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# *Archetypes of the Irish Soul (II)*

John Hill

Having, discussed an archetype of life in part I,<sup>1</sup> it would now seem appropriate to deal similarly with death. There are many ways of looking at this perennial subject. I will limit myself to one which, I believe, is rooted in the Celtic imagination.

Orthodox religion has conceived of two distant locations for the continuity of life – eternal paradise and eternal damnation. Our myths, folktales and literature assure us that there are more places close at hand. In folktale, the dead behave much in the same way as the living. They dance, play music, marry or are most anxious to pay off their debts. There are no sharp boundaries between the living and the dead. The ghosts of those thought dead are kept out of the house and appeased with rosaries masses and intercessions and, we find, they are not dead at all. Then there are those, who have obviously passed on, but who return home again to find they have been dead for several hundred years. Flann O'Brien,<sup>2</sup> a modern Irish author, takes up a theory of the mad deSelby and produces a novel in which it is never clear if the hero is dead or alive. The theory is that living is an illusion and with that everything becomes possible.

Likewise, in the famous *navigatio*, of the early Irish literature, one is never quite sure if one is in the land of the living or the dead. Since time immemorial, the offshore islands have always been conceived as an ideal setting for a continuity of existence. The Skellig rocks, known as Teach Duinn, 'the house of Donn' – a lord of the underworld – were considered as an assembly place for the dead. Until recently, pilgrims used to go there in the belief that they would hasten the progress of their soul through purgatory after death. From the writings of Synge<sup>3</sup> and Robin Flower, we learn that the islanders themselves reckon with the continual interference from the dead or the fairies, with whom they share their ocean dwelling-place. Perhaps this taste for the Beyond is revealed in the recent words of one islandman<sup>4</sup>: 'I go out there so I can look into myself, and when I am there I can see myself standing still and the rest of the world going mad'.

It is beyond doubt that historically between the 6th and 10th centuries peregrinations were undertaken as a form of ascetic practice of the early Celtic church. The ruins of the monastic settlements on the off-shore isles as well as many chronicles testify to this. The utterly unworldly spirit of these undertakings is revealed in the following Anglo-Saxon chronicle<sup>5</sup>: 'Three Irishmen came to

King Alfred in a boat without any oars, from Ireland, whence they had stolen away because they desired, for the love of God, to be in a state of pilgrimage — they reckoned not where'.

The inspiration of these voyages is to be found in a body of literature called 'immrama', which tells about visits to otherworldly islands.<sup>6</sup> Here we are no longer confronted with an ordinary dimension of existence but rather with the unfamiliar shapes and figures of a mythological order. Pagan hero or Christian saint set off in a small boat, guided solely by the wind or the waves. They are in search of the land of Delight (Mag Mell) or, as in later versions, a paradise promised by Christ. The islands which they visit have little in common with the homeland they have forsaken. There are islands with just one animal species (ants, dogs, sheep), islands with one peculiar vegetation (supernatural berries), islands of monstrous forms (a horse with dog-claws, pig-headed men, dog-headed men), islands of one sex (the famed isle of women), or of one human type (hermit, miller, giant) or of one human attitude (laughter, joy, sorrow) or of radical divisions (separation of black and white, youth and old age, social classes, monastic orders). When they return home again, the wanderers find time has passed on — they have become historical figures of ancient times or, as with Brendan, there is just enough time to put things in order before soul and body become separated.

There are the unavoidable questions of modern times. Is this array of archaic imagery evidence of a fragmented psyche? Is the voyage to the otherworldly islands a display of dissociated hallucinations that we find in schizophrenia? Can the immrama as a whole be interpreted as a flight from reality, a surrender to the terrifying and seductive images of a latent psychosis? Those of us who take the world of 'common day' as the one norm of reality may answer positively. But is this not simply another way of keeping those ghosts outside of the house, appeasing them with rosaries and intercessions? Certainly those who have found meaning on the isles and madness on the mainland would answer negatively.

Three writers, a mythologist, a poet and a psychologist, all of whom seem to have a solid footing in both worlds, have amplified, envisioned or experienced this phenomenon from their respective standpoints.

Let us start with the explorations of Alyn and Brinley Rees<sup>7</sup> which have yielded valuable signposts to the significance of this literature. On these otherworldly voyages, the familiar world to which we are accustomed becomes loosened up, disentangled and resolves itself into the separated and isolated elements of its original composition. Animal or vegetable species, colour, human sexes, ages, classes or attitudes exist as separate forms, independent from their mixed state in the manifest world or our immediate experience.

