right and proper person to respect the sacred order of the land. For it is the task of a *filidh*, and later a cleric, to know certain things: 'the day of the solar month, the age of the moon, the tides of the sea, the day of the week, the calendar of holy days.' (14.) We can attempt the background to possible answers, as follows:

1. 'Who explains the stones of the mountain?' - The ridges, mountains and hilltops are frequently sited in Irish and British Celtic lore as the yardsticks of great antiquity, as we can see from example of the oldest animals in Culhwch and Olwen, where the eagle away pecks the mountain over many aeons, or from the Irish country saying that states, 'There are three ridges from the beginning to the end of the world.' (15.)

2. Who invokes the ages of the moon? - The metonic cycle of the moon was part of the ancient prehistoric knowledge, as has been proven by the examination of many megalithic sites. Druidic knowledge of the metonic cycle can also be inferred from a study of the Gaulish Coligny Calendar. (16)

3. Where lies the setting of the sun? - The angle of the sun's declination and rising demarks the annual growing cycle and is a vital piece of knowledge for the planting and harvesting of crops. This exact angle of 84° discernable between the sunrise or sunset which separate a solstice from an equinox, has recently been discovered on the bronze age Nebra Sun Disk discovered in Germany, as well as being measurable in many sacred landscapes. (Currently held by the Landesmuseum für Voegeschichte in Halle.)

4. Who bears cattle from the house of Tethra? - Tethra was a Fomorian (or 'Beneath the Wave') king, a name that becomes a kenning for the sea itself. The cattle of Tethra are the stars that are seen to rise from the sea and fall back into it again. The image in this question refers to the Irish habit of cattle-raiding which was a customary larceny from prehistoric times onwards. The one who bears the cattle away is night itself. One of Taliesin's rhetorical questions is, 'What came first - the darkness or the light?' (17.) Throughout Celtic understanding, night has precedence over the day.

5. Who are the cattle of Tethra who laugh? - Knowledge of the stars, their names and their progress across the heavens was essential part of druidic knowledge.

6. What man, what god forms weapons?' - The answer to this question is implied by the last lines of the invocation: 'A satirist of wind.' The ancient Irish word for wind is 'Gáeth' which has a triple meaning: it means 'wind,' 'intelligent or skilful' and an 'estuary.' Hidden within the word is another root meaning, for Gáe means both spear and a beam or ray. The metaphor underlying this answer is of a skilful man whose words strike like rays or spears into the heart of all mysteries: and the one who wields the weapon of words is also one with the source of the weapon, the power of the wind itself which sculpts all things into shape. The skilful use of wind and of breath is a primal weapon of druids in creating battle-fogs or storms, such as is evoked in the Siege of Druim Damhgaire (18.) by the fearsome druid, Mog Roith where he 'began to blow upon the hill. Each warrior ... was unable to stay in his tent, so great was the storm.' We see a similar invocation of wind used to great effect by Taliesin against Maelgwn Gwynedd to help free his patron, Elphin from imprisonment. (19)

This is ancient knowledge indeed, dealing with the tides of time, the movement of heavenly bodies and the remembrance of the land. It has been frequently asserted that a major druidic function was the understanding of cosmology and these questions seem to fall within the remit of the things that all druids should know.

THE QUESTION OF THE SUCCESSION

The question of the succession was perhaps the most important one for the keeping of the peace. It was customary for Gaelic kings to nominate their *tanaiste* or regnal successor during their own life-times to ensure peaceful transition, so that the tribe would know the heir apparent. Kingship was not hereditary in the modern sense, though candidates would have been drawn from the *derbfine*, or generational kinship deriving from a common forebear. Neither was kingship based on primogeniture. An uncertain succession could mean internecine tribal conflict that left the region open to attack by rival provinces.

