

Dánta grádha : an anthology of Irish love poetry

(A.D. 1350-1750)

Thomas Francis O'Rahilly

INTRODUCTION by Robin Flower.

These poems stand less in need of an introduction than they did at the time of their first publication in 1916. For they have now taken their place in the canon of Irish literature, and their qualities are generally recognised. We can now see how great a debt of gratitude we owe to Mr. O'Rahilly for his work in disinterring from the manuscripts and so carefully editing all these pleasant verses. In this new edition he has added to our obligation by printing a considerable number of new poems, which serve to illustrate further this particular genre of poetry, though they necessitate no revision of our general conception of the type. My own views on the subject have not undergone any noticeable modification in the course of further reading and research, and I may be permitted to reprint my first essay with some amplifications which will perhaps serve to give a clearer view of the characteristics of these poems.

Their characteristics are fairly clear. The subject is love, and not the direct passion of the folk-singers or the high vision of the great poets, but the learned and fantastic love of European tradition, the *amour courtois*, which was first shaped into art for modern Europe in Provence, and found a home in all the languages of Christendom wherever a refined society and the practice of poetry met together. In Irish, too, it is clearly the poetry of society. To prove this, we need only point to the names of some of the authors of the poems : in Ireland, Gerald the Earl, Magnus O'Donnell (the chief of his clan), the Earl of Clancarthy, and Pierce Ferriter ; in Scotland, the Earl and Countess of Argyle and Duncan Campbell of Glenorquhy, "the good knight," who died at Flodden. One is reminded of the company of noble poets, whose love-poems are collected in *Tottell's Miscellany* (1557)—The Earl of Surrey, Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder, and Lord Vaux. The other contributors to this anthology belong to a class which had no representative in England, the bardic order. They correspond in a way to the University men, but their fixed place in society was higher than any that his attainments alone have ever been able to secure for the University man in England. They were, indeed, until the fall of the old Irish order an intellectual aristocracy, with all the privileges and, no doubt, many of the prejudices of a caste. They held their position by virtue of their birth and the practice of their art. It is, thus, without any surprise that we find them sharing this peculiar art of love poetry with that other aristocracy of alien conquest or tribal right. And we shall probably not go very far wrong if we hold that just this poetry is the offspring of the marriage of these two orders. In this happy union the aristocrats of position contributed the subject, the aristocrats of art the style. By their intermediation the matter of European love-poetry met the manner of Irish tradition. And in these poems we see how perfect was the fusion, how happy the result.

The poems we possess are mostly of a comparatively late date, of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Among the earliest recorded are those preserved in the Scotch Book of the Dean of Lismore of the early sixteenth century. But the tradition, and, no doubt, the practice of the art goes back to a much earlier date. The first recorded practitioner of the kind is Gerald the Rhymer, Fourth Earl of Desmond, of that great family of the Fitzgeralds—the "Greeks" and "Florentines" of Ireland—which played such a part in the history of Irish literature. He was Lord Chief Justice of Ireland in 1367, and in 1398 he disappeared, says the tale, and sleeps below the waters of Loch Gur, whence he emerges every seven years to ride

the ripples of the lake. His wife—she was in history a Butler, Eleanor, daughter of James, second Earl of Ormond—was famed in poetic tradition for her gallantries :

*A mharcaigh fá ndearnadh fanóid,
an gcuala tú sgéal Ghearóid Iarla,
mar d'imigh uaidh a Chuntaois
re luircín ar feadh bliadhna ?*

It is this romantic figure that stands at the head of our company of poets. Several poems are attributed, rightly or wrongly, to him in the Dean's Book. And the Shanachies speak of him in their great style :

“ A nobleman of wonderful bounty, mirth and cheerfulness in conversation, charitable in his deeds, easy of access, a witty and ingenious composer of Irish poetry and a learned and profound chronicler ; and, in fine, one of the English nobility that had Irish learning and professors thereof in greatest reverence of all the English of Ireland.”

