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Title	The Kenning
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Publication date	2017-12-01
Original Citation	Gilson, J. (2018) 'The Kenning', in McGrath A. and Meehan, E. (eds.) Dance Matters in Ireland: Contemporary Dance Performance and Practice, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 191-200. doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-66739-3_11
Type of publication	Book chapter
Link to publisher's version	https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-66739-3_11 - 10.1007/978-3-319-66739-3_11https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9783319667386
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Download date	2026-11-07 01:34:51
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/10314

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University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Jools Gilson. (2018) 'The Kenning.' In McGrath A. & Meehan, E. (eds.) *Dance Matters in Ireland: Contemporary Dance Performance and Practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 191 – 200.

The Kenning

T A I C H I

October 2013

I'd rather stay in bed, but know from years & years of body shadows in my shoulders & neck, that if I don't get up and do my Tai Chi, everything in my day will be harder. And so I rouse myself from a warm bed, pull on a robe, walk through to the TV room, and open the door to the deck. For the first time this Autumn, there is a bite of cold, and I go downstairs and pull on a coat, hat & gloves. When I go back outside, it is a magical starlit darkness. I know that whilst I work the stars will fade, and the sun will think about rising. Yesterday, I stood here accompanied by the distant bark of dogs, and the recurrent pissing and shitting of the cows in the field beside me (the romance of the countryside . . . But this morning, stars astonish me. I wish I knew their cartographies, which was which, how far away they are. They put the world & my small body into a vertiginous perspective. And so I stand like a tree, doing my Chi Gong, dressed like a fool, in the cool of an October morning. I give space for tensions to release, to feel the wooden deck through my socks & slippers, and the rise of my spine like a swaying bamboo cane. Over half an hour or so, I move gently through 6 arm positions, I play a game of letting go of the chatter in my mind, and mostly failing, trying instead to be present in my belly. Across the water, the red light from Ballycotton lighthouse pulses, and a fishing boat motors East. This precious practice is almost the only thing that helps my back and neck, and believe me, I've tried

everything. Once I've finished the Chi Gung, I stretch up into twilight, before rolling slowly down my spine. Sometimes, I'm accompanied by Bartie chivvying the cows in to be milked. Almost always, Susie the cat comes to play, nudging my legs demanding attention, biting playfully at my pyjamas, and most times I give in, crouch down and rub her delighted belly whilst she purrs like a juggernaught.

O G H AM S T O N E S

Along the northern corridor of the quadrangle at University College Cork (UCC), there are several dozen Ogham stones standing in lines like sentries. Around 1500 years ago (between the C4th & the C8th) their outer edges were carved with the language of Ogham, made up of sets of strokes and cross hatches. Together, these diagonal notches make up an alphabet of twenty letters - the earliest form of writing in Irish. Victorian collectors at UCC hauled these stones from where they stood in the Irish landscape for a millennia or so, and placed them in the colonial architecture of the university quadrangle. Aside from their physical dislocation, two things enchant and trouble me about these stones – that Ogham may have been a secret sign language (five strokes/ five digits), and that each letter was named after a tree or a shrub indigenous, and still present, in the Irish countryside. The alphabet is sometimes called the 'tree alphabet' or the 'Beith-Luis-Nion' i.e. Birch-Rowan-Ash. Because of these beguiling histories, I chose to work with twenty young dancers and make a choreography for the main university quadrangle, out of an imagined signed version of the Ogham language. The dancers sometimes spoke the names of each letter in the Ogham alphabet as they performed the choreography, ghost-signing a language we know almost nothing about. And they do so in the same groups of five letters in which

the Ogham alphabet was written; /Wild Apple, Hazel, Holly, Oak, Hawthorn/; /Ash, Willow, Alder, Rowan, Birch/; /Yew, White Poplar, Heather, Gorse, Silver Fir/; /Elder Blackthorn, Reed, Ivy, Bramble/.

