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As Poetry Recycles Neurons

3rd June 2013

I is for Illumination.

Through all the ups and downs of my field study this quarter, this has been the predominating theme. Though I was originally going to go with “B is for Bard,” I decided that, due to my focus on the work of William Blake, it would be better to run with his axiom of Illumination in all its respects, e.g. his method of “Illuminated printing.” I’ve come to find that this is a far deeper element of what I want out of my life. My Druid source books, when discussing the practice of the Bardic tradition, make references to the “Illumination of the Bard,” a method of, as the title implies, making the words of a given work *shine* through prosodic format and word choice.

There is an even deeper element to I. My field study to a great extent came to be about me. How do *I* structure myself to get my head out of the clouds, and take my dreams into the realm of pragmatism? How do *I* decalcify my pineal gland, open my “third eye” of imagination to a secretly, subjectively illuminated world? How do I bring out my hidden Imagination to the world so that, quasi-paridoxically (or cyclically), my life can be geared more toward the world around, and less focused on *me*?

Ultimately, it is Illumination that makes the Bard, not the other way around. All legitimate sources on the Bardic tradition that I’ve found thus far will tell you that Bards studied and practiced for years to develop a complex “system” of prosody, which in Welsh literature is referred to as “Cynghandedd (Cung-HAN-deth),” which literally translates into English as “harmony” (Parry 122).

The reality is that, contrary to what such rigorous superimposition of form may imply, aesthetic does not arise solely through words and syntax meticulously crafted. Though some lyric does arise as such an artificial construct, the result often comes off as crafted and inauthentic, as in most contemporary romantic-comedy movies: written to utilize and encourage certain social conventions, subliminally advertise certain popular products, and follow an at least somewhat conventional plot outline.

“As within, so without.” The illumination of reverie provides what Robert Bringhurst calls the “narrative impulse” that pulses out like the energy that powers the flowering of Spring. But of course, like Rhiannon atop her steed, galloping through the forest of the night, the quasi-shamanic (in this case, Bardic) state of consciousness achieved by true lyricists must be sustained, otherwise she disappears like *la fumée.* Form and aesthetic tell the story together, at *two different levels: emotional* and *territorial.*

“If the form constrains the sound, it does so to enable it to hover like a dragonfly, leap like a dear or pounce like a cat. The constraints, if they succeed, become a source of freedom and power. Literary form is part of what it takes for language to enter the realm of *literature* or *poetry*…If the form is a constraint, it’s the kind of constraint that allows a song or a story to go where others can’t. Wings are a constraint that makes it possible to fly.” (Bringhurst 208)

A truly Inspired lyrical/literary work is thus self-sustaining. It is powered by a jolt of imagination—meaning *has* to happen however it can, otherwise everything loses its point. Everything manifests in however a manner is sufficient for the environment into which it takes form. A lightning bolt is never a straight line; its shape is always fractal and twisted. Static electricity accumulates in a thick cloud, and by the nature of physics must discharge into anything with which it can establish a current. Both the destination and path of the bolt are decided by the path of least resistance—the most mutually beneficial and harmonious means possible, unless the object being struck is an unfortunate passerby.

Reverie works the same way. The cloud of imagination,[[1]](#footnote-1) sometimes thin and whispy, will, when conditions are right, thicken into a massive cumulonimbus, with tons of thunder waiting to roll within. The energy of semantic accumulates as the static electricity of aesthetic, and, once the storyteller is positioned properly, strikes them with force,[[2]](#footnote-2) shaping itself to the environmental conditions of society at that particular time.

With this established, the remainder of this essay is self-epigraphed from a smaller essay on the eAlphabet site, explain further. Some information will be repeated; I choose not to edit it for the sake of convenience on my part, and reinforcement of understanding on the reader’s.

Quantum physicists and crazed mathematicians are slowly coming to realize the possibility, and even the probability of a literally infinite universe. If we were to imagine an entirely aphysical state of existence, in which there is nothing to perceive, only perception itself, and nothing to manifest, only pure kinetic energy, we would likely have achieved the ultimate state of existence that the Druids, Brahmans, and Shamans always refer to in one way or another as enlightenment. Quantum theory, in fact, comes dangerously close to describing what some might call heaven.

In his final book, The Holographic Universe, Michael Talbot offered a theory based on the work of specialists from various fields, such as Dr. Stanislav Grof, a pioneering psychiatrist, physicist David Bohm, and neurophysiologist Karl Pribram. Talbot theorized from their discoveries that our “physical” reality is actually an elaborate hologram. In other words, it is a projection of quantum energy: a means of manifestation for potential energy.

