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The Eighteenth Mount Haemus Lecture

The Elementary Forms of Druidic Life: Towards a Moral Ecology of Land, Sea, and Sky

by Jonathan Woolley

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to characterise the central features of Druidry as a culture. Contemporary Druidry is defined varyingly as a religion, a spirituality, or a philosophy – but the broad category of "culture" allows us to consider Druidry as something that is as much practiced as it is thought, as much felt as it is imagined, and something that looks out onto broad philosophical horizons. Through examining both Druidry-as-practiced, and recent discussions of Druidic themes in previous Mount Haemus Lectures, it becomes clear that the fundamental orientation of Druidry today is towards one philosophical horizon in particular – that of aesthetics.

This elemental aesthetic reveals a cosmology that is orderly, yet full of feeling; holistic, yet diverse – that in turn renders sensible a culture where body and soul, nature and humankind, emotion and reason cannot be kept apart, where all aspects of existence are valuable. In appreciating these pivotal aspects of Druidic thinking, I suggest, it becomes clear to see the unique contribution of Druidic philosophy to central moral and political concerns of the present day.

Defining Druids I - On seeking the essence

The argument I wish to make today begins in silence. It's the silence that I used to find whenever anybody outside of Druidry, asked me what Druidry actually involves. I am very open about my membership of OBOD, and people are, quite often, rather curious to know what it's all about. And yet, when pressed, the best I could manage, for many years, was "Well…"

I have been a Druid for seven years. I have a clear sense in my own mind what this means, and the power and value of it is something I feel to my bones. And the problem was not I was lost for words. Rather, when I spoke the words we often use to describe Druidry - "religion", "nature", "spirituality", "philosophy", "Celtic", "gods", "earth" "tradition", "belief", "practice" – I felt them fall short. Not only did many listeners glaze over as soon as I started to use religious language in particular, but I myself felt that such words were inadequate. In a way I couldn't quite articulate, such terminology fails to express my own lived experience of Druidic wisdom. I was acutely aware that I was being asked to speak for my entire tradition, a monumental task for which I felt, at that time, ill-equipped.

My desire to better express what Druidry involves is not solely personal. Social anthropologists like myself specialise in studying living societies. We are less interested in

whether or not a belief is true, than in why people believe it; less interested in the historical accounts of a society, than in how those historical accounts affect present-day realities. And as a fundamentally comparative discipline, the key question for any social anthropologist is not just what a given society is like, but how it differs from other societies. As such, the difficulty I had putting the essence of Druidry into words was also something of a tantalising intellectual challenge. And so, in 2011, when I embarked on my research masters, I decided to study the practice of Druidry.

Perhaps the best place to begin when understanding any society, is with how that society describes itself. And yet, one of the most curious things about Druidry, is that most contemporary Druids struggle to define what the essence of Druidry is – it wasn't just a problem I was having. It is often joked that, if you ask 10 different Druids to define Druidry, you'll get 12 different answers – and an argument.

Seeking to honour this diversity, our most prominent authors have provided definitions that are usually rather long, and quite complex. From the website of the Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids:

What does it mean to be a Druid today? Above all else, Druidry means following a spiritual path rooted in the green Earth. It means participating in a living Western spiritual tradition drawn from many sources, including surviving legacies from Celtic wisdom teachings, but embracing the contributions of many peoples and times. It means learning from archaic traditions, from three centuries of modern Druid scholarship, and from the always changing lessons of the living Earth itself. It means embracing an experiential approach to religious questions, one that abandons rigid belief systems in favour of inner development and individual contact with the realms of nature and spirit.

John Michael Greer, *Druidry – A Green Way of Wisdom*

It's an attitude, an understanding, an exquisitely simple and natural philosophy of living. For a great many it is a rich and ancient religion, a mystical spirituality. For others it's simply a guiding way of life. It is absolutely open and free for anyone to discover.

Emma Restall Orr, *Druid Priestess*

Rather than being an organised religion, Druidry offers a personal individual life path that can become part of a modern urban existence as easily as a rural life. It connects us instinctively to the life-giving energies of the earth beneath the pavements, and the sky above the highest office or apartment block.

Cassandra Eason, *The Modern-Day Druidess*

To these tracts, it is helpful to add those provided by the leaders of other, different traditions within modern Druidry, for example:

"Neopagan Druidry is a group of religions, philosophies and ways of life, rooted in ancient soil yet reaching for the stars. We are part of the larger Neopagan movement, one of the world's most vital and creative new religious awakenings. Like much of that movement we are polytheistic nature worshippers, working with the best aspects of the Pagan religions of

our predecessors within a modern scientific, artistic, ecological and wholistic(sic)*context using a nondogmatic and pluralistic approach."*

Ár nDraíocht Féin (ADF), *Neopagan Druidism Today: Concepts and Organization*.

The problem with all these definitions is they are not, in fact, definitions at all. They are all excellent *descriptions* of Druidry, but that is not the same as being good definitions. The work of description is quite distinct from that of definition; the former aims for completeness, while the latter aims for sufficiency. A good description is complete, because it takes into account everything about its chosen subject; a description of cutlery, for example, will make reference to all the different kinds of cutlery found in the world, covering all their various attributes - their size, use, origin, cultural significance, and so on. As such, a good description - like the examples above - is often somewhat lengthy. In seeking to describe Druidry, Greer describes its pedagogy, Restall-Orr its psychology, Eason its sociology; they all take great pains to recognize its variety.

A good definition, however, aims to be *sufficient*. A definition is sufficient when it provides the key combination of traits that mark out its subject as a distinct entity, relative to other, similar things. A definition of cutlery, therefore, would be "a type of kitchen implement, typically used to assist in the consumption of food." This distinguishes cutlery from other implements, for example, or other things one might find in a kitchen. Whereas description serves to tell you everything you should know about a subject, definition merely helps you understand what makes that something a subject in its own right. A description aims to cover the whole of a thing; while a definition cuts right to its heart - its *essence*.

