

The Oran Mór A Song for a Fragmented World

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There are those who claim that the Celts do not have a creation myth. If true, how sad, for it is in our Creation Tales that we discover *Who* we are. I suppose we may forgive such folk for making such claim, for they are of course referring to a Genesis type creation myth, assuming that because such a Creation Tale does not exist in a coherent form that one must not exist. This, however, is a false assumption. It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that a Celtic Creation Tale does in fact exist. Agreed, we will not find this tale in its full cohesive form anywhere in Celtic myth, but this does not mean that it does not exist. In fact, I think that it means just the opposite: The Celtic Creation Tale is so primordial, so intrinsic to the Celtic mythos, that its existence and reality was taken for granted by the ancient Celts. It had no need to be spelled out, as are other Celtic tales.

Here is a primordial myth that, like a Celtic knot weaves throughout the entire corpus of the Celtic mythos, knitting an interwoven, cohesive mythology. This primordial myth is known as the *Oran Mór*, "The Great Song." The Oran Mór, as the primordial "sea melody," flows through the myths and legends of submerged lands, mystical springs, live-giving cauldrons and holy grails. As *Wisdom* it "fills the head," and gives meaning to the severed heads that so disturbed Caesar. It is the "creative melody," always creating, both in the hearer and in the one singing. It is the myth of *Uaithne and Boand* who between them gave birth to the three strands of music: sorrow, joy and peace. It is the *Song of the Three Cauldrons* giving and receiving creative blessing in their song. The words of the song are as diverse as there are people to hear it; always taking their meaning from their divinely breathed sound, never from that design which we impose. The Oran Mór's divine sound gives meaning to – no creates – the Celtic languages; languages that provide us melodious words such as *Cruithear*, *yr wyddor*, and *grammeria* to role on our tongues and savor; words that have no import apart from the divine melody.

Ultimately, the divine song, as with Percival, gives form to, and rises up within us the basic question of Celtic myth— "Why do you suffer?" The answer is simple, Creation suffers because we no longer listen for and hear the numinous melody. It is this primordial song, which in the Celtic mythos interprets not only Celtic myth, but is Life herself!

And this is exactly why having a Creation Tale is important. Although merely having a Creation Tale is of little value if it has no import in how we live our lives. We live in an age that no longer hears, or even listens for, that primordial Melody of Creation. This is an age that serves up soul-less science and life-less religion, each noisily clamoring to be heard over the other. It is an age runctiously marked by fragmented, in-your-face individualism, an individualism so tumultuous that it robs the self of its very ease. No longer, in the discordant noise of this age, can the Great Melody be heard. If it is hear, ever so slightly, it is seldom recognized for what it is. All we hear is the contentious noise of conflicting "realities." And, thus, we wander restlessly with a sorely dis-eased soul, through a clashing wilderness of antagonistic half-truths, each demanding to be heard as the Melody of Life. Yet, the Oran Mór, the primordial Creation Tale assures us that all we need to live wholly is already within waiting to be heard and creatively applied.

I have been accused of being "intense" about this. And, rightfully so— I am. People are hurting, countries are warring, and children are shooting children. Is it no wonder that people are hungering for ease? And it is to the Celtic mystique that people are turning. But what are they finding? What are they being offered? Or maybe more to the point, why are you reading this articles? Is it mere curiosity, or is it something more?

We are looking for alternatives. We who are Western people need not look anywhere else than to our Celtic ancestors. The “Celtic Way” strikes a cord, perhaps even unrealized, deep within us. Perhaps once again we are beginning to hear the melody.

We must admit that for some the interest is nothing more than a fad, another “old way” revived. The problem with revivals is that the evangelistic fervor quickly loses steam. And for some, its money and acclaim that drives them to sing the nostalgic praises of Celtic spirituality, serving up some sort of Celtic Pabulum that demands nothing. And others are the *re-creationists* who seek to re-create authentic Celtic Christianity or Druidism. Yet, what value is there in re-creating something of the past in the name of authenticity that has no relevance to today? However, before we point fingers we must acknowledge that we all have been guilty in one way or another. Is it perhaps because we have missed for ourselves that which the Celtic mystique truly has to offer a hurting world? I would like to suggest that we will find this not in revivalism, recreations, or nostalgic remembrances, but in the rediscovery of the primordial myth of creation, the Oran Mór, and applying it in a way that makes sense to us who live on the verge of a new millennium.

