



Imramma

The Initiatory Voyage in Celtic Tradition

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*'Do not fall on a bed of sloth,
Let not thy intoxication overcome thee,
Begin a voyage across the clear sea,
If perchance thou mayst reach the Land of Women'*
(*'The Voyage of Bran'*, v.30)

The ancient Druidic priesthood of Britain and Gaul as regular representatives and guardians of the Primordial Tradition exemplified the special role of the Celtic Tradition as embodying the archaic juncture between the Hyperborean and Atlantean cycles: the Celtic tradition in particular reveals the transition from an originally polar symbolism to that of a solar context, highlighted by those mythic accounts in which the paradisaical realm of the supreme initiatic Centre is no longer conceived of situated in the boreal realm but rather in the west, evincing a later transference from an originally Hyperborean-circumpolar domain to a Pleiadic-Atlantic locus¹ as we see in related Indo-European traditions such as Greek accounts of the Garden of the Hesperides whose trees bear the golden fruit which bestows eternal life. So in Celtic lore the 'abode of immortality', the 'blessed land', is attained by questing heroes and initiates, seekers who fare into the far west: *'There are thrice fifty distant isles in the ocean to the west of us...'* (*'The Voyage of Bran'*, v.25)

The journey over water is a classic symbol of the initiatory voyage across the psychic domain with all its dangers and thus we find this properly initiatic content and significance preserved in the genre of Celtic wonder-tales termed *Imramma* which recount travels across the waters to enchanted isles. The 8th century Irish poem 'The

¹ The original Hyperborean symbolic complex of the circumpolar constellation of Ursa Major, the Sapta-Riksha, was transferred by substitution to the seven stars of the Pleiades, the Atlantides or Daughters of Atlas in the Atlantean tradition – this occurred *'after the end of the secondary period during which the Atlantean tradition represented the pre-dominant form and, as it were, the "substitute" for the original Centre...'* (R. Guénon, 'Symbols of Sacred Science' ch. 24 'The Wild Boar and the Bear'). Various Celtic traditions concerning submerged cities and sunken lands in the west including the legends of Lyonesse and the City of Ys relate to this Atlantean '*Tula*' and its role in Druidic esoterism.

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Voyage of Bran' (*Imram Brain maic Febail, ocus a Echtra andso sis*) provides a fertile source for the analysis and consideration of these symbolic motifs pertaining to the domain of esoterism and here we shall contemplate some of its details in our exegesis of Celto-Druidic lore in the light of the Primordial Tradition. The 'Voyage of Bran' is suffused throughout with profound esoteric symbolism and significance – it illustrates very clearly René Guénon's explication of the meaning of the perilous voyage across the waters to the 'farther shore' of Wisdom and Liberation and describes just such a spiritual quest to the Supreme Centre, the 'Abode of Immortality', conveying imagery replete with archaic primordial symbolism elaborated within the sacral ambiance of early Celtic Christianity and the Culdees, saints and hallows of the Celtic church.

The central hero-initiate of the story, Bran (the Gaelic name denoting 'Raven', a bird holy to Hyperborean Apollo), the son of Febal, one day hears an otherworldly strain of music which lulls him into an enchanted slumber – when he awakens from sleep in his hall he finds beside him a silver branch with crystal-fringed leaves and silver apples from whence the enchantment of supernatural music emanated. In his hall a supernatural Lady of radiant and mysterious beauty appears and tells Bran and the assembled of the Land of the Blessed, the place from whence this silver branch originates:

*'A branch of the apple-tree (aball) from Emain
I bring, like those one knows
Twigs of white silver are on it
Crystal brows with blossoms'*

(*'The Voyage of Bran', v.3*)

The apple-tree images the fruit of immortality from the Tree of Life at the axial centre of the Terrestrial Paradise and we note that René Guénon linked the name of Avalon not only with words for apple including the Celtic forms such as Gaelic Irish *abhal* or *aball* and Welsh *afal* along with Anglo-Saxon *aeppe* but with the same root-element as the divine name Apollo and particularly with the Celtic forms of the Hyperborean god of light, Bel, Abellio or Belenos²-Apollo, the 'Bright' or 'Shining One' and thus with the White Land or White Isle where he presides, preserved in Celtic mythology as *Emhain Abhlach* or *Ynys Afallon*, the 'Island of Apples'. This 'Insula Pomorum', as Geoffrey of Monmouth terms it is an image of the radiant paradise of the Hyperboreans, the 'Abode of Immortality' or 'Land of the Ever-Living', the supreme Centre as locus of the Divine Principle. From the sacred orchards of Emhain Abhlach, the 'Blessed Isle', Manannan distils the 'draught of immortality', the Amrita-nectar or White Haoma which renews the