It may be possible to describe Druidry as a religion, a spirituality, a ritual practice, a mystery tradition, but the fact that it can be all of these things to different people suggests it is, in fact, not *defined* by any one of them. There are druids who don't do much ritual, who are atheists, and prefer truth to mystery. Defining Druidry as a "religion" is particularly dubious – with many members of OBOD having disagreed strongly with the Druid Network's choice to register as a religious charity. Many Druids have arrived at the same conclusion as social scientists like Talal Asad and Timothy Fitzgerald, who argue that "religion" is a distinctively Christian concept, that simply isn't universally applicable (Asad, 1993; Fitzgerald, 2013). Neither does it help us to define Druidry as "nature spirituality", as lots of other traditions could claim this description for themselves too. As a definition, this is just too broad. Even if we make recourse to generalities and poetry, as does Ár nDraíocht Féin, this raises yet more questions - Which philosophies, lifestyles, and religious forms does it encompass? What soil? Which birds? Which stars? Vagueness might be inclusive and elegant – particular virtues in Druidic circles - but it is not a good trait for a definition to possess.

Of course, one potential explanation is that Druidry is simply many different things to different people. This would entail that there is no "essence" to Druidic life; merely a series of syncretic, spiritual bricolages labelled as "Druidic" by individual seekers, as they wish. This postmodern reading of Druidry would reflect the criticisms on Celtic spirituality in general, provided by figures like Donald Meek (Meek, 1996, 1992)and Colin Williams (Williams, 2000). But reflecting upon my own fieldwork, and that of other social scientists of Celtic spirituality, such as Marion Bowman (Bowman, 2000), I would suggest that the word "druid" is not simply a floating signifier – devoid of any core features or meaning. Despite the wealth of different perspectives on the gods, the world and its nature, I found a palpable but largely implicit sense of what was Druidic, and what was not. Without this, the communal rituals, practices, prayers and traditions that I have observed would be impossible to sustain. I allege therefore, that beneath the fluid use of descriptive language within the Druid community, there exists a very clear region of common ground – a common sacred landscape - that underscores the diversity of opinion amongst Druids today.

So what is the common ground that allows us to work together, despite the range of opinion we all express? What definition would best capture the essential features of that common ground? Below, I seek out the fundamental – one might say, elemental – features of Druidic Life; the pivotal features around which our whole tradition turns.

Groundwork: Towards a Druidic Critical Tradition

In *The Earth, The Gods, and the Soul* (Myers, 2013)philosopher and Mount Haemus scholar, Brendan Myers, provides a survey of the history of Pagan philosophy from Classical Europe to the present day. He concludes that, since the triumph of Christianity in the late 4th century AD there has not been a critical tradition within Pagan thought. Though many sages, mystics, mythographers and commentators have proposed theories of the world, and human destiny within it, that have been influential to Pagans today, such accounts do not form part of a continuous scholarly tradition, characterised by common debates, discussions and intellectual genealogies. Amongst authors who write within the canon of Druidry, Witchcraft, Heathenry and the rest today, there is relatively little critical discourse. Within Druidry, it is usual to read confessional accounts of personal practice, or how-to manuals for earnest seekers. Some such texts are good, some are not so good, but few of them serve to stimulate debate, or build upon each other's work in a rigorous, systematic fashion. This is quite unlike more established philosophical or religious communities, which – from Marxism to Buddhism – incorporate a thriving intellectual discourse conducted through published works, as well as texts written for introductory, artistic or confessional purposes.

It is for this reason that the Mount Haemus Lectures are so important. In providing a platform – and a not inconsiderable sum of money – to support scholars with an interest in Druidic ideas and practices, these lectures have the potential to stimulate such a critical tradition, within the worldwide Druid community, to help develop and refine our common understanding of the Druid Way. It is with this in mind, that in seeking the essential qualities of Druidry, I will seek to respond to points raised in three previous lectures – the Ninth, given by Myers, the Tenth, given by Andy Letcher, and the Fifteenth, given by Julia Farley. In taking these essays together as my point of departure, I hope to explore the potential of the Mount Haemus series to introduce a climate of critical reflection and debate within Druidry. And, considering that my objective is to seek out what defines Druidry today, a series of academic lectures devoted to the subject is certainly an excellent place to begin.

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In the Ninth Mount Haemus Lecture, Brendan Myers advances a Druidic ethics, that continues the exploration of the concept of virtue in the Celtic tradition in his published work (Myers, 2008)and reflects a broader interest in ethical questions amongst other Druid writers at the time (see Carr-Gomm, 2006; Restall-Orr, 2008). Drawing upon the eminent proponent of virtue ethics Alasdair MacIntyre (MacIntyre, 2007), Myers points out that – like the heroic ethos of Classical Greece - ethics in ancient Irish society were a matter of personal identity; rather than an abstract set of legalistic standards to which everyone was held. Every role in Irish society – farmers, healers, poets, midwives, kings, bishops, queens – would have had their own attendant set of virtues; modes of behaviour they were expected to embody. Furthermore, Myers identifies that a crucial component to such a model for correct conduct is the notion of excellence – of attaining a refinement, a finesse, an exercise of skill in the undertaking of one's socially-ordained identity. In Myer's words "Just as an artist crafts a work of art for the sake of beauty, so might a person craft herself" – something that can be

seen as much in Cuchullain's learning of the Salmon Leap from Scathach, as it is in the *Instructions of Cormac*.

Myers rightly concludes that although such awesome virtues in the Sagas may inspire us, it would not be appropriate to revive or reconstruct them faithfully today – as this would run the risk of distorting our understanding of the past, and leading us into immoral (not to mention heedlessly violent) behaviour in the present. Nonetheless, Myers identifies a deep significance in the marriage of the good and the beautiful. Setting himself the task of discovering where the aesthetic and the ethical might combine today; Myers then moves to consider two different varieties of aesthetics – the Classical view that beauty is *intelligible* perfection that directs the mind towards transcendence, and the Modern view that beauty is *sensible* perfection, sufficient in itself – and finds both insufficient for helping us understand matters of virtue. Myers argues for a "third way" in aesthetics, in which art is an "exploration of who and what we are, what more and what else we could be… [a means of] finding ways to dwell in the world." Beauty, here, is when such connections are given fulsome expression.

