

A Shaman dancing on the Glacier

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WHEN, AT one point in the lead-up to this symposium, I was asked what was going to be the title of my lecture, the words 'A shaman dancing on the glacier' leaped up to my mind with all the inevitability of dictation from the subconscious. Which is another way of saying that my title may sound a bit surrealistic. I didn't understand it very well at first myself, but, as I worked at this lecture, I came to understand it more and more. A good part of this lecture will consist in an attempt to demonstrate the relevance of my title in the context which is ours today: "Burns, Beuys and Beyond" - the figure of an artist in (modern) society.

I'm fairly certain I'm not the only one in this room to have been fascinated by Mircea Eliade's book *Shamanism - the archaic techniques of ecstasy*. But maybe nobody read it with such a jolt of recognition as I did when I first came across it in Paris around 1959.

At that time I was living, quite spartanly, off a post-graduate scholarship from Glasgow University, working at a thesis (which I later abandoned), on 'Surrealism and Politics', but mainly wandering around the streets and backstreets of Paris and writing bits and pieces that were later gathered into a book called *Incandescent Limbo*. I say 'bits and pieces' not in any pejorative sense. On the contrary. What later became *Incandescent Limbo* (it took me years to find a satisfactory shape) was written with no ready-made notion of what a book should be, with no preconception of unity. It consisted in random explorations of external reality (places, encounters, conversations), but also in explorations of inner reality (dreams and memories). And among the latter were a great many flashbacks to my childhood on the west coast of Scotland.

When I was about eleven or twelve years old, I was much concerned with an area I called 'up the back'. This area took in about ten square miles of territory in Ayrshire, comprised of field, wood, moor and hills. After a period of belonging to gangs, which was my introduction to politics, I

was then entering a long period of isolation, and I was up to all kinds of solitary practices, all of which were connected with the territory I've just evoked. Before going into any interpretation, before trying to open up any perspectives, let me just describe them.

What marked, and still does, the north end of the village of Fairlie was a great outcrop of stone called the Craigie Rock. Up alongside this rock rose a winding path lined with hawthorn. I'd climb up that path till I came to a fence that really marked the beginning of the territory. In one of the posts of that fence, in a slit in its wood, I'd inserted a bit of quartz - I'm eleven or twelve years old, remember - and before I entered the territory I had to get myself ready for it by concentrating at that point, with my hand on the piece of quartz, counting out four sequences of sixteen, which was the most complete figure I could think of. Once into the territory, after that little piece of ritual, I had all kinds of possibilities open before me.

A lot of my time was spent in just standing and staring, or in a meditative kind of wandering. But I'd also take in a lot of particular objects and occasions. There would be the animals: complacent cattle, solemn horses, maybe some plodding, determined hedgehog. But there were mainly birds: first of all the gulls circling and caterwauling round the coup; hordes of crows in a sycamore wood; and, in a beech copse farther up, a band of heron - in spring, the ground would be strewn with broken pale-blue shells, blood-smearred, smelling of the sea. I'd done a lot of what we used to call 'nature study' in earlier years, and there was still an element of this in my habits, but something more ancient, more archaic, more radical, seemed to have taken over. This manifested itself in a fascination with bones, skeletons, skulls (of animals and birds) that I picked up in the fields, in the woods and on the moors. And in something that might better be called ornithomania than ornithology: I remember, at nights, "talking" with owls, whose cry I imitated not too badly - my attempts at least aroused response (I'd done the same thing with seals on the shore). I had favourite places too: a certain clump of birch, a rock on the moor, where I felt some kind of special concentration. And I had some rather special practices. One consisted in stripping down and standing for a pretty long stretch of time

under a waterfall. And I had chosen trees with conveniently shaped branches where I undertook something that Sigmund Freud, had he known it, might have called arboreal masturbation. I'd climb up to the tree to my 'climax' branch and there enjoy an ejaculation that opened out on to a contemplation of space: the blue-green Firth of Clyde, the Cumbranes, Arran, Kintyre. At other times, I might guddle for trout in the Glen burn, but mostly I'd just be watching the water, almost hypnotised by its ripple, whirl and flow. And there'd be the moor: the wind and the emptiness. There was a long stretch of it leading up to the Kaim, a great mass of frontal moraine marking the termination of some quaternary glacier. In winter as I tramped towards it, I loved to watch the snow smoozing off its heights. And up there, made from the rubble of stone, I had a hut. In the beginning, in that hut I had a mirror, a length of red thread and nine pebbles. The ostensible purpose of the mirror was to light fires, I was not sure of the purposes of the other two items, I just liked to have them there - till I threw them away one day as no longer necessary to me, mere encumbrances.

This is where Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism - the archaic techniques of ecstasy* comes in. As I read through that book, I came across more and more correspondences between what he was laying out and my own early experience. In other words, I realised I had stumbled onto shamanism, had practised a kind of home-made shamanism, that is, an immemorial tradition going back to neolithic, paleolithic and pre-lithic times, elements of which can be found all over the world, from Siberia to Australia via the Americas and Oceania. This isn't really so surprising as it may sound. It's almost certain that, given enough scope, enough freedom, a child will go through all the past phases of humanity, from fishes to philosophers.

