



## And There Was A Song...

### The Psycho-spiritual Dimension of Celtic Myth

Frank A. Mills



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 endlesswaters. Subdued at first, then quickly gathering momentum until itreaced 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.*

This primordial myth of Creation, common to all people, tells of a mighty melody, the very breath of God, that sung Creation into existence. To the Celts it was known as the *Oran Mór*, "The Great Melody"; a melody that did not cease with the initial creation, but goes on and on, and on, inspiring Creation along its pilgrimage of (w)holiness.

But, alas, we live in an age that no longer hears, or even listens for, that primordial divine Melody of Creation. This is an age that serves up soul-less science and life-less religion, each noisily calmmoring to be heard over the other. This is an age runctiously marked by fragmented, in-your-face, individualism. An individual-ism 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 heard, ever so slightly, it is seldom recognized for what it is. All we are left with 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.

Thomas Cahill in his book *How the Irish Saved Civilization* sets out to show us just that. However, we may ask, what good is there in saving civilization if we cannot hear the Melody that civilizes? What good is there in saving civilization if it has lost its own Soul, and with it, *ours*?

Fortunately, the Melody does not have to remain unheard, and the Soul lost.. There is another way, a way that can literally save – restore – your soul, and ultimately that of civilization. The "other way" is found in The Great Melody, the *Oran Mór* of Celtic mythology.

Let us be clear here, when we speak of "salvation" and the "saving of our soul", we are not talking about escaping hell and going to heaven. It is about something far more urgent; a matter of spiritual

spiritual and psychological, life or death, right now, *in the present*, here on earth. "Salvation" is about finding a way to live, now, that makes sense in a troubled world. It is not about escaping, it is about living at-ease.

If the Great Melody is common to all people, why Celtic mythology, why not other mythologies? The simple answer is that we need a myth that enables one to hear the strain of the Melody, and the western myths that we most traditionally live by seldom, if ever, do. Celtic myth is not the only myth that provide the means to hear the music, but it is Celtic myth out of all myth that seems to resonate in almost all of us who are of western ethnic heritage. Somewhere, at a different place in each one of us, it strikes home. Is this, perhaps, because very few of us can escape having a bit of "Celtic blood" in us? Merely look at a map of ancient Celtic Europe to see the truth of this. If so, then it is this western myth – and it is solidly western – that, because of our individual "collective unconscious", most poignantly speaks to us and resonates within.

Surprisingly, Celtic myth also seems to speak to others who are not of Celtic European heritage—the African, Asian and Native American. It is not insignificant that one of the world's largest Celtic festivals is held in China! Why is this? The answer is simple. Celtic myth, while European in context, flows from a much deeper well of mythos, the mythos of the Great Melody, that all people hold in common. In this sense, Celtic myth is an European archetype of that communal mythos that we all must discover and place into practice if we are to find salvific wholeness in a fragmented world.

Celtic myth tells history, life if you will, as it ought to be, not necessarily as it appears. In this sense, Celtic myth serves as a bridge between the spiritual and natural realities, perhaps even the bridge between sanity and insanity. Celtic mythology offers to us not only a place to begin, but an archetypal lifestyle that enables us to connect with our roots and discover who we really are. It allows us to make sense out of our life, enabling us to find goodness and fulfillment in who we are, giving to us our rightful place in the larger cosmic scheme. In the context of creation myth, it enables us once again to hear the inspiring strains of the Great Melody.

### A Melody That Spirals

There is no linear movement to the *Oran Mór*. It is a great spiraling melody, that while never changing is always different. It is a song that spirals inwardly, rejuvenating itself, and outwardly, recharging Creation with its melody. Like the



Oran Mór, Celtic myth is built upon a logic that unlike more familiar western linear logic, spirals inwardly and outwardly, at the same time. Right from the beginning we are presented with some difficulty: How are we to make personal sense of a spiraling logic in a conflicting linear world? Yet, it is this difficulty that, paradoxically, opens the door to finding wholeness in our fragmented world. To think spirally requires that we intently re-examine that place in the world where our linear thinking forces us to exist. Spiral thinking will open up for us new vistas of imagination, full of endless possibilities. We will be no longer forced to look at our life situation linearly with its limitations and externally imposed value judgments.