The Tenth Lecture, given by Andy Letcher, follows on directly from this point – exploring the question of "What is a Bard?". Following a systematic survey of the Bardic training available to contemporary seekers, Letcher proposes that while Bardism today is more about free creativity and personal development, historically it was more a matter of the mastery of a particular form – that is, the complex and austere styles of praise poetry, historic epics, or satire in which the *fili* and bards of Ireland and Wales specialised. It is only when refracted through the romantic mysticism of the Celtic twilight, and then converted into an archetype using the methods of Carl Jung, that this ancient profession can become a spiritual rather than performative practice. And yet, Letcher contends, this limits the relevance of Bardism, turning it into a concern solely for spiritual seekers, rather than retaining it as a distinct and identifiable mode of expression, that can be appreciated by anyone. Pointing to the genesis of modern Druidic ideas about inspiration in the writing of Robert Graves, he critiques contemporary Druidic practice for treating *awen* like something that can be summoned or invoked, rather than a gift that arrives unbidden like a lightning strike. "I want to suggest" Letcher says "that rather than worrying about awen – which, surely, remains beyond volition – we should work to make ourselves better or more worthy vessels with which to contain it when it arrives. In other words, like Ancient Bards we should be concerned not so much with inspiration but with craft." For Letcher, it is not creative genius or spiritual insight that are the governing virtues of Bardism, but patience and determination. Its essence is not personal growth, but successfully grasping a certain "bardic spirit" – a language that "eschews cliché, striving always to name things better, to narrow the gap between the word and the world. Bardic language captures and invokes." He also notes that Druidic art and performance today are stylistically identical to wider Western musical and poetic culture. The guitar is preferred over the harp; jazz, pop and blues are more influential than folk; metres and rhyming schemes are drawn from the modern spoken word scene and not the Black Book of Camarthen. Where druids mark out their work as different is through the content; invoking myths and figures from the old stories – something that, Letcher points out, limits their appeal and relevance for non-Pagan audiences. He does not provide an explanation for why Druidic creativity has moved in this direction, but it does come with significant limitations – limitations I shall revisit below.

Rolling forward to 2014, and Julia Farley provides a state of play overview of the history of Druidry's relationship with academic archaeology. Addressing the perspectives of notable critics of Druidry's historical authenticity within the archaeological community – including

Stuart Piggott (Piggott, 1985)and Glynn Daniel (Foster and Daniel, 2014)– Farley describes how the move towards post-processual archaeology, with its emphasis upon multivocality and plural perspectives upon past events, has led to a rapprochement between archaeologists and Druids. In recent decades, the former increasingly view the latter as stakeholders in the continued management and enjoyment of Britain's prehistoric heritage. This trend has been coeval with a shift in how archaeologists view the Druids of the Iron Age, too; with academic commentary moving away from treating Iron Age religion as fundamentally inaccessible and mysterious, and instead as an embedded practice, inextricably linked with material technology and social organisation. Though it is impossible to reconstruct ancient mindsets or worldviews, it is also problematic to suggest that those worldviews can be bracketed out of the archaeological record entirely. Archaeologists have also become increasingly inclined to incorporate an experiential component into their research and analysis, as explored in the research of Jenny Blain and Robert Wallace (Blain and Wallis, 2007)– something that, Farley points out, has always been a key part of Druidic engagement with ancient monuments, and the past more generally. Contemporary Druidry is imagined by its practitioners as "not a relic from the past, but a timeless response to nature, to the landscape and sacred sites, and was capable of re-interpretation, re-imagination, and re-creation, without losing its spiritual essence" (Farley, 2014). Farley's primary example of this attitude is Ross Nichols' own suggestions on how to engage with ancient monuments. Such suggestions were, Farley says, not too far removed from the call made by Professor Richard Bradley in 1999 for archaeologists to spend time with and get used to ancient monuments – in short, to be "patient" with them.

Myers, Letcher, and Farley raise some important themes. Myers' expansive assessment of the ethical and the noble in Druidic source material helps emphasise the importance of beauty in the original writings and artwork of Iron Age and Medieval societies in North Western Europe – whose cultural patrimony has had such a key role in inspiring modern Druid movements. He also identifies certain unresolved areas of his own thesis; particularly Thomas Mann's criticism of aesthetics – that an act of cruelty or malice could be justified, if it is sufficiently beautiful.

Letcher's work has more of a critical edge. He points out in his introduction that Druidry was in 2009 going through a period of self-examination, prompted by Ronald Hutton's demonstration that once certain truths of Druidic practice, were in fact actually 19th century inventions. The power of Bardism is shown, Letcher claims, not through the literal retelling of old stories using modern methods, but through the use of myth as a storehouse of metaphor, that supplies "*all the manifold ways that ordinary people have tried to unriddle the universe.*"

Farley observes that the distinction made by Piggott between "Druids-as-known" through archaeological evidence and "Druids-as-wished-for" by Druids and antiquaries isn't tenable. She continues: "The canvas of prehistory has often been used to construct familiar worlds and desired societies, and in a very real sense there is no way to write an objective account of the past that does not reflect our own interests, experiences and expectations" (Farley, 2014).It is precisely this proximity between knowing and desire, that makes the experiential engagement with ancient sites as recommended by Nichols such a tempting prospect. Writing an account of a historical society about which so little is known is necessarily a creative act, and potentially a bardic one. Patience is a virtue, if we wish to paint upon the canvas of prehistory.