We need now to *listen* to the Oran Mór, not merely hear the words, but *hear* as we would a piece of music, letting the words, melody, and harmony become part of us, for the primordial Celtic myth of creation is a song. It is the Oran Mór, the creative divine melody. Steve Raby in his book, *In the House of Memory* describes the Oran Mór as “creation’s all-embracing melody.”¹ It is this and far more. It is as John Scotus Euirgena suggests, God re-creating himself in Creation. The Oran Mór goes something like this...

*Quiet—
Eternal Quiet
Not even the sound of the restless, stirring, dark waters could be heard.*

*Then...
A great spiraling strain of Melody moved across the endless waters.
Subdued at first,
Then quickly gathering momentum until it reached a great crescendo.*

*And, then...
There was Life!*

*But the Melody did not stop.
It continued its song,
Filling all of Creation with its divine harmony.
And so it continues today,
For all those who listen.*

Here is the Genesis tale, yet it is not the Genesis tale, at least as we traditionally know it. It is not the Genesis tale because the act of creation does not end on the seventh day, but is an *eternal process* which all of Creation participates in with the numinous Creator. The song is clear that the divine melody is *enfused* into all of Creation. That is “enfused” spelt “*en*,” with all the meaning that this prefix implies. Creation is imbued with, that is, composed *of* and *by* the numinous melody. Creation is not the Oran Mór, but is fully enveloped and permeated by the Song, so that it is virtually impossible to tell where one starts and the other leaves off. This, by the way, is the mythic meaning of Celtic paradise, Tir na n’Og, the mystical Blest Isle of the West. Would it not be wonderful if we could rediscover this mystical paradise for ourselves; that place where the primordial melody sings loud and clear? Celtic myth implies that we can indeed do so. Not only rediscover it, but also live in it! How? By learning to hear and listen to the divine melody of

Creation that permeates all of Creation. And let us never forget that as part of Creation! The divine melody sings in us, too.

Up to this point we have moved forward assuming, perhaps stridently, that the primordial Creation myth, the Oran Mór, does indeed exist. But can we actually demonstrate this assumption, and if so, is it such as in fact to merit the claims that have been made thus far for the Oran Mór? We need now to postulate three working hypotheses:

First, if the Oran Mór is as claimed, intrinsic to Celtic myth and language, then we will find at least hints of the Oran Mór in Celtic myth and language.

Secondly, if the Oran Mór is intrinsic to the whole of Creation, then those disciplines that study Creation and her creative energy – the sciences, psychology, theology, linguistics, etc. – along with the myths of indigenous people will bear this out.

Thirdly, if the Oran Mór is intrinsic to the whole of Creation, as we have claimed, then we can argue that it is the Oran Mór that gives Creation her creative intrinsic wholeness, and offers creative vitality and wholeness to a world who has lost her intrinsic wholeness.

To fully explore these hypotheses would take far more time than we have allotted. We will by necessity, then, have to limit ourselves to a few superficial explorations to test the validity of these hypotheses. Hopefully, the questions raised in this paper will cause us to undertake further exploration.

We will begin where we ought to begin, with the first hypothesis. Can we find hints of the Oran Mór in Celtic myth and language? Two mythic examples will suffice: That of the “Gifting of Music,” and “The Song of the Three Cauldrons.”

The “Gifting of Music” comes from the Irish vernacular, and is part of the legend of *Uaithne* and *Boand*. In this tale the human *Uaithne*, which means “harmony,” and his otherworldly wife, *Boand*, which means “melody,” give birth to three sons. With each birth Uaithne plays his harp, a gift from The Dagda, the father of Boand, to Uaithne so that he could soothe his wife’s labor. The first son, *Goitriaghel*, is born with much mourning and weeping, giving us the music of sorrow. The second is born amidst joy and laughing and is named *Giantriaghe*, the music of joy. The last to be born, *Suantriaghe*, is born in peace and tranquility and, thus, the music of sleeping comes to be. We must note that the legend is quite clear that both Boand’s labor and Uaithne’s harping were equally part of the birthing process. As in the Oran Mór, it is the creative melody moving across the waters of the creative womb.