According to Talbot, Dr. Pribram came to believe from his pioneering work on the structure of the brain that “our perception of the world occurs as a result of a complex reading and transforming of information at a different level of reality.” (Talbot, xv, emphasis mine) Outside of “this” reality is nothing but potential.

The state of pure existence is probably where you go when you leave this universe, and also what people describe when they have a Near-Death-Experience (NDE). Talbot: "What do NDEers look like when they have not constructed a hologramlike body for themselves? Many say that they were not aware of any form and were simply 'themselves' or 'their mind.' Others have more specific impressions and describe themselves as "a cloud of colors,' 'a mist,' 'an energy pattern,' or 'an energy field,' terms that again suggest that **we are all ultimately just frequency phenomena, patterns of some unknown vibratory energy enfolded in the greater matrix of the frequency domain**. Some NDEers assert that in addition to being composed of colored frequencies of light, **we are also constituted out of sound…”** (Talbot, 247-8, emphasis clearly mine)

“It is all a matter of vibrations--a matter of response to vibrations. In no other way than through vibrations do we get anything...We are all made--plants and fish and cats and elephants and men--of organisms built of tissue that is built of cells. The life force in the cells--protoplasm—[is] made up of almost everything in the universe in infinitely minute particles. Now, because that protoplasm...is made up of almost everything in Nature, it responds to almost everything in Nature. Protoplasm is the sensitized film on our bodily and intellectual plates; vibrations from about us strike it and gradually they make a dent.” —Luther Burbank (cited in Buhner, 53)

When you strike a pitch fork or a guitar string, it doesn't resonate at just one frequency. Every note is an aggregate of frequencies oscillating and harmonizing together. Certain intervals of notes are naturally consonant, others dissonant. Certain notes, when sung on the guitar, will cause other strings to vibrate in unison. Similarly, a pitchfork of the same frequency as the first one will, if reasonably close to the original, will harmonize with it without being struck itself. It's a simple  philosophy in Druidry: Like forces (not necessarily identical) attract.

The great wordworker Robert Bringhurst devoted a great deal of time in chapter 8 of his Elements of Typographic Style to the hidden geometrical patterns found within different forms, from page shapes to musical intervals. The measurements of common page sizes are directly proportional to certain mathematical ratios corresponding to various geometric patterns--pentagons, hexagons, etc. Now, these same proportions also correspond with the ratios of notes in the diatonic music scale, e.g. perfectly square pages represent a ratio of 1:1, which is identical to the frequency ratio of a unison in musical terminology, meaning two perfectly identical notes played together. An octave, the same note at different pitches, has a frequency ratio of 1:2, the same as the proportions of the most common of ISO standard paper sizes.

A common ratio found in science and the arts (according to Wikipedia), and occuring everywhere in the Natural World (in reality), is the golden ratio (φ), in the words of Bringhurst, "two numbers, shapes or elements embody the golden section when the smaller is to the larger as the larger is to the sum."

Bringhurst explains the essence of the natural flowing of a story in The Tree of Meaning: "Broadly speaking, the eternal patterns of metrical verse are associated with song, and with speech under the influence of song," while more internal, branching, and fractal structures are associated with story, and with speech under the influence of story—speech propelled by some kind of narrative impulse."

The styles of poetry and storytelling of oral (indigenous) cultures follow this flowing pattern, where certain segments of the whole story fit in to a perfect proportion to the rest. They are propelled by an instinctive impulse--the Illumination of the Bard. It is meaning that just fits naturally—fractally—within the whole story. It's an intangible energy that is perceived not through any one specific element of a story being told, but a charge that is evident in every aspect of the story or song or poem.

Form reflects aesthetic; form **is** aesthetic. "as above, so below; as within, so without." form is how the story manifests on the physical level, communicating the intangible, living charge of meaning. Everything manifests according to the charge that drives it. So, like everything else with Nature, it just circles back into itself: form is manifestation is propelled by kinetic energy is a charge that has accumulated or has been accumulated is meaning, is semantics, which is inherent in aesthetic and reflects itself in...form.

# Works Cited

Bringhurst, Robert. The Tree of Meaning. Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2008

Buhner, Stephen Harrod. The Secret Teachings of Plants. Rochester:Bear & Company, 2004

Parry, Thomas (Translated by Bell, H. Idris). A History of Welsh Literature. Oxford: Clarendon Press , 1962.

1. This might be confusing. Running with the theme of “Imagination,” “Illumination” and “Inspiration” together, it might make more sense for clear, sunny skies to represent imagination. The above metaphor pertains to the idea of semantic charge powering the manifestation of the literature, and it is, of course, only a metaphor. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Also, storytellers are superheroes who harness the power of lightning to jolt people’s neurons. Again, just a metaphor. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)