There can be no reasonable doubt that in men such as this our poetry came into being. Acquainted with both worlds, the French world of the matter and the Irish world of the manner, they were admirably placed for introducing this new thing into Irish verse. There are in Harley MS. 913 (fol. 15b) certain Anglo-Norman verses, which have for a heading *Proverbia Comitum Desmonie*, and these have been attributed to our Gerald. But the MS. was written before his day. They may serve, however, to prove the practice of French verse in his family. In Irish verse the name of Fitzgerald is famous. In the sixteenth century the eighth Earl of Kildare had a fine library of Latin, French, English and Irish books. In the sixteenth century, too, there was a Fitzgerald, David the Black, who was regarded as a sort of Admirable Crichton. This is what Stanihurst has to say of him :

“ David Fitzgiralde, vsuallie called Dauid Duffe, borne in Kerie, a civilian, a maker in Irish, not ignorant of musike, skilfull in physike, a good & generall craftsman much like to Hippias, surpassing all men in the multitude of crafts, who comming on a time to Pisa to the great triumph called Olympicum, ware nothing but such as was of his owne making ; his shoes, his pattens, his cloke, his cote, the ring that he did weare, with a signet therein verie perfectlie wrought, were all made by him. He plaid excellentlie on all kind of instruments, and soong therto his owne verses, which no man could amend. In all parts of logike, rhetorike, and philosophic he vanquished all men, and was vanquished of none.”

We have none of the poetry of this later Hippias. But some of the poems of his son, Muiris mac Dháibhí Dhuibh, are extant, and he plays a part in the *Pairlement Chloinne Thomáis*, that strange memorial of the contempt of the bards for the lesser sort. In the eighteenth century Pierce Fitzgerald of Ballymacoda keeps up the family name for poetry. And let us not forget here one who, if not a poet, was a cause that poetry was in others, Mistress Garrett, Surrey's

“ Fair Geraldine,” a “ Florentine” of this race :
“ From Tuskane came my Ladies worthie race :
Faire Florence was sometyme her auncient seate :
The Western yle, whose pleasaunt shore dothe face
Wilde Cambers cliffs, did geue her liuely heate :
Fostered she was with milke of Irishe brest :
Her sire an Erie : her dame of prince's blood.”

Nor were the Fitzgeralds the only Anglo-Irish family which patronised and practised Irish verse. Two fifteenth century manuscripts, Laud Misc. 610 and Add. 30512, both belonged alternately to the Fitzgeralds and the Butlers. And both contain good store of Irish literature of almost every type and period. Add. 30512 has some charming verses by a Richard Butler of the sixteenth century. The Roches of Fermoy are honoured in the best bardic style in the Book of Fermoy. One of the poems here printed is by a Richard Burke. And so we might go on through all the families of the Gaedheal-Ghoill, establishing for them all a connection with Irish poetry. Nor should we neglect the influence of the religious orders, particularly the Franciscans, who can be proved to have played a great part in the carrying of continental themes into Irish literature. Did not Brother Michael of Kildare practice English poetry in the country of the Fitzgeralds ? [1]

Certain areas of southern Ireland were indeed, as Professor Curtis has shown us, trilingual in the 14th century. Thus Richard Ledrede, Bishop of Ossory 1318-1360, found that the clerics of his cathedral city were most unclerically fond of singing certain “base, worldly and theatrical songs” on high days and holidays. These songs were in French and English, and we have examples of them. One English song we immediately recognise as of the type familiar to us in 18th century poetry as *An Seanduine*.

Alas ! hou shold Y syng,
Yloren is my playing,
Hou shold Y with that olde man
To leven and [lose] my leman
Swettist of al thinge.

The French songs are songs of love of a more popular character than those with which we have to deal here, but related to them in origin.

*Heu alas pour amour
Qy moy myst en taunt dolour.*

So sang the amorous clerics.

*Mór mo ghalar do ghrádh mná,
A grádh dom ghoin gach aonlá.*

So the learned poet takes up the theme and subtilises on it in his own manner.