Spiral thinking – Celtic logic – flows from within, outward. Such thinking causes us to reach in through the *dis-eased* self to find that *at-ease*, or whole, place that is within, and then to build upon that *at-ease* place until we reach outward, personal wholeness. Psychologists call this *metapsychology*, the process of reaching inward to find that “*meta-point*” from which our healthy, or *at-ease* self flows from, and upon finding it, to build upon it. Unfortunately for us, psychology for the most part is linear, thus, at best, as such it can only add to the confusion.

In Celtic myth, the “*meta-point*” is symbolized in the Paradise Tree, the spiritual center of the world, the *axis-mundi* from which, and to which, all wisdom flows. We will come upon the Paradise Tree again, but for now it will suffice to note that in the Paradise Tree of Celtic myth we find a “*meta-point*” to build upon as we allow spiral thinking to bring us to that place of personal wholeness.

Spiral thinking is subjective, while linear thinking is objective. The process must be spiral (subjective) not linear (objective), otherwise we are building upon “*truths*” as we have been conditioned to see them by culture. We need to permit Truth to flow from our real Self, that Self which is animated by the Great Melody. Such Truth can only be found subjectively. We must allow our soul to process and arrange the Truth in a way that makes sense to our personal pilgrimage

### Memory is Myth.

Human history is not fact-processed, but story-processed. Human memory is one part fact and one part story. One part of our memory draws facts out of events, while the other part *places them in their episodic sequence*. It is the sequence, not the facts, per se, that allows our memory to establish purpose. Roger C. Schank, the artificial intelligence pioneer, states, “We know them [stories], find them, reconsider them, manipulate them, use them to understand the world and to operate in the world, adapt them to new purposes, tell them in a new way [...] Our ability to utilize these stories in a novel way is a hallmark of what we consider to be intelligence.” Human memory then, is subjective, not objective. Human memory sequentially arranged is what we call *myth*. It is that which allows us to make sense of our world.

If we examine myth as “human memory sequentially arranged” we see that myth is neither objective or embedded history. That myth is not objective reality is obvious. Myth contains too much imagination to be objective fact. That myth is not embedded history is less obvious. In fact, anthropology has long held that we can learn about primitive society via the truth intrinsic to their myth. However, this has the effect of making that which remains after the embedded truth has been removed, *un-true*, thus, *non-real*. But is that which is left truly *non-real*?

The problem with this approach is that it fails to do justice to the reality of myth in the lives of ancient peoples who functioned totally within the framework of their myth. To understand the people of antiquity and their culture, to give reality to their history, we must do so within the full context of their myth. If we are to understand what Celtic myth has to offer to us today, we can do so in no other way.

History, according to Levi-Strauss in *Structural Anthropology*, studies societies which are “*other than we live in.*” This makes history by its very nature objective. Unfortunately, given human nature, this is an impossible construct. The recorder of the event, and the later historian, are both subject to the criteria of their own milieu. We draw, for example, much of our knowledge of the period of the “Free Celts” from the records of both Greek and Roman historians, yet we can assume, from internal evidence, that these histories were colored by a number of immediate criteria, not the least being to stir up the Roman and Greek citizens against Celtic marauders. No longer, then, are we presented with objective historic facts.

