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VARIA IV

On the alliteration in 'The guesting of Athirne'

One of the finest examples of early Irish nature poetry consists of four poems on the seasons, connected by an eleventh-century story about a visit by Athirne to his foster-son. These unrhymed poems are composed in the common heptasyllabic metre, each stanza ending with a shorter line of five syllables. The lines are linked by chain alliteration, the first stressed syllable of the line alliterating with the last two or three stressed syllables of the preceding line. The last word of each poem is the same as (or the shorter form of) the first one.

The poems have been assumed by D. Greene to 'be textbook pieces intended to illustrate for students the technique of archaic Irish verse'.¹ Nevertheless, in none of the three manuscripts² do we find a text with full alliteration. Professor D. Greene has attempted to restore it, basing his emendations on the assumption that the alliteration was essential for the metre.

The most drastic emendations he had to make were in the poem on spring, which reads in the edition of K. Meyer as follows:

1. Glass úar errach aigide,
2. [] úacht in gáeth gignither,
3. gláidsit lachain lindusci,
4. luin ic écnacht corr crúadéigme.
5. Cluinit cúana a díthrebaib
6. fri éirge moch matanraid,
7. dúscit éono indferaid
8. mór fiad resafirtheichet
9. a fid, a feór glas.

Alliteration in line 5 seems to have been admissible (cf. line 9), but lines 6–8 are evidently corrupt. To restore alliteration Greene accordingly changed the first words of these lines:

6. fri dúsacht moch matanraid.
7. Medraid éonu a hinnsénaib,
8. imda fiad ré firtheichit . . .

I would propose an easier solution. We can gain the normal pattern of alliteration in these lines if we change the order of lines 6 and 7. The order was probably mixed up because of the scribal tradition to continue the first

¹ D. Greene and F. O'Connor, *The Golden Treasury of Irish Poetry*, London, 1967, 140.

² *Book of Leinster*, p. 118a, and *Harleian 5280 fol. 77a* are edited by K. Meyer, *Ériu* 7 (1914) 2–5; a copy from RIA 23 N 10 is edited by R. Thurneysen, *Ériu* 7 (1914) 197–8.

line of a stanza on the previous line if there was open space. This implies that *dúscit* began a new stanza.

The translation may then be as follows (reading with Greene *úacht ina gaith* (l. 2), *luinnécnach* (l. 4) and *a hinnsénaib* (l. 7)):

Raw and cold is icy spring,
 cold will arise in the wind,
 the ducks of the watery pool have raised a cry;
 passionately mournful is the harsh-shrieking crane,
 which the wolves hear in the wildernesses.
 The birds³ awaken in the isles
 at the early rise of the morning:
 many are the wild animals from which they flee
 out of the wood, out of the green grass.

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³ Reading with RIA *eóin*, *eóno* being probably Middle Irish *acc. pro nom.*