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Praise, Pleasure and Power

By

Nicole Miller

"A book was not an isolated document on a dusty shelf; book truly spoke to book, and writer to scribe, and scribe to reader, from one generation to the next" (Cahill 163). This wonderfully intricate interpretation of the living nature of the word represents an attitude inherent in an active literary culture—be it contemporary or ancient. In his book *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, Thomas Cahill defines civilization through the preservation and creation of its literature. The Irish served as the sole transition from a literate Roman Empire to the monastic centers of learning of Medieval Europe. Through his examples of the Roman poet Ausonius and Christian theologian Augustine, Cahill defines civilization and through this definition reveals that the Irish reverence of the word in all its sanctity provided the means for this preservation of civilization.

Cahill presents Ausonius and Augustine as representatives of their respective cultures. Ausonius represents the stagnant, dying Roman culture just before the fall of the empire. Cahill defines a thriving culture as one which is changing and creating. The Rome of

Ausonius was in fact, "a static world [in which] civilized life [...] lies in doing well what has been done before. Doing the expected is the highest value" (Cahill 21). This is most clearly seen in his lifeless poetry in which "insights are scarce and genuine emotion is almost entirely absent" (Cahill 21). Cahill uses Ausonius to represent the "complete extinction of *Res Publica*, the Public Thing—social concern" (Cahill 28). While Ausonius represents the dying spirit of the Roman Empire, Augustine represents the establishment of Roman power in the church. Cahill highlights the importance of Augustine's works, for he "is the first human being to say 'I'—and to mean what we mean today. His *Confessions* are, therefore, the first genuine autobiography in human history" (Cahill 39). Although independent thought and analysis were occurring, there was a marked shift in the emphasis of literature. The writings of ancient Rome, especially those of Ausonius, had been focused on the secular. With the introduction of Augustine as the representative author of the age, Cahill is emphasizing that the creation of literature has become ecclesiastically based. This shift in emphasis represents the shift in power of the Roman civilization revealing that the only power held by Rome had become the church.

Cahill establishes his definition of civilization in literary terms using Ausonius and Augustine as examples of the society in which they were living. In this definition, Cahill makes it possible to argue that because the Irish preserved the literature of the past and continued to create new literature, they in fact saved civilization. As Rome fell and the illiterate Germanic tribes gained control of the once thriving Roman Empire, Ireland, "at peace and furiously copying, thus stood in the position of becoming Europe's publisher" (Cahill 183). Modern western civilization is based upon Roman ideals of law and literature. Cahill argues that the Irish saved nearly all evidence of classical civilization through literature. Without the Irish scribes preserving the works of the classical world, only the vaguest notion of the Roman Empire would have remained, and western civilization would have taken a completely different course. Had it not been for the Irish preservation of classical literacy, "We would have lost the taste and smell of a whole civilization. Twelve centuries of lyric beauty, aching tragedy, intellectual inquiry, scholarship, sophistry, and love of Wisdom—the acme of ancient civilized discourse—would all have gone down the drain of history" (Cahill 58). In preserving the ancient works, the Irish redirected the course of western history.

The Irish monks could not have possibly fully understood the magnitude of their actions. For these scribes, the copying of books had become a religious act as they "enshrined literacy as their central religious act" (Cahill 163). This reverence of books is seen in the medieval poem "Glorious Lord." The poem seeks to illustrate the glorification of God through all the aspects of the life of the monk. Amongst the very Celtic aspects of nature and water, appears the Celtic respect of the word, "May books and letters praise you" (Davies 28). In this line, the poet reveals that he uses his duty as scribe as a religious act. Although regarded as an act of praise and glorification of the Almighty, these monks were also learning as they copied. Brendan Kennelly's poem, "Sculpted From Darkness" unites this attitude of reverence with the aspect of learning. "Those who eat the god/ Digest the god's language/ To increase their substance, deepen their shadows" (Davies 207). In this, Kennelly describes Christians as those who "eat the god," evoking unusual images not normally associated with communion. In this poem, he is commenting that these believers are also gaining knowledge in the form of language. This language increases their abilities and understanding of the world and, in turn, grants them further power. The Irish monks were not simply ignorant

scribes copying marks from one page to another. They pursued knowledge, wisdom and an understanding of the books they were copying. They did not discriminate against non-ecclesiastical works; in fact they even preserved much of their own language and many of their own traditional tales.