Ledrede made the probably vain attempt to substitute sacred songs for these secular lyrics, writing Latin hymns to the same tunes, among which we may recognise interesting and very early examples of Christmas carols. But the damage was already done, and the wanton themes were probably already passing over into Irish to go underground in the popular tradition and to survive and propagate openly in the written verses of the nobles and the poets. For one may suppose that it was through these channels that so many foreign themes came into Ireland. They found there a formed and regulated literature practised by an organised literary class and propagated by academies (if we may so term the bardic schools) conducted on a standardised method. There has never been a country in which the sense of tradition was more intense than in medieval Ireland. Irish literature had been created under the auspices of the Irish church in the period between the sixth and the eleventh centuries. The Norman invaders found this literature established as a part, not only of Irish culture, but also of the tribal organisation. It was of the very atmosphere of the people's life, a part of their consciousness as Irishmen, an expression of the forms of their being. The technical devices, imitated originally from Latin sources, had become a necessary part of the equipment of an

Irish poet. He thought of literature in these terms, in part by an inevitable predilection, in part as a result of the long and strict training of the bardic schools. The rules of his art were formulated in a series of treatises, the tradition of which begins, at any rate, in the eighth century, and extends to the elaborate summary of the sixteenth century which Professor Bergin is at present printing as a Supplement to *Ériu*.

The love-themes, which were now to make their entry into Irish literature, usually carried with them on their pilgrimages certain lyric methods which became acclimatised in all the literatures of Europe. It was not so in Ireland. There the established forms were too strong. It is to be noted that these forms were used for many purposes outside of the more deliberate compositions which are most frequent in our transcripts. Thus already in the ninth century the playful poem of the student and Pangur Bán, his cat, solves easily the problem of putting the *deibhidhe* metre to familiar uses. A fairly faithful English version may, perhaps, serve to show the ease and freedom of this poem :

I and Pangur Bán, my cat,
'Tis a like task we are at ;
Hunting mice is his delight.
Hunting words I sit all night.

Better far than praise of men
'Tis to sit with book and pen ;
Pangur bears me no ill-will,
He, too, plies his simple skill.

'Tis a merry thing to see
At our tasks how glad are we,
When at home we sit and find
Entertainment to our mind.

Oftentimes a mouse will stray
In the hero Pangur's way ;
Oftentimes my keen thought set
Takes a meaning in its net.

'Gainst the wall he sets his eye
Full and fierce and sharp and sly ;
'Gainst the wall of knowledge I
All my little wisdom try.

When a mouse darts from its den,
O ! how glad is Pangur then !
O! what gladness do I prove
When I solve the doubts I love.

So in peace our task we ply,
Pangur Bán, my cat, and I ;
In our arts we find our bliss,
I have mine and he has his.

Practice every day has made
Pangur perfect in his trade ;

I get wisdom day and night.
Turning darkness into light.

This kind of poetry gets little representation in our manuscripts. But hints here and there—marginal quatrains, stray quotations in commentaries, references in the Annals—show that it persisted in the schools. The presence of the type at a later period is attested by the pleasant poems of 16th-17th century date printed by Professor Bergin in the *Irish Review*, 1912-1913.

These forms, then, were ready to the hand of the adaptors of the new foreign themes. They were the established forms of light and personal verse, and they adapted themselves with ease to the witty turns and delicate dialectic which poetry of this character requires. There has always been in the Irish nature a sharp and astringent irony, a tendency to react against sentiment and mysticism, an occasional bias to regard life under a clear and humorous light. This could easily be illustrated from the older epic tales. Much, indeed, of the exaggeration in those tales—so fiercely ridiculed by certain critics—is the exuberance of a man who sees the fun of the thing, and would not for the world have his monstrosities taken at their face value. And from Mac Conglinne to Merryman the light of this inexhaustible irony plays upon Irish life and letters. We miss the point of much in the literature if we forget this. Modern mysticism has tended to hide the clear outlines of ancient Irish literature in a veil of mythological fancy and to tempt us to forget the lively humanity lying at the basis of this curious fabric. What with the mythologists, the philosophers, the genealogists and the topographers, there is a real danger that we may forget the fact that poetry is produced by poets, and that poets are men living in a world of which these honourable sciences can at best give us but an imperfect and partial picture. It is the office of poems like this to call us back to the men who produced them, and to let us see the play and colour of their minds.

This note of light irony is perhaps the master-note of these poems and a chief cause of the fascination they have for us. Here and there, no doubt, one feels a strain of real passion in them—the *odi et amo* of Catullus—*Tugas féin mo ghrádh ar fhuath*. And in these matters the partition that divides the real from the make-believe is notoriously thin. A man may express real feeling through a tradition just as a careless technique need not connote overmastering passion. But, taken in the main, these poets, no doubt, slept none the worse for their love, and died in song to live the more intensely in the foray and the feast. “Men have died and worms have eaten them, but not for love,” says Rosalind, who was a great authority.