So can we see any common ground here? The common ground they share, I suggest, is shared because they each speak to the essence of Druidry, from a series of different perspectives. Philosophical traditions, ideologies, and religions tend to focus their attention on a particular intellectual project – something explored by the philosopher Thomas Kuhn with respect to scientific disciplines (Kuhn, 1996). These paradigms underpin central claims made by that ideology, and the sort of debates that take place under its auspices. Christianity, for example, hinges on the person of Christ – who he is, and what his life and death represent. But this rests on a deeper philosophical concern – namely, a theological one. The entire Christian message relies upon what are, essentially, theological questions – Who is God? What does he want? What is our relationship to him? If we compare this to another religion, such as Buddhism, certain differences become apparent. Buddhist philosophy does engage with these same questions, but not with the same level of enthusiasm. The Buddha himself proclaimed that the existence or otherwise of God was immaterial to his own teachings. Instead, Buddha cared more about a different set of questions – What is suffering? How can we escape it? Conversely, Christians also take interest in these questions too, but they simply aren't as central as they are for Buddhists. Even if we consider non-religious attitudes, like Marxism, the same pattern is evident: Marxism isn't interested in the nature of suffering, or in the nature of the Divine – it is concerned with understanding how economies change over time, and how this process leads to political transformations. Druidry, I suggest, is interested first and foremost in aesthetic questions – What is beauty? What is its role within the world? How can we lead more beautiful lives?

The influence of these questions is clear to see in the essays above. The influence of the aesthetic on Myers' work speaks for itself – the task at hand is to take the observations made by Myers about the importance of "connection" within the Druidic aesthetic, and its moral consequences, and to explore the true depth of this concept within Druidic thinking. The very fact that Letcher is able to convincingly claim that Bardism – an artform – and the inspiration it may receive is capable of "unriddling the universe" and "narrowing the gap between word and world" indicates the roots go deep; beyond the realm of morals, into metaphysics. The "deeper meaning" Nichols sought from ancient monuments, contrasted with archaeological facts, is an implicit invocation of the aesthetic – something that Farley makes more explicit by speaking of prehistory as a "canvas" shortly after. Although we have very limited evidence of the actual worldview of the ancient Druids themselves, what we do have is copious evidence of their cultures' art. Carvings, metalwork, earthworks, musical instruments, and jewellery, and arriving with their immediate successors, heroic epics, illuminated manuscripts, music, and poetry. The evocative and profound genre of "Celtic" art has moved and inspired us to produce stories about this antique and mysterious period for generations. But what is inspiration, if not an *aesthetic* reaction? A feeling of being moved to create – not things that are merely useful, or interesting, or enduring – but *beautiful*.

Fieldwork: An Ethnographic Approach to Druidry

So the Mount Haemus lectures cited above have provided us with indications of what – I contend – is the central paradigm of Druidry today; a particular stance on aesthetics. It is an aesthetic that argues beauty is a matter of connection; that Bardism is a matter of drawing out these connections – through bringing word and world together. Such connections also emerge through the patient, felt experience of prehistoric European art and monuments, and the landscape of which they are an intrinsic part.

To better trace the precise character of this aesthetic, I will now bring in to play the material from my own fieldwork, conducted at the Imbolc and Beltane celebrations of OBOD Camps in 2011. I also conducted fieldwork at the Morrigan Encampment of the Warriors Call in 2014, an anti-fracking activist collective initiated by OBOD members. During this time I helped construct the campsite, and clear up after the other camp-goers had left; I took part in rituals, eisteddfodau, initiations, debates around the campfire and community meetings. In the course of these activities, I recorded three forms of material that I shall discuss below: the way in which druids connect their practices to their own childhoods, the cosmology of OBOD Camps, and the moral connotations of that cosmology. I'll examine each in turn, and will make use of other cases from the social scientific literature to further contextualise and draw out the significance of each. This will, in turn, show that the Druidic view onto the cosmos is a vision of beauty.

Coming Home – Play, Ritual, and Experience

There is a very particular narrative that I encountered regarding the life course of individual druids. When I asked my contributors "Why are you a druid?", they would always begin with a story from their childhood. Kieron Sibley, one of my key contributors, spoke of his experiences as a child making forts and playing games in the New Forest; an area he referred to as his "Power Place". According to Keiron, "If you live in the forest, you got more imagination. You've got to make up your own stories. You've got more imagination, because the trees become castles or rope swings… it's very physical out in Nature… in a forest, it's very much more tactile. You would build structures. You would build rope swings, rope bridges across rivers… I think that's what grounded me, a lot." Kieron attested to the highly personal relationship he developed with the spirits of the New Forest, particularly the "Spirits of the Place". Even now, when he returns to the area "When I get around about Picket Post, right, just off the motorway, I wound down the window, and I could feel that the first trees there recognised me and the whole forest just goes *whoosh*…" This somatic connection with the land – or being "tuned into forestness", as Kieron put it - is typical of Druidic sensibility, and it is rooted in youthful experiences of play and imagination. The trope that magical practice and communication is somehow intuitive or "natural" for children was also a commonplace – with children in the camps community often being referred to as "magical", when they expressed behaviours like talking to imaginary beings, or creating little houses for fairies out of sticks, stones, leaves, and flowers; something that adult druids I spoke to claimed they did themselves when they were younger.

This story – of childhood familiarity with the Otherworld gained through experiences of the natural environment, being lost and then rediscovered through practices learned in adulthood – is not unique to Druidry, and is very much of a piece with conversion narratives in other contemporary Pagan traditions (Singler, 2013). The close association of children and play with magical practice echoes the characterisation made by Tanya Luhrmann of ceremonial magic and witchcraft as forms of "serious play" that allow for intense, yet profoundly enjoyable experiences by participants (Luhrmann, 1989). The characterisation of children as "naïve animists" is found in developmental psychology – specifically the theories of Jean Piaget (Klingensmith, 1953; Piaget, 1931, p. 534–536.; Piaget and Cook, 1952). According to Piaget and his supporters, all people pass through a developmental stage in which they attribute consciousness to objects – the difference between Western societies and some others, including indigenous cultures, is that Western children are socialised into discarding these attributions (Dennis, 1943; Guthrie, 1993). This theory has been a controversial one, both over the evidence base for Piaget's original claims (see Huang and Lee, 1945; c.f.