B E R E N G R A V E L A N E

Down the bottom of Berengrave Lane where my two sisters and I were born, the road gives out onto lanes that lead down to the muddiness of the River Medway and views across the water to the power stations at Hoo. On these shores full of flint, and the ruins of a disused cement factory, I spent my childhood foraging for fun. And we found it in capturing fish, and all kinds of other creatures, in climbing walls and hiding in bushes, in skinning our knees, and running home through the alley that led between orchards back to our house at 100, Berengrave Lane.

ken-ning (kĕn'ĭng) n. A metaphorical, usually compound expression substituted for the name of something, especially in Old English, Old Norse and Old Irish poetry.

Whale Road (the sea)

O G H A M S T O N E S 2

The Ogham choreography which formed part of *The White Quadrangle,* was a riff on loss and remembering, a performative embodiment of signing bodies. An invocation

of the Irish countryside from which these stones came, in a context of ordered shrubbery and manicured grass, in the quadrangle modeled on the English University. In such incantation, there is a connection to the present tense of rural Irish flora – the indigenous trees and shrubs of the Irish countryside, used to label mouth-sounds one and a half millennia ago.

B E R E N G R A V E L A N E 2

In this overgrown place my mother and father picked blackberries and damsons, took them back to the kitchen at Berengrave Lane, and poured them from old Tupperware boxes into bowls of cold water. And this sets them going. Gears shift, and jam jars are lined up along the counter, cooking apples peeled, sliced and thrown into the preserving pan with the blackberries, damsons washed and boiled up with lemons, and then placed into muslin, to drip their purple-red elixir into a wide bowl. And we burst through the back door with dirt on our jeans and blackberry stains around our mouths, climb on a chair and peer at the wonder of a purple rolling boil.

T A I C H I 2

I can see the shadow of my husband moving in the kitchen below, cast across the lightening grass. In my last twenty minutes or so, I practice the form, the moving part of Tai Chi. I rehearse a different way of moving in the world, one which is undone of superfluous movement, one which uses the ground to direct core gestures, one which leaves the neck and shoulders, and even arms, gloriously untroubled. When I work through this pattern of gestures, sliding feet and turns, I try to be mindful of the layers of learning, the un-doing of complexity, to access forgotten strength. At the moment,

my hour of Tai Chi in the early morning comes just before dawn. And so as I labour quietly, undoing internal tangles, night turns into day. Once I am done, I take my grateful body inside to rouse sleepy children with chilly hands & a twinkling grin.

> **Kenning**, ***noun,*** Middle English *kennen* to make known, see, know, Old English *cennan* to make known, declare; cognate with Old Norse *kenna*, German *kennen*.

Corpse Sea (blood)

O G H AM S T O N E S 3

Carla Bottiglieri is my Assistant Director for *The White Quadrangle*. Carla is Italian - I met her in Paris whilst doing a voice training course, but she's a dancer - my sort of woman. Carla has a wide-open sensibility, a beautiful performer and singer, and an unassuming gentleness that I so love. We devise the choreography of the Ogham alphabet in a Kick-boxing gym on the quays in Cork. She is my remembral, helping me mark the ways I find gestures to meet the Ogham. Four sets of five signs to conjure the trees and bushes of each letter. We work on five at a time, so that groups of trees and bushes cluster at our lips, as we carve something in three dimensions to meet their heft.

Carla also helps me with the warm-ups for the dancers, and it is here that I first begin to understand something about the strange training she's doing in Germany, on an island in the middle of the winter. We lay on the floor as she coaxes a connection between our shoulder blades and our palms, and we dig deep into our internal map of

ourselves to find a way for these two parts of ourselves to converse again, - there was once a time, when we were tiny embryos, when one grew out of the other. And this strange experienced anatomy is called Body Mind Centering

T A I C H I 3

Once a fortnight, Peter O'Donoghue comes to the Church of the Holy Family in Youghal to teach us Tai Chi. He does this, because we've organised for him to come, and because a group of women have found in its airy spaces, open doors of possibility. We've become enchanted with other ways to be in the world. And if this sounds a little hokey, you may be right, but it is true nonetheless.

On the weeks between the Peter Saturdays, we meet on the beach in front of the Lifeboat Station, looking across the water to the Ferrypoint in Waterford to practice. We do so amidst Saturdays busy with beach business. There are Jack Russells sprinting, cormorants diving, Lifeboats being cleaned, rowdy teenagers learning to sail, and a dozen women moving slowly in unison, on a small sandy beach in Youghal town.