*Do chongaibh mé m'fheoil is m'fhuil
do ghrádh ainnre an chuirp mar ghéis ;
ithim mórán, do-ním siian,
in gach ceól is hiian mo spéis.*

Despite his love Cúchonnacht Ó Cléirigh lived to rhyme another day. And we may echo the cynic verse that says :

*Créad fá gcreidfinn duine féin
dá rádha riom go dtéid d'éag,
's nách tig claochlódh ar a chruth ?
Fear, a Chríost, ar lucht na mbréag !*

There is a delicate sense of beauty, too, in these poems. One notes particularly the delight in the beauty of hair which finds constant expression in the poetry of Ireland in all periods. *Is barr sobarche folt and*—the primrose bloom on the hair is the first in the catalogue of bodily beauties that adorn the people of the Isle of the Blest. And one remembers the hair of Étaín :

Dá triliss órbuidi for a cind ocus fighe chethurdhúaluch for cehtar n-ai ocus mell óir for rinn cech dúail, “Two plaits of golden hue upon her head, each plait woven out of four tresses, and a ball of gold upon the end of every tress.” The same hair ripples and shines through these poems, and one of them (no. 13) is an exquisite rhapsody, playing deliciously with words and with the hair that they describe. To those who find the bardic style difficult a translation in an English lyric measure may give some idea of the manner of this poetry :

Veiled in that light amazing.
Lady, your hair soft-waved
Has cast into dispraising
Absalom son of David.

Your golden locks close clinging
Like bird-flocks of strange seeming,
Silent with no sweet singing,
Draw all men into dreaming.

That bright hair idly flowing
Over the keen eyes' brightness.
Like gold rings set with glowing
Jewels of crystal lightness.

Strange loveliness that lingers
From lands that hear the Siren :
No ring enclasps your fingers.
Gold rings your neck environ.

Gold chains of hair that cluster
Round the neck straight and slender,
Which to that shining muster
Yields in a sweet surrender.

This might well be the praise of Étaín out of fairy-land.

We have little evidence as to the time of composition of most of these poems. There seems no reason to question the tradition that the few attributed to Earl Gerald are really his, and our conviction here is strengthened by what Mr. O'Rahilly tells me of a recent discovery of a long series of poems by this author in the Book of Fermoy, a fifteenth century MS. And when we read the single example of his work given here (no. 4), we see at once that it has nothing to distinguish it in language, sentiment or expression, from other poems of the kind certainly composed in the seventeenth century at the time of the breaking up of the schools. So that we have the remarkable fact (but in Irish literature it is not remarkable), that poems written at either end of a period of between three and four hundred years strike upon our ear with the effect of contemporary compositions. This is of course due to the condition of the bardic schools which were a sort of conservative trades union, hedging poetry about with rules and restrictions and jealous of unlicensed innovations.

How and where were these poems written ? There is no internal evidence, and the external evidence is scanty and difficult of interpretation. But we can make a reasonable guess which will not be altogether wide of the mark. So far as they are the product of the bards they were probably written under the bardic conditions, somewhat relaxed no doubt for verse which was a little apart from the professional stock in trade of the poets and need not conform to the

more rigid rules of the art. While the schools lasted it was the custom—a custom of immemorial antiquity—to compose in the dark. The “poets tossing on their beds” (to use Mr. Yeats’s phrase in another connection) ordered the lines of their verses and disposed their assonances and alliterations in “a chamber deaf to noise and blind to light.” This was their day’s portion, and in the evening candles were brought into the main chamber of the school and the poems were written down to be submitted to the searching technical criticism of the master. From the metrical tracts which have come down to us we can see how intense a scrutiny they had to undergo. And to this training these verses owe their clean idiom and the concinnity of their technique.

But were they fashioned thus? We cannot tell. There are many alternatives, and of those many I like to fancy that one hits the mark. Professor Bergin has translated a poem from the Book of O’Conor Don, in which a poet of the stricter school attacks an errant bard for making his poems on horseback riding over the hills. There is no reason why poems should not be composed on horseback (Swinburne did it), but to the bardic mind it seemed a wanton break with sacred tradition. Yet these poems of light love made by nobles as well as bards may well have been dictated by a Muse that

Tempered her words to trampling horses’ feet
More oft than to a chamber-melody.

