

*The Song of the Silver Branch:
Healing the Human-Nature Relationship in the Irish Druidic Tradition*

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November 29th, 2007

*Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*

—John Keats¹

To be human, when being human is a habit we have broken, that is a wonder.

—John Moriarty²

At the Hill of Tara in the sacred center of Ireland a man could be seen walking across the fields toward the great hall, the seat of the high king. Not any man was this, but Lúgh. He came because the Fomorian people made war with the Tuatha Dé Danann, two tribes of people living in Ireland. A war between dark and light. A war between two people experiencing the world in two opposing ways. The Tuatha Dé, content to live with nature, ruled only through the sovereignty of the land. The Fomorians, not so content, were possessed with *Súil Milldagach*, the destructive eye which eradicated anything it looked upon, were intent on ravaging the land.

Lúgh approached the doorkeeper at the great hall who was instructed not to let any man pass the gates who did not possess an art. Not only possessing of an art, but one which was not already possessed by someone within the hall. The doorkeeper told this to Lúgh who replied, “Question me doorkeeper, I am a warrior.” But there was a warrior at Tara already. “Question me doorkeeper, I am a smith,” but there was already a smith. “Question me doorkeeper,” said Lúgh again, “I am a poet,” and again the doorkeeper replied that there was a poet at Tara already. Lúgh continued, determined to get in. He was a harpist, an historian, a sorcerer, a builder, a champion, a cupbearer, and a physician. But Tara had someone skilled in each art. Finally Lúgh said, “Go and ask your king if he has someone skilled in all of those arts and if he has then I shall leave.” So the doorkeeper went, and the king sent for Lúgh and placed him in the seat of the sage, for Lúgh was truly a sage of every art.

Soon began the battle between the Tuatha Dé and the Fomorians. The king, regarding Lúgh as precious, had him locked up because he feared what might happen if he were to fall in battle. But Lúgh could hear that battle raging on outside at Magh Tuireadh. The Fomorians had let loose their own champion, Balar of the Piercing Eye, and he met the king on the field. Lúgh could hear the fury of their encounter and broke free of his prison, taking a chariot and racing to battle. He was too late though. The king had already been slain.

As Lúgh arrived he jumped from his chariot to face Balar. Now, Balar had just one poisonous eye for which he was named. So afraid of this eye were the Fomorians that they placed nine lids over it, each lid attached to a chain with a hook. Anything which the eye looked upon was consumed and destroyed. Balar spoke: "Lift the lids of my eye so that I might see the whelp who confronts me." The lid was lifted off Balar's eye.

This is a moment of the utmost importance, not only in the story itself, but in the whole of Irish mythology. It came down to this: Lúgh standing ready with a stone in his sling, and the lids slowly being lifted off Balar's piercing eye. It was a battle, as Irish philosopher and poet John Moriarty has it, "between a people intent on shaping nature to suit them and a people who, surrendering to it, would let nature shape them to suit it."³

Might it be said that we are standing at a moment which recapitulates this same mythic motif? Has our culture *become* a Fomorian Súil Milldagach? An examination of our tendencies toward environmental destruction in favor of, and as a means to human wealth and progress seems to suggest this. Moriarty has the courage to say that we now resemble Fomorian seeing more than Tuatha Dé vision. We have the collective Súil Milldagach.

The ancient Irish religion and its modern incarnation, which we call *Druidism*, battled this destructive Fomorian eye. The term *Druidism* applied to ancient Celtic religion, Irish or

otherwise, is a bit of a misnomer. The Druids were a caste in Celtic society, comparable perhaps to the Brahmans of India. They were intellectuals, philosophers, poets, doctors, and magicians. Many speculate that they played a shamanic role, a theory which is well supported by evidence but often refuted by scholars, conservative and hesitant to apply a foreign term to them. French scholar Jean Markale describes them as the “consciousness of the social organization,”⁴ pointing out that once the Celtic frameworks of society vanished the Druids followed. Many of them joined the Christian priesthood, accounting for a unique Celtic Christian tradition in Ireland, and went on to scribe many of the stories and myths which have survived. Other Druids may have regrouped as the *filidh*, an elite caste of poets which carried on many of the Druidic traditions after the coming of Christianity. After several invasions and occupations both the Druid and *filidh* institutions were dismantled and much of the ancient tradition was lost.

Druidism was later revived by the English gentry in the 18th century. This attempt had more in common with Freemasonry and Christianity than it did with any ancient “pagan” religions. Nevertheless it tells us that Druidism was still very much alive in the imagination of the people. Many of the Druid Orders from this time survive still today with active memberships, especially in Europe. In the 1960’s however, as interest in pagan and earth-based religions grew stronger, there was a second revival (although it was built upon the first revival, which is still strong today), this time attempting to incorporate what we know of Celtic religion and blending it with what we might now consider New Age ideas. It was altogether more pagan than the English Romantic revival.

One of the leaders in this movement was Ross Nichols who formed the Order of Bards Ovate and Druids (OBOD, which exists today as the largest international Druidic organization). Nichols was close to Gerald Gardner, the creator of Wicca, and it should not be surprising that

this “British Druidry” had an approach similar to Wicca, especially where liturgy and ritual were concerned.

Modern Druidism became popular in the United States when a group of students at Carleton College formed the Reformed Druids of North America as an act of rebellion against the college’s rule that students participate in some form of religious services. Many other organizations have since formed in the U.S., the major ones being Ár nDraíocht Féin: A Druid Fellowship (ADF) and the Henge of Keltria. Currently there are a variety of movements and traditions within modern Druidism, ranging from conservative reconstructions of the ancient tradition to New Age inventive romanticism and everything in between.

This summary of the history of Druidism leading up to “neo-Druidism” may give the impression that it was a rather linear matter. This is the history which most modern Druids know, but it is important to note the absence of the native people whose tradition this was. Although Britain was once a Celtic speaking land the area of England had long been anglicized by the time of the revival. To this day there remain pockets of Celtic speaking people in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Isle of Mann, Brittany, and Cornwall (sometimes Galicia in Northwest Spain is included as well).

Though there is not a coherent tradition, certain facets of Druidism endured in Ireland, out in the west where the Irish language survived. Traditions of storytelling, ancient rituals now thinly Christianized (such as circumambulations around holy wells on certain important days), and a strong belief in the faery people (once known as the Tuatha Dé Dannan) all are testament to the survival of certain beliefs and practices within the native Irish. Ireland has the richest collection of surviving mythology of any of the countries in which Celtic culture and thus ancient Druidism thrived, and these native stories tell us a great deal about the ancient Irish

psyche. It is this substratum of Druidism, remnants of the native Irish tradition which exist outside the milieu of these Reconstructionist and revivalist lineages.

For better or for worse, Druidism can trace no unbroken line of transmission into modern times, and so is free to shape and be shaped by the needs of the time. It is free to be re-imagined, to be returned to its own source in the Otherworld Well, and to emerge again, relevant to our time and need, for anyone moved and compelled to drink from its cup. In the introduction to his book *Dreamtime* John Moriarty asks a question, originally posed by the poet Hölderlin in his poem *Bread and Wine*, and later taken up by Heidegger: “What use are poets in times of need?”⁵ Poetry being at the core of Druidism, Moriarty’s answer is also the answer to “What use are Druids in times of need?” He says, “poets must be healers—healers who, healed themselves, heal us culturally, heal us, or help heal us, in the visions and myths and rituals by which we live, and to do this effectively they must in some sense be...temporary ones, not eternal ones, of the Dream.”⁶ And so we return to the source of Druidism, nature itself and the stories which are the living Dream of Ireland. We do this to wash us of the need to reconstruct and revive what we might come to see as a living tradition, so that we might swim in the temporary constellation of the Dream as it arises now and not two thousand years ago.

Druidism is a source of battling Súil Milldagach with ancient roots. I will augment my discussion of Druidism with various other disciplines and spiritual wisdoms. Mostly I will limit my commentary to the language of Druidism and Irish culture, but occasionally aspects of the tradition might find deeper expression through reference to some other source of wisdom.

Ecopsychology is one discipline which has influenced this work enormously. Although very modern, is a no less potent of a source, and can provide a sophisticated model of our relationship to nature which is grounded in transpersonal psychology (that is, a psychology

which embraces the spiritual and mystical experience). Stated simply, ecopsychology is the study of the human-nature relationship, psychologically and ecologically, in an attempt to bring about understanding of our destructive behavior towards the earth.

The depth psychology of Carl Jung has also been a valuable resource, but in particular his work with mandalas was indispensable in my research. Jung's work also made an impression on my readings and commentary of these myths. There are many layers to the myths which I will retell here, and many lights in which we might see them. My own reading is grounded in this sort of depth psychology. I use the term psychology here in a way which may be unfamiliar to the reader. The origins of the word is based on the Greek psyche(soul)+logos(story or study). Thus I use the term psychology to mean the study of the soul.

Additionally I have been influenced by Buddhist thought and practice, but particularly by the secular *Shambhala* teachings as taught by Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche. These teachings find resonance in Druidism as I see it, and it has been marked by many scholars that Irish and Indian culture have much in common. The ancient Druids are often spoken of as cousins of the Hindu Brahmins, and it is not too far of a stretch to imagine that their religion held some points in common with Hinduism and Buddhism. In fact, well respected scholars of Celtic studies such as Peter Berresford Ellis have stated much the same.⁷ I will not often refer to Buddhist concepts by name, but many of the ideas which I will discuss are paralleled in Buddhism, and the way in which they are taught in that tradition has inspired many of my own commentaries.

Finally the work of the late Irish philosopher John Moriarty has shaped this paper perhaps more than any other influence. His book *Invoking Ireland: Ailiu Iath n-hErend* is one of the few texts which deal with the themes of my paper through the lens of the Irish tradition. I have

referred to him countless times in my research, and much of the language used to describe the central concepts of my work is derived from his writing.

I will proceed to explore Irish mythology and Druidism in depth, beginning with an attempt to define “nature,” and the importance of our maintaining a right relationship with it. Here I will make the greatest use of some important ecopsychological themes and many of the central concepts of that discipline. This will give us a ground and language from which we can discuss many of the questions which guide this project and which I intend to give an answer to (though by no means *the* answer): What is the human-nature relationship? Has the human-nature relationship been psychologically severed? Who do we become when we lose our deep connection with nature? Who do we become when we connect deeply with nature? From here I will begin exploring several major stories and traditions from Ireland, retelling each of them and providing commentary with the intent to elucidate the themes contained within them.

This is my assertion: our human relationship with nature is unbalanced and destructive as evidenced by the havoc we have wrought on the ecological world in the name of industrialization and consumerism. We exhibit what in mythological terms is the Súil Milldagach, consuming all that we look upon. The modern Druidic tradition, although still young and in some ways immature, can become capable of healing the human-nature relationship. Exactly what this healing means, however, may not be the answer we expect.

So we return to Lúgh and Balar of the Piercing Eye meeting in battle, the nine layers of the Súil Milldagach, the destructive eye which has become our human vision, being lifted. As the eye opens Lúgh casts his stone toward it, sending it out of the back of Balar’s head, and destroying the Fomorian army it looks upon. We might do the same and let nature shape us.

The Human-Nature Relationship

To answer many of the questions posed we first must set about the task of defining nature. At first glance it may appear obvious that nature is simply the green and growing world around us. We talk about “going into nature” when we spend time in the wilderness or perhaps even a city park. This simplistic definition, however, does not hold up to scrutiny. Where does one draw the line between what is nature and what is not? Most would agree that a tree is natural but what about the wooden desk I sit at writing? If not, at what point did it stop being natural? A typical answer to this question might be that the desk is not natural because it was worked and shaped by human hands. This response becomes problematic when we follow its logic further. A beaver dam has been shaped and worked yet most would also agree that it too is part of nature. Why is what the beaver shapes natural and what the human shapes unnatural? The problem is that we suppose ourselves separate from nature, and thus what we shape is also separate and unnatural.

