

## The Welsh Bardic Tradition Lecture Excerpt

### 7. Gnostic Stanzas

(trans. Tony Conran, *Welsh Verse*)

Mountain snow, everywhere white;  
A raven's custom is to sing;  
No good comes of too much sleep.

Mountain snow, white the ravine;  
By rushing wind trees are bent;  
Many a couple love one another  
Though they never come together.

Mountain snow, tossed by the wind;  
Broad full moon, dockleaves green;  
Rarely a knave's without litigation.

Mountain snow, swift the stag;  
Usual in Britain are brave chiefs;  
There's need of prudence in an exile.

Mountain snow, hunted stag;  
Wind whistles above the eaves of a tower;  
Heavy, O man, is sin.

Mountain snow, leaping stag:  
Wind whistles above a high white wall;  
Usually the calm are comely.

Mountain snow, stag in the vale;  
Wind whistles above the rooftop;  
There's no hiding evil, no matter where.

Mountain snow, stag on the shore;  
Old man must feel his loss of youth;  
Bad eyesight puts a man in prison.

Mountain snow, stag in the ditch;  
Bees are sleeping and snug;  
Thieves and a long night suit each other.

Mountain snow, deer are nimble;  
Waves wetten the brink of the shore;  
Let the skilful hide his purpose.

Mountain snow, speckled breast of a goose;  
Strong are my arm and shoulder;  
I hope I shall not live to a hundred.

Mountain snow, bare tops of reeds;  
Bent tips of branches, fish in the deep;  
Where there's no learning, cannot be talent.

Mountain snow; red feet of hens;  
Where it chatters, water's but shallow;  
Big words add to any disgrace.

Mountain snow, swift the stag;  
Rarely a thing in the world concerns me;  
To warn the unlucky does not save them.

Mountain snow, fleece of white;  
It's rare that a relative's face is friendly  
If you visit them too often.

Mountain snow, white house-roofs;  
If tongue were to tell what the heart may know  
Nobody would be neighbours.

Mountain snow, day has come;  
Every sad man sick, half-naked the poor;  
Every time, a fool gets hurt.

#### **8. Haiku comparators.**

Blowing from the west  
Fallen leaves gather  
In the east.

- Buson

Winter seclusion -  
Listening, that evening,  
To the rain in the mountain.

- Issa

Over the wintry  
forest, winds howl in rage  
with no leaves to blow.

- Soseki

### 1.5 Eiry Mynydd (11-12th cent. ?)

*"Mountain snow, deer are nimble;  
Waves wetten the brink of the shore;  
Let the skilful hide his purpose."*

#### Content

- Implied rather than explicit narrative.
- Creating suggestive associations between the different elements.
- Proverbial, authoritative statements about the world.
- Poetic observation as a way of extrapolating general truths about life.
- Meditative quality, implication of the stillness of the witness.
- Suggestion of the spiritually attenuated observer.

#### Form

- *A gosteg of englynion. A mixture of englyn penfyr and englyn milwr.*
- Repetition of the setting as with Canu Heledd.
- "Mountain snow . . ." conceptual still-point providing a setting for two thematic developments: witnessing of nature and of humanity.

The logic of the connexion between the nature- and human maxims is the first easiest step [in interpreting gnomic poetry]. . . . The two propositions follow naturally from the order of the world; one is as inevitably true as the other, and the fundamental truths of human life have a status comparable to that of the motions of the sun and moon or the cycle of the seasons. . . . its characteristic combination of different sorts of observation about the world emphasises the unity of the physical and the moral universe, and to some degree celebrates the purpose of God, both in creation, . . . and in the moral order which determines the position of humanity within that creation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jacobs, Nicolas, *Early Welsh Gnomic and Nature Poetry* (London, 2012), p. xxix.