There are a series of dialogues which deal with the important issue of regnal succession. The main question form is 'who reigns next?' Examples of this would be the Welsh *Ymddiddian Merlin I Gwenddydd*, which concerns the succession of the Welsh kings (20) and the Irish, *Baile in Scail*, or the Ecstatic Vision of the Spirit, which are prophecies uttered by the God Lugh and supported by the Goddess of Sovereignty concerning the succession of the High Kings. (21)

These texts always appear in the context of prophesied reigns of kings, but they could equally have been composed retrospectively to support and validate a particular dynasty. However, we do know that, in cases of uncertain succession that there was a specific druidic ritual for discovering who was to be king. This ritual, the *tarbh feis* or Bull Sleep, involved the slaughter of a sacred bull. After the eating of its flesh, and the drinking of its broth, the druid in question was wrapped in its hide, bloody side to his skin, then he lay down upon a platform of rowan wattles to take a prophetic sleep as an invocation of truth was chanted over him. In this shamanic procedure, the druid envisioned or dreamed the signs that would help recognize the rightful king. In *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, the Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel, the *tarbh feis* is made after the death of King Eterscel. The druid's vision shows him a naked man on the road to Tara with a stone in his sling. A search is made and Conaire is discovered in just such a condition. (22.)

This ritual is remarkably akin to the identification of the Dalai Lama, in which certain signs and tokens help the finders recognize the rightful candidate. So important was this ritual spirit-search that, long after its usage had gone into abeyance and been forgotten, people still used the expression, 'I have gone to the wattles of my knowledge,' meaning they had left no stone unturned in their questioning search, into the fifteenth century. These wattles of the magical rowan wood, always associated with otherworldly transactions, are a fundamental part of finding the answer. (23.)

THE QUESTION OF PROPHECY

The *tarbh feis* was only one druidic form of prophecy which is based on the asking of questions. Information about druidic forms of divination is unfortunately thin on the ground. In our time, divination and prophecy are considered very airy-fairy, as having little substance or point. But this is not the case when we look at the answers given. On reading them, it is astonishing how pragmatic they are. The answers of the *filidh* are both traditional and spontaneous, considered and serendipitous, both rooted in a deep ancestral knowing but also arising out of the needs of the present moment.

We are lucky that textual transcription speaks of the skills that still resonate with the lost early forms, for after Druidry was replaced by Christianity and oral tradition began to be supplanted by written tradition, the poets still maintained components of earlier skills, all of which include the question. The training of the Irish *filidh*, the vision poets, enabled them to discover the answers that no other means could supply. These methods, known

collectively as the Three Illuminations, were all metaphysical and poetic ways of receiving answers to questions that were beyond human ken. The Three Illuminations were ways of asking the Otherworld for help, guidance and clarification.

I've written extensively elsewhere about *Imbas forosna*, *Teinm Laegda* and *Dichetal do Chennaib*. (24) We've already seen a mode of *Imbas forosna* in the *tarbh feis*: it requires the poet to enter a watched sleep in which he seeks the answer. *Teinm Laegda* and *Dichetal do Chennaib* are both incantatory method of arriving at answers, used frequently by the Irish hero, Fionn Mac Cumhail. These three methods of answering difficult questions had both prophetic and poetic components. We know that *Imbas forosna* and *Teinm Laegda* required the sacrifice of animals, because the answers were to be supplied by gods and otherworldly beings. This is one of the reasons they were banned after St Patrick's day, although the ability to perform both these forms of divination continued to be recognized under Irish law until the fifteenth century, acting as a kind of poetic 'benefit of clergy,' for poets in trouble with the law. These skills were honoured because they were the means of bringing answers out of impossible questions. The only sanctioned prophetic form in the Christian era remained *dichetal do chennaib*, a form of psychometry and invocatory chant combined, which was generally used to help recognize, identify and locate unknown objects, physical remains or lost people. These are undoubtedly druidic skills that remained in usage among the *filidh*.