Strauss, 1951), and the fact that it reduces animism to an infantile mindset, rather than a sophisticated philosophical position (Guthrie, 1993, p. 46), but it has nonetheless continued to be highly influential (Müller et al., 2009). The conviction that children attain significant benefit from experiencing wild places and spaces can be found in recent literature on so-called "nature-deficit disorder" (see Louv, 2009). Indeed, research by team at the University of Cambridge explores the extent to which children continue to build vividly imaginative engagements with place, albeit in increasingly disrupted and enclosed landscapes (Irvine et al., Forthcoming). Reflecting Luhrmann's account, Druids evoke this same imaginative, animistic sentiment they encountered as children, in their adult rituals.

A great many of the rites practiced at camp directly engaged the *genii loci* of the immediate vicinity (see Patterson, 2013). At Beltane, for example, efforts were made to honour the White Horse of Rhiannon and the Dragon associated with Dragon Hill, two local landmarks visible from camp that featured in local folklore. But this landscape was not merely treated as a passive backdrop, from which stories could be read metaphorically from hill and vale – the landscape, and the denizens that make it up, are responsive. I recall one particularly evocative incident, when Des Crow was invoking the Hawk of Dawn (see below), two red kites appeared and circled in front of him. This avian behaviour was referred to afterwards by others as evidence of the engagement of the beings with which we shared the landscape in Druidic ritual, and of Des' skill as a ritualist in particular.

This provides a valuable qualification to the observation I made earlier; about the importance of Celtic art and literature in inspiring Druidic practice today. As Letcher points out, this inspiration is not necessarily stylistic – use of traditional poetic meters and instruments, fluency in Celtic languages, archaeological and historical accuracy are valued, but, as Nichols' exhortation reminds us, there is a deeper level of meaning that druids today seek to access. Indeed, the reason why Celtic art and prehistoric monuments are so precious is because they provide access to this "deeper level", rather than for their own sake. What experiences like Kieron's reveal is that, for Druids today, that depth reaches into a particular domain – that of the Natural world. Authenticity arises not from adherence to a series of ancient modes and forms set down by our ancestors, but from engagement with Nature itself. Engagement can be achieved through the medium of our ancestors' creative oeuvre – whether that is the nature poetry of Dafidd ap Gwilym, or the sinuous spirals on the stones of Newgrange[1]. But direct experiences of Nature play a crucial role; both informing Druidic ritual, and prompting children to discover Druidry in the first place. As Myers points out, Druidic creativity aims not for self-reference or transcendence, but for connection – and the connection being sought is connection with all of Nature.

Defining Druids II – A cosmological perspective

Druidic ritual, I suggest, exists to reinforce and refine an imaginative, playful creativity with respect to our surrounds that we all know as children, but that Western society often socialises us to ignore. Insofar as it emphasizes direct experience as the primary source of spiritual authority, over and above other sources, Druidry is typical of many 20th century spiritualties, (Bender, 2010, p. 2; Berger and Ezzy, 2007). As I've explored above, it is connection with "Nature" that plays a fundamental role in such experiences. What kind of thing is "Nature", then, as druids understand it?

The importance of experiencing Nature for Druids is something explored in depth by another social anthropologist, Thorsten Gieser, who studied OBOD in 2006 and produced an

unpublished doctoral thesis on the phenomenology of British Druids (Gieser, 2008). Although I would support the broad thrust of Gieser's argument, there is a major lacunae in his work, in that he doesn't spend any time exploring the cosmological aspects of Druidic philosophy. The world inhabited by Druids is enchanted; shared with many other agencies beyond those of human individuals. Spirits, gods, ancestors, fairies, sociable animals, speaking trees and divine waters, magic and *awen* – all have their place within the cosmos of Druidry, take part in rituals, and are encountered by Druids in the course of their practice. Druids may disagree about their precise qualities; whether they are objectively real or projections of the psyche. But what we see in Kieron's account is a clearly *animistic* quality to the Druidic experience of the environment; the land, the sea, and the sky are not just natural, but social places. What I'm seeking to do here is to make a connection between this animist cosmology, and the aesthetic orientation of Druidry as a whole. To do this, we need to understand what animism means in general, what Druidic animism in particular is like, and then view this in relation to an aesthetic of connection.

Above, I've used a term – animism – with which you'll all no doubt be familiar. Graham Harvey and Andy Letcher have applied it in the study of Pagan religions, where it is defined as the belief that "the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others." (Harvey, 2006, p. xi; Letcher, 2001)Animism, so defined, is part of the Druidic lexicon, and is used by many Druids in describing their worldview. Animism is a word invented by anthropologists; one anthropologist in particular – a nineteenth century scholar of religion named Edward Tylor. Tylor argued that all religiosity and spirituality arise from a basic conviction that spiritual beings exist, based upon the universal experience of dreaming. We dream about non-physical alternates to real life objects, which can do unusual things, independent of what we see them do whilst we are awake. This left all people, Tylor argued, with the impression that everything has its non-physical counterpart; its spirit. Tylor argues that various rites and practices grew up around these spirits, and these gradually became codified and formalised as religions (Tylor, 1958). He coined the term "animism" to describe this phenomenon.

Tylor was actually a vehement atheist, and hated all religion – with animism being the tool he used in his attempt to discredit the Christian god, and the souls over which he presided. The fact that is has been useful for Druids, wishing to articulate their own spiritual experiences of the cosmos, is an irony, I think, of which Tylor would have emphatically disapproved. It's also important to point out that Tylor's model was fundamentally wrong; his allegation that animism is somehow primitive, resting at the base of a linear evolution of all worldviews – with his own scientific atheism at the top – is fundamentally flawed, not to mention offensive. Subsequent generations of anthropologists have, on the basis of extensive fieldwork with societies where spirits play a role, demonstrated that ideas about spirits are highly sophisticated, and far more diverse than Tylor could ever have imagined (Praet, 2014; Vilaça, 2014; Viveiros De Castro, 1998; see Willerslev, 2007).