As each child is born bearing the name of a particular strain of music we see an interesting progression that entices us to think about the movement of life. The births move from innocence of pre-birth, to sorrow, to joy, to peace. Incidentally, the same progression that the Lutheran theologian Walter Brueggemann finds in the Hebrew Psalter. There is much significance in this as we consider fragmentation and wholeness. The most obvious being the sequence from birth to pain of maturing to the peace of death. From the innocence of Creation we move through the sorrow and suffering of fragmented Creation to the reuniting of the This-World and the Other-World into One. Most significantly, from our perspective is the realization we cannot know joy or peace unless we first experience sorrow, for innocence gives us nothing with which to make judgements upon. Each is a birth, each is a creative act, and each moves us creatively forward. In all we find the idea of pilgrimage, that of finding our places or resurrection. But to find resurrection we first have to die. While not explicit, this truth is implied in the Oran Mór, for it is an observable fact that what makes creation eternal is that things must die to be reborn. We see this in the tree loosing its leaves in the fall only to have them “reborn” in the spring, and in the seed kernel that dies in giving birth to the sprout.

The Song of Three Cauldrons, comes from a gloss found in a fifteenth century Irish legal codex attributed to the mythical *awenyddion*, Amairgen, the druidic personage behind the Milesian invasion of Ireland, and Nede mac adne, the chief poet of the Ultonian king, Conchobhar mac Nessa.² The song sings of three cauldrons, *Goiriath*, *Emmae*, and *Sóis*, the cauldrons of warming, vocation and knowledge, respectively. *The Song of the Three Cauldrons* is worthy of a paper in its own right, but what is significant for the purpose of this paper is that the song equates music with the act of creating. In particular, the cauldrons, which we are told are “God-given,” creatively sing. For example, in Caitlín Matthew’s translation, *Coire Emmae*, the Cauldron of Vocation, sings...

*“with insights of grace,
with measures of knowledge,
with streams of inspiration...”*

Does this not sound like the Creative Song, the Oran Mór? But there is more, for we are told that the cauldron’s singing provides...

*“exaltation of the lowly,
mastery of eloquence,
royal discernment,
sovereign insight,
a poetic lineage
to cherish students;
(it is) where laws are regulated,
where meanings are recited,
where musical runs are chanted,
where knowledge is propagated,
where the free-born are taught,
where the bound are set free,
where the nameless win fame;
where praise is related
by measured regulation, by measures of immunity,
with eloquence of sages;
a confluence of scholarship...”*

Creative acts all. The continuing creative presence of the Oran Mór. Lastly, we are told in the *Song of the Three Cauldrons* that the Cauldron of Vocation creatively...

*“Gives and is replenished,
promotes and is enlarged,
nourishes and is given life,
ennobles and is exalted,
requests and is filled with answers,
sings and is filled with song,
preserves and is made strong,
arranges and receives arrangements,
maintains and is maintained.”³*

What is significant about this cauldron, as well as the other two, is that we are told by Amairgen that the God-given cauldron’s are “from the mysterious elements,” that is, those primordial creative elements, and “ennobled in each belly.” Further, the “ennoblement” is by song, and from this ennoblement “pours forth the utterance of divine Word.” A close study of this gloss makes it evident that this “Word” is

creative energy, and that it goes forth in song. Although put in the context of an ennobled stream flowing from, and through, three cauldrons, the song is clearly the Oran Mór.

