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Brendan Devlin

‘Sursum Corda’

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Seán O Ríordáin (1916-1977), major Gaelic poet of the 20th century, expresses a relentless quest for honesty and authenticity, personal and cultural, here in the objective correlative of a West Kerry seascape. The poem is translated by Brendan Devlin, a priest of the Diocese of Derry, resident in Maynooth College.

It's not all that important, it's the body only:
But if it were in your soul that the ailment lodged
Everything of your making would bear its flaw
For you cannot but defer to the fault far down:
A loss of bearings this, a masquerade,
But you must move on, through the driving rain,
Through the fog, with me to guide you, till distant hills light up,
And light they will not until your own mind is enlightened:
But tend to what is yours, and you will see afar
A seal lording it amid the ocean,
Surveying idly what there is to see
(For the faithful will be praying for your good estate):
Riches will be yours, I promise, if you are of the noble breed,
The ever-rolling ocean, the unyielding hills,
Cast out your baited lines, my old sea-dog,
The catch is bountiful there and health-restoring:
On this the masquerade will fail and you will breathe
Tang of sea-wrack and the tearful surf,
A surf cast up from ocean's depths,
A shining surf and coursed by seabird-flocks;
Let your wits loose and go gladly with the stream,
For you cannot but defer to the tide within you:
All artful rhetoric will melt away at that
And words will surface from your train of thought,
As reefs rise up and break the ocean's skin:
Feast your two eyes then on the sea-girt islands,
Drape about you Beiginis and the Seanduine.
But if that birth-mark of yours is causing your unease,
Be sure between you and me it's the proof of your noble line.

(From the Gaelic: Seán O Ríordáin, Brosna, 1964)