As a result of this diversity in the ethnographic record, the study of animism is a subject of very vibrant debate within anthropology today; with a wide variety of different models having been created to explore cosmological and ontological thought in different parts of the world. Timothy Ingold, for example, argues that animism is characterised by a belief in a free-floating life-essence, that needs to circulate freely for life to continue – something that is perpetuated through human actions, such as rituals or the hunting of game animals. He distinguishes this from totemism, where "the forms life takes are already given, congealed in perpetuity in the features, textures, and contours of the land. And it is the land that harbours

the vital forces, which animate the plants, animals, and people it engenders." (Ingold, 2000, p. 112). More recently, the French anthropologist Philippe Descola, has argued that there are four categories of ontology – what he refers to as "modes of identification" – each of which is defined by the extent to which it stresses the continuity or discontinuity of physical and mental existence (see Figure 1). Animism – where all beings share a human mentality, but are distinguished by fundamentally different physical natures – is distinguished from the Totemism of Aboriginal Australian societies, which holds that human and nonhuman persons share a common physical and inner nature. Naturalism – the belief that humans have unique mental capacities that distinguish them from everything else in Nature, with which we share our physical nature – is the prevailing ontology in secular European societies.

Figure 1: Descola's four modes (2013, p. 122).

Similar interiorities Dissimilar physicalities	***Animism***	***Totemism***	Similar interiorities Similar physicalities
Dissimilar interiorities Similar physicalities	***Naturalism***	***Analogism***	Dissimilar interiorities Dissimilar physicalities

Marshall Sahlins, responding to Descola's work, suggests instead that anthropomorphism – the tendency to interpret objects as persons – is an extremely widespread human tendency – with this "animic" view underlying all the systems defined by Descola. Indeed, he suggests that the animism, totemism and analogism described by Descola are mere sub-types of animism, being "communal animism", "segmentary animism" and "hierarchical animism" respectively (Sahlins, 2014, p. 283). Each of these sub-types reflects a particular kind of organisation in which humans and spirits participate. For communal animism – the schema that prevails in Amazonia, North America, Siberia, and parts of South Asia - humans relate to all spirits in fundamentally the same way – they form one community of beings. For segmentary animism – typical of Aboriginal Australian philosophies - spirits occur in different kinds, as species beings, that are identified with human groups, such as clans or lineages – Kangeroo, Honey Ant, Crocodile. Hierarchical animism – which prevails across most of Asia and Africa, as well as Mesoamerica and Polynesia – involves the organisation of all spirits in a great chain of being, the diversity of which is captured in "cosmocratic god-persons" – think of Zeus, Pele, or Shiva – that are all iterations of anthropomorphic deity (Sahlins, 2014, p. 282). The models proposed by Ingold, Descola, and Sahlins are just a sampling of those that anthropologists have constructed over the years. So where does the animism of Druidry fit in?

The answer lies in one of the pivotal aspects of Druidic practice – namely, the four elements of Earth, Air, Fire and Water. These four elements structure Druidic ritual, the orientation of our sacred spaces within the wider landscape, and are also key forces at play within our lives. When we call the quarters, we acknowledge the open gateway to each element in turn; open gateways that signify the presence of each element in our own experience. Air is our breath, the inspiration we feel each new morning, the Eastern direction, the sky above our heads, the power of intellect (see Figure 2). It is also embodied by a single, animal spirit – the Hawk of Dawn. The Hawk can manifest itself in ritual, too. I will always remember the day when Des Crow called to the Spirits of the East, and a huge red kite soared into view over the crest of the hill in front of him.

Figure 2: The elemental forms of Druidry:

East	South	West	North
Air	Fire	Water	Earth
The Hawk of Dawn	The Stag in the Heat of the Chase	The Salmon of Wisdom	The Bear of the Starry Heavens
The Dawn	The Sun	The Encircling Sea	The Plough (Ursa Major)
Inspiration	Passion	Wisdom	Nourishment

But these elements do not just provide structure to the landscape and the rituals of Druidry. They also give form to the way Druids categorise people, too. This happens primarily through the medium of astrological signs, each of which corresponds to a particular element, and also draws upon the Jungian development of the four humours – Black Bile, Yellow Bile, Phlegm and Blood, each of which was associated with a classical element - into a system for typologising personalities (Jung, 1968). Working within this Jungian tradition, Philip Carr-Gomm has developed this usage of the four elements further, applying it to the ritual and pedagogical course of the Bardic Grade and the Druidcraft Tarot (Carr-Gomm, 2004). It is also common for Druids to gloss their astrological signs in terms of their element – "Earth signs" are practical and calm, "Air signs" are imaginative and flexible, and so on. The classical elements don't just give structure to the human community, they also organise Otherworldly beings too - just as there are "Spirits of the Earth", there are "Earth people", and so on. What this suggests, is that Druidry's cosmology involves humans and non-human beings being organised according a common set of segmentary categories. The power of the elements is hewn in the rock, wind, and rain of Albion, but it is also evident in the nature and relationships of Druids themselves as individual persons. My contention, therefore – as I argue in greater depth elsewhere – is that the animism of Druidry is a form of segmentary animism, but one that uses personality rather than kinship as the main means of distinguishing these segments (Woolley, Forthcoming).

The key point about this cosmological order, predicated upon the four elements, is not the elements themselves however. What I want to emphasise is that throughout my description above, what is clear is that the elements serve as a *formal* property of existence. As Druids, we don't believe that the four elements are each a kind of physical stuff from which different kinds of people and animal are composed. Rather, we treat them as *forms*; aesthetic classes where common characteristics are based upon patterns, not merely physical substances. Fire, in a sense, is a pattern, found in all parts of nature; yet it does not replace or transcend the physical world, but is inextricably linked to it. Fire is also, fire. One of the crucial features of the Druidic aesthetic is that we treat these patterns as equally real as material existence. If we return to the contrast Myers struck between the transcendental perfection of the Classical aesthetic – of which Platonic formalism is the prime example – and the sensible perfection of the Modern aesthetic, we see Druids plot a third course straight between the two. Whereas the Classical aesthetic imposes a hierarchy between form and matter, and the Modern aesthetic alienates each object from all others, reversing this hierarchy – the Druidic aesthetic approaches beauty as interconnections between the four formal elements that are its essence, in a way that makes any absolute distinction between matter and spirit, and any hierarchical relation between them, impossible to sustain. There is no distinction between the mind and the body, the social and the natural. But this is not absolute oneness. Baruch De Spinoza (Lloyd, 1996; Spinoza, 1994), one of the most prominent Enlightenment philosophers, also articulates a holistic ontology of a kind that allows the incorporation of difference; the reason being that the unity Spinoza voices is not "one-ness" but "infinity" – a non-numeric expression of All. Druidry today echoes this ontological scheme, in that it is not a holism of one-ness, but a holism founded upon diversity, framed through the formal categories of the four elements.