Water imagery is only to be expected. The Celtic word for sea, depending upon which branch of the Celtic language one speaks, is either *már* or *mór*. *Mór* then can mean either “great” as in “The Great Melody,” that song that is sung by the clan chief following a banquet, or “Sea Melody,” or “Melody of Water.” The Hebrides island of Oran Mór, and the whisky that is produced there by the same name, certainly speaks both of “great” and “water.” Thus, it should not surprise us that the Celtic myth of origin, although it takes shape in many forms, is at its core concerned with water. In the retelling of the Oran Mór, the melody moved over the water. In subsequent myth, the sunken city, the submerged land, and the overflowing spring are the most common motifs, each obviously concerning the creative action of water. That, *The Song of the Three Cauldrons* should use the water motif should be of no surprise either. What is significant in this poem is that water becomes equated with wisdom, holy numinous Wisdom. Therefore, that which overflows the land in the Celtic submergence myths is Wisdom, or the divine melody, the Oran Mór. It is not insignificant that the proto-Celtic primordial mother-goddess is named Anu or Danu, the Water-Goddess who lends her name to the Danube. Throughout ancient Celtic lands rivers are named after the vernacular versions of the mother-goddess, hence we have the River Boyne and the Shannon. Here the Oran Mór takes on another aspect, that of femininity. More accurately, the Oran Mór is simultaneously masculine and feminine. The breath, or energy, being the masculine aspect and the water, or nurture, being the feminine aspect. Both are merged together to wholly function as the numinous melody. Unfortunately is hard to picture in the English language how breath and water become wholly the creative movement, thus in this regard our previous interpretive synthesis of the Oran Mór falls short.

There is a legend from Brittany that upon close examination is a retelling of the Oran Mór, one that convincingly combines the masculine and feminine concept. It is the legend of “Joachim and Anne,” or simply, “The Legend of St. Anne.” Before the telling of the legend, we must note that in French, *anne* means grace, and that St. Anne is venerated as the mother of the Virgin Mary. “Mary,” from “Marie,” comes from *mar*, the word for water. Our version comes from the seventh century commentary of Father Christophe de Vega on the legend:

*“In the beginning god created the heaven and earth (Joachim and Anne). And the earth was without form and void (Anne was barren). And darkness (affliction and confusion) was upon the face of the deep (on the face of Anne), and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters (the waters of Anne’s tears to console her). And God said, ‘Let there be light (Let there be Mary) ... and the gathering together of the waters (the gathering of the graces) he called maria (seas or Mary).”*⁴

The *Legend of Saint Anne*, while supporting our hypothesis, gives rise to a number of pertinent theological and philosophical questions that must be addressed.⁵ Both the legend and the Oran Mór call into question our theological definition of grace. Is grace separate from the numinous, or is it intrinsic to the numinous? Does grace have a human aspect? The Oran Mór, I believe answers that Grace is the numinous energy that sustains creation, or as the Orthodox Church defines Grace, “the uncreated energies of the God-head.” Thus, grace is not external to the numinous. Then it must be grace that is sung into *all* of Creation. And if grace is divine, then what does that say about the God-image within Creation? Obviously we have made the switch to the second hypothesis: that our understanding of the Oran Mór can be made to bear upon those disciplines that deal with Creation and her nature. However, we are getting ahead of ourselves.

In this retelling of the primordial Celtic myth of Creation, the numinous melody is nothing other than divine Grace. Moreover, from this legend, and others, it is safe to surmise that Grace is another name for both the Oran Mór and the numinous image within (or at the very least, aspects thereof). If we follow the logic of these assumptions, how should we then understand the divine image that is simultaneously, both

within and outside of Creation? Furthermore, how will such understanding effect our cosmology? It seems, at least to me, to turn topsy-turvy all of our traditional Western assumptions about God and Creation and souls.

To this question we must add the Irish *nuirt*. The *nuirt* although frequently translated as “soul” is better understood as the numinous image within Creation, an image that according to Celtic myth is both sung into existence within, and the Creative Song herself. Such imagery suggests much in regards to wholeness from both a psychological and spiritual standpoint. Herein, I believe, are contained truths that must be explored and made applicable: truths that can help a fragmented world find wholeness.