To resolve this we must employ a more precise set of terms for speaking about the world. We must talk about nature, soul, and a quality of wildness. In one sense everything is nature; it has ecological, cultural, psychological, and spiritual dimensions to it. Simply stated, it is existence. Contrary to the notion that nature is a part of culture, in this sense, culture is in fact a part of nature. Nature is just another word for reality, and it is our insistence on the separation between humans and nature which reifies our relationship of alienation and confusion. On the other hand we can't leave it at that because it is far too slippery a thing to suggest that there is no human-nature relationship when so many people are feeling disconnected from the natural world and we are causing so much destruction upon it.

We must add to this an understanding of wildness and soul. The wild is not a place, although it can be found in places; a secluded mountain top, a dense forest, or beneath a waterfall. These are wild places. Wild is a quality of connection with soul.⁸ I do not mean soul in the Christian theological sense. What I call the soul (Irish *anam*) is nearly identical to the Buddhist concept of *buddha-nature*. In *Secret of the Vajra World*, Reginald Ray describes buddha-nature:

Its essence is emptiness; its nature is complete clarity and cognizance; and it manifests as compassion...This enlightenment, already in itself mature and complete...exists within the heart of all sentient beings.

The reason [that we suffer], is that buddha-nature is covered over by defilements of all sorts...They in no way actually damage or blemish the buddha-nature, they merely hide it from our view.⁹

It is not some eternalized ego, but actually the deepest layer of being which is intelligent and enlightened awareness. It is the wholeness at the center of the mandala of our being. What appears individual about it is the way in which it is expressed through our human lives. It is whole, sane, and enlightened from the outset.

Wild nature, which I will continue to refer to simply as nature, might be thought of as the physical and sensual world which retains the integrity of its core wildness. Because humans are a part of nature, this does not necessarily mean that nature is everything divorced from the impacts of human activity. We might say that nature is the sensuous place in which soul dwells. So rather than defining nature as everything *other* than human, we can include ourselves within it. When we repress our intrinsic and inherent connection with the earth, what Theodore Roszak calls the “ecological unconscious,”¹⁰ we cut ourselves off from the most vital depths of our humanity as well. As David Abram writes in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, “To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyles to condemn these other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our own senses of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their coherence.

We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human.”¹¹ When we destroy, and cut ourselves off from nature we cease to be fully human, fully alive, because it is by nature, an act of self-destruction. Thus through deep and *reciprocal* relationship and identification with nature we become, or rather return to being, more fully alive and human.

It is the ego which covers over the reality of the soul, just as cities cover the wild nature of the earth. This does not mean that one must have eradicated the ego in order to experience true connection with nature, only that the ego is an obstacle. It means that in beginning to develop a relationship to nature we are going beyond the ego, if only for a brief period of time. This requires some definition of what the ego is and I have encountered some mistrust in the Druidic tradition of seemingly Eastern ideas of “transcending the ego.” There is a fear that this means suppression of the personality and individuality. This, however, is not so. In the discipline of psychodynamics (related to the depth psychology of Jung and Freud) there are two ways in which the word ego is used.

The *functional ego* is the locus of our personality and ability to function in the world, perceive, and make choices. The *representational ego* on the other hand is our self-identity, the image which we build up over time of who we believe ourselves to be. As is taught in Buddhism, which has a long and sophisticated tradition of relating to the ego, the representational ego is fixated on promoting this self image as being the actual reality of our existence when in fact it is but a whirlwind of thoughts and judgments which we temporarily identify with. To transcend the ego does *not* mean that we are in any way suppressing the functional ego, but that we are dis-identifying with our neurotic fixation on our constructed self-image. We do not lose our personality or sense of individuality. Instead, it is more that we cease attempting to locate and attach a sense of “me” or “not me” to our experience. It has actually

been shown that meditation and experiences of wild nature assist us in the strengthening of the functional ego even while the representational ego is dissolved.¹² The apparent separation between humans and nature is rooted in the representational ego, which covers the soul (which experiences no boundaries between humans and nature) with confusion and neurosis. From now on, when I refer to the ego, I will be specifically speaking of the representational ego, and *not* the functional ego.

In a society Súil Milldagach is the forgetting and obscuration of our true human identity as nature and soul; in the individual Súil Milldagach is the ego which distances our experience from the pure taste of reality as it is. To say there is an imbalance in the human-nature relationship is to say we have Súil Milldagach. To say we have Súil Milldagach is to say we must see beyond the ego to heal ourselves and our world.

Closed into our tiny egoic worlds we cannot truly experience nature or soul, and are thus divorced from our own sanity. Sanity here is not meant in the way of being normalized to society, for when a society as a whole is insane we are required to in some sense be an “outlaw,” an outpost of sanity rooted in creative rebellion against the ego. This kind of sanity requires a degree of integration into a larger pattern. Thus, another way of saying sanity is wholeness. In the psychology developed by Carl Jung the quintessential archetype of wholeness was the quaternary, symbolized by the mandala. In the center of the mandala was wholeness, or as in his personality typology, individuation.

With this as our orientation we might take Druidism to be one of many paths toward sanity or wholeness. Because the Celtic people at one time covered most of Europe, most people of European roots can trace their line back to the Celts, which perhaps explains its current mainstream popularity amongst spiritual seekers. Misunderstood as it so often is, this popularity

need not be seen in a cynical light but as testament to the veracity of the culture and its ability to adapt and stay relevant. For those people of European origins who are seeking such a path it is healing to know that there is a tradition within our ancestry that offers a path for transforming our confusion into wisdom.

One of the challenges which arise with Druidism is that it was to some extent both absorbed into and eventually replaced by Christianity. In the modern world there is no such thing as a surviving, purely Druidic tradition, although elements of it such as the storytelling tradition and reverence for the Faery People have certainly continued in more remote areas of Ireland. Although there are some who claim to be part of lineages which do date back to ancient times these claims cannot be validated, and in most cases appear to date only as far back as the 18th century revival. People are forever attempting to authenticate themselves by claiming ancient pedigree.

Rather than discuss the Druidism of the 18th century revival or any of the neo-pagan reconstructions of the past fifty years, I will return to the source, namely the mythology, the Irish landscape, and the immaculate Otherworld in which the tradition is rooted. From these I hope to articulate a different vision of Druidism altogether. It is with purpose and clarity that I do not attempt to “reconstruct” the ancient tradition. What follows is one expression of the spirit of the tradition which is relevant to modern life and our particular struggles and confusions. It is my hope that the fruits of this will help heal the human-nature relationship, and gently guide us into those perfect, beautiful, and enlightened dimensions of existence. More than a revival, this is an initiation into new territory (or perhaps territory which has simply been forgotten). To use John Moriarty’s lovely twist of words, I believe “that we need a Naissance, not a Renaissance. We need to be radically original in our thinking.”¹³

The Second Battle of Magh Tuireadh

When the Tuatha Dé Danann came to Ireland some say it was on the clouds themselves, landing on a mountain in the Northwest of Ireland on Bealtaine, the first day of summer. Others say they came on great ships, which they burned upon coming to shore. Whatever the case they soon made Ireland their home and ruled, as was the custom of everyone who came to Ireland, from the Hill of Tara. The name Tuatha Dé Danann is often translated to “the People of the Goddess Danu.” Danu is a mysterious figure. There are no stories connected to her, though they call her the mother of the gods. There are only mountains named for her; two breast-shaped mountains with cairns of stones for nipples. If Danu is their mother, surely the Tuatha Dé are the children of the land.

They were not alone in Ireland. They shared the land with the Fomorians, a darker race of beings who wanted to rule the land, not be ruled by it. The Tuatha Dé had an uneasy alliance with the Fomorians and when the king, Nuada, lost his arm in the first battle of Magh Tuireadh (when they won the land from its previous inhabitants), he was replaced by a half-blood Fomorian named Bres.

No king in Ireland could rule with a blemish—the severed arm a blemish on his psyche—or the land would go barren. He had no choice but to abdicate. And so Bres, whose name means beautiful, and who was half Tuatha Dé and half Fomorian became the new king. It seemed a wise idea and could perhaps unite the two people.

Soon though Bres became a much greater blemish, both to the land and the Tuatha Dé. Every day the Dagda, chief of the gods, would build for Bres, and Ogma was reduced to carrying firewood. No one who ever visited the hall at Tara was ever given ale or shown the generosity required of a king. The land grew barren. The cows stopped giving milk and nothing green

would grow. One day the great poet Cairpre, who by law deserved the highest honors, visited the hall. He was given nothing but stale bread to eat, not a drop to drink, and was lodged in the poorest conditions. So Cairpre, using his best judgment, composed a poem which caused Bres to break out in hideous blemishes.

Meanwhile the physician of the Tuatha Dé had crafted Nuada a new arm of flesh and blood and with Bres removed from the hall of Tara, was made king once again. This is how the second battle of Magh Tuireadh came about; Bres humiliated went back to his people and roused them to war.

This is when the sage Lúgh arrived at Tara with his many arts and the battle between Lúgh and Balar of the Piercing Eye began. Balar's nine lids being lifted by the Fomorian army. Lúgh's slingstone being hurled through the eye. It is said that the stone dislodged the eye and came out, clear through on the other side of Balar's head where it looked upon the Fomorian army, instantly destroying them.

Bres fled but the Tuatha Dé caught up with him and his remaining people. He begged for mercy. "What will you give for our mercy?" the Tuatha Dé asked. "I will tell you the secret of getting milk from your cows and crops from your land in every season." Knowing the importance of the pattern of things, they did not accept this deal. "Tell us in which season to sow our seeds, in which season to harvest, and how to tend to the land, and we will show you mercy." So Bres told them what they wanted to know, how to live appropriately in Ireland and in return he was allowed to live.

This story is often considered to be the primary cosmological story of the Irish people. It can be analyzed on several different levels. Myths are layered like dreams. Once this story may have meant what scholars interpret it to mean. It may have been a struggle between culture and

nature, between the dark and fecund Fomorian spirits of nature and the luminous Tuatha Dé culture of humans. And indeed, it is a story about how to live appropriately. Today though it has another meaning also. Today the roles have been reversed and we can say that it is the eye of human culture which consumes whatever appears in its open eye. Our Industrial culture is the Fomorians, not the Tuatha Dé. Today it is an inner battle between two ways of seeing and being in the world.

In their wisdom the Tuatha Dé were not interested in complete control over the land, knowing it for the folly that it was. They wanted only to know how best to work with its natural patterns. On a deeper level though, it is a battle against Súil Milldagach, the piercing or poisonous eye of Balar and the Fomorians. To repeat John Moriarty's words, it was a battle "between a people intent on shaping nature to suit them and a people who, surrendering to it, would let nature shape them to suit it."¹⁴ Two ways of seeing and being in the world. It is the king who represents this attitude, and the passing of kingship from Bres to Lúgh marks this changing dynamic.

The first appearance of Lúgh in mythology is a curious one. He arrives at Tara and is told "no one enters Tara who does not possess an art." He then goes on to tell the doorkeeper that he is, in fact, master of all the arts. If, as we will soon discuss, we consider that Tara is at the center of a mandala representing sovereignty, individuation, sanity, wholeness, and perhaps even enlightenment, then this takes on a new philosophical importance. No one enters a state of wholeness who does not possess an art. No one finds enlightenment who does not possess an art. Philosophically this is what it means to enter Tara.