If Sir Philip Sidney made his sonnets on the highway, so may our poets, his analogues in Ireland, have “reined their rhymes into buoyant order” on the mountain roads. At any rate, if we indulge this fancy, there is none that can disprove it.

Well, however composed, here they are for our delight. And we may spend a little more time in considering their nature. We have seen already that their chief marks are beauty and irony—beauty to lend them wings, and irony to keep those wings from soaring too high. A love poetry that studies beauty alone readily degenerates into sentiment. But these were born before the days of sentiment and keep the detachment and the realism of that older and wiser world. They have little psychology—one of the modern forms of inverted sentiment—and, for the most part, conceive woman with an enviable simplicity as beautiful and false. This is a part of the old Provençal tradition, in which no woman was ripe for love until she was married and few were allowed to commit the indiscretion of loving a husband. And so it is rare to find a husband speaking of a wife in these poems. There is one piece not given by Mr. O’Rahilly, which I know from only one manuscript (Eg. 155 in the British Museum), in which a husband grieves because his wife has left him. There is no doubt that the word *tréigbheáil* used in the heading implies a voluntary desertion on the part of the wife. For whom had she left him? It would be natural to assume a mortal lover, and, read so, the husband’s praise would bear witness to a touching loyalty in another’s disloyalty. It seems to me possible, however, to suppose the lover with whom she had gone from him to be Death. In that case the word would convey a gentle reproach to be paralleled by that lovely poem of Coventry Patmore’s :

It was not like your great and gracious ways.
Do you that have nought other to lament,
Never, my Love, repent
Of how, that July afternoon.
You went.
With sudden, unintelligible phrase,
And frightened eye,
Upon your journey of so many days.

Without a single kiss, or a goodbye ?

If this interpretation seem fanciful, the poem is printed here, and the reader is free to choose between the alternatives.

Moladh mná ré n-a fear tar éis a thréigbheá.

*Dá ghealghlaic laga leabhra,
troighthe seada sitheamhla,
dá ghlún nach gile sneachta, —
rún mo chridhe an chuideachta.*

*Trillse drithleacha ar lonnradh,
taobh seang mar sról . . .
braoithe mar ruainne rónnda,
gruaidhe naoidhe neamhónnda.*

*Ni thig diom a chur i gcéill
diol molla dá dreach shoiléir,
stuagh leanbhdha mhaordha mhá lla
mheardha aobhdha éadána.*

*D'éis gach radhairc dá bhfuair sinn
do mhearaigh go mór m'intinn
ná raibhe suan i ndán damh ;
is truagh mo dhál im dhúsgadh.*

*Dob usa gan éirghe dhamh
d'fhéachaint an tige im thiomchal ;
ní bhfuair sinn a sompla ó shoin,
inn fá dhorcha 'na deaghaidh. [2]*

Some of the beauty and tenderness of this poem may survive into an English version.

He praises his wife when she has left him.

White hands of languorous grace,
Fair feet of stately pace
And snowy-shining knees —
My love was made of these.

Stars glimmered in her hair.
Slim was she, satin-fair ;
The straight line of her brows
Shadowed her cheek's fresh rose.

What words can match her ways,
That beauty past all praise,
That courteous, stately air.
Winsome and shy and fair.

To have known all this and be

Tortured with memory—
Curse on this waking breath—
Makes me in love with death.

Better to sleep than see
This house now dark to me
A lonely shell in place
Of that unrivalled grace.

The ladies celebrated in these poems are beautiful after one pattern, the bright-haired type always admired where a population is mixed of dark and fair. Under golden tresses, rippled or in innumerable curls, shines the broad white forehead, luxuriant brows shade blue eyes moving in their orbit with a stately slowness, the cheeks smoulder like a fire, the lips are crimson over the level range of snowy teeth, the neck is straight and slender, the bosom is white as fresh-fallen snow or the foam of the sea, the wave of breast and side and knee flows beautifully down to the straight calves and trim white feet, that bear up all this lovely weight—the details of this picture appear again and again in these poems, and only one writer, Richard Burke, confesses his love for any and every type of beauty, so that it be willing and his own.