B E R E N G R A V E L A N E 3

'Joy has black currants at the bottom of her garden and doesn't know what to do with them!', 'Mr Pleasance has raspberries, bun, we'll have to go tonight,' 'John down the road has too many crab apples, we can get them in the morning.' At other times, fruit is just left in plastic bags on the step by the front door. And in this way, fruit produce moves between neighbours, in smiling repetitions of gathering and giving. And once

it is transformed into something beautiful that will keep, so it is off out again, back into the grateful palms of those who gave it, and to those we visit, to anyone sick, and always to family. And this economy of fruiting, preserving, and feeding makes wide wondering arcs of care, much like the curves of so much of the fruit that goes into its making. In the days that trip upon days that make up a life, there is always all kinds of difficulty, but in the movements of such kindness, in its curving gestures, difficulty seems somehow, answered, if not appeased. “Take some jam,” my mother says, as I leave the house for a visit. “Can you manage some jam?” as I leave to fly home, “there’s a crumble for tea” as she leaves to walk up the lane. ‘I’ve made gooseberry pie’ as she opens the basket at a neighbour’s house. And I am eight again and feel the weight of stolen cherries in my pocket.

“Kennings are riddle-like circumlocutions where the object or person they refer to is not named directly, but must be inferred through a knowledge of the conventions of kenning patterns and an understanding of the way concepts relate to each other.” Debbie Potts

Battle Oak (a warrior)

T A I C H I 4

Winters, we stand wrapped up in layers with scarves and gloves, and off we go then to Luigi’s, where we clasp hot tea, and undo the week in counterpoint to our quietness on the beach.

From the outside, Tai Chi looks like nothing at all, a few wafty moves you could pick up in a couple of minutes. But *really* it's a practice of powerful effortlessness, of doing something so corporeally simple, that it's impossibly hard. And the way to learn is not to try too hard, not to strive for *doing*. I have learnt that if we let struggle stop, our moving can be an undoing.

OGHAM STONES 4

In the final choreography, four quintets are spun into a complexity of patterns, rhythms and repetition, energies shifting between groups of dancers. These three running in from the West Wing, and these two slowly moving in front of us across the south path, and those dozen in turning sweeps from the middle of the East Wing. Richard Povall's music places them in a puzzle of three-dimensional signing. They are powerfully present, as they focus on the score, sprinting across grass and gravel to get to their places in time. Half way through there is a beat of silence: all twenty of them standing in the north east corner of the quad, hearts beating, listening for their cue. And then the music hefts in on us again, and they sprint into its tumbling driving energy – twenty of them running together in a wide circle, before the kaleidoscope reels and fractures them again, playing counterpoint against counterpoint. In this whirl of movement, two of them come to stand before us and begin to sign methodically, and then a trio joins them, and then a duet, and gradually all of them in a long line across the quadrangle. And for the first time, they begin to sign altogether. The music stops suddenly, and twenty figures in white march towards us signing and incanting all the tree names of the Ogham alphabet into the chill silence of a March

night, and when they are done, the lights blackout quickly, and it is over. The Irish countryside is in my mouth again. Listen.

1. Wild Apple, Hazel, Holly, Oak, Hawthorn
2. Ash, Willow, Alder, Rowan, Birch
3. Elder, Blackthorn, Reed, Ivy, Bramble
4. Yew, White Poplar, Heather, Gorse, Silver Fir

B E R E N G R A V E L A N E 4

As I write this out in the Swallow House in my garden in Ireland, I have a timer on for ten minutes. Every time it rings I get up, put the computer onto the little table beside me, and go into the kitchen, where I peer at boiling gooseberries and elderflower, carefully take a teaspoon of the liquid and drip it onto a cooled saucer which I place in the fridge.

And when I go back in another ten minutes, I run my finger through the cooled liquid to see if its surface wrinkles, and if it does, it's set. When I do this, I think of my mother's forefinger moving like this through hundreds of saucers of jam, decade after decade. And like me, she licks her finger, after testing for the set. And here is my daughter in the door, and up on a chair, peering at the wonder of a red-orange rolling boil.