Such thought is ripe for exploration and contributes to our understanding of the Oran Mór, thus bearing out our hypothesis, but for the sake of time we must turn to the Celtic languages. The ancient Celts believed that the individual words take their meaning not from that which we impose, but from their very sound. The word for alphabet in Welsh literally means to “sing sounds of wisdom.” The languages of the Celts are very rich languages steeped in the imagery of music. In Scot’s Gaelic the primordial Creator God is known as *Cruithear*, “the one who harps;” reminiscent of The Dagda and his mystical harp. The Scots Gaelic word for harp, *cruth* or *chruith*, literally means, “to gather together to give form or image.” Many English words such as “faith,” “grammar” and “magic” have their etymological roots, as do many words in other languages, in the Celtic divine Song of Creation. In this, there is an intrinsic etymological continuity that speaks to the imbued nature of Creation.

Although in English we spell “(w)holy” with either a “w” or a “h,” with each spelling meaning something different, both words have the same intrinsic meaning. That which is whole is *holy*, and that which is holy is *whole*. We are told that the Oran Mór sang holy creation into existence and continues to sustain holiness with her song. A holy Creation is a whole Creation, and a whole Creation is a holy Creation. Such logic must be made to bear upon science. And in fact it does. The modern Welsh word for science is *gwyddor*, which is derived from *yr gwyddor*, meaning “the study of sound.” Thus, *gwyddor* with its etymological root in music hints that there is a relationship between science and the Oran Mór. This is a relationship one that goes far beyond the mathematical formula of musical notes, although this too bears out the intrinsic nature of the Oran Mór. There is a scientifically demonstrable relation between the Oran Mór, whose music is conceived spirally rather than linearly, as Celtic art amply illustrates, and the Koch-curve, Mandelbrot’s fractal theorem, quantum theorem, and Black Holes. Math and physics only touch upon the scientific truths disguised as myth and illuminated by the Oran Mór

Peter Gilet in his examination of Vladimir Propp and the universal folktale suggests that folktales are derived from a primordial myth of initiation, or beginnings.⁶ It is part of our second hypothesis that indigenous myth from other than Celtic sources will bear out the universality of the Oran Mór concept.

To test this we turn first to the American Navajos and then to the Hebrews. The American Navajos call the feeling of harmony, of being in tune, *horzo*. It is *horzo*, the harmony of Creation (both the song and the reality of) that Changing Woman, at the creation of the worlds, instructed all Navajos to seek after. In this Changing Woman echoes Celtic thought. In Hebrew mystical spirituality it is the *alef* that is at once, both primordial God and the numinous breath that “sounded” all into existence, and the *alef*, while not Creation, is found in Creation. Here again, an echoing of Celtic ideas.

This leads us to the third and most pressing hypothesis. We have seen in a cursory way that the Oran Mór is intrinsic to the Celtic understanding of creation and their place in it. We have also tested the hypothesis of the universality of the Oran Mór concept, and have found that at least the Navajo and Hebrew myths bear out the validity of this hypothesis. Therefore, we can accept at least conditionally, that the Oran Mór is intrinsic to the whole of Creation, and as such, is that which first, gives Creation her intrinsic

wholeness. And if this is true, can we not say that then that it is the Oran Mór that offers creative vitality and wholeness to a world who has lost her intrinsic wholeness?

Given the validity of our hypotheses, may it not be supposed, hypothetically, that the intrinsic reality of the Oran Mór can be brought to bear upon various disciplines of study in such a way as to cause each in their own way to contribute to the wholeness, rather than the fragmentation of Creation? Perhaps, even more to the point, given both the intrinsic psycho-theological and scientific aspects of the Oran Mór, could we not expect that a interdisciplinary exploration of the concept and its practical application to us as we move into a new millennium would restore harmony, or wholeness, to us as humans?

¹ Rabey, Steve, *In the House of Memory*, (NY: Dutton/Penguin, 1998), p. 269..

² MS TCD MS H.3.18. pp.53 al – 57 bs.

³ Matthews, John & Caitlín, *Celtic Wisdom*, Rockport, MA: Element, 1994), pp. 256 ff.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jean Markale provides a thorough study of the role of St. Anne in Breton legend in *The Celts: Uncovering the Mythic and Historic Origins of Western Culture*, (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1993), pp. 32, 283-4.

⁶ Gilet, Peter, *Vladimir Propp and the Universal Folktale: Reconnisioning an Old Paradigm*, (NY: Peter Lang, 1998).

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