What makes this even more interesting is the Irish word for art, *dán*. This word has several meanings, though many of them are variations on two distinct and seemingly unrelated

definitions: art and destiny. The poetry between these words comes strikingly close to Bill Plotkin's description of a *soul-gift*:

Each of us is born with a treasure, an essence, a seed of quiescent potential, secreted for safekeeping in the center of our being. This treasure, this personal quality, power, talent, or gift (or set of such qualities), is ours to develop, embody, and offer to our communities through acts of service—our contributions to a more diverse, vital, evolved world. Our personal destiny is to *become* that treasure through our actions.¹⁵

This is precisely what Lúgh did when he won the second battle of Magh Tuireadh, after which, Nuada falling in battle against Balar, he became king. To enter Tara we must in some sense obey the ancient Delphic aphorism, “know thyself.” We must have made contact with the soul and through that initiation realized our *dán*, our art, and only then will the gates of Tara be open to us.

Lúgh is the sovereign king, married to the land; a psychopomp who guides the dead, thus associated with thresholds and transitions; a trickster; a harvest god; and is associated with heights and mountain tops. In some versions of the above story it is said that when going into battle Lúgh took on the “crane posture,” standing on one leg, with a hand behind his back, and the other hand over his eye. One foot in this world, one foot in the Otherworld. It is Lúgh's connection with the Otherworld that gives him his art and allows him to be the antidote to Súil Milldagach.

Lúgh, with his connection to mountain tops and heights, represents what John Moriarty calls “the higher view,” writing about a folk practice which still goes on in Ireland today, that when someone becomes sick a mountain is climbed in prayer for them: “It is how we understood sickness. We understood it as the fading out of the higher view.”¹⁶ The Fomorians are a fading out of the higher view. Súil Milldagach is a fading out of the higher view. Lúgh's coming to Tara was a return to the higher view. We might say that Lúgh, psychopomp that he was, led the

Tuatha Dé through death and rebirth of vision, seeing the world as beauty rather than commodity.

The Settling of the Manor of Tara

To understand this story we must understand the role of the king in Ireland. The king, and the accompanying concept of sovereignty, is at the center of the Irish mandala, both socially and psycho-spiritually. Historically Ireland is divided into four provinces with a fifth central province. Each province has its own king, but the *ard rí* (high king) at Tara was central. This was more of a ritual position than it was a political one of power. Irish kings in fact held little power and all of it depended on how they ruled and the favor they had with the people. Ritually however it was the king who ensured that the proper order of the cosmos was maintained, including the relationship between the people and the land. This was symbolized by the *banais rí*, the marriage of the king to the goddess of the land.

In some sense then this is a story about “ruling your world”¹⁷ to use the words of Shambhala lineage holder, Sakyong Mipham. There was a strong sense of individual heroism in the Irish tradition, and the position of kingship should be seen as something which any person, regardless of social status or gender, can invoke into their own life. From the Second Battle of Magh Tuireadh we learn that a king must be generous, without “blemish” (which although symbolized by physical blemish is most certainly referring to blemishes of the psyche: the ego), and maintain the proper relationship between the tribe and the land.

There is a story called *The Settling of the Manor of Tara* which illustrates this dynamic well. It is a story about the four *airts* (winds) of Ireland, a directional cosmology which establishes the proper order of the cosmos.

It was the time of the Great Feast of Tara in Ireland, and all the minor kings were assembled in the fields below Tara. The Great Feast was held every three years, a ritual gathering to renew the connection between the king and the land, and maintain the proper order of things, socially and ritually. This year the kings would not enter the hall of Tara until a matter was settled.

The kings gathered in the fields, arguing over the partitioning of the land, and how it was before their day and how it might be after. The kings sent a message to Diarmait Mac Cerball, the high king, asking that he partition the land. A message was sent back inviting them to the hall, and that he would send for a wise man, Fiachra, to come and settle the dispute. And so the kings proceeded up the gently sloping hill to the magnificent hall.

Fiachra came but he too could not recall the partitioning of the land, and said that five of the wisest poets should be summoned from each of the five provinces. And so it was done. But upon their arrival they too said that they could not rightly remember the partitions of Ireland. No one could remember the proper order of things. One man, said the poets, would know, “he who is eldest of us all: Fintan Mac Bóchra.” It was known that he knew the entire history of Ireland from its earliest invasions to the present. Knew it because he had *lived* through its entirety. So Fintan was sent for.

When he arrived he was given a great welcome and was seated in a place of great honor in the hall. Fintan would not sit in the seat though, not until he knew the question which he was summoned for, saying, “I am sure of your welcome, as every son is sure of his foster-mother—and Ireland herself is my foster-mother.” He then went on to recount the entire history of Ireland. The kings who had gathered shared with him their frustrations, not being able to remember the way in which the land had been partitioned. Fintan knew.

“And tell us,” said those gathered, “how is it you have come to know these things.”

Fintan recalled another time long ago when the people of Ireland forgot the partitioning of the land. On that day they saw a man walking toward them from the west at sunset, tall as a tree and broad as a boulder, carrying a silver apple branch. The men invited him to come and speak to the king, Conaing Bec-eclach.

He came and they questioned him, “from where are you coming, to where are you going, and what is your name?” they asked. “My name,” he said, “is Trefuilngid Tre-eochair, and I am coming from the setting sun and going to the rising sun; it is I who causes its setting and its rising.” Trefuilngid decided that he would stay and relay his wisdom to the Irish. When told that giving him hospitality might be a burden to the people, he replied that his silver branch would sustain him for as long as he lives. He asked that seven of the wisest men from each corner of Ireland and from Tara itself be sent for.

When they arrived he spoke to them all, and told them all he knew of the land and its stories. “I know,” Fintan said, “because I was amongst those men, and being the eldest of them it was I who he interrogated later to know that I had learned well what he had taught.”

Trefuilngid questioned Fintan, “How has Ireland been partitioned and where do things lie therein?”

Fintan replied: “Not hard: knowledge in the west, battle in the north, prosperity in the east, music in the south, and kingship in the center.” Fintan then made his judgment that the partitioning of the land should not change, but would remain as Trefuilngid Tre-eochair had lain it out, for it was he who ensured the proper order of things in the rising and setting of the sun. Then he went to Uisneach, the hill at the geographical center of Ireland, and set up a pillar

stone, marking the place where the five provinces met. Pleased with the results and the proper order of things returned, the Great Feast could now continue.

That is the story of how Ireland was ordered. Trefuilngid gives many secondary associations for each of the five divisions, some of which we will look at more closely.

What we have here is a mandala in the way that Carl Jung used the term, who has something very interesting to say, keeping the above story in mind:

Mandalas...usually appear in situations of psychic confusion and disorientation. The archetype thereby constellated represents a pattern of order which, like a psychological 'view-finder' marked with a cross or circle divided into four, is superimposed on the psychic chaos so that each content falls into place and the weltering confusion is held together by the protective circle...At the same time they are *yantras*, instruments with whose help the order is brought into being.¹⁸

This is precisely what occurred in the story. There was great confusion and literal disorientation as to how the land is arranged. A figure came and constellated the ancient pattern in which Ireland has always been arranged, thus ordering chaos and clearing them of confusion. The result is that the pattern, which was interrupted when the kings refused to come to the Great Feast, could now continue on. As Jung suggests, following this pattern is also the way in which order is maintained. To understand what this means it requires some explanation and deeper examination of the partitioning of Ireland.

In the east, the province of Leinster, is prosperity. The prosperity being spoken of here is not only that of actual richness, but prosperity of the spirit. In Celtic culture hospitality played an important role, and so our interpretation of this direction might be a sense of generosity. In the story of the *Táin Bó Cúalnge* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley), Méadhbh tells her husband the three rules she has for a lover, who would be king. Her first rule is that he cannot be a stingy man; in other words he must be generous. We saw this play out in the Second Battle of Magh Tuireadh when the poet Cairpre used his poetic magic to remove Bres from Tara because he was

stingy. Generosity here may mean simply taking care to offer the hospitality of a beverage to guests, or it could take on a more expansive definition of offering the world the fullness of your gift or dán. One of the associations given to the east in the original translation of the story is “householding,” which could be interpreted as the way in which we organize and tend to our environments. This has both ecological and personal implications to it. Many people go through life with an attitude of poverty. Author Frank MacEowen, speaking of the eastern quarter of this mandala, writes that “The problem is that when we approach life from a perspective of scarcity and combine this with the infection of materialism, which tells us we must acquire more and more to be happy, we set ourselves up for addiction and depression.”¹⁹ This is essentially the modern Western approach to the world. It is a description of Súil Milldagach, and in the language of the eastern airt it is simply poor householding.

The southern province of Munster is associated with music, creativity, inspiration, and poetic art²⁰. The quality that this direction is pointing to is the flowing of creativity through a person’s life; not necessarily as an actual art (though art is a beautiful way to cultivate creativity of course). Here we are touching upon the art necessary to enter Tara. Life itself can be approached as an art – as if it were a poem or a painting, constantly unfolding and coming deeper into its own wholeness. When we encounter the deeper layers of our selves, beyond the ego, something comes to life within us. A sense of purpose wakes within the heart and our lives effortlessly orient around this. Frank MacEowen and Tom Cowan both associate the south with a practice they refer to as *geancannach*, or “love talking,” derived from an Old Irish form of praise poetry.²¹ Essentially the “music” of the south is what wakes our hearts. When this happens we fall in love with the universe. This love is pervasive and subversive to the ego. To love is to merge with the beloved, something the Sufis are well aware of, referring to God as the

Beloved, mysticism being the practice is dissolving into that love. To love nature, to the love the universe, and to love life, is to merge with it in divine union. This is the secret behind the secondary southern association of advocacy. Merging and identifying with the beloved as ourselves, we are moved to protect it and speak out on behalf of what cannot speak for itself. We may also consider here the role that music plays in Celtic mythology, ushering people into the Otherworld (such as with the music from a silver branch, which we will discuss later on), as well as the importance of art in the Second Battle of Magh Tuireadh. Music is an expression of the creative spirit just as our lives might become an expression of *dán*.

In the western province of Connaught is knowledge, learning, or wisdom. The stories associated with the west, are mostly of the Tuatha Dé Danann, who were renowned as great magicians and Druids. The knowledge and learning being spoken of here is not just intellectual in nature, but also intuitive. There is a sense of marriage here between the intellect and the intuitive mind; they are simply two ways of knowing the world. The west is also associated with the Otherworld. There is a whole category of stories called *imramma* which involve setting sail in the western sea and encountering many Otherworldly islands and beings. Beauty is another association of the west. Irish philosopher and poet, John O'Donohue, speaks of beauty as being a numinous presence. He writes, "Beauty never finally satisfies though she intensifies our longing and refines it. Were the human person simply soul, beauty would be an absolute embrace. We are, however, threshold creatures of deep ambivalence and when beauty touches the matrix of human selfhood, it can only be just that: a touch."²² Beauty, in a sense, is a way of talking about the divine ground, whatever we might understand that to mean. To dwell in beauty would be to dwell in the Otherworld of divine presence, to embrace our wild nature of soul. Whereas the beauty of the south might be thought of as an expression of the creative spirit, the

west is a philosophical and spiritual beauty of presence. We may only be able to touch beauty temporarily, as O'Donohue suggests, but an eye disposed to wonder may see it even where it is not expected.