In this copying of ancient and contemporary works, the Irish monks not only saved many classical works, but they also preserved the spirit of a literary culture. This tradition, carried over from the classical world, valued books and the creation of new literature. The Irish monks embodied both these ideals. Not only were these monks "intensely interested in the worlds opened up to them by the three sacred languages of Greek, Latin, and—in a rudimentary form—Hebrew, they loved their own tongue too much ever to stop using it" (Cahill 160). This love of their own language is most clearly seen in the margins of the books copied by the monks and the "scribblings of the Irish scribes, who kept themselves awake by writing out a verse or two of a beloved Irish lyric—and so, by accumulation, left for our enjoyment a whole literature that would otherwise be unknown" (Cahill 161). This creation of literature sets Ireland apart from the remainder of Europe during this period, as the only people continuing literacy and

further creating new interpretations. In this sense, the Irish preserved the spirit of the classical world.

By Cahill's definition of civilization in the creation of new literature, the Irish had in the process of preserving the ancient civilization become their own distinct civilization. The monasteries became centers of learning which "accepted commoners as well as noblemen and those who wished for learning but not the cloister" (Cahill 158). This attitude of catholicity and education is a reflection of the Irish cultural roots in Celtic society. The institution of monasteries as places of learning is logical in light of the tradition of Druidic colleges in ancient Celtic society. In the great Irish epic, *The Tain*, Cathbad the Druid is described as having "a hundred studious men at his feet, trying to learn the lore of the Druids from him. (That was always the number that Cathbad taught: when one left, he made room for another.)" (*The Raid* 86). This description of the transfer of precious wisdom emphasizes the sacred quality of knowledge and the expression of thought through language.

As the Druids demonstrated, the ability to invoke images in the minds of the listeners with mere sounds is an immense power. Expression of thought is in a sense, the creation of these meaningful sounds from silence. The very act of this

creation is sacred in every sense of the word. To create something from nothing is in essence, a miracle. Herein lies the sanctity of the word. The inspiration of the poet is difficult to explain or even to describe. In fact, the best explanation might be the one provided by the ancients: divine inspiration. The Celts embraced this idea of divine inspiration in the expression of thought. In his "Letter to the Beloved Welsh", Morgan Llwyd reminds each member of his congregation that "within you there is the Blessed and Infinite Trinity, the Father, the Word and the Spirit (that is, will, delight and power, the three of these being one)" (Davies 85). Although this is a direct description of the Trinity, it also represents the act of creation and equates that act with the divine. The Father is the will--that is the inspiration and desire to create. The Spirit represents the power in the actual act of creation. The Son represents the delight in the final creation. In this description, creation is equated with a divine act. The theme of the miracle of creation is also seen in the medieval poem "Almighty Creator". The poet praises God and reiterates the great respect for the expression of thought, "The Father created the world by a miracle;/ it is difficult to express its measure. / Letters cannot contain it, letters cannot comprehend it" (Davies 27). In this, the

poet compares the expression of thought through language to the highly miraculous creation of the world from nothingness. In this expression of praise, the poet also points to the sanctity of writing as believed by the Druids. Because language is so potent, the Druids were the only people permitted to capture language in writing.

As Celtic society evolved, the position of Druid and bard merged into a kind of priest-poet. The importance of the bard originated with the emphasis on reputation and the role of his songs in determining that reputation. These poets "were part of the skilled elite" (Cunliffe 106). The value placed on these men's words was so great that "one can anticipate the tension that there must have been at a feast when the bard started to perform to see whom he would choose to praise and how he would use his skills to balance his eulogies between those he considered to be worthy of them" (Cunliffe 106). Even the Romans recognized the power of the word wielded by the bard. Lucan remarks in his *Pharsalia* that the bards are those "whose chants of glory bring back the memory of strong men lost in battle for the distant future" (qtd. in Markale 50). This power to allow men to live on through song was immense. In this almost mystical ability, the bard became "a kind of priest who saw himself as one of the founts of wisdom in the Celtic world.

The hidden mysteries of his knowledge are his verses, the words he uses are the basic ingredients of an alchemical *grand-oeuvre*" (Markale 125). In the recognition of the sanctity of the expression of thought, the bard became a priest figure and merged with the identity of the Druid defining the expression of thought as a sacred task.