The only knowledge we have of early British prophetic tradition is described to us by Gerald of Wales: 'Among the Welsh there are certain individuals called *awenyddion*.... When you consult them about some problem, they immediately go into a trance and lose control of their senses, as if they are possessed. They do not answer the question put to them in any logical way. Words stream from their mouths, incoherently, and apparently meaningless and without any sense at all, but all the same well expressed; and if you listen carefully to what they say you will receive the solution to your problem:

'When it is all over, they will recover from their trance, as if they were ordinary people waking from a heavy sleep, but you have to give them a good shake before they regain control of themselves ...They seem to receive this gift of divination through visions which they see in their dreams. Some of them have the impression that honey or sugary milk is being smeared on their mouths; others say that a sheet of paper with words written on it is pressed against their lips.' (25.)

This account of the *awenyddion* seems to suggest a less professional and controlled method than we have from Ireland. The manner of asking the *awenyddion* about problems seems closer in kind to the Scandinavian oracular tradition of *seidh*, where the *volva* or seeress gives her answers in inspired, gnomic speech.

The use of questions to provoke healing as well as prophetic answer is seen in the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth, which I make no apology for including in this account, since Merlin is regarded as the foremost prophet in British tradition. All of Merlin's great prophecies recorded, as recorded in the *Historia Regnum Britanniae* all hinge around one question, posed by Vortigern, who wanted to know why his fortress keeps falling down. Digging down, on Merlin's suggestion, they come across a pool. Vortigern asks, 'What lies beneath this pool. On hearing this question, the dragons which have been beneath it, rise up and contend. Merlin bursts into tears, falls into a trance and utters his prophecies concerning the land of Britain. (26.)

Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini*, presents us with a different, older Merlin, one who succumbs to battle-fatigue and the horror of war. After running mad in the Caledonian Forest, Merlin is restored again by the posing of a seemingly unimportant question, 'what causes wind and rainstorms?' In order to answer this, Taliesin undertakes a great exposition of the cosmos. He reconstellates Merlin's world through this druidic relation of the cosmic order and restores Merlin to himself again. This great healing, becomes the linguistic equivalent of the Navajo sand-painting where the *hatali*, the medicine person, creates in coloured sands, the cosmos and its divinities, where the sick person is ritually ensconced upon this earth-picture to become part of the universe once again. (27.)

Every time a question is posed, the cosmos is potentially being reconfigured and created anew. This is the power of the Grail question, which is variously given as, 'Whom does the Grail serve?' or 'Why are things like this?' This single question alone can become the pivot of change and healing if the seeker follows the clues.

In considering the druidic method of question and answer, we should not harbour any notion that all the answers had to be given verbatim and exactly. In cases of precedent and legal judgement, in the transmission of traditional knowledge, genealogy and so on there certainly had to be conformity of answer. But I am wondering about the importance of darkness and light in the transmission. By lying on their beds in the houses of darkness, poets, fully equipped with the tools of prosody and of prophecy, dived into the great darkness and dreamed the poem or answer that swam towards them like the great salmon

from the great waters of the river of inspiration. As Fionn Mac Cumhail proved to his own druidic teacher, you might catch the salmon, but the proof of the wisdom was in the eating.

Questions are but a means to the theft of wisdom, and the more skilful the questioner, the more likely the answer dances upon the end of his rod. Ignorance separates us from knowledge. But as Socrates tells us:

'If it is true that we acquired our knowledge before our birth, and lost it at the moment of birth, but afterward, by the exercise of our senses upon sensible objects, recover the knowledge which we had once before, I suppose that what we call learning will be the recovery of our own knowledge, and surely we should be right in calling this 'recollection.' (28.)

The continuance of the druidic tradition into our own era is still based upon the oral tradition because it depends upon our recollection. Not a cosy, pink-spectacled, romantic Druidry, but when where we believe that the questions are still our teachers: every generation must answer them by applying directly to the source, just as the *filidh* did when they used the Three Illuminations.

Questions make the invisible visible and so must be a prime tool in the task of druidic transmission. If we continue to be skilful in our own questioning, there is no ignorance that cannot be illuminated.