Also, what to us appear as monsters, are but fresh combinations of those elements, forming a different world from the one we know. Even evolution tells us that each species has within itself vestiges of other possibilities for development, but, for reasons unknown, an unfolding took its course and produced the world as it is. The Rees brothers believe that this forgotten world of possibilities remained, for the druids, a cherished doctrine on life-after-death. Indeed it is part of a common indo-european doctrine for which we find evidence in the more famous Tibetan

book of the dead and other related literature, all serving as a guide for that final voyage beyond the boundaries of life and death.

Hermann Hess<sup>8</sup> created the magic theater of the Steppenwolf to help modern man come to terms with the world of the immortals. The price of admittance is sanity. Harry Haller, the hero, sees himself disintegrating into the thousand fragments of his own lifetime. One after the other the doors to the various parts of himself are opened. He sees himself as an animal, a machine, a lover, a murderer. Each 'island' of his personality is entirely unmolested by the other. Through the door of Love: 'I was not perturbed by the thinker, nor tortured by the Steppenwolf, nor dwarfed by the poet, the visionary, or the moralist. No — I was nothing but the lover and I breathed no other happiness and no other suffering than love'. One of these elements in himself was termed 'Construction of the Personality'. Here he meets the chessplayer who asks for a few pieces from his broken-up personality. In the game that follows, the pieces — old men and young men, children and women, strong and weak, cheerful and sad — are arranged into groups, families, friendships, enmities. The game takes its course, relationships are altered; it is then ended, only to let another begin in its place with fresh combinations: play, strife, treaties, wooing, marrying and multiplying. The aim of the game is 'to demonstrate to anyone whose soul has fallen to pieces that he can rearrange these pieces of a previous self in what order he pleases, and so attain to an endless multiplicity of moves in the game of life'. The story continues. Haller finds his beloved Hermine in the arms of another man. He stabs her to death. As a penalty for this deed, he is to be laughed at. In the game he had played, he learns from the immortal Mozart, that he forgot one piece — Laughter. He took life too seriously.

A turning point in C.G. Jung's story<sup>9</sup> of self-realization was the discovery that the dead were alive and present within him. On his journey through the vaults of his unconscious, he noticed those long buried began to move and to come to life. This was accompanied by a distinct fear of becoming mad. He had now broken with Freud, surrendered his university career and radically departed from the accepted academic and intellectual standards of the day. He had 'abandoned the idea of the superordinate position of the ego . . . I had to let myself be carried along by the current, without a notion where it would lead me'. From the hosts of spirits which loomed from the dark, two were most remarkable — Philomen and Salome. Philomen taught him about a psychic order and wisdom that transcended the conscious personality. Salome represented the feminine in man, his moods and feelings as well as a capacity for creating images. Later, both became better known as 'self' and 'anima'. Besides these, Jung brought back from that odyssey into those dark regions of the soul the most fundamental principles of his psychology, above all, the ancient vision of man's psychic wholeness as a vast system of multiple consciousnesses. There is not just one personality but many. The psyche is the theatre in which a drama between the various parts of oneself becomes enacted.

Are there any plans to this drama? Are there guide-books or maps for this psychic odyssey? Those who have become entirely mad do not seem to possess any. Those who have survived their madness usually come back with some document of their experiences. Jung returned with the Mandala. He writes: 'When I began drawing

the Mandalas, I saw that everything, all the paths I had been following, all the steps I had taken, were leading back to a single point – namely to the mid-point. It became increasingly plain to me that the Mandala is the center. It is the exponent of all paths, it is the path to the center, to individuation'. Day after day, different configurations – square, circular or cruciform, a flower, sun, star, castle, city or courtyard – were drawn. He witnessed the Mandala as "Formation, Transformation, Eternal Mind's eternal recreation" and knew a framework was provided wherein all parts of the personality could express themselves. Evidently the magic theatre or the chess game of Steppenwolf is a framework with a similar function. Did our Celtic ancestors provide us with any such architecture of their otherworldly experiences?