This reverence for the priest-poet is shown throughout traditional Irish myth. Cuchulainn, the hero of the Irish epic *The Tain*, and the great missionary St. Patrick are the archetypical Irishmen. The myth surrounding each man is the manifestation of Celtic-Irish ideals. Cuchulainn's actions throughout *The Tain* reflect the attitudes and values of ancient Celtic society. The myth presented in this epic in fact contains true elements of Celtic culture. In the tale of St. Patrick, the missionary managed to unite the diverging cultures of Roman Christianity and Celtic Paganism. In this fusion of beliefs, he created a distinctly unique Celtic Christian culture. Both men performed supernatural feats and conveyed similar attitudes about nature, trials, and death. They both ultimately shared the same respect for the creation and inherent power of the word. Cuchulainn reflected the attitudes of the Celts in his respect for bards as he treated the bard politely "for he well knew the strength of the poet lay in the stories that

he could tell about those who displeased him" (Eickhoff 144). Patrick himself becomes this priest-poet in writing his *Letter to Coroticus*. Patrick insistently reiterates his own ignorance and inability throughout his works to emphasize the divinity inherent in the inspiration of language. He states that he "believes it to be the undeniable truth that it was the gift of God" (*Confession* sec. 62). Through the heroes of their myths, the Irish ultimately revealed their reverence for the word that drove them to become scribes.

As the distinctly unique Irish developed their culture, they united their ancient Celtic past with their newfound Christian faith. As their centers of faith and learning grew, they ventured out into Europe to become missionaries. These Irish monks

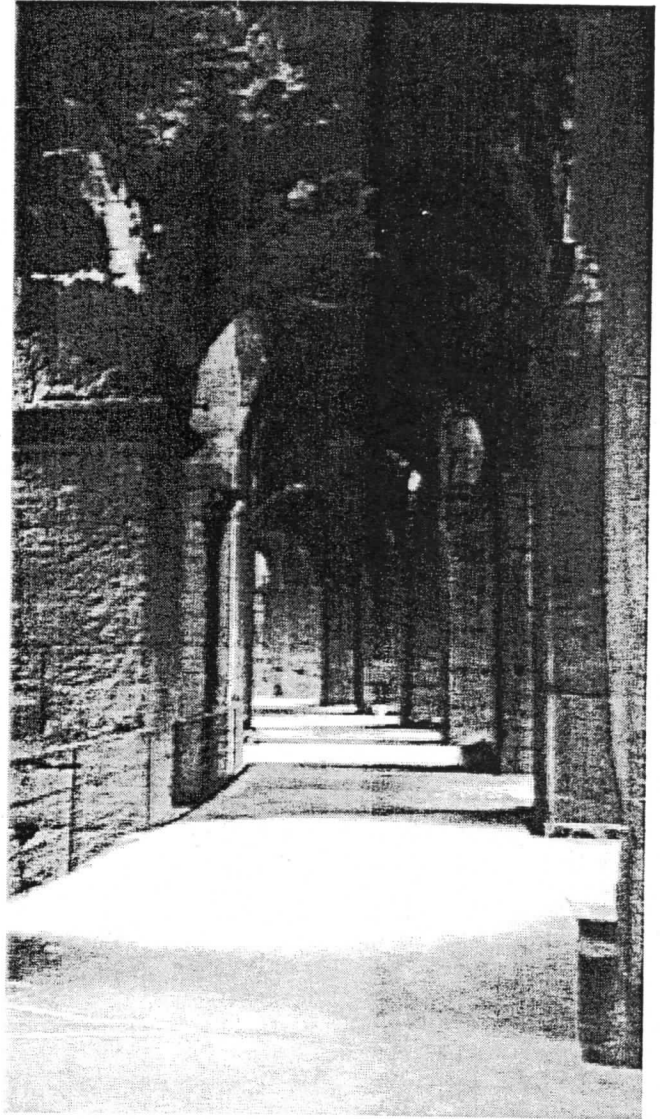
brought with them their books [...] tied to their waists as signs of triumph, just as Irish heroes had once tied to their waists their enemies' heads. Wherever they went they brought their love of learning and their skills in bookmaking. In the bays and valleys of their exile, they reestablished literacy and breathed new life into the exhausted literary culture of Europe. (Cahill 196)

These faithful believers found praise, pleasure, and power in the written word and took this tradition, entwined with their religion, into illiterate Europe. The

Irish preserved the works and spirit of the ancient world, but they also gave their own unique flavor to these works and carried on the literary tradition that has shaped Western Culture.

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Flavian Amphitheatre at Rome