To such beauty our poets are infinitely, though perhaps not too seriously, susceptible. And their love, too, is of the old tradition. It is a sweet sickness—that bitter-sweet which the poets of the Greek Anthology already knew ; it must be hidden from jealous watchers and spoken only in the eyes, it haunts them in their waking hours, and, “ like a jewel hung in ghastly night,” it will not leave them when they sleep ; death is their only refuge from it, and when they die it will stand between them and God’s love. And now and again a mocking voice strikes in and blows all this light and glittering web of make-believe into the air. “ Death is all your desire,” it says ; “ die then, but leave all the women behind for me, the sole survivor of the slaughter. You are sick with love ; I, too, love, but I keep my health. The world of your disordered fancies is still the old familiar world to me.

Though I love her more than all
The sun-ripened maids of Donegal,
Yet, by all the gods above !
I’m no sufferer for her love.”

So the argument proceeds, and they spend all their long meditated art in the elaboration of casuistical subtleties : they are dead, but their ghosts keep up a semblance of life about the place where love murdered them, they envy the blind secure from the basilisk glance of fatal beauty, their hearts are at issue with the eyes that let in the lovely shafts that pierced them through, they are miserable, but their misery is their sole delight,—and in the midst of all this suffering they are never so lost that they cannot formulate a paradox or give a fresh turn to some one of the ancient conceits.

For like all poetry of the kind, these verses are profoundly literary, full of reminiscence and suggestion of other times and literatures. Thus we can hardly believe that the writer of no. 15 was not thinking of that famous and much-imitated dialogue, the ninth ode of Horace’s third book :

*Donee graius eram tibi.
Nee quisquam potior bracchia candidae
Cervici iuvenis dabat,*

Persarum vigui rege beatior.

Surely this was in the mind of the man who wrote in just such a dialogue :

*Do b'fhearr liom it fhochair-se,
ós duit tugas mo chéadchais,
inás ríge an domhain-se
do bheith agam it éagmhais.*

Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh's echo-song brings us into another world, the world of the Renaissance, for the Elizabethans borrowed from Italy that device of the mocking echo which John Webster used with such strange effect in *The Duchess of Malfi*. And when we read Pierce Ferriter's

*Foiligh Oram do rosg rín,
má théid ar mharhhais dinn leat ;
ar ghrádh th'anma dín do bhéal,
ná feiceadh aon do dhéad gheal,*

our own lips begin to move involuntarily and to murmur :

Take, oh, take those lips away,
That so sweetly were forsworn ;
And those eyes, the break of day.
Lights that do mislead the morn.

Ó Géaráin bids his mistress put away her mirror lest, looking in it, she herself be lost for love of all that irresistible beauty and pine away self-slain like Narcissus. So the Shropshire Lad, in our own day, warns his love :

Look not in my eyes, for fear
They mirror true the sight I see ;

And for fear that she also will dote upon her image, like Narcissus who now wavers in the wind " a jonquil, not a Grecian lad." We might go on matching thought with thought, image with image, pain with pain, out of that age- long Book of Love, whose pages return always upon themselves, so that the poets of the Greek Anthology, the Romans Ovid and Propertius, the men of Provence, their pupils of Italy, the Elizabethans, the Jacobean, the Carolines, write in again and again the same things with every variety of script and idiom.

And yet when we had finished our comparisons, we should find that there was something unconquerably native and original in the Irish contributions, an inbred tone and quality that comes from another tradition than the common European and that gives their peculiar edge and accent to these poems. This is more to be felt than illustrated, and it cannot be conveyed to those who do not know the language, for, as with all good poetry, here, too, the whole effect is dependent upon the deft handling of idiom and a keen sense of the history and the associations of words. And one who has attempted the translation of certain of these poems may be allowed to think that it is something more than an apology for failure to claim that they are essentially untranslatable. This native quality does not come altogether from their use of the figures of Irish story to point their argument, as when one poet, persuading his unwilling mistress to fly with him, recites the many precedents of elopement among the heroines of legend, or another celebrates the inventors of the arts of love among the Gael, telling