The modern historian, too, is not free from his immediate criteria. When we look for embedded historical truth in myth, it is always from the perspective of our immediate context and criteria. Even to label ancient cultures as “primitive” is to bias one’s definition of objective truth. It is impossible in our study of history to place ourselves within the immediate context which formed the basis and criteria of past cultures and their myths. It is also impossible, in our study of history, to place ourselves outside our immediate context and criteria. Therefore, we can never make the aim of history that of knowing truth. This is not to say that history cannot be known. History is but one facet of the same reality within which an actual event took place, the chronicler recorded it, and in which we live as we study it. Our task, therefore, is not to learn historical facts with no immediate context, but to make a particular historical experience “open-up” so as to experientially incorporate it into our lives. If we fail in this task we will be left with soul-less science and life-less religion, or to put it more bluntly, dogma that has no bearing on, or basis, in true reality.

If myth is not embedded history, what is it? How are we to view myth so as to make it meaningful to our reality? Simply put, we are to see myth as *history in its totality*, but with a difference: Myth is *subjective* history. The role of



myth, or as we have described it, sequential memory, in our lives is to stimulate us to know our true reality. Myth affords us a knowledge of reality by giving rise to the phenomena of reality within us. Myth is able to do this because it subjectively encapsulates history and works it and reworks it in such a way that places our subjective perceptions in an episodic historical context that stimulates us with a knowledge of reality. Myth ignores, or twists, the objectivity of facts, i.e., truth, by recognizing that their is far more to life than objectivity. Myth suggests that perhaps objective thinking is the least important of all psychological functions. Their are questions that are beyond objective answers, myth asserts, and in so doing, provides us with subjective answers that need not be absolute, or more accurately, subjective questions that defy absolute answers.

We must distinguish between "real" and "truth". The "real" is that which exists. "Truth" is our judgment about that which exists, even to the point of denying its existence. The atheist, for example, must consider the existence of the *fact* of God's existence before he can make a judgment about his non-existence. While "truth" poses as objective, it can be nothing other than subjective. "Truth" is always subject to our perceptions. In Euclidean math  $1+1=2$  *absolutely*. Yet there are other mathematical constructs, where according to their logical perceptions,  $1+1$  *absolutely* does not necessarily equal two. Here, we are faced with two conflicting absolutes. Which one is correct, or true? Only the one that applies to the external contextual perceptions that we are working with. Thus, what is absolute truth for one person may not be for the other. Our perception of "truth" always varies according to our circumstances and the criteria that form the basis of our immediate culture. The "real", on the other hand, while appearing subjective, is absolute, in that it exists, and is therefore objective. Myth therefore, by presenting the *objective absolute* – reality – subjectively "opens-up" history for us by placing us in relation to the "other than" of history. It is our relation to the "other than in which we live" of history that causes an interaction between our soul and what we perceived that constitutes reality. Facts in themselves can never constitute reality. We need to look no further than electricity to see this demonstrated. Which proves, or allows us to make a judgment about, the reality, or existence, of electricity? The "facts" of the theory of electronics, or the interaction between the hand and belief – that which is perceived to happen – when the switch is thrown and the lights come on?

Using myth in our pursuit of finding our real identity forces us also to differentiate between "real" and "imaginary". There are two ways to do this. The first is one of absolute opposition. The "real" is everything that *is*, the absolute. The "imaginary", then becomes everything that *is not*, thus *non-real*, and ultimately *un-real*. This, of course, is the classic dictionary definition. The problem with this approach is that it limits the "imaginary" to our imagination, our un-real mind-thoughts, and nothing more. The alter-native way to differentiate is to accept that the "imaginary" is built upon

perfectly real foundations, not the *un-real* of our mind-thoughts, and from a relative objectivity that turns it into reality as it is processed. The word *imaginary* has its etymological roots in the Old French *imago* which at its core means "to give birth to a reality". In other words, to give "reality" to our thoughts. It is the forming of thoughts, even those of the imagination, into solid images that creates our sense of reality. Thus, the "imaginary" is how we have sequentially arranged the episodic events, thus memory is subjective history. Which is the definition of *myth*. It is this sequential arrangement within human thought that, according to the French mythologist Jean Markale, tenuously functions as a bridge between reality and whatever is imagined. Without the ability to give expression to our imagination in a way, that to us, makes functional sense, we would become insane.