The last of the quadrants is the north, the province of Ulster, which is associated with battle. Although the stories of Ulster are predominantly stories of battle, war, and heroic deeds, we can look at this idea of battle from a different perspective. Frank MacEowen is one author who sees many parallels between the Celtic traditions and the Shambhala lineage of warriorship articulated by Chögyam Trungpa. Battle then might be the struggle between the ego and the purer experience of reality as seen by the soul. In the north we are always being tempered and tested, like a blacksmith hammering away at a blade, making it sharper, able to cut through that which does not truly serve us. In Irish we might call someone who works with the energies of the north a *laoch*, a hero. Seán Ó Duinn suggests that the *loachra*, the warrior caste, played an important part in the maintenance of the cosmos, and that they may have been responsible for annual attacks on other tribes to secure people for sacrifices.²³ There is still very little archeological evidence to suggest that the Irish participated in human sacrifices, and most evidence that the continental Celtic people (the Gauls) did was written by their enemies, the Romans. Certainly in ancient times it would not be surprising. Entertaining the idea that they did, and looking at this from a philosophical point of view it raises the relationship between warriors and sacrifice. The ego is the sacrifice. Descending into the Underworld of the psyche we might view the north as an initiation into accord with the cosmos, with beauty, with soul, with sovereignty. This sacrifice of the ego can be a tremendously painful process and its association with battle is appropriate. We grow through conflict.

Each airt presents us with a process which we must continually engage with in order to cultivate and dwell in sovereignty. Battle may be the clearest example because it is so implicitly a process, but it is just as true for the other airts. We must continually engage in the fulfillment and expression of our soul-gifts, the flowing forth of our creative spirits into the world, cultivating wisdom and the wonder-eye of Otherworld beauty. There are always more depths to plunge into, and as we go deeper into ourselves our relationship to embodying each airt no doubt will change.

Truth and Sovereignty

This of course brings us to the center of our mandala, sovereignty, kingship, and truth. I have mentioned several times now that the king was ritually married to the goddess of the land. The king's ability to rule was directly connected with both his relationship with the goddess, and thus the fecundity of the land, and a concept known as *Fír Flathemon*, the Ruler's Truth. Because kingship was primarily a ritual position, any political power the king might have would have been based on these things. They are his responsibilities in the position at the center of the mandala where he must maintain and protect the proper order of things. There is a story about one of the most famous kings in Ireland, Niall of the Nine Hostages, which illustrates the marriage of the king to the land.

One day, Niall was out hunting with his three brothers. They had caught nothing and thought to turn back toward home when suddenly a great thirst came upon them. One of the brothers went off in search of water and came back with a tale of a spring guarded by an old and hideous hag. She had told him that he could drink his fill of water if he would kiss her. Despite his thirst, he refused. The second brother went to her, but he too, looking upon her face could

not bring himself to kiss her. Despite his thirst, he too refused, and went back to the camp as thirsty as he left. The third brother went to her and looking upon her, brought himself to give her a small kiss on the cheek. For this she assured that he would one day be a powerful figure, and she gave him a small drink of water. Finally, Niall gathered his courage and went to her. Looking upon her she was hideous as his brothers told, but he closed his eyes and kissed her deeply and passionately. When he opened his eyes she had transformed into a beautiful maiden. She said her name was Flaithias, Sovereignty, and rewarded Niall both with a night of passionate lovemaking and promise that he would be the greatest king in Ireland.

There is an aspect here of seeing the world with equanimity, metaphorically making love to both what attracts us and what repels us. This is exemplified in the rule of Conaire Mhór who instated the *Ind Énflaith*, the birdreign, an ecumenical existence between all people and creatures, named so because his father could shapeshift into the form of a bird.²⁴ Perhaps, as is told of the way he became king, Conaire had it right. When we show up seeking entrance to the halls of Tara we must be completely naked.

It took more than kissing an old woman to be king though. No one gets off the hook that easy. Méadhbh, whose name means “intoxicating one” and who gives her name to the drink mead, is perhaps the most widespread goddesses of sovereignty. From the beginning of the great epic, the *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, the Cattle Raid of Cooley, we learn that Méadhbh has three rules for anyone who would be her husband (and thus king). He must be without fear, without jealousy, and without stinginess. Stinginess and fear are easy to understand the meaning of. A king must, as we have seen, be generous and fearless in battle, whether literal or psychological. Now, of course, one cannot be jealous when marrying Méadhbh. It is said that she never has one man “without another waiting in his shadow.” But jealousy, really, is about wanting something which

someone else has and we lack. It is an emotion which comes from the very opposite of the prosperous, and thus generous, spirit. Jealousy does not recognize the interconnectedness and lack of boundaries between things—that what others have we have and vice versa—but instead derives itself from selfishness and the ego, qualities not befitting a king.

Finally the *Fír Flathemon*, the Ruler’s Truth, is important in the maintaining the proper order of things. In a way truth *is* the proper order of things, as modern Druid author Greywind writes, “Truth is a measure of the degree to which something is rightly integrated with the underlying unity of all things.”²⁵ This idea of truth (*fírinne* in Irish) has much in common with concepts from many cultures around the world. There is resonance with the Chinese concept of *Tao*, which translates to “the Way”, with the Buddhist understanding of *dharma* which implies cosmic law or truth, or Navajo *horzo* which means beauty²⁶. Truth is what upholds our sovereignty, our ability to rightly rule and maintain the proper order of things. There are many ancient texts in Irish which instruct a king in the matters of truth, such as *An Audacht Morann*. If truth is a measurement of the integration of something into the “underlying unity of all things,” then truth is fundamentally connected to the Otherworld which, as we shall see, is unity of being.

This next story tells of the great Irish king, Cormac Mac Art, his journey to the Otherworld, and how he received the Cup of Truth.

The Otherworld and Connla’s Well

One day, while in the plains below the Hill of Tara, the high king, Cormac Mac Art, saw a great warrior striding towards him. Over his shoulder he carried a silver-branch with three golden apples, which made the sweetest music he had ever heard. Cormac stopped the warrior and asked him where he came from. “I come from a land free of suffering, where no one ages,

and no one dies, and no one ever falls ill.” Cormac told him the same was not true of this place. They declare an alliance and Cormac names his terms, “The branch!” he cries, eager to have its music. The warrior grants him this provided that Cormac grant him three boons. Cormac agrees and the warrior strides off.

Cormac returned to the hall of Tara with his silver-branch and his company marveled at it. When he shook it everyone who heard its music fell into a deep sleep.

Now, some time passed and the warrior returned. On the first day he came, he requested from Cormac, his daughter. To this Cormac reluctantly agreed. The warrior left and at the same time the next day return, now requesting his son. Again, Cormac reluctantly agreed. He had already sworn to grant this man three boons in exchange for the silver-branch. As king he must uphold his oath. The warrior returned at the same time on the third day and now requested his wife.

Cormac agreed to this, but soon after the warrior left he set out to follow him. After a time he found himself enveloped in a thick mist in a plain as far as his eyes could see. When the mist began to clear he caught sight of a great keep surrounded by a bronze wall. Within the keep was a house made of silver, partially thatched with the feathers of white birds. A group of the most beautiful people worked to thatch the roof, but whenever it was half complete a wind would come and blow their work away.

Cormac moved on and saw a man kindling a fire and setting an oak log into it. Then the man would go away and return shortly with another log. As soon as he returned to place the new log on, the first one had just finished burning to embers.

Finally Cormac came to another keep, in the court of which he sees a great spring flowing forth like a fountain. Around the water are nine hazel trees laden with nuts, and in the pool are

five salmon. Every now and again a hazel will drop one of its nuts into the pool of water, to be eaten by the salmon whose bellies turn purple with the juice. Out of the spring flow five streams, whose running creates a melody as beautiful as the silver-branch's.

He proceeds on into the keep, and sees the warrior sitting in a chair. From behind him a man enters, an axe slung across his shoulder, holding a log and a pig under his arms. The warrior tells the man to make ready, "for a great guest has joined us tonight." The man set up his fire, and put the pig on a spit over it.

"This pig shall not be cooked until a truth is spoken over it for each quarter." And so the men gathered take turns speaking their truths over the pig, and with each story told the pig is rotated and one quarter cooked. Finally, at the last quarter, it is Cormac's turn. He tells the men gathered of the warrior who came carrying the silver-branch and how he traded it for his family, and that now he has come to retrieve them or otherwise stay here amongst them. With that the pig is cooked and portioned out to those assembled.

Cormac declares that he never eats a meal unless there are at least fifty men in his company. The warrior began to sing, and Cormac fell fast asleep. When he awakens, his company of men is there with him, and his wife and children as well. He is delighted to see them again.

The warrior reveals that he is Manannán Mac Lir and the land he is in is called the Land of Promise. He brought Cormac here for a reason, knowing that he would not suffer to have his family taken from him. Manannán allows Cormac to keep the silver-branch and in addition gifts him with a beautiful ornate cup. He tells him that if a lie is spoken over it the cup will break into three pieces. When three truths are spoken over it the cup will become whole again. Thus shall

Cormac rightfully judge as king. Manannán tells Cormac that on the day he dies these gifts will be taken from him.

Manannán goes on to explain that the spring he saw was the spring of wisdom, Connla's Well. The five streams are the five senses and they flow out into the world as the rivers of Ireland. "Everyone drinks from the streams," says Manannán, "but only poets, the skilled ones, and those who possess an art drink from both the streams and the spring itself."

Cormac awoke in the morning in the green fields below Tara with his family, his Cup of Truth, and the silver-branch. And Manannán told it right, when Cormac finally died, the cup and the branch both disappeared from this world. While Cormac lived, he was arguably one of Ireland's greatest kings.

There are three major elements in this story relevant to our topic here: the silver-branch, the Cup of Truth, and Connla's Well. For now let us stick to the cup and the well.

As we can see from this story it is truth which maintains the integrity of the cup. The cup is a symbolic representation of the cosmos. There was a formula for taking an oath that was popular among many Celtic tribes: "If I break my pledge, may the sky fall upon me, the sea rise up to drown me, and the earth crack open to swallow me." Author and teacher Tom Cowan suggests that there is a parallel between the shattering of the cup and the shattering of the world in not upholding the truth. The cup breaks into three pieces if someone tells a lie, but if the king fails to be a proper representative for the unity and integration of things which truth measures, it is the cosmos which will come apart.²⁷ The integrity of both the cup and the cosmos lies in maintaining and mediating truth from Connla's Well.

The Otherworld is unity of being.

Pausing for a moment and returning to our mandala we can see more clearly the implications of curing Súil Milldagach: nothing less than integration with philosophical and spiritual truth and with the goddess of the land. The price of breaking this oath? No king who has broken his sacred oath has ever lived long enough to tell. We must remember that these are not merely rules for a mythological king of an ancient society; these are rules for anyone seeking to enter Tara's halls, to enter the soul, in search of enlightenment or wholeness. The great Sufi poet Rumi once wrote, "*The price of kissing is your life.*"²⁸ We might imagine that we pay the same price when we kiss the goddess of the land.

But as Lúgh reminds us, "No one enters Tara who does not possess an art." Where does such art come from? I have said earlier that the dán, or soul-gift, is buried in the deep strata of the soul. Cormac's story of the Land of Promise gives us a more exact location. "Only those who possess an art drink from both the streams and the spring itself." The Otherworld is the soul of the world, the eternal world, not everlasting in time, but actually beyond time. The Otherworld is the interior depths where world and psyche are one in unity of being. That is the secret of the silver-branch and the secret of Connla's Well. The Otherworld is not strictly a place; it is sight when the wonder-eye of beauty has awoken.

This then, is where the arts which will give us entrance to Tara are located. Connla's Well, whose five streams are the senses. Moriarty writes:

As is the case with all other rivers, our river has its source in Connla's Well. And that is why we learn to speak. For us, to learn to speak is to learn to say:

Our river has its source in the Otherworld Well.²⁹

Every river issues forth from Connla's Well, from the Otherworld. There is no This-World and Otherworld. There is only sight; before and after we drink from Connla's Well. Otherworld sight is the art that grants us entrance to Tara. Otherworld sight is sight that turns

words into poetry, brushstrokes into art, and chords into music. Otherworld sight is what turns humans into Human Beings, opening us to philosophical and spiritual depths.