If we are to look for the peculiar genius of the Celtic imagination we will certainly stop and ponder at its magnificent creations of the seventh to the ninth century. This was the age of saints and scholars, the age of the great monasteries of Clonmacnoise, Bangor, Kells and Iona, the golden age of Celtic art. Just one hundred years before this age began, the great figures that inspired it, Columba, Columbanus, Gall and Fursey, had already established many great monastic houses in Scotland, England and all over Europe. The voyage of the peregrini, the island-settlements 'on the edge of the world' and the re-Christianizing of Europe, all undertaken in that adventurous spirit of the Celtic hero, had now reached their high point; now the time had come to settle down, to tell the story, to render it in visible form.

The works of the story-tellers and artists are no historical documents; they are further recreations of the spirit that originally inspired the age. The Vitae tell us that Columba turned a jealous queen into a wild crane, Brigid had a cow whose quantity of milk produced a lake, Brendan visited an island of birds who sang the psalms but were actually fallen angels who passively approved of Lucifer's revolt. In these tales, man and beast, Christian faith and Celtic magic, intermingle and lose their original contour to form a literature of originality and depth. The same intermingling of pagan and Christian elements is to be found in the finest of all the flowers of that great age – in the illuminated manuscripts of Durrow, Lindisfarne, Kells and others. What hand, what artistry, what inspiration produced so magnificent a synthesis? Already in the twelfth century Gerald Cambrensis<sup>10</sup> had an answer: 'But if you take the trouble to look very closely, and penetrate with your eyes to the secrets of the artistry, you will notice such intricacies, so delicate and subtle, so close together and well knitted, so involved and bound together, and so fresh still in their colourings that you will not hesitate to declare that all these things must have been the result of the work, not of men, but of angels!'

That Gerald devined an otherworldly secret to those pages is perhaps not so misplaced, considering the spirit of the myths and legends that inspired them. May we not contemplate these manuscripts as cryptograms of the otherworldly experiences of the Celts, in much the same way as a Mandala is for the Tibetans? There are definite parallels. In both myth and manuscript the world-image is broken down into its separated components. Now the impossible can become a reality. This process we have already witnessed in the creation of the wondrous beasts of the islands. In this imaginary realm, God, angel, man, beast, plant are all interchangeable parts of a religious, poetic or artistic vision of the universe. In the

voyage of Mealduin, waves of the sea throw salmon into a house, a leaping cat provides the hero with a feast, three magic apples satisfy the wanderers for forty nights. In the voyage of Brendan, a great hound leads the saint to a paschal meal, birds sing vespers, mass is said on the back of a whale. The metamorphosis of Creator and created, man beast and plant, letter and image is made visible in the artistry of the manuscripts. As the eye follows the intricate patterns of interlacings, spirals, keys, letterings and zoomorphics, a human being may become part of an animal then appear as a plant, then be transformed into a letter. Animate beings become abstract forms, inanimate letters begin to devour each other. Following the ancient Celtic doctrine of metamorphosis, all parts of the universe become interchangeable and participate in one another. Mme Francoise Henri<sup>11</sup>, believes that this fantastic ornamentation may be taken as an image of that protean existence encountered in the heroes of Celtic myth and legend. She quotes Tuan's song to Finan:

A hawk today, a boar yesterday  
Wonderful instability!  
Dearer to me everyday  
God, the friend who chooses my shape . . .  
. . . Among herds of boars I was,  
Though to-day I am among bird-flocks;  
I know what will come of it:  
I shall still be in another shape.

Symbolic interpretation<sup>12</sup> of individual motifs has been sparse. Interlacings have been understood as symbols of running water or as a solution of conflict; spirals as having a solar or vegetative significance, or, considering their inspiration from shells, as symbols of development, keys as representing fire or spirit. We have to be careful when fixing a meaning not to lose the original message which remains fluid and elusive. Seen as a whole, these manuscripts reveal things not as they are but as what they could become: not the actual unfolding of evolution but the multiple potentiality of creation. It has often been said that the dominating factor of Celtic art is the attempt to escape from two extremes — an exact imitation of living shapes or the rigidity and immutability of geometric forms. For the Celt, there was no Platonic bifurcation of concrete reality and abstract form, rather a parallel world oscillating between the two. This world is perceived by imagination rather than by sensation or reasoning. It is then no wonder that the main designs of these works — the interlacings and spirals — reflect water and sun from which all living beings maintain their existence. Perhaps we may see these masterpieces as an expression not of the elements as they actually appear to us but of their inherent vitality and potentiality. These cryptograms are a revelation of the Irish soul as it meditates the wonders of creation and gives praise to the 'Dia Mor na nDul' — 'the Great God of the Elements'.