When we allow myth to function in our lives as it is intended, myth is not about the past, or even the future, it is about *now!* Myth opens-up a particular historical experience and incorporates it into our present *here and now* understanding. History, from the perspective of myth, is more than sterile facts slanted toward a particular bias. It is *living* reality, and in its living, gives vitality to our sense of the presence of the present. As myth has no purpose other than to give meaning to reality, it is able to record more "real facts" and "truths" than objective history can ever hope to do. This being the case, it better serves our purpose to let myth illuminate our quest for our real self, than to force our quest upon myth. In other words, it serves no purpose in our quest to interpret myth from the basis of what we consider to be our quest.

We need also to let myth as it is lived in our lives, form our quest. This is especially true in Celtic myth. For to the Celts, their myth is their history, and as their history, *it is who they are*. If we are to use Celtic myth to find who we are, we must approach myth in the same way as did the ancient Celts. making it both our history and who we are.

The ancient Celts believed that we are the collective wisdom of our ancestors. If this is true, we can assume that the collective reality of myth lies within each one of us. It is through this collective reality that we are able to discover our *at-ease* self and thus give rise to our wholeness. It is this accumulated reality that C. G. Jung called the "collective unconscious". He writes that we each carry a permanently buried reservoir of material accumulated through humankind's evolutionary journey." It is this that causes Celtic myth to hauntingly resonate within us when we hear it, even when we call it primitive fable. It is this hidden reservoir that must be uncovered within each one of us if we are to find our true self.

### The Healing web of Myth

Celtic myth is first and foremost, historical. No individual Celtic myth, even those of relatively late formation, ever stands fully alone. Each myth is always part of the larger



web. While there are subjective truths to be found in the individual myth, it is the interweaving of the various myths that give sense and a depth of richness not only to the whole, but also to the individual myth. No matter how much we plumb the profundity of meaning, we are forever finding deeper meaning, each new discovery sending us on a pilgrimage through the entire corpus of Celtic myth.

There is an etymological relationship between *history* and *histology*. "History" (*historia*, Grk.) and "histology" (*histos*, L.) both have as their root the idea of web. "History" then, is the study of single events in relationship to each other, so as to present the *complete story*. In other words, it is the episodic order of events, interwoven into a web, that give them their meaning. "Histology" is the study of tissue, or the interwoven "web of cells". (Have you ever noticed how the lines on the surface of our skin tissue look like a web?) Combining these two ideas, and applying them to Celtic myth presents us with the idea that when we say Celtic myth is "histological" we mean that it interweaves history in a way that is reasonable, or logical. [*Log* refers to the "study of". *Logic* (*logike*, Grk.) speaks of reasoning. Thus, "logic" is to "study out so as to put together in a reasonable interweaving ('his') way."] Celtic myth makes reasonable sense only when we make two assumptions. The first, as we have already stated, is to accept myth as *history in its totality*, although subjective. The second is to allow myth's inherent web to be that which guides us in our pilgrimage to unravel the purpose and direction of Celtic myth for our own lives.

It is the interweaving of myth that makes it fluid, ever-changing in both interpretation and application. When, in our study of myth, we think we have arrived at it, we find a new Truth, and once again begin over, but in a new and cumulative way. This is *pilgrimage* in the Celtic sense. As Celtic myth is ever interweaving, so is our pilgrimage: always building upon what went on before, always repeating, but always in a slightly different, cumulative way. Pilgrimage is different from *journey*. Journey presupposes a final destination. In the Celtic pilgrimage, even the destination is only a new place of beginning.