Moriarty calls for “silver-branch perception of things in their silver-branch being.”³⁰ In silver-branch perception, see-er and seen are one, subject and object are one. The veil of boundaries is removed. The song of the silver-branch comes to shatter our duality. No human, no nature, no relationship. To heal the human-nature relationship, to heal Súil Milldagach, is to enter the halls of Tara, to be king, to drink from Connla’s Well.

The Voyage of Bran

One day Bran Mac Feabhail walked out of his keep alone, down and down, to the wild places outside his walls. He walked for a time, and turned back. Queerest thing, when he turned back to the keep there was the sweetest music behind him. He turned to look, but saw no one and no thing. He turned again toward home. The music returned. He walked on and on toward the keep, but his feet and eyelids grew heavy. At last he fell asleep, the deepest sleep he had ever fallen to.

When he awoke there was nothing but the grass, the trees, and the birds. And beside him the silver branch with white blossoms. It seemed to sing and it haunted him to his very core.

He took the silver branch and returned to his keep. When he arrived the place was humming with activity. A woman had arrived and demanded to see him. Bran entered and looking him in the eye, with the whole keep looking and listening on, she erupted into poetry, describing her Otherworldly home across the waves of the sea, beautiful and free of suffering entirely. She ended, inviting Bran to come and find her in the Otherworld.

The next day Bran departed with several of his men in a small boat. They sailed and sailed for two days and two nights, and on the third day they saw a great figure riding toward them on a chariot across the waves. He declared that he was Manannán Mac Lir and he spoke:

Bran deems it a marvellous beauty
In his coracle across the clear sea:
While to me in my chariot from afar
It is a flowery plain on which he rides about.³¹

He went on to tell Bran and his men all that he saw, a land without suffering, calling it the Plain of Delights, a splendid vision of the Otherworld.

They left Manannán and came at last to the Island of Women. The woman who had visited Bran's keep stood on the shore and asked Bran to come with her. He dared not, so she threw a ball of string to him, which stuck to his hand when he caught it, and she pulled him and his men in. There on the island they were given every pleasure, food and women for the men, and no one ever knew grief or suffering.

One day however, seemingly about a year from the day they left, one of Bran's men felt homesick and implored Bran to sail back with him to Ireland. Reluctantly Bran agreed, but the woman said to them that they should not touch the land.

When they arrived, the boat came ashore, and a man came down to greet them. "Who are you?" he asked. "I am Bran Mac Feabhail." And the other man said, "We know of no such person, though we have an old story which tells of the voyage of Bran." At this the man who had begged to return leapt out of the boat hardly having touched land but a moment, turned to ashes and fell to the ground, as if he'd been dead centuries. And indeed, they had been gone centuries, and the body would not endure returning from eternity beyond time back to temporal existence.

The men saw this, and no else tried to leave the boat. Bran told his entire story to the man, and then turned around, sailing off, never to be seen again.

What to make of this story? It all started with the song of the silver branch. Moriarty, who offers a brilliant commentary on this story in *Invoking Ireland*, tells of St. Patrick hearing this story of Bran's. Patrick hears the story on the lips of everyone in Ireland and asks himself questions anyone might ask of the silver branch. Was it...

A totally new way of understanding ordinary things? A totally new way, or perhaps a dangerously new way, of relating to river and star? The silver branch among us? Was that Manannán's way of seeing things among us? Is reality our way of seeing it or Manannán's way of seeing it?³²

Moriarty's answer to these questions is of course, yes, it is a dangerously new way of seeing the world; it is Manannán's way of seeing the world. This is silver branch perception. This is what it means to dwell in the Otherworld. "What to you is a bitter sea, is to me a Plain of Delights...a perfect world, nothing in it that isn't as perfect as an otter's face or as the fragrance of a primrose."³³ When Manannán tells Bran that what he sees is a Plain of Delight, he does not only mean that he literally experiences the sea as a meadow, but is speaking of two fundamentally different ways of experiencing reality. This is the essence of the Otherworld, of silver branch perception. The silver branch as we learn in these stories is what invites us into and ultimately grants us entrance to the Otherworld. Where Bran and his company see turmoil and bitterness, Manannán sees beauty and perfection. Where Bran and his company see suffering, Manannán sees beauty and perfection. Silver branch perception is pure perception, without convention and without the concepts we tend to project onto the world. It is the very opposite and antidote of Súil Milldagach.

And what of the woman and the Island of Women? There are many accounts of an Island of Women in *Imramma*, sea-voyages, the category of tales that this story falls into. We might

consider that she is a representative of the soul. Ireland, although ahead of its time in the world in terms of the equality given to women, was most certainly a patriarchy at the time this story would have been told, and even more so at the time when it would have been written by Christian scribes. Is it merely a poetic device to describe, what to a man, would be the ultimate pleasure? Perhaps, but there is another explanation as well. In Jungian psychology there is a theory of the *anima* and *animus*, the archetypes of gendered Otherness within the psyche. The anima is the feminine component to the masculine psyche and the animus is the masculine component to the feminine psyche. Jung writes that the role of the anima and animus is to “remain in (their) place between individual consciousness and the collective unconscious...The anima and animus should function as a bridge, or a door, leading to the images of the collective unconscious...”³⁴ The literal Latin meaning of these words are “soul” and “spirit.” Jung may not have said it outright, but I will suggest here that the collective unconscious is nothing less than the divine ground of being from which all phenomena arise. It is the Otherworld. It is silver branch singing. It is the woman who invites Bran to come to the Otherworld just as it is the anima and animus who are a doorway to the collective unconscious.

Music being so important to the southern airt, it is worth asking, what music the silver branch sings with. The silver branch sings the Óran Mór, Scots-Gaelic for “the Great Song.” In Irish it is the Amhrán Mór. Before exploring this topic further it is necessary to tell of the final invasion of Ireland, when the Milesians, who we now know as the Gael or Irish, took control of the land.

Amhairghin and the Óran Mór

The great poet, Amhairghin Glúngheal stood at the prow of the ship, coming up the shore in Kerry, Ireland. He traveled with the Sons of Míl, the Milesians (who we know today as the Celts), seeking to end their homeless wandering and settle the land in Ireland. The boat grated against the sand of the shore, and Amhairghin placed his right foot on the ground, chanting:

I am a wind in the sea
I am a sea-wind upon the land
I am the roar of the ocean
I am a stag of seven fights
I am a hawk on a cliff
I am a tear-drop of the sun
I am fair
I am a boar for valour
I am a salmon in a pool
I am a lake in a plain
I am the excellence of arts
I am a spear waging war with plunder
I am a god who forms subjects for a ruler³⁵

The Celts fought their way across the land and found themselves on the mountain called Slieve Mish. There they met the goddess Banbha. “If you have come for the taking of Ireland, you are not justified. Safe passage to Tara if you name the land for me,” she said. Amhairghin judged this fair and agreed.

The battle continued and next they found themselves further inland, on the mountain of Cnoc Áine. There they met the goddess Fódhla. “If you have come for the taking of Ireland, you are not justified. Safe passage to Tara if you name the land for me,” she said. Amhairghin judged this fair and agreed.

Finally, battling deeper into the land, they found themselves at the very center of Ireland on the hill of Uisneach. There they met the goddess Éire. “If you have come for the taking of

Ireland, you are not justified. Safe passage to Tara if you name the land for me,” she said. Amhairghin judged this fair and agreed. Because he made this judgment at the center of Ireland it is Éire for whom the land is still most commonly named.

The Celts arrived at Tara, where the Tuatha Dé Danann made their great hall, as was always done in Ireland. In those days there were three kings at Tara, MacCuill, husband of Banbha; MacCecht, husband of Fódhla; and MacGrene, husband of Éire. The Celts approached Tara, with Amhairghin in the lead and the kings came out to meet them. Unaware that they were coming, the kings asked that the Milesians return to their ships for three days, leaving Ireland free of plunder and battle during that time. Amhairghin agreed, “We shall go back out over nine waves.”

They returned to the ships, sailing as Amhairghin had suggested over nine waves. But the Tuatha Dé had no intention of allowing the Milesians back onto the land, and they set their Druids to creating a magical wind to keep them away. On the final day, Amhairghin, suspecting the truth of this wind, sent a man up the mast to see if it were real or created. It did not blow above the mast.

Amhairghin rose from his seat and wove an enchantment:

*Ailiu iath n-hErend
Hermach hermach muir
Mothach mothach sliab
Srathach srathach caill
Cithach Cithach aub
Essach essach loch*

I invoke the land of Ireland
Shining shining sea
Fertile fertile mountain
Flourishing flourishing wood
Plentiful plentiful river
Fish-rich fish-rich lake³⁶

The winds ceased, and the Milesians once more made landfall on Ireland. They met the Tuatha Dé at the hill of Tailtiu. It was a bloody battle, but in the end victory went to the Milesians. To end the battle a treaty was struck: everything above the land to the Milesians, and everything below to the Tuatha Dé.

Amhairghin, who is often considered the first Druid of Ireland, is the primary character in this story. Before telling the story I made brief mention of the Óran Mór as the song sung by the silver branch. What makes this story interesting in relation to the Óran Mór is the way in which Amhairghin leads the Milesians into Ireland: through song. Amhairghin's name translates to "Born of Song," and to render the words Óran Mór into modern Irish would be *Amhrán Mór*.

The Óran Mór is a rather obscure concept, not in the vocabulary of most people in the modern Celtic and Druidic traditions. It is an old way of referring to God in remote areas of Scotland and Ireland which survives in the oral folklore tradition. This idea appears in a few contemporary books on the Celtic tradition,³⁷ and in *The Celtic Way of Seeing: Meditations on the Irish Spirit Wheel*, Frank MacEowen quotes a personal communication with Stuart Harris-Logan, a Gaelic healer and scholar: "Out on the Isle of Barra, the people have long spoken of the Óran Mór as one of the old names of God. The Óran Mór is the Great Song from which all things have arisen."³⁸

The Óran Mór is variously referred to as the name of God or the music produced by the Dagda's harp. It was said this harp, *Uithne*, meaning vibrant green or verdant, plays three strains of music: *Goltraí* (sorrow), *Gentraí* (joy), and *Suantraí* (sleep). There is a sense here that the harp Uithne gives life to the universe and fills it with the shaping power of music, which can bring a person to joy, sadness, or lull them into a healing sleep. Tom Cowan, sheds some light on the power of sleep in his book *Yearning for the Wind: Celtic Reflections on Nature and the*

Soul: "Perhaps the music of sleep is required to produce the tranquil state *beyond* joy and sorrow, a preview of the ultimate consciousness in which all dualities are reconciled, a brief glimpse of the dreamland where the tension between opposites is transcended."³⁹ Silver branch perception and silver branch being.

This alchemy of language can be heard in a Scots-Gaelic name for God *Cruithear*, related to the Irish word for "creator" *cruthaitheoir*.⁴⁰ The Irish word for a small harp is *cruit* and perhaps we can hear echoes of the Óran Mór in the Irish phrase "cruthú na cruinne" which translates to "the creation of the universe;" the music of the harp, shaping, and the universe in one breath. The Óran Mór is the music of "cruthú na cruinne." It is the divine ground of beauty out of which all reality and phenomena emerge. Within the Óran Mór, the human-nature relationship is healed, because the duality has been entirely reconciled, and all boundaries removed.

Amhairghin, a poet and harpist, chants a powerful verse of 'I am's' which cannot help but remind one of Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gītā. In this sacred Hindu text Krishna recites a similar chant: "I am the radiant sun among the light-givers...among the stars of night, I am the moon...I am Meru among mountain-peaks...I am the ocean among waters...Of water-beings I am Veruna: Aryaman among the Fathers: I am Death...I am the wind..."⁴¹ As the Rees brothers say of Krishna in *Celtic Heritage*, "He is the cosmic juggler or magician and he is all those appearances through which the true essence of existence manifests itself – the cycle of the year, light, wind, earth, water, the four quarters of space, and so on."⁴² They suggest that Amhairghin has a similar role as can be seen from his incantations above; he *is* the unity of things, and so it is through him that their essence becomes expressed.