² Belenos is linked with the Greek root 'Belos' – 'an arrow', symbolising the axial Divine Ray, the 'Seventh Ray' that passes through the centre of the sun, equating in Vedantic doctrine with the principle of *Buddhi* or *Mahat*, the spiritual ray projected from the Atmanic Self which passes centrally through and interlinks all the manifested states of the being – it is the supra-dimensional pathway of the sun-door via which, beyond conditioned existence, Liberation and Immortality are attained via realisation of the Supreme Identity. This corresponds with the '*stag of seven tines*' mentioned in the ancient Gaelic 'Song of Amergin', the heraldic form of Apollo Karneios, the divinity of Hyperborea.

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life of the gods and bestows eternal youth upon those who attain to the sacred Centre in conquest of the ‘Abode of Immortality’.

*‘Splendours of every colour glisten
Throughout the gentle voiced plains.
Joy is known, ranked around music,
In southern Mag Argatnel [‘Silver-Cloud Plain’]’*

(‘The Voyage of Bran’, v.8)

The silver branch from the Tree of Life is the initiatory token of immortal life and of passage in the Mysteries - and the faery woman, the Great Queen (*Mor Rigantona*), standing in the hall of the citadel before Bran and the company of warriors chants fifty poetic verses evoking the supernal realm of the spiritual Centre, the White Isle or ‘Silver-Cloud Plain’ where there is no death or decay and describes the axial Tree of Life which grows there, its golden-leaved boughs bearing miraculous apples, its branches full of birds (higher states/angelic beings) who sing the hours (their song is the veritable ‘Language of the Birds’³, the primordial speech of man and the angels in the garden of Paradise before the Fall).

*‘An ancient tree there is with blossoms,
On which birds call to the Hours.
‘Tis in harmony it is their wont
To call together every Hour.’*

(‘The Voyage of Bran’, v.7)

Her poetic eulogy of this mystical realm, ‘Isle of Apples’ or ‘Pure Land’ culminates in a Druidic prophecy of the coming of Christ who will heal all sicknesses, purify the hearts of men and redeem the Creation. After exhorting Bran and his men to rouse themselves from their slothfulness and intoxication (the ego-bound passionate sleep of worldly heedlessness due to the deluding effects of *Avidya-Maya*) and to seek the Land of the Living, the faery woman takes the silver apple-branch and departs from their sight.

³ In Celtic tradition the 20 letters of ‘Bird-Ogham’ (*Enogam*) as expounded in the mediaeval ‘Book of Ballymote’ written circa 1390. This represents a Druidic repository of the ‘Language of the Birds’, enshrining the sacral-poetic science and wisdom of the divinity Lugh and Ogmios, ordered according to the ‘Beith-Luis-Nuin’ sequence: 1. *besan* ‘pheasant’, 2. *lachu* ‘duck’, 3. *faelinn* ‘gull’, 4. *seg* ‘hawk’, 5. *naescu* ‘snipe’, 6. *hadaig* ‘night raven’, 7. *droen* ‘wren’, 8. *truith* ‘starling’, 9. *querc* ‘hen’, 10. *mintan*, 11. ‘titmouse’, 12. *géis* ‘swan’, 13. *ngéigh* ‘goose’, 14. *stmólach* ‘thrush’, 15. *rócnat* ‘small rook’, 16. *aidhircleog* ‘lapwing’, 17. *odoroscrach* ‘cormorant’, 18. *uiseog* ‘lark’, 19. *ela* ‘swan’, 20. *illait* ‘eaglet’. This bird-alphabet encapsulates the esoteric bardic science, analogous to the *Manteq at Tair* in Persian Sufic symbolism and ‘*la Langue des Oiseaux*’ of the Troubadours, founded upon the symbolism of birds as embodying higher states of being pertaining to the angelic and divine intelligence in the superior domain of the spirit.