with a pleasant fancy how Naoise discovered kissing one evening when he found Deirdre drawing on her treads, and how it has been left for him, the poet, to open the doors of jealousy, and now, alas ! he cannot close them. No, it is a deeper thing than that, a something essential dyed in the material that makes them strange and singular in their kind. There could be no better illustration of this than that remarkable poem (no. 41 below), first printed by Mr. E. J. Gwynn, put into the mouth of the wife of Aodh Ó Ruairc, whom Thomas Costello is besieging with love in her husband's absence. It is a picture of a woman swaying between two loves, and many such pictures have been drawn, but never one like this. The poem divides itself into two halves, each of sixteen quatrains, the first half addressed to the husband, the second to the lover, only the lover has the lodgement of half a quatrain in the husband's portion. This distribution of the quatrains is in itself an exact image of the woman's mind. For she is going upon the razor edge of love ; a nothing, a breath, a feather, a snowflake, two lines of verse, would incline her this way or that ; she is faithful to her husband, yet as she wavers on the debateable border her mind has already passed over and waits for her body to follow ; she calls to her husband to save her from all the subtle arts of her poet lover, and then turns to the lover and, pouring out her uncontrollable passion in a flood of wild apostrophes that leave no veil upon her secret will, she bids him betake him to his art of poetry and spare her and her husband and their wedded love. All this is told in an idiom of perfect simplicity, only the verse has all the complex harmony of alliteration and assonance and consonance that lends so subtle a charm to that most Irish of measures, the *deibhidhe*. The poem is in essence what Browning used to call a dramatic lyric, and is the last in a long series of poems, like the Old Woman of Beare and Liadain and Cuirithir, in which a figure or a situation of passion is realised with an absolute and final intensity. Such poems as these would alone justify the study of Irish literature, for their like is not to be found elsewhere, and their disappearance would be a loss, not only to Ireland, but to the whole world.

When Edmund Spenser was discoursing with his friend Eudoxus, the interlocutor questioned the poet on the compositions of the " kinde of people called the bardes, which are to them insteade of Poetts" : " Tell me, I pray you," said he, " have they any arte in their compositions ? or bee they any thinge wyttye or well favored as poems shoulde bee ?" " Yea, truly," answered Spenser, " I haue caused diuers of them to be translated unto me, that I might understande them, and surelye they savored of sweete witt and good invencon, but skilled not of the goodly ornamentes of Poetrie ; yet were they sprinckled with some prettye flowers of their owne naturall devise, which gave good grace and comlines unto them, the which yt is greate pittye to see soe good an ornament abused, to the gracinge of wickednes and vice, which woulde with good usage serve to bewtifie and adorne virtue."

There are translations and translations. And we do not know who served Spenser in this office. It is clear that the poems he meant were bardic poems of the more formal sort extolling the deeds of chiefs. Poems of our type, perhaps, never came his way. Surely, if they had, he would have recognised a familiar note in them. For these poems are witty and well-favoured in a kind that was only being brought to perfection in England in Spenser's own day. In the days when English bards were busy in beautifying and adorning the virtue of Henry VIII., this style was first practised in England. And that first harvest was gathered into the collection known from its printer as *Tottel's Miscellany* in 1557. The most casual glance at that volume will show how closely akin in subject these productions of the society that gathered round the Earl of Surrey and Sir Thomas Wyatt are to the Irish poems here printed. A few examples will suffice to show this. The examples may be taken from Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder.

To a ladie to answer directly with yea or nay.
Madame, withouten many wordes :

Once I am sure, you will, or no.
And if you will, then leaue your boordes,
And vse your wit, and shew it so.

For with a beck you shall me call.
And if of one, that burns alway,
Ye have pity, or ruth at all :
Answer hym fayer with yea, or nay.

If it be yea : I shall be faine.
Yf it be nay : frendes as before.
You shall another man obtain :
And I mine owne, and yours no more.

And here is a rendering by Wyatt or a *strambotto* of Serafino's :

To his love whom he had kissed against her will.

Alas, Madame, for stealing of a kisse,
Hauē I so much your mynde therein offended ?
Or hauē I done so greuously amisse :
That by no meanes it may not be amended ?
Reuenge you then, the rediest way is this :
Another kisse my life it shall hauē ended.
For, to my mouth the first my heart did suck :
The next shall clene out of my brest it pluck.