A similar Irish concept speaks directly to this. The word *neart*, which in modern Irish means “strength,” refers to the power of creative energy. Seán Ó Duinn, a Glenstal Abbey monk and scholar of Celtic religion writes, “Behind...the cyclic movement of nature, the death of one form, and the birth of another, the Celts must have seen a strange energy going out from a stable center filling everything, invigorating everything, constantly changing, leaving aside one form and taking on another.”⁴³ We might say that the stable center is the Óran Mór, and *neart* is the impermanent emanation of this song into the relative world, which is reflected in Amhairghin’s changing ‘I am.’

The Óran Mór is the music of consciousness arising as form. There as a mountain, there as a tree, there a stone, and there a person; each form is at its most basic nature made up of this limitless and enlightened awareness. Our original nature before it is obscured by the ego. This arising of forms, the act of the shaping of consciousness itself, is the music of the Óran Mór. We can see this in the story of Amhairghin, singing the world into creation. Through the power of voice and song he sings the unity of all things and through this, form arises – the cosmos of Ireland comes into being, allowing the Milesians to land there.

Amhairghin, “born of song,” and the song which he is born from is the Óran Mór. John Moriarty is more skeptical, not of the song but of its singer. “Listening to Krishna we are sure the ‘I’ of his many ‘I am’s’ is the innermost Self, is atman Brahman, the Divine Ground of all being. Listening to Amhairghin we cannot be sure that the ‘I’ of his many ‘I am’s’ is not ego, and if it is then we are dealing with the serious insanity of ego-inflation.”⁴⁴ So who is Amhairghin’s ‘I’? Is it the Irish *anam*, the soul? Is it the silver branch singing the Óran Mór? Perhaps.

And yet history shows us that, silver branch singing or not, Amhairghin failed. The Celts were a bloody people, headhunters even. History shows us the reality of the so-called ecological

sensitivity of the Celtic people. During the Iron Age when Celtic culture came to Ireland (the means by which it came are debated) marked a period of ecological devastation in Ireland, which was once covered almost entirely in forests, cleared now for agriculture. Moriarty writes:

The truth is this: those nine waves that surround Ireland and its islands are nine initiations into nine wholly unexpected dimensions of reality. To properly come ashore into Ireland therefore we need to sail, not over them, but into them and through them. Taking them at face value, the Celts sailed over them. Hence the sadness of their subsequent history here.⁴⁵

Whatever the reality of the past, Amhairghin and the Óran Mór are still with us. We can still take Moriarty's suggestion, the Tuatha Dé Danann suggestion, and sail back out over nine waves of initiation, returning through them into "wholly unexpected dimensions of reality." Into silver branch perception, singing the Óran Mór. It is through this initiation that we heal ourselves of Súil Milldagach.

Conclusion: Entering the Halls of Tara

Lúgh and Balar of the Piercing Eye meeting in battle, and the nine layers of the Súil Milldagach, the destructive eye which has become our human vision being lifted. As the eye opens Lúgh casts his stone into it, sending it out of the back of Balar's head, and destroying the Fomorian army it looks upon. Balar's piercing eye looking upon the ecology of the planet. Balar's piercing eye looking upon human rights. Balar's piercing eye looking upon our spirituality. Balar's piercing eye reducing our world to the ashes of commodity. Lúgh casting his thunderbolt of truth through that eye.⁴⁶

If the Second Battle of Magh Tuireadh shows us the conflict of our human condition the coming of the Milesians to Ireland instructs us to be initiated into the Óran Mór, into silver branch perception and being. If John Moriarty is right, the sadness of the subsequent Celtic history in Ireland can be attributed to their way of being on the land, to their banishing of the

Tuatha Dé Danann into the Otherworld. Perhaps, as Frank MacEowen suggests in *The Spiral of Memory and Belonging*, we might view the Tuatha Dé as an enlightened society, like the Tibetan Shambhala.⁴⁷ Taking this perspective, it is in uniting our vision with the Otherworld, silver branch perception, which initiates us into wholeness and invites ecumenical existence between Milesian and Tuatha Dé. Human eyes and Otherworld vision.

Bran was initiated into silver branch perception at sea. Cormac was initiated into truth at Connla's Well. The Irish kings were initiated into the proper order of things by Fintan. Lúgh initiated the Tuatha Dé into enlightenment when he entered Tara and cast his stone through Balar's piercing eye. Amhairghin brought the Milesians into what could have been, for them, a radical initiation into the Óran Mór. Instead they chose invasion and took the land from the Tuatha Dé. They chose Súil Milldagach, and we still hold mythically to that choice today.

The mandala I have described, not only tells us what the proper order of things looks like to the Irish eye, but as Jung suggests, is also a *yantra*. It is the path to this cosmic order, and each of the four airts is one aspect of the journey. Householding and generosity of spirit; art and the Óran Mór; Otherworld vision and beauty; surrendering the ego to the greater pattern of soul. Kingship and wholeness in the center. Silver branch perception and silver branch being dissolving the boundaries between self and world, healing Súil Milldagach.

It is time to take Moriarty's and the Tuatha Dé suggestion, and sail back out over nine waves. Not the nine waves around Ireland, but the nine waves of our human condition. It is time to sail to the edge of the self and return with silver branch perception. Then we will see things as they are, as the Óran Mór, the divine ground of beauty from which all things emerge. This is the antidote to Súil Milldagach.

This is the surprise of our initiation. Nature as we thought we knew it does not exist. The relationship we thought was a problem does not even exist. Our thoughts about nature are no more real than our projections about the strangers we see on the street. It is like the old Zen saying, “First mountains are mountains and streams are streams. Then the mountains are not mountains and streams are not streams. But in the end, mountains are mountains again and streams are streams again.”⁴⁸ To say that nature is not real requires that we actually go further in this deconstruction, and eventually return to the simplicity of things *as they are*. In other words, we return with silver branch perception and see reality as it is, rather than through our old lens of psychological constructions. Nature as we thought it to be does not exist, but then, neither do we. We are not the ego we thought we were. At root all things are the dance of divine ground, the Óran Mór. This is how we can say: Soul and nature are one; they are the wildness of the world and the wildness of the self. To alienate ourselves from one is to alienate ourselves from the other.

To heal the human-nature relationship is to see that there is no human-nature relationship at all, because it is dependent on the relative duality of perception. It is in unity of thought, sense, and being that we are healed. When the forest we fell for paper and fuel is seen as the silver branch singing the Óran Mór, we can no longer act only in our self interest. We must take into account the *intrinsic value* of Deep Ecology, that all things have worth and value independent of our human needs. We must also consider that life feeds on itself. The slaughter of a rabbit, by hawk or human, is no less the silver branch singing than is the powerful roar of a waterfall or the quiet of a forest. The difference is, when you hear the silver branch singing, you are that much more grateful for what has been given or taken from life. This initiation is the call

to ultimate ethics. Rather than saying “do not take life,” it requires nothing less than feeling fully the sacrifices made on our behalf and the making of offerings in mutual reciprocity.

The problem with much of modern Druidism is its stance on the human-nature relationship. It is regarded as a reified “thing,” contrary to the way in which I’ve discussed it earlier as a psychological schism, a confusion in our thinking and being. With this concept, and no method for seeing beyond concept, there is no room for nature to be anything other than what we think it is. As long as we consider that there is a human-nature relationship, that what we are somehow missing is a connection with nature, we continue to perpetuate the egoic confusion which has caused us so many problems in the first place.

The good news is this: the five streams of the senses have their source in Connla’s Well. What we perceive with our senses can lead us back. We only need to learn to drink. It is not really a problem that humans are considered something outside the realm of nature. There is no problem with “connecting to nature.” We start at the streams. The problem lies in refusing to go beyond that connection, opening to the experience until there is no more self and no more nature; no more connection and no more relationship. Druidism is about *merging* with nature and the sacred, according to Frank MacEowen,⁴⁹ yet there are no coherent practices within the mainstream tradition which facilitate going beyond the dualism of a human-nature dichotomy.

The silver branch is the way beyond this dualism; in its singing we see things for what they are. The boundaries disappear, dissolved into the unity of the Óran Mór. To get there, however, Druidism must also make Moriarty’s initiation through nine waves. Individually making the journey, however, the greatest irony is that when we arrive we must burn the vessel on which we sailed. Such was the wisdom of the Tuatha Dé when they arrived in Ireland, as some stories have it, burning their boats on the shore.

There will be resistance to this idea of course. There will likely be resistant to the way in which I have read the old stories here as well. Many who practice a form of Druidism hold very tightly to what little we know of the ancient Druids, insisting that we mimic them as closely as possible. There is the idea that in mimicking what has come before us we are being more authentic to the tradition. Would changing the modern tradition dishonor the ancient tradition and the Celtic culture which still survives at the fringes of the Western world? In discussing the radical way in which Chögyam Trungpa taught Buddhism in the West, Fabrice Midal strikes on something which is incredibly relevant to innovation in any tradition, including the Druidic:

The word *tradition* must be understood here in the precise sense of being associated with the *source* of the teachings. It thus has nothing to do with the desire to maintain the past for the past's sake... Thus, an authentic relationship with Tradition is a matter of purity of heart and not of being a conservative. It is inseparable from the freedom to return, beyond all conventions, to the source.⁵⁰

This is a radical idea. Sometimes this means the equivalent of burning our religious and spiritual vessels on the shores of our own self-concept. In this instance, where we know so little of ancient Druidism, and where so much of modern Druidism is based on neo-paganism and the 18th century revival, it means sailing back out over nine waves. Like the heroes of many of our stories it means leaving the comfortable and familiar homes we have grown accustomed to, and being initiated into something wholly unexpected. It means returning through nine waves with the silver branch in our hands, singing a song of 'I am.'

In this way Druidism can be "bread and wine" for us. In this way we are Moriarty's "temporary ones of the Dream," invoking what is needed to heal ourselves in these times. A myth is not a solid thing, and neither is the ways in which it can be read. This is why they were not written down by the ancient Druids, until the Christians came and preserved these dying stories in their books. To take them off the page and return them to our lips means that they will come alive in their speaking, that we might find familiar faces taking on new and alternative

meaning. Sadly, perhaps different than it was in the past, our industrial culture is the Fomorian eye. This fact itself changes so much of how we must listen to and read the old stories.

What I hope to have impressed upon the reader here is that what is needed in our modern times is the healing of the psychological split between nature and humanity; unity of Otherworld being in silver branch singing. No easy task, and likely most of us need guidance and structure to show us how to heal ourselves of our own Súil Milldagach. That is why I invoke Druidism as an antidote. Not *the* antidote, but certainly a worthy one, which so many of us who are of European descent find resonance with. Before Bran set sail on his voyage across the Otherworld sea, no doubt the boat was checked to ensure that it was sea-worthy. I liken the work of these stories and commentaries to ensuring the soul-worthiness of Druidism, and gently suggest that it may need patching up.

Connecting to nature alone is an important first step and one which Druidism has guided many people to do. It still implies that the practitioner is connecting to something outside of themselves. In the terms of ecopsychology it is expanding our identity to include nature, the development of an “ecological ego.” An ecological ego is not enough. It may include identification with the phenomenal world, but because it is still an identity, it can not dissolve or transcend into the Óran Mór of silver branch perception. Conditioned by identity, it is an obstacle to what I have called wildness. The soul, which is the silver branch singing us into non-duality, and into greater fulfillment of our humanity, requires that the ego be dissolved. Like erasing portions of a circle, it no longer confines us, and we can hear in those gaps the singing of the silver branch, and know that the ego is not the whole story.