NOTES:

1. Phaedo 72e-73b in Plato: Collected Dialogues, ed. Edith Hamilton & Huntington Cairns, Princeton University Press, 1962

2. Julius Caesar: The Conquest of Gaul, VI,14 trans. S.A. Handford, Penguin, 1951

3. Plato op. cit., Phaedrus 275a

4. The problem with Celtic material in general, it will be argued, is that it has been transcribed at some remove from an oral tradition, and then often re-transcribed as texts decayed, allowing for errors, interpolations and other discrepancies such as Christian re-interpretation, in the case of the early material. We do know that the structures of bardic learning, which are the only detailed framework that we possess for any druidic curriculum, are closely paralleled by the clerical curriculum. While the textual material may not seem perfect, it nevertheless contains conservative elements that help us reach into earlier oral times.

5. The trefocul is glossed thus: 'three words are in it: two words of praise are given after the reproach which the third word causes' the palliative after a satire! See *Senchus Mor*, III, 92,10.

6. *Auraicept na N'Eces*, ed. George Calder, Four Courts Press, 1995

7. Christian Guyonvarc'h, *The Making of a Druid*, Inner Traditions, 2002, p 5

8. *ibid* p.45

9. *ibid.* p. 57-8.

10. An Interactive Dialogue: Talmud and the New by Mel Alexenberg, in *Parabola* Summer 2004

11. Original translation c. Caitlín Matthews from the 14th century Welsh manuscript, *Llyfr Taliesin*

12. *The Celtic Heroic Age* ed. John T.Koch & John Carey p.259

13. *ibid*

14. *Saltair na Rann* quoted in Caitlín Matthews, *Celtic Spirit*, Harper SanFrancisco, 1999

15. Caitlín & John Matthews, *Encyclopaedia of Celtic Wisdom*, Rider, 2000

16. Garrett S. Olmsted, *A Definitive Reconstructed Text of the Coligny Calendar*, *Journal of Indo-European Studies*, Monograph no 39, 2001.

17. *Taliesin's Bardic Lore: from Red Bk Hergest - Prif gynarch geluyd* trans. Caitlín Matthews

18. Caitlín & John Matthews, 2000 *op. cit.* p.191

19. *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales*, trans. Patrick K. Ford, University of California Press, 1977.

20. See, R.J.Stewart and John Matthews, *Merlin Through the Ages*, Blandford, 1995

21. Caitlín & John Matthews, 2000 *op. cit.* p.254

22. John & Caitlín Matthews, *Encyclopaedia of Celtic Myth and Legend*, Rider, 2002, pp 289-324

23. The wood that represented the ogam letter, Luis, is glossed in *Auraicept N-Eces*, as 'the friend of cattle.' *Op.cit.*

24. Caitlín & John Matthews, 2000 *op. cit.* p247ff.

25. Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales*, trans. Lewis Thorpe, Penguin, 1978

26. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe. Penguin, 1966

27. R.J. Stewart & John Matthews, *op.cit.*

28. Plato, *op.cit.* Phaedo 75,e

29. This and the following section are copyright Caitlín Matthews and are extracted from a forthcoming book, *The Kingly Code of Cormac*.

The Author

Caitlín Matthews is a writer and teacher whose ground-breaking work has introduced many to the riches of our western spiritual heritage. She is acknowledged as a world authority on Celtic Wisdom and the ancestral traditions of Britain and Europe. Caitlín's interest in druidism has brought a continuing association with OBOD since its reformation, when she served as co-president. She was the recipient of the Mount Haemus Award in 2004.

Caitlín appears frequently on international radio and television, and was the songwriter and Pictish language originator for the Jerry Bruckheimer film *King Arthur*. With John Matthews, her partner, who was historical consultant on the film, she shared in the 2004 BAFTA award given to Film Education for the best educational CD Rom: this project introduced school-children to the life and times of King Arthur.

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