Let anyone read the poems in this volume carefully and compare them with Tottel's collection, and he will not be able to escape the conclusion that this is the same matter, the same witty and well-favoured verse speaking with different tongues. These are collaterals descended from a common ancestor, but by a different way. Surrey and Wyatt got their inspiration out of Italy ; it is a probable conjecture that our Irishmen derived the matter of their art from French sources, though in the later stages an English influence is certainly to be reckoned with.

But there is one main difference between the two schools. Reading Tottel, one is conscious of a matter not entirely assimilated, of a style as yet uncertain of achievement. Fine though much of the poetry is, it is yet not sure of itself, it lacks the poise and balance of achieved lyric art. That was to come later with Sir Philip Sidney and his fellows. In the Irish it is otherwise. The highest flights of the company of Surrey are above the reach of our poets. But the least remarkable of these Irish poems shows no lapse in technique, nothing otiose or unnecessary in style. Every word has its place and its meaning. The rhyming is perfect, the expression always neat and epigrammatic. These are not, as Spenser ignorantly affirmed, the "pretty flowers of their own natural device," an accidental blundering into beauty, but rather "the goodly ornaments of poetrie," the fruit of a long training and of old tradition.

The question of tradition is the gist of the whole matter. There was not in Surrey's day a stable tradition in English verse in poetry of this kind. In Ireland, on the other hand, an old and honoured tradition gave the poets a firm and steady grasp of style. One may quote here the excellent words of W. P. Ker in his address on the Eighteenth Century to the English Association : "It is the convention of a school or a tradition, such as keeps the artists from eccentricity, vanity, and 'expense of spirit,' the convention which makes an understanding

between them as to what is worth doing, and sets them speedily to work, instead of wasting their time considering what they ought to do next.”

This is said of the convention of the English eighteenth century, but it is equally true of the Irish poetical convention while it was still practised by the trained bards. In the eighteenth century the real life went out of the convention, and a diffuse and formless style replaced the strict athletic manner of the bards. But our poets still stand on the ancient ways, and their admirable idiom shows us the Irish speech as a living and muscular organism, producing literature.

There is little more that can be usefully said here. It remains only to thank Mr. O’Rahilly, who, with patient industry and an exquisite skill, has done for these our poets after three centuries what Tottel did for the English poets of his own time. And we may end by quoting Tottel’s address to the Reader, which, with the necessary changes, applies exactly to this enterprise :

“ That to haue wel written in verse, yea and in small parcelles, deserueth great praise, the workes of diuers Latines, Italians, and other doe proue sufficiently. That our tong is able in that kynde to do as praiseworthy as ye rest, the honorable stile of the noble earle of Surrey, and the weightinesse of the depewitted sir Thomas Wyat the elders verse, with seuerall graces in sondry good Englishe writers, doe show abundantly. It resteth now (gentle reder) that thou thinke it not euill doon, to publish, to the honor of the Englishe tong, and for profit of the studious of Englishe eloquence, those workes which the vngentle horders vp of such treasure haue heretofore enuied thee. And for this point (good reder) thine own profit and pleasure, in these presently, and in moe hereafter, shall answeere for my defence. If parhappes some mislike the statelinesse of stile remoued from the rude skill of common eares : I aske help of the learned to defend their learned frendes, the authors of this work : And I exhort the vnleamed, by reding to learne to be more skilfull, and to purge that swine-like grossnesse, that maketh the swete maierome not to smell to their delight.”

So today let the learned defend their learned friends, the authors of these poems. And the “ kind of people called the bards, which are to them instead of poets” will be avenged upon Edmund Spenser.

ROBIN FLOWER.

[1] The poems of Brother Michael are found in the same MS. as the *Proverbia Comitum Desmonie*.

[2] The MS. copy is not a good one, and is imperfect in l. 6 ; and some necessary emendations have been made in printing the text here. In the last line *dhorcha* should perhaps be *dhocra* (: *sompla*).

Dánta grádha: an anthology of Irish love poetry (A.D. 1350-1750) (1926)

Author : O’Rahilly, Thomas Francis

Subject : Irish poetry; Love poetry, Irish

Publisher : Dublin : Cork University Press

Language : Irish; English

Digitizing sponsor : National Library of Scotland

Book contributor : National Library of Scotland

Collection : nationallibraryofscotland

Source : Internet Archive

<http://www.archive.org/details/dtagrhaanthology00orah>

Edited and uploaded to www.aughty.org

February 14 2011