The nature which we are estranged from is not the phenomenal world; it is the soul, wildness, which is most often found in nature. Connecting with trees, mountains, rivers, and

animals is good, but unless we recognize and work with that from which we are really estranged, the soul and the Óran Mór, we will not truly be healed.

So we return to our mandala, which happens to be the island of Ireland itself. At the center of the mandala is Sovereignty, meaning both the goddess of the land and the spiritual “kingship” of embodying truth: the Hill of Tara. Think of Lúgh approaching the doorkeeper. No one enters Tara who does not possess an art. Think of the kings, Nuada, Bres, and Lúgh. No one rules Tara who is not a symbol of wholeness. It is Lúgh, who knowing so fully his nature, entered Tara, slew Balar and pierced his piercing eye with the slingstone of truth—he became king, ultimately. To enter and rule Tara means to drink from Connla’s Well. “Everyone drinks from the streams,” says Manannán, “but only poets, the skilled ones, and those who possess an art drink from both the streams and the spring itself.” To get there we must hold the silver branch, and hearing that song, we too will be called to make a journey over the waves. There we will find the divine ground of beauty, the original ocean of song from which all things have emerged. There we will be healed of Súil Milldagach.

Glossary of Terms

Airts – literally ‘winds’ in Old Irish. It refers to the ancient divisions of Ireland, namely: learnings in the west, battle in the north, prosperity in the east, music in the south, and kingship in the center. Here it is used to refer to the quadrants of a mandala and yantra which describes the proper order of the cosmos in the Irish tradition.

Amhairghin Glúngheal – the poet who sailed at the helm of the Milesian ships. His name is often cited as meaning “born of song,” the song he is born of perhaps being the *Óran Mór*. Ideally we come to shore in Ireland (a metaphor for the mandala, which represents here the configuration of the self), like Amhairghin, singing the *Óran Mór*.

Balar – the champion of the Fomorians. He has one great eye, which was protected by nine lids, each attached to a chain by a hook. When the lids were lifted anything it looked upon was consumed and destroyed. He was defeated by his grandson, Lúgh, in the Second Battle of Magh Tuireadh.

Banbha – one of the goddesses of the land who the Milesians met on their way to Tara. She promised safe passage for them if they agreed to name the land for her. In *Invoking Ireland*, John Moriarty refers to her as one of three immaculate and perfect dimensions of Ireland. She is the wife of MacCuill, one of three kings, each who rules a different dimension of Ireland.

Beauty – a philosophical quality rather than a principle of aesthetics. Here it refers to the manifestation of the Otherworld, God, Divine, etc in time and space. It is the Divine Ground glimpsed in ‘ordinary reality.’

Bran Mac Feabhail – a king who, finding a silver branch, takes a sea-journey to the Otherworld and meets Manannán Mac Lir, who tells him of ‘silver branch perception’ and the nature of the Otherworld.

Buddha-nature – a concept in Buddhism, the basic enlightened nature of reality which becomes covered over by the confused nature of the ego. See also *soul*.

Connla’s Well – a well or spring in Manannán’s Otherworld realm, the Land of Promise. There are nine hazels around it, and five salmon swim in the water. Occasionally a hazelnut of wisdom will drop into the water to be eaten by the salmon. Issuing from the well are five streams which represent the physical senses. Manannán tells Cormac that “Everyone drinks from the streams, but only poets, the skilled ones, and those who possess an art drink from both the streams and the spring itself.” It is the source of Otherworld wisdom, unity of being, and silver branch perception.

Cormac Mac Airt – one of the greatest of Irish kings. He met Manannán and exchanged his family for a silver branch. When he followed Manannán, not being able to bear the loss of his family, he entered the Otherworld realm called the Land of Promise. Manannán returned his family to him, allowed him to keep the silver branch, and gave him the famous Cup of Truth. He is a symbol of sovereignty and Fír Flathemon, the ruler’s truth. While he ruled there was no suffering and all things remained in perfect cosmic order.

Cup of Truth – if a lie was spoken over the cup, it would break into three pieces, if three truths were spoken over it, it would become whole again. Represents the cosmic order behind upheld by the principle and embodiment of truth (fírinne). Failing to uphold truth results in the collapse of cosmic order.

Dán – literally means art, poetry, or destiny in modern Irish. Here it refers to ‘soul-gift,’ the quality rooted in soul which we birth into the world through our action and way of being. *Dán* is realized through engaging with the mandala of the airts and working to dissolve the ego which reveals deeper and deeper strata of the soul. Bill Plotkin defines the soul-gift as: “an essence, a seed of quiescent potential, secreted for safekeeping in the center of our being. This treasure, this personal quality, power, talent, or gift (or set of such qualities), is ours to develop, embody, and offer to our communities through acts of service—our contributions to a more diverse, vital, evolved world. Our personal destiny is to become that treasure through our actions” (Plotkin, 39).

Deep Ecology – an ecological philosophy developed by Arne Naess. Its first principle is the intrinsic worth or value of all things, regardless of human usefulness. It is related to ecopsychology.

Divine Ground – from which all phenomena arise (see also Óran Mór). Also the *divine ungrund*, the divine groundlessness. They are one and the same, both a ground and a no-ground simultaneously because it lacks any reference point.

Druid – a caste of people in ancient Ireland, similar perhaps to the Brahmins of India. They were the intellectual caste, and fulfilled many roles; poets, storytellers, musicians, magicians, shamans, priests, judges, historians, counselors, and sometimes kings. Also a modern religious and spiritual movement, with roots in two revivals—one which was Masonic influenced during the 18th century, and another, related revival or reformation in the 1960s which moved it in the direction of neo-pagan spirituality. In the context of this paper it describes a person who battles or transforms Súil Milldagach through silver branch perception and drinking from Connla’s Well. The origin of the word is often thought to come from the Greek *drus* meaning Oak and *vid* meaning knowledge; one who has knowledge of the oak. Jean Markale, however, argues that it comes from the Old Celtic *dru+wid*, meaning “all-knowing” or “all-seeing” (Markale, 12). This would certainly fit in with our definition here, and the relationship of Druids to silver branch perception.

Ecological Ego – an expanded egoic identity which is centered not only on the individual person but identified with the environment as well (both human and environmental environments). A necessary and important stage in dis-identifying with the ego altogether.

Ecological Unconscious – a term coined by Theodore Roszak in *The Voice of the Earth*. It refers to a deep layer of the psyche, similar to Jung’s collective unconscious. Roszak argues that, while the collective unconscious is made up of human cultural and religious archetypes commonly shared by all of humanity, the ecological unconscious is wider in breadth, and contains the environmental and ecological aspect of our identity. It means that, at base, we are inherently a part of the earth.

Ecopsychology – an emerging psychological discipline, whose name was coined by Theodore Roszak in *The Voice of the Earth* (although there are “ecopsychological” texts which came before it, such as Paul Shepherd’s *Nature and Madness*). Roszak writes that the core of the mind is the ecological unconscious, and it is the repression of this which is the cause of our social wide neurosis, which causes us to do so much damage to the earth in exchange for economical and industrial development. In ecopsychology, sanity involves a return to an ecological integrated way of human life.

Éire – one of the goddesses of the land who the Milesians met on their way to Tara. She promised safe passage for them if they agreed to name the land for her. In *Invoking Ireland*, John Moriarty refers to her as one of three immaculate and perfect dimensions of Ireland. She is the wife of MacGrene, one of three kings, each who rules a different dimension of Ireland.

Ego – there are two ways in which the word ego is used, resulting in some confusion about what it means to “dissolve” or “transcend the ego.” *Functional ego* is the locus of our personality and ability to function in the world, perceive, and make choices. The *Representational ego* is our self-identity, the “me-ness” of our existence. It appears to be a solid thing, but is in fact a whirlwind of thoughts and storylines which obscures our sight from seeing the true nature of our experience. It has been noted that practices such as meditation and wilderness retreats build up the functional ego, while dissolving the representational ego. The phrase in transpersonal psychology, “you have to be somebody before you can be nobody,” seems to be pointing to this dynamic. A ego can be healthy or unhealthy. The neurotic, unhealthy ego is *Súil Milldagach*.

Filidh – after the coming of Christianity to Ireland when Druidism had faded from society and many aspects of it became illegal, the filidh, an elite caste of poets, took over many of their social functions and practices.

Fintan Mac Bóchra – one of the first people to come to Ireland, he survived a shipwreck in the form of a salmon, and lived for many lives in many shapes. When Tara was in upheaval and no one could remember the proper order of things, he was called in to tell the story of the divisions of Tara, and restored the proper order of the cosmos.

Fír Flathemon – literally “the ruler’s truth,” as characterized in an Old Irish text, *An Audacht Morainn*, which details the maintaining of right order, socially and cosmically, as a result of the king’s truth. As a Druidic term it refers to “ruling one’s world” at the center of the mandala, being in harmony with the “underlying unity of all things” (Greywind, 102). The king’s role is ultimately one of service to the community and the land, thus forming the basis of an “engaged Druidism.”

Fírinne – literally means ‘truth.’ Greywind defines it as “...a measure of the degree to which something is rightly integrated with the underlying unity of all things” (Greywind, 102). Perhaps similar to the Indian concept of *dharmā* (law or truth) or the Navajo *horzo* (beauty).

Fódhla – one of the goddesses of the land who the Milesians met on their way to Tara. She promised safe passage for them if they agreed to name the land for her. In *Invoking Ireland*, John Moriarty refers to her as one of three immaculate and perfect dimensions of Ireland. She is the wife of MacCecht, one of three kings, each who rules a different dimension of Ireland.

Fomorians – a race inhabiting Ireland. Unlike the other invaders, the Fomorians were simply there from the beginning, intimating that at one time they were considered the destructive spirits or forces of nature. Within the context of this work they are a people who “shape nature to suit them” (Moriarty, 164), epitomized by their champion, Balar of the Piercing Eye. They are a destructive and chaotic force, the shadow of the psyche, the confused and neurotic energy of the ego.

Immram – (plural *Immrama*) an Otherworld sea-voyage (lit. “rowing about”). Once a type of story in the organization of Irish mythology there are now only a few of these stories known: “The Voyage of Bran”, “The Voyage of Máel Dúin”, and the Christian “Voyage of St. Brendan” are the most well known and substantial. In all cases the journey initiates the pilgrims into a new way of seeing or being in the world.

Lebor Gabála Éirenn – the “Book of Invasions” or “Book of the Taking of Ireland.” A Medieval book written by Christian scribes which details the many mythological invasions of Ireland, and includes what are thought to be apocryphal invasions as well. An attempt to combine the old stories of the invasions and formation of Irish culture with the Christian story of Genesis and the Flood.

Lúgh – popularly thought to be a solar deity, he is more likely associated with storms and lightning flashes, however (Kondratiev). A god of many arts, he gained entrance to Tara by being master of all arts, and later defeated his grandfather, Balar, and his *Súil Milldagach* in the Second Battle of Magh Tuireadh, before becoming king. Archetype of the enlightened warrior.

Manannán – god of the sea and the Otherworld, ruler of the Land of Promise. He gave the silver branch and the cup of truth to Cormac, and met Bran on his immram, riding a chariot atop the waves, and told him of silver branch perception.

Mandala – C.G. Jung describes mandalas thusly: “Mandalas...usually appear in situations of psychic confusion and disorientation. The archetype thereby constellated represents a pattern of order which, like a psychological ‘view-finder’ marked with a cross or circle divided into four, is superimposed on the psychic chaos so that each content falls into place and the weltering confusion is held together by the protective circle...At the same time they are *yantras*, instruments with whose help the order is brought into being” (Jung, 416).

Milesians – the final group of invaders in the Irish *Book of Invasions (Lebor Gabála Érenn)*. Considered to be the Gael, the Celtic Irish.