Perhaps the most vivid description of how the cosmos of Druidry impinges upon the experience of individual Druids in an aesthetic way, came from a recollection by Ivan, told as a story at an eistedfodd. Whilst inside a bakery at St Just in Cornwall, Ivan saw that his friend outside was distracted by a wasp, just as he left the building:

> *I knew, I could tell, that the most awesome, world-shattering thing was about to happen. I pushed the door open. I became the master dancer. I could feel this current, this force, that was carrying my body through space and time. All I knew I had to do, was step out of the way, and relax. I danced across the pavement! I span, I gyrated… I was flying! I was dancing! I was a comet, flying through the heavens! […] I was so much in the flow. I was just part of it all. Everything was in slow motion […] And suddenly, I could see her attention… and the wasp flew away… and her head started to come around. By this time, I was spinning past her right shoulder. As her attention came back to the shop, I came to a sort of floating rest just behind her. I knew that not only, not only that she hadn't seen me, I knew that she knew without any doubt whatsoever, that I was still in the shop. I knew that she had forgotten about the wasp, and in her consciousness, she had been looking at the shop all the time. Now came the most difficult part of the whole experience for me, because I knew without a doubt that […] however mercifully I made, I got into contact with her, it would scare the shit out of her! So, after a little while, I had to make a noise and I said [clears throat]. She went [screams] and fell over and said "Don't you EVER do that to me again!! And that was the first time […] I knew in my body that magic[2]was real…*

Ivan's magical experience has several key features: firstly, it is quite clear that it has a strongly aesthetic character – note his movement is not just swift, it is graceful; a dance.

Secondly, it is dramatically and radically embodied: Ivan's experience of magic does not take him out of the material world, out of his body, but is rooted within it. Thirdly, it is completely intersubjective. It arises not from the subjective vagaries of Ivan's own experience, or that of his friend – or even that of the wasp – but from the interaction of all three. It would not have been enough for Ivan to simply believe he was invisible to his friend; she had to not see him, and he had to know that he hadn't been seen. Finally, that interaction does not respect the divide between the human and non-human domains: the wasp's participation was crucial, and as Ivan himself says, in that moment he was "just part of it all". The individual perspectives of this account, are underscored by a fundamental unity of being, that in a moment of peak experience, Ivan is able to access.

The Moral Ecology of Druidry – Emptying the Wicker Man

Having established the cosmological underpinnings of Druidic aesthetics, I now turn to address a moral issue with this aesthetic-based philosophy raised by Brendan Myers at the end of his own paper – namely, Thomas Mann's critique of aesthetic morality as being unable to defend against cruel, but otherwise beautiful acts. This concern is significant, because it represents one of the many obstacles Druids face, when attempting to make aesthetics the foundation of their entire philosophy. Therefore, in seeing how Druids use the cosmology outlined above, to navigate themselves morally about the landscapes in which we live, we also see more clearly how Druidic aesthetics actually fits together. By looking at Druidic moral ecology, then, we get another chance to appreciate the way in which Druidic culture draws upon its aesthetic of connection to construct and enact social norms.

Druids make use of an array of ritual practices which, they believe, serve to ameliorate the suffering experienced by other-than-humans. One way such aims are pursued is through shamanic journeying, which is based on the writings of Caitlin Matthews, who has worked to recreate an indigenous Celtic journeying tradition that, she argues, was lost with the onset of Christianity (Matthews and Matthews, 2004; Rutherford, 1978). At Beltane, we were able to put this into practice in a direct way, when Becky, one of the members of OBOD Camps, felt called to conduct a group ceremony in which we would journey into the otherworld to offer our aid to various animal spirits in order to strengthen their habitats in the face of human exploitation. We each summoned an animal spirit to guide us[3]and then journeyed with our animal familiar to its habitat, where we went through a process of exploring, understanding and then energetically strengthening that animal and its environment through a series of guided visualisations. Finally, we each agreed with our animal familiar to do something in the future to help – such as donating to a conservation charity, volunteering one's time or working to make one's garden better for wildlife.

This event stimulated a discussion between myself and Hilde Liesens, another member of the camps community who has considerable experience with shamanic work. Hilde described a spot on a London common where she regularly meditates under a large oak tree which was "[Her] shamanic journey centre, as well as just being a very good tree." However, other people used the site and frequently left large amounts rubbish around the tree. After having already spent an afternoon clearing up what looked like "the remains of a rave", Hilde returned to the spot for a private Beltane ritual and found yet more rubbish and the remains of a fire. Wanting to know "What was wrong with people" and what could be done about it, Hilde went on a shamanistic journey – the answer she received was that "it's basically all about disconnection, but we all knew that anyway." She was also given a ritual in which water would be blessed and used to strengthen the land so "its peace and its inspiration can

get through to the people who are there." Subsequently, she was then able to share this ritual with others at a Pagan Federation celebration.

Both of these rituals share common features. They rely on a sense of empathy for non-human entities, an empathy that is violated by destruction or damage due to human activity, and is reinforced through ritual acts that highlight the connections between humans and non-humans. They integrate magical working with pragmatic action in a way that is spiritually meaningful. They ascribe agency to other-than-human-beings. And they involve normative claims about how human beings should interact with others that are brought to bear as a critique of wider society.