The epic Irish *imrama* (voyage-quest) of St. Brendan in pursuit of the "Land of the Blest" is a perfect example of this. In the epic, St. Brendan and a company of fourteen companions, inspired to visit the Land, sail off to the west on a spiral pilgrimage that will take them seven years. Each year they revisit the same places at each of the major festivals of the church year. On each visit they bring with them all that they had learned from their previous visit, as well as their entire voyage up to that point, and with each visit they learned something new that is predicated upon the previous visits. St. Brendan's voyage also serves as a perfect example of the interweaving of Celtic myth. The saint's voyage is reminiscent of the *imrama* of Welsh demi-god Bran the Blessed who is the possessor of a life-restoring cauldron. It goes beyond being reminiscent when the cauldron reappears six times as part of an Eucharistic celebration on the back of a whale.

The cauldron appears frequently in Celtic myth. In the Grail legend it reappears with *Brons*, who seems remarkably similar to Bran, as the keeper of the Grail. The interweaving goes on and on, and spins off in numerous directions. In the Arthurian cycle, Brons is said to be the son-in-law of Joseph of Arimathea (of Biblical fame) who brought the Grail with him from Jerusalem. And if this is not enough, Brons is the grandfather of Perceval who eventually becomes the Grail-King and perhaps even a Christ-type. Interestingly, even when we get to what is obviously a Christianized version, and thus, much later myth, we still can not escape the interweaving. There are other interwoven connections that could be made from the epic of St. Brendan, not the least of which is the role of St. Barrind. It is St. Barrind, who upon returning from his *imrama* to the Paradise of the Blest that inspires St. Brendan on his quest. The Irish St. Barrind reappears as *Barinthus the Navigator* in the Arthurian cycle where he guides Merlin and Taliesin on their voyage to the Other-World with the wounded Arthur. Besides the fact that Taliesin appears here out of time sequence, Barinthus epitomizes the *ferryman of the dead* and is probably drawn from the myth of *Manannan mac Lir*, the sea-deity of Ireland (*Manawyddan*, is the Welsh version). With Manannan we come face to face with one of the most ancient of all the Celtic gods and with the ancient Celtic myth of origin, one of the ancient "root" myths of the Celts. In ancient myth Manannan is the keeper of the *Cup of Truth*, a grail-like object. As is to be expected, Manannan shows up again in the Grail legend as one of the Grail guardians along with Pyderi.

Celtic myth is nothing if not spiral, and as with Celtic myth, our pilgrimage will always be spiral, moving both forward and backwards at the same time. At one moment we will be considering a facet of the Arthurian cycle and the next moment considering a facet of a more basic myth. What is always amazing, is that this movement always makes histological sense. We must allow it to interweave into our lives.

It is only in pilgrimage's spiral-ness that it has any meaning at all. For an individual mythic cycle to have meaning it must relate to the whole mythos. For myth to have meaning to us it must draw us in and in some mystical way become interwoven with our personal mythos. The individual myth, to have personal meaning, moves the self from where it is at to where it must be, that place where the self must live to be whole. To do so, myth must also relate histologically to the whole corpus of mythos, for the self can find meaning in the individual myth only when the myth is able to move the self into the whole *personal* mythos within which the self finds its basis of reality. The value of myth has nothing to do with its relationship to the self, or where we live, but in its ability to *realign the self* with its meta-point, or place of at-ease. In other words, the value of myth lies in its action *within* our being. It is not the meaning, per se, of the myth that makes myth an active force, but it is myth's activity that gives it meaning that is appropriate for each of us in the place where



we are at.