Nature – another word for reality. For a more specific definition *see also wild nature*.

Neart – literally means “strength.” Creative energy emanating from the Óran Mór, as seen in the shifting shapes and patterns of life. The rising and falling of form. Life, death, and rebirth; impermanence and change.

Nine Waves – the distance the Milesians sailed out to when the Tuatha Dé Danann kings asked them to leave Ireland for three days before invading again. According to Moriarty, these represent initiations into “wholly unexpected dimensions of reality”. Also it is the distance which was considered exile from Ireland, and possibly represented a return to the Otherworld.

Otherworld – the eternal realm, not an eternity of time, but outside time altogether. The Otherworld is unity of being, soul, firinne. Like silver branch perception it is silver branch *being*. Not a world outside of ours, but our world when experienced as perfect, whole, and enlightened (this does not discount the “shamanic” reality of the Otherworld as a realm of subtle energy).

Óran Mór – the divine ground of beauty out of which all reality and phenomena emerge (see also divine ground and beauty). Within the Óran Mór, the human-nature relationship is healed, because the duality has been entirely reconciled, and all boundaries removed. Traditionally one of the many words for God in remote areas of Scotland.

Pagan – literally a Latin word meaning ‘country-dweller,’ used pejoratively to describe people, usually on the fringe of civilization, in the country, who held to the native, often nature-honoring, traditions of Europe. Later it came to mean anyone of a religion other than Judeo-Christian. Now it has come to be used as an umbrella term (along with ‘neo-pagan’) for any of the religious movements, many of which have their roots in the 1950’s and 60’s, which seek to connect their adherents to the natural world and any number of deities. Wicca is an example, and many neo-pagan religions are cultural reformations of Wicca.

Second Battle of Magh Tuireadh – decisive battle between the Fomorians and the Tuatha Dé Danann. In the battle Lúgh defeats Balar of the Piercing Eye and becomes king.

Silver Branch – a branch, usually apple branch, which creates the sweetest of music, and ushers mortal holders into the Otherworld. John Moriarty coined “silver branch perception” (Moriarty, *Invoking Ireland*). He defines it as, “the marvelous way of seeing and knowing things that, in effect, is paradise regained” (236). Silver branch perception is seeing the world as it is, beyond convention, thought, and projection. When we see with silver branch perception we see Beauty, like Manannán’s Plain of Delight.

Soul – *anam* in Irish. The enlightened nature of our experience, which is covered over by the ego. One might say that spirituality or mysticism is the practice of coming to rest in and identify with soul rather than the limited, confused, and conditioned experience of the ego.

Soul-gift – *see dán*

Súil Milldagach – the destructive, poisonous, piercing, or evil eye as it is numerous translated from the Second Battle of Magh Tuireadh. Balar’s eye, which consumes and destroys anything it looks upon. In a society or culture it is the destructive tendencies; toward the environment, human rights, justice, and equality. In an individual it is the confused and neurotic ego. The antidote is silver branch perception.

Tuatha Dé Danann – one of the groups of invaders, and arguably the most important, in the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*. Often considered to be the deities of the Irish tradition. Most scholars hold that while the Fomorians are the chaotic and destructive spirits of nature, the Tuatha Dé represent the order of the tribe and human community. In the case of this work, the Tuatha Dé are a people who “would let nature shape them to suit it” (Moriarty, 163). They represent the Otherworld and silver branch perception battling the *Súil Milldagach* and the ego.

Wild – a quality of connection and embodiment of soul. Similar to the Chinese *Tao* or the Irish *frinne*.

Wild Nature – the physical and sensual world which retains the integrity of its core wildness. Because humans are a part of nature, this does not necessarily mean that nature is everything divorced from the impacts of human activity. We might say that nature is the sensuous place in which soul dwells.

Endnotes

- ¹ Epigraph: Keats, John. "Ode to a Grecian Urn." The Oxford Book of English Verse: 1250–1900. Ed. Arthur Quiller-Couch. 1919. 17 Nov. 2007. <<http://www.bartleby.com/101/625.html>>
- ² Epigraph: Moriarty, John. *Invoking Ireland: Ailiu Iath n-hErend*. The Lilliput Press: Dublin, Ireland, 2005. 139
- ³ Moriarty, 164
- ⁴ Markale, Jean. *The Druids: Celtic Priests of Nature*. Inner Traditions International: Rochester, Vermont: 1999. 201
- ⁵ Hölderlin, Friedrich. "Bread and Wine." Friedrich Hölderlin: Selected Poems. 1978. trans. James Mitchell. 16 Nov. 2007. <<http://home.att.net/~holderlin/poem/breadandwine.htm>>
- ⁶ Moriarty, John. *Dreamtime*. The Lilliput Press: Dublin, Ireland, 1999. vii
- ⁷ Berresford Ellis, Peter. *Our Druid Cousins*. Feb., 2000. Accessed Nov. 10, 2007. <<http://www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/2000/2/2000-2-16.shtml>>
- ⁸ Gary Snyder makes strikingly similar distinctions between wild and nature. The articulation here is my own, but it is worth giving Snyder's definition of wild, since it so wonderfully compliments the one given in text. He writes, "The wild is self-creating, self-maintaining, self-propagating, self-reliant, self-actualising, and it has no 'self'. It is perhaps the same as what the East Asian philosophers call the Dao...In this sense 'wild' is a word for the intrinsic, non-theistic, forever-changing natural order." (Snyder, Gary. "Writers and the War Against Nature." Resurgence Issue 239, Nov. 2006. <<http://resurgence.org/2006/snyder239.htm>>) Also see Snyder's article "The Etiquette of Freedom" in *The Practice of the Wild: Essays*, 2003.
- ⁹ Ray, Reginald A., *Secret of the Vajra World: The Tantric Buddhism of Tibet*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2001. 103-104
- ¹⁰ Roszak, Theodore. *The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology*. Grand Rapids: Phanes, 2001. 301-305
- ¹¹ Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996. 22
- ¹² Davis, John, Ph.D. "Psychological Benefits of Nature: An Outline of Research and Theory With Special Reference to Transpersonal Psychology". Home page. 5 Oct. 2007. 24 Oct. 2007. <<http://www.johnvdavis.com/ep/benefits.htm>>
- ¹³ Moriarty, John. quoted in "An Irishwoman's Diary." Sheila Sullivan. The Irish Times, 2005. <http://www.johnmoriarty.info/pdf/Sheila_Sullivan_Irish_Times_An%20Irishwomans_diary.pdf>
- ¹⁴ Moriarty, *Invoking Ireland*, 164
- ¹⁵ Plotkin, Bill. *Soulcraft: Crossing into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche*. Novato: New World Library, 2003. 39
- ¹⁶ Moriarty, *Invoking Ireland*, 166
- ¹⁷ Mipham, Sakyong. *Ruling Your World: Ancient Strategies for Modern Life*. New York: Morgan Road Books, 2005.
- ¹⁸ Jung, C.G. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Fontana Press: London, 1995. 416

¹⁹ MacEowen, Frank. *The Celtic Way of Seeing: Meditations on the Irish Spirit Wheel*. Novato: New World Library, 2007. 71

²⁰ Curiously, the first in the list of secondary associations is “waterfalls.” MacEowen suggests a connection between this association and an old Irish ritual of wrapping oneself in a bull’s hide and lying down behind a waterfall to produce a visionary state of sleep. This practice was part of the *banais rí* when the king was ritually married to the land. Irish kingship was not usually passed down hereditarily from father to son, and the new king would be discovered by Druids using the ritual described above. Keeping in mind that kingship is at the center of our mandala, this becomes even more imbued with meaning. (MacEowen, *The Celtic Way of Seeing*, 92)

²¹ MacEowen, *The Celtic Way of Seeing*, 89

²² O'Donohue, John. *Divine Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*. London: Bantam Books, 2003. 31

²³ Ó Duinn, Seán OSB. *Where Three Streams Meet: Celtic Spirituality*. Blackrock, Ireland: The Columba Press, 2000. 36-40

²⁴ Moriarty, *Invoking Ireland*, 59

²⁵ Greywind. *The Voice Within the Wind: Of Becoming and the Druid Way*. Girvan, Scotland: Grey House in the Woods, 2001. 102

²⁶ Cowan, Tom. *Yearning for the Wind: Celtic Reflections on Nature and the Soul*. Novato, California: New World Library, 2003. 79

²⁷ Cowan, Tom. “The Pledge to the Elements.” *Irish Spirit: Pagan, Celtic, Christian, Global*. Ed. Patricia Monaghan. Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 2001. 81-88

²⁸ Rumi. *The Essential Rumi*. Trans. Coleman Barks. New York: HarperCollins, 1995. 37

²⁹ Moriarty, *Invoking Ireland*, 10

³⁰ Moriarty, *Invoking Ireland*, 140

³¹ *The Voyage of Bran*. Trans. Whitley Stokes. London, 1985. Internet Sacred Texts Archive. < <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/celt/vob/index.htm>>

³² Moriarty, *Invoking Ireland*, 144

³³ Moriarty, *Invoking Ireland*, 143

³⁴ Jung, p. 412

³⁵ translation by John Carey, quoted in Moriarty, *Invoking Ireland*, 31

³⁶ Moriarty, *Invoking Ireland*, 33

³⁷ The Óran Mór appears in several books, though mostly remains an oral tradition. It appears in two of Frank MacEowen’s books, *The Mist-Filled Path: Celtic Wisdom for Wanderers, Exiles, and Seekers* and *The Celtic Way of Seeing: Meditations on the Irish Spirit Wheel*. It also appears in Tom Cowan’s *Yearning for the Wind: Celtic Reflections on Nature and Soul* and Steve and Lois Mowday Rabey’s *Celtic Journey: A Travelers Guide to Ireland’s Spiritual Legacy*. Frank Mills also wrote an article entitled *The Oran Mór*, which at one point was widely available on the internet, but appears to now be unavailable. Mills notes the relationship between many of the names of the Christian God and music in Celtic languages.

³⁸ MacEowen, 84

³⁹ Cowan, *Yearning for the Wind*, 65

⁴⁰ The *Pocket Oxford Irish Dictionary* translates the word as “creator,” but the root *cruth* translates to “appearance, form, shape,” and we might more accurately translate this term as “shaper” or “one who forms appearances.”

⁴¹ Rees, Alwyn and Brinley. *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales*. Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 1961. p. 99

⁴² Rees, p 99

⁴³ Ó Duinn, 78

⁴⁴ Moriarty, *Invoking Ireland*, 36

⁴⁵ Moriarty, *Invoking Ireland*, 37

⁴⁶ Lúgh is often thought of as a solar deity. However, Alexei Kondratiev argues that he is more appropriately identified with storms and the “lightning-flash.” Lúghnasadh (August) storms in County Mayo in the West of Ireland are often considered the battle between Lúgh and Balar. His more popular solar status is likely a product of Victorian scholars possibly attempting to reconcile him with the solar hierophany of Jesus. (Kondratiev, Alexei. “Lugus: The Many Gifted Lord,” *An Tribhís Mhór: The IMBAS Journal of Celtic Reconstructionism* #1, Lúnasa 1997. *Mythical Ireland*. 11 Nov. 2007 <<http://www.mythicalireland.com/mythology/tuathade/lugus.html>>

⁴⁷ MacEowen, Frank. *The Spiral of Memory and Belonging: A Celtic Path of Soul and Kinship*. Novato: New World Library, 2004. 34

⁴⁸ Trungpa, Chogyam. *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1973. 48-49

⁴⁹ MacEowen, *The Mist-Filled Path: Celtic Wisdom for Exiles, Wanderers, and Seekers*. Novato: New World Library, 2002. xxxii

⁵⁰ Midal, Fabrice. *Chögyam Trungpa: His Life and Vision*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2004. 84

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