This empathic moral ecology arises, in part from historical precedent, and moral themes within wider Western discourse – contemporary Druidry has a long history of pacifism, established by the Welsh revivalist Iolo Morganwg in the 18th century(Hutton, 2007); a pacifist impulse that harming other beings needlessly violates. The same kind of Enlightenment sensibilities about the nature of a moral life is found in the writing of Adam Smith, whose theory of moral sentiment affirms the importance of empathy – in his words, "sympathy" – as the foundation for ethical behavior (Smith, 2002). The main difference here, as I've argued above, is cosmological – Druids extend their sense of empathy to include all beings, where for most Enlightenment thinkers it is confined to humans only. It is also worth noting that Druidic relations with Nature do not follow a pattern of direct reciprocity, but rather a system of generalised reciprocity, of the kind described by Marcel Mauss(Mauss, 1990). Druids do not respond to the deaths of non-humans by offering up their own lives in direct exchange; they respond indirectly by leading sustainable, thankful and spiritual lives that nonetheless help maintain the Natural order. In her description of Inupiat kinship relations, Barbara Bodenhorn suggests that a similar situation among the Inupiat – in which humans respond reciprocally to prey animals "giving themselves" to hunters by sharing the meat – reflects a deeply-held respect for individual autonomy in Inupiat culture (Bodenhorn, 2000). The way in which Druids respond to the sacrifices – needful or needless - made by plants and animals is to actively cultivate a sense of emotional sensitivity to their pain, and to directly channel this powerful engagement into pro-ecological behavior. As Emma Restall-Orr puts it, this has the effect of fostering a network of sustainable relationships – in other words, to create more life and greater connection (Restall-Orr, 2008). If empathy is a direct consequence of connection, and empathy leads to respect and care, then cruelty or excessive harm becomes unthinkable. The particular structure of Druidic moral ecology makes any overlap between cruelty and beauty impossible to sustain. The rigours of the Druid's aesthetic – and the animistic cosmology it instills - simply does not allow for such a confluence to occur. The Druid ethic could be glossed thus - to be connected is to empathise, and empathy prevents cruelty.

Conclusion: Druidry as an aesthetic of enchantment

My journey through the cosmology of Druidry, and the moral ecology found there, demonstrates some key points. Contrary to what we might believe, Druids don't seek to connect with nature; rather, for Druids, Nature *is* connection. The cosmos is a community of an infinity of beings, brought together through the elemental forms of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. This reality can be known and explored through both the body, and the spirit, the head and the heart. This unfolding landscape of relationships is essentially beautiful, and it is through our aesthetic sensibilities we may come to know it for ourselves. In short, what binds the universe together – for Druids – is beauty; as much as physical laws.

This is a distinct model of the universe, but one that has roots extending deep into European intellectual history, and out into wider society. As part of the Romantic reaction against the rationalization of modernity, Druidry is a form of re-enchantment; an attempt to restore some of the magic and meaning stripped from the land through the alienating forces of capitalism and consumerism. In her essay on the historical process of disenchantment, Jane Schneider traces the way in which literate elites - be they Pagan, Christian, or Atheist - have sought to disenchant the animate landscape of rural Europe (Schneider, 1990). The basic work of the Druid way is to spin this process into reverse, to challenge the relentless commodification and alienation from our world. It does so through constructing a very specific aesthetic -*an aesthetic of enchantment.*

For modern Druids, it is the material world, and not some transcendent domain, that is the home of forms; the seat of beauty and meaning. Perfection is expressed not through transcending our humanity, or through becoming sufficient in ourselves, but through forging connections with the world around us; intellectual and emotional, spiritual and physical. These are all the hallmarks of an enchanted existence, one that places the experience of delight and wonder at the heart of spiritual discipline. In making the aesthetic and the physical co-present in this way, Druidry ensures that the aesthetic is accorded a level of reality equivalent to, but different from, that of physical existence.

My work here in defining Druidry must be accompanied by a series of caveats. Firstly, although what is advanced above is a definition of Druidry, I am not claiming that it is a *definitive* one. The Druidic community is constantly changing, as are the wider worlds of which it is part. These facts, if nothing else, heavily constrain any attempt at defining Druidry. The claims I am making can therefore be nothing so grand as eternal truths. Instead, they serve as a response to certain questions – raised in prior scholarship, and referred to at the beginning of this paper – with a view to stimulating further discussion. The model I've put forward is therefore not intended as a dogma, or a creed, or an article of faith. Instead, it is offered as something different; a tool. Tools are used until they are no longer needed or – as often happens – they break in the course of their use, and need to be replaced. I offer these Elemental Forms as a tool to help Druids situate their own practice; to articulate what they do when speaking to outsiders; and to stimulate further discussion and debate.

But the intention from the very start, has been to develop a tool that is sufficient to trace the full extent of Druidry as we know it today. The scope of the Druidic quest for connection – an aesthetic of enchantment – touches upon the three key touchstones for Druidry in OBOD at least; Art being the province of the bard, Nature being the province of the Ovate, and Community, being the province of the Druid. This work was already begun by previous scholars. Brendan Myers, in establishing the fundamentally aesthetic quality to our ethics, has demonstrated the central importance of the aesthetic for peace, justice and the community; he, therefore has shown its relevance for the Druidic province. Andy Letcher's meditation of the spirit of Bardism – closing the gap between word and world, unriddling the universe – makes a fundamentally similar point about Art. In demonstrating that we see Nature in terms of segmentary animism, that connects us all together as an infinity, I have simply sought to complete the triptych. Following Ross Nichols' invitation, as discussed by Julia Farley, I suggest that Ovates too are aestheticians – what is the reading of omens, after all, but patiently seeing patterns in the clouds, and the lay of the land?

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[1]Indeed, I would suggest that the reason why ancient monuments possess such a power, is that they are preserved through and integrated with the landscape upon which they are built.

[2]In Druidry, as in many Pagan circles, "magic" is the term used to describe energy working of various kinds, often to describe more "extraordinary" occurrences.

[3]For some individuals, this was an animal to which they had a particular prior connection; for others, it was the first animal that came into their head.

The Author

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