There is nothing original in this idea. It is inherent in all myth built upon the spiraling Great Melody of Creation. It is intrinsic to the Celtic understanding of their mythos. For the Greeks and Romans, words were but containers of meaning. To the Celts it was the sound that gave meaning to words. For the Greeks, words enabled them to speculate about the foundation and course of the universe. To the Celts, the word itself was the foundation and the course of the universe. Myth, then, is not to be viewed as words which tell about the Celts' place in the cosmos, but the actual force – the Oran Mór – which moves the universe and gives its meaning. In the Hebraic Genesis account of Creation we read that it was the *breath* of God that moved and thus created. In the Bible, God's breath is equated with both the Spirit of God and the Logos (Word). In the Eastern Church it is this breath, the combined uncreated energy, of God that is called *Grace*. Grace, then, in this sense is that aspect of the numinous that gives meaning to the cosmos. All the meaning that there is ever to be found is not found in the word, but is the Word itself. This is exactly the Celtic understanding of their myth, not that they ever called it myth. To the ancient Celts it was Life!

It is said that language, art, and music, all part of the Oran Mór, were each a gift from divinity given to reunite This-World with the Other-World, worlds separated when the soul was allowed to stray from its true home. Myth is language, art, and music, all combined into one. Myth was never simply told. It was sung and acted out, with its words pregnant with meaning from their very sound. The Celtic myth of music is apropos here: In this myth the human *Uaithne* (Harmony) and his wife from the Other-World, *Boand* (Melody) give birth to three sons. With each birth, Uaithne plays his harp, a gift from the gods, to soothe his wife's labor. The first son, *Goltriaghe*, 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 tranquillity and the music of sleeping comes to be.

Music, in all its expression, according to Celtic myth, is the mystical way to make sense out of our existence, a way to harmonize our soul with the cosmos and its Creator. Is it no wonder then that Celtic myth was sung? Sung, yes, but in a way that came not from the musical scale, but from the very lift of breathing the words themselves.

There is something compelling about this kind of music, or myth, if you will. It draws us into its very core, and in some mystical way the myth's core becomes our *at-ease* place. Having accomplished this, it then sets us on our way, our pilgrimage quest, to find our place in the cosmos. All along, while we are on our quest, assuring us all that our place has already been found, in fact, according to Celtic myth, it has never been lost. We simply have failed to recognize it.

In this way, as we will come to see, Celtic myth offers us a world-view that is whole and all-encompassing, and is, most importantly, sensitive to our place in it. It does more than offer. It creates for us a personal world-view, one that we can "grab hold of," that informs and re-forms the whole of our life. Celtic myth presents each one of us with a now *present potential*. Although we are on a quest, all that we will find is already present, and as with St. Brendan, waits to be built upon. And in so doing we learn what we have already known, but did not know we knew.

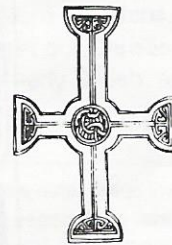
Celtic myth applied enables us to hear the Great Melody of Creation. In Celtic myth it is the Oran Mór, the Great Melody, that inspires the Paradise Tree, and so it is the Great Melody that inspires our personal "Paradise Tree" within, our *axis-mundi* – the *at-ease* point. The place from which we can find the wholeness that already exists within each one of us, even when we fail to "hear" it.

This article is adapted from the first chapter of a forthcoming book, *And There Was A Song*, which explores the use of Celtic myth in finding a place of *at-ease* for the soul.

## CELTIC CROSSES

### Clonmacnois

A simple statement by an early Celtic artisan, a monk at the monastery of Clonmacnois on the River Shannon, Co. Offaly, 887 CE. The Celts loved patterns signifying mans pilgrimage and destiny. "... to arrive at what you do not know you must go by a way ... the way of ignorance."



### Cross with hole

It appears to have been the practice of chieftains in ancient times to use holed stones as instruments for sealing pacts. The touching of fingers through the hole was a symbolic and binding gesture. Crosses such as these might have been used to seal the bond of the *anam cara* friend-ship.



### Swan Cross

Off the coast of Donegal on the Isle of Iniskeel is to be found a stone slab with this carving on it. It is based on the Irish myth of the four children of Lir who were turned into swans by their step-mother, Aoife, who was also their aunt. Aoife, for her own ends sought to convince Lir that his children were unfilial.