A kenning is a grammatical meander. In its sinews, a kenning is a hesitation about naming, a resistance to the finality and stilling force of the noun.

T A I C H I 5

I'm recording my Tai Chi teacher for a radio programme. In order to do this, I must stay close to Peter as he turns and moves and shifts his weight. I have to let go of self-consciousness as I dance with his teaching, microphone in hand, listening to his directions, conscious of the rest of the class following. I spiral gently, mirroring the movement he teaches, turning as he turns, shifting weight as he does. I can only listen like this, because I move like this. And I can only listen / move like this, because I have been practicing Tai Chi on my own and with Peter for years. I must move this way to hear his moving speak, so that I might use the medium of listening (radio) to hear the shapes he makes in space, how he works with effort, or rather without it, and how a voice can also be a movement.

In her book, *Relationscapes*, Erin Manning describes what David Sprigg's *Animate Sculptures* do to the viewing body – "David Spriggs's works are wonders in movement. They make you move." (Manning 2009) These sculptures produce viewing bodies which compulsively move to see the sculpture differently. In counterpoint to the cool distance of viewing a painting, Sprigg's work choreographs the viewing body in pleats and turns, and though it is a different thing, I am reminded of dancing / recording Peter's Tai Chi teaching. I must move to listen, and the listening / recording is a cipher for his moving body precisely because I moved / listened in this way.

O G H A M S T O N E S 5

The White Quadrangle took place at dusk on St. Patrick's Day in 2005. It performed the labouring presence and consequence of dancing bodies, tangled and snared within the layered complexes of histories present within the quandrangle. It was about an Irish university, and the Ogham Stones it houses, and the things we do to make meaning, ever-housed in our aching moving bodies. There in the cool March dusk, twenty dancers perform their present tense, with concentrated precision.

B E R E N G R A V E L A N E 5

There are wide fields of strawberries, and later on orchards with plums and pears. My mother and the other mothers round about, pick fruit in the summer and autumn to earn extra money. When I am pre-school small, I am bundled on the back of a bike, after breakfast, sitting close to my mother's working back, as she cycles along the Lower Rainham Road, past the *Three Sisters*, and up the hill to Upchurch, where she crouches with the other women, gently tucking straw under strawberry plants, so that their tender fruit will not be spoiled.

A kenning twinkles. It has a game at its heart – the riddle.

Mead of Odin (Poetry)

T A I C H I 6

Tai Chi is a choreography of presence. Its slow processes strengthen what my teacher calls ‘the seat of integrity’. To practice it feels like a process of becoming more oneself, being able to respond more genuinely and straightforwardly to all manner of situations. It is also a practice which engenders humbleness. Peter, our teacher, tells us it’s made him nicer. And we believe him.

O G H A M S T O N E S 6

A *Bríatharogam* ("word ogham") is a two word kenning which explains the meanings of the names of the letters of the Ogham alphabet.

Alder	*dín cridi*	protection of the heart
Willow	*tosach mela*	beginning of honey
Hazel	*milsem fedo*	sweetest tree
Blackthorn	*saigid nél*	cloud seeker

B E R E N G R A V E L A N E 6

I’m three years old, perhaps four, and I’ve wandered away from the group of women who work methodically down the rows of strawberry plants. The small plants are flowering, and I’m enchanted by their papery white blossoms. I don’t understand that these are the very things that will turn into strawberries, and so I have picked a growing bunch of them in my tiny hands, until one of the women looks up, sees what I have done and scolds me. Panic licks my insides and I taste salt, and drop my small posy in the dirt.

O G H A M S T O N E S 7

“Ogma, the strong god of eloquence with a face like the sun, is said to have created the Ogham script. His tongue was believed to be linked to the ears of his followers by thin gold chains.” (Connolly & Moroney 2000)

T A I C H I 7

And always the billowing clouds and the land across from us in County Waterford, and the tide marking its slow ascent and descent from us.

B E R E N G R A V E L A N E 7

Her hand in mine walking across the dappled orchard.

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THANKS

With thanks to Tom Birkett, Lecturer in Old English, and Kevin Murray, Lecturer in Early and Medieval Irish, both at University College Cork.