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The various Celtic traditional epithets of the 'Isle of the Blessed' or 'Abode of the Immortals' at the sacred Centre reveal esoteric aspects of the kardial axis of the Divine Principle – it is called *Mag Mon* – 'Plain of Sports' reminding one of the timeless 'play' or *Lila* of the Lord. Its name *Ciuin*, the 'Gentle Land' or *Imchiuin*, the 'Very Gentle Land' resumes the concept of Peace as the pre-eminent quality of the supreme Centre. As *Mag Mell* it is the 'Pleasant or Happy Plain', characterized by the spiritual attribute of Beatitude or Bliss (*Ananda*): '*Without grief, without sorrow, without death, without sickness, without debility. That is the sign of Emain.*' ('The Voyage of Bran', v. 10) Thus the Celtic tradition describes the primordial state of the Terrestrial Paradise, the blissful realm untouched by time or mortality.

Bran with 27 companions resolves to take sail in his coracle-ship and voyages westward far across the ocean, encountering divers wonders. The Celtic divinity Manannan in his chariot drawn by the horses of the sea appears and encourages Bran and the heroes upon their quest to his domain, prophesying that Bran will have a son of great renown, reiterating the prophecy concerning the coming of Christ and also showing them the wondrous sights of underwater forests and woods which their ship travels over, beholding the inhabitants and topographies of the subtle worlds beneath the clear waves as they journey on.

Regarding the figure of Manannan, divine guardian of the 'Isle of the Blessed', in consideration of the etymological root of his theonym one might recall R. Guéron's comments in 'Le Roi du Monde' on the Vedic figure of *Manu*, the Welsh *Menw*, the Gothic *Manna* and the Germanic *Mannus* as the 'King of the World'⁴ – Manannan's sacred bird being the crane⁵ analogous to the Meso-American and Toltec emblem of the white heron, representing Tollan, the ancestral 'Place of the Sun' synonymous with Tula, the Centre of Hyperborea – all names for the 'White Land', white being the symbolic hue of sacerdotal authority. Thus the names for the Isle of the Blessed in the 'Voyage of Bran' include *Mag Findargat* (from *Finn* – 'White, Fair') – 'White-Silver Plain', and *Mag Argatnel* – 'Silver-Cloud Plain' – the 'Isle of the Blessed' as the 'White-Silver Plain' echoes the names (the Vedic *Svetadvipa*, Roman Alba Longa, Albania and so forth) of secondary centres representing the original supreme Centre, *Tula* or Ultima Thule – the White Land⁶.

Before reaching their goal Bran and his company undergo an initiatic trial when they encounter the 'Isle of Joy' where they behold its inhabitants who are consumed with inane mirth, as if intoxicated or bereft of intelligence – Bran and the men do not alight but one of their number ill-advisedly alights and is likewise possessed by delusional

⁴ In the Yellow Book of Lecan there are said to be four Manannans: '*Manandan mac Alloit, a Druid of the Tuath De Danann, and in the time of the Tuath De Danann was he. Oirbsen, so indeed, was his proper name.... Oirbsen over the land, so that from him (is named) Loch Oirbsen. This was the first Manannan.*' These figures might represent the respective Manus presiding at the inception of the great cycles of each Manvantara (which in Vedic lore signifies the age of a Manu).

⁵ C.f. The 'Crane Bag of Secrets' possessed by Manannan. The sacred ibis of Thoth is cognate with this ornithomorphic symbolism connected with the mysteries of the Divine Word.

⁶ As the 'Land of Women' - *Tir Inna m-Ban* - it is related to the colour 'white' [*Bán*] according to 'Colour-Ogham' (*Dathogam*). Here 'women' comports the symbolism of the supra-formal 'transcendent Wisdom' or the function of *Prajnaparamita* in oriental tradition.

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hilarity and has to be left behind as they voyage on. This denotes the realm of the psyche equating with the land of the lotos-eaters described in ‘The Odyssey’ by Homer, the intermediate realm of the inferior psyche to whose lures and blandishments the unwary may succumb, becoming entrapped in the illusory domain of lower *maya*.