If this article is to serve any purpose, and not merely remain an expression of my own particular affection for the legends and artistry of our Celtic heritage, it must

describe something of the nature of these primordial images that have given shape to the life and culture of our nation. It is imperative that we understand these images and not relegate them to 'the great times that were'. The ancient way of the Irish has now reached its *Götterdämmerung*. Modern culture has stimulated the taste for ready-made consumer articles and images on the one hand and intellectual uniformity and functionalism on the other. Either satisfied or striving for more, the soul of modern Ireland has neither the time nor the leisure to muse and dream, to render visible that forgotten world of what all things can be.

For most of us, this world has retreated into the night and now can only be heard in the vague murmurings of our feelings or seen in our dreams. Two archetypes, one of life, the other of meaning, still maintain their existence within us. For want of space, I have only been able to give examples of three dreams concerning the archetype of life, however, it would not be too difficult to remember dreams about semi-divine women, a magic potion, transformation of age, sex or species, a sea voyage, sojourn on an island, kings, monsters, hermits and all the host of animate or inanimate beings which populate the mythological realm. I have pleaded that these images are not mere copies of what has gone before, but signs that these archetypes are still living in us — guiding, warning, mocking, baffling, playing, loving, inspiring. We belong to them, just as we belong to life and death. They pose the questions; have we given them an answer?

Perhaps the poverty of the usual answer lies in its repetition. Too often we give the answers that have been taught to us, the answers of our fathers and their fathers. In the past, all too often the archetype of life has been consummated in nationalism and the archetype of meaning in missionary zeal. These transcendental heritages become the property of their shadows — intolerance in political and religious institutions. What could be, is levelled down to that which always has been. What Jung did with the Germanic and other mythologies that welled up within him, we should be able to do with Celtic mythology. Jung transformed these images into a way of life in which all things pointed towards the center. Similar transformations have moulded the works of many modern Irish authors. In Yeats, we learn to explore, in Joyce we are actually provided with a chart for mythological territory. It may be no accident that the greatest novel Ireland has produced, *Ulysses*, is dedicated to Homer's *Odyssey* — a Hellenistic relative of the Celtic *immrama*.

These few pages have tried to point out that the further we go back in our cultural history, the deeper we explore our collective psyche, we come upon myths, some urging us to life, others calling us to death, some involving us with this world, others drawing us to another. In Celtic myth and ritual, there are no sharp boundaries between these worlds, between what is and what can be, between perception and imagination. Death is an attribute of life, life of death. In order to love, often we may have to undergo some form of death, in death, we may discover an island of love. If we can avoid the spirit of modern life wherein material satisfaction, worldliness and the pleasures of life become ends in themselves; if we can remain critical of fixed dogmatic judgements as to what comes after death, and if we do not forget our fairies 'whose night is day and day is night', Ireland will not just become one other European nation, but may well remain for Europe the guardian of its Celtic soul.

1. *The Crane Bag*, vol 1, No. 2, Autumn 1977.
2. Flann O'Brien, *Third Policeman*, Picador, 1967.
3. Synge, J.M., *The Aran Islands*, Oxford, 1962.  
Flower, Robin, *The Western Island*, Oxford, 1962.
4. Uris, Jill & Leon, *Ireland*, Corgi 1977, p 110.
5. Quoted in O'Faolain, S., *The Irish*, Penguin 1969, p. 53.
6. *Voyages of Saint Brendan the Navigator*, Colin Smythe 1973.
7. Rees, A. & B., *Celtic Heritage*, Thames & Hudson, 1961, p.314ff.
8. Hess, Hermann, *Steppenwolf*, Penguin 1977, pp. 209-234.
9. Jung, C.G., *Memories, Dreams & Reflections*, Vintage 1963, ch. Confrontation with the Unconscious, pp. 170-199.
10. *Topographia Hibernie*, quoted in *Course of Irish History*, ed. Moody & Martin, Mercier 1967, p.88.
11. Henri, Francoise, *L'Art Irlandais*, Zodiac 1963, pp. 295-6.
12. ibid. pp. 292-3. Bain, G., *Celtic Art, Methods of Construction*, Maclellan 1972.