They reach the Land of the Blessed and at first are reluctant to land – a group of women of supernatural beauty appear on the shore and their leader, the faery Lady or Queen who visited Bran in his hall in Ireland, casts a ball of thread to Bran: ‘*The woman throws a ball of thread to Bran straight over his face. Bran put his hand on the ball, which clave to his palm. The thread of the ball was in the woman’s hand, and she pulled the coracle towards the port.*’ (The Voyage of Bran v.62). The symbolism of this thread corresponds with the *sutratma*, the luminous ray emanated or projected from the Atman. As René Guénon says of the thread of the *sutratma* ‘*which, both from the macrocosmic and from the microcosmic point of view, links all the states of existence one to another and to their Principle*’ constituting ‘*a path which the being is compelled to follow from one end to the other in order to reach its goal.*’ (Symbols of Sacred Science, ch. 68 ‘Bonds and Knots’) As Guénon asserts regarding the *sutratma*, it ‘*is what unites the multiple states, not only among themselves, but also, we repeat, to their Principle itself, so that...it becomes...the means by which the being can effectively rejoin its Principle, as well as the very path conducting it to that goal. In this case, the thread...has a truly “axial” value, and...may represent the process of returning to the Principle*’ (ibid).

So the voyage of Bran may therefore be conceived as a vertical ‘axial’ ascent, moving along the ‘central channel’ (*Sushumna-Nadi*) through each of the chakras or lotus-flowers (*Padma*). The mystic isles are described as full of ‘*red-headed flowers*’, as ‘*Mag Mell* [Pleasant or Happy Plain] *of many flowers*’ and elsewhere chariot-wheels of gold, silver and bronze are mentioned, echoing the symbolism of the ‘*khorlos*’ (wheels) of Indo-Tibetan Tantrik sadhana.

Upon reaching the shore, drawn by the thread, Bran and his companions alight and each pair off with the beautiful women of this blissful realm, in a veritable *Hieros Gamos* or ‘alchemical wedding’ within a great castle or house, drinking wine and feasting with their supernatural paramours amid the wonders of the Isle. As the Sanc-Grail provides each knight with the nourishment and drink he most desires just so each of the company of Bran were satisfied, for whom ‘no savour was wanting.’ The Isle of the Blessed is co-identical with the Grail-Kingdom and the hierogamy of the mystic feast in the Land of Women is analogous to the *maithuna*-union of Shiva-Shakti, in the central lotus-seat of the *Paramatma* - the sacred Centre which the Druids termed the *Medio-Nemeton*, *Mediolanum*, *Mide* as the ‘Invariable Middle’ or ‘Heart of the World’.

After what seems to them to be the passage of a year, one of their number, a man named Nechtan, desires to return to Ireland – the Lady warns them not to alight on or touch the shore when they return but after they voyage to take him back to his former world, forgetting her counsel, Nechtan jumps from the ship onto the shore and immediately turns to dust, like unto one who has been dead for long ages: ‘*The man leaps from them out of the coracle. As soon as he touched the earth of Ireland, forthwith he was a heap of ashes, as though he had been in the earth for many hundred years.*’ (‘The Voyage of Bran’ v.65) Bran and his companions then sail away, back across the waves, never to be seen again.

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As with other Celtic myths and folktales which describe the strange disparity between the experience of those who enter the numinous realm and the passage of serial time in this mundane sphere this cautionary episode illustrates a profound metaphysical doctrine - the distinction between the supra-cosmic and intemporal state of the 'Terrestrial Paradise' of the Isle of Apples, *Emhain Abhlach*, and the passing of profane time in the mortal world of generation - more precisely the 'Isle of the Blessed' is the Supreme Centre, transcendent, immortal and timeless and to have attained thereto is to have passed beyond all antinomies, liberated from the cyclical revolutions of time at the circumference by reaching the motionless axial centre-point. The initiatic 'conquest of the Centre' is identical with transcendence of the temporal sequence of becoming in realisation of the eternal instant of simultaneity existent beyond past, present or future, the *Urzeit* wherein all is experienced *sub specie aeternitatis* – the quest for 'Blessed Isle' is the recovery of the divine station of immutable Being at the supreme Centre.