Let me give a few concrete examples, to corroborate what I've just been claiming, and to lead us farther into the field (the field of feeling, technique and symbol) of shamanism. Eliade tells, for example, how among the Buryats of Siberia, the shaman will sit by a sick person, beside him an arrow from the head of which a red thread leads to a birch tree outside - it is along this thread, along this lifeline, that the soul of the sick man will come back into his body. So much for the red thread. Likewise to



Kenneth White on Rannoch Moor. Photograph: Elisabeth Lyon

purify and fortify himself, the ancient practitioner of Shinto stood under waterfalls. And while we're in this therapeutic context, let's mention the fact that in his "bundle", the American medicine-man will have pieces of quartz or rock-crystal. But beyond medical or magical therapeutics, I was much more interested in the general cosmology. It must never be forgotten that if the shaman is a "medicine-man", concerned with individual sicknesses and collective problems in the tribe, he also practises simply "for joy". What the shaman, or the "dawn-man", as the Ojibwa call him, is out for is an ecstasy (getting outside one's-self as well as outside history), and a de-conditioning. Starting out from a reduction (renunciation of social identity, etc. - he is in fact invited to see himself reduced to his bones), the shaman achieves a transcendence, a capacity for experiencing (and also expressing) total life. By separating himself, at least temporarily, from the community (and to a certain extent he always remains outside), the shaman comes to know an identity larger than the one coded in the community, by giving it breathing space. If the shaman imitates the movements and voices of animals and birds (I recall my owls and seals), it's in order to learn the language of the whole of nature, this desire for complete language leading eventually to the practise of incantation (providing enchantment) and/or the development of a jargon (the language of the *jars*, that is, the wild duck). The total experience of the earth is also a luminous experience, which is to say that it is uranian as well as telluric. The uranian and the telluric may be represented by deities: Mother of the Animals, Supreme Sky Being, but they may also be de-theologised, if I may say so, and reduced to 'white light' (*ak ajas*, among the Altai Tatars), or 'the girl in the forest', the birch-tree. It's with the 'forest-girl' that the sexual element comes in, sexual relationships with 'the

powers', outside the reproductive (family-domestic) chain, being part of the shaman thing. As to the light element, it's there right at the inception of the shaman's career when, in certain ceremonies, pieces of quartz or rock crystal (ie, sky-stones, stones of light, solidified light) are actually thrust into his body (as I thrust my bit of quartz into the post). Another sign that the shaman is now indeed recognised as a shaman is the erection of a post, surmounted by a bird-sign, outside his house. This is the sign (the totem, if you like) that he is able to undertake the metapsychic journey that will take him from hell (the kingdom of the dead, the land of shades) to heaven (the land beyond the clouds) and all over the earth. A whole mystic geography, cosmic topography is involved. In ceremonies, in symbolic performances, this metapsychic journey may begin with the shaman climbing up a birch-tree (nine degrees or stages will have been marked on it) till he "flies off". In this performance, and in others similar, he will sometimes be "helped off" by narcotics, but mostly simply by drumming, dancing and leaping. Performances apart (it's there, obviously that charlatany and trickery plays its role - trickery willingly accepted by the onlookers, via a kind of willing suspension of disbelief), what gives the shaman his inner power is a sense of connexion, and what enables him to give "artistic" manifestation to this power-sense is his skill in body-movement and, above all, his voice, his words. To give just one example of these, here's an Eskimo poem illustrative of the ornithophany just evoked:

*The gull
he who
cleaves the air with his
wings
above our heads
you gull up there
steer down towards me
your wings are red
up there
in the freshness
ayaya! ayaya!*

And to point once

again to the correspondences between this ancient shamanism and my own early experience, here are the first lines of the first poem I ever wrote to keep, 'Precentor Seagull':

*You up there
in the lurching church of
the elements
mover and moved
white as a ghost and fat
as the paps of the dark
earth-woman
with a squawk man in
you
would waken wide if
there was one
the sleeping gate to Paradise
or the white world's
thighs
give us the sound at least
the note
the initial noise
and it's we will make the
psalms we need
with whatever we know
we are...*

Let me just insist on the fact that I wrote 'Precentor Seagull' about fifteen years before I came across the Eskimo invocation.

Now, it may be thought that all this is very well, but that it is much too idiosyncratic to have any bearing whatsoever on Scottish literature, presumably what we're concerned with when there is mention, say of Robert Burns. I can well imagine, if not in the present enlightened company, at least in this near vicinity, cultivated citizens with, on their faces, that irony which is so often the veneer of an ingrown despair, who will be saying that, having always taken me for an outsider, they now know I'm also a throwback and that my exotic talk of Siberians and Amerindians, not to speak of Polynesians and Bushmen, while, of course, fascinating, has precious little relevance to the Scottish context, Scottish culture and identity. We all know what Scottish culture is, don't we? That mixture of common sense and sentimentality, of social realism and aery-fairy, of Gaelic piety and Lowland pawkishness, etc., etc. We all know about Scottish identity: porridge and the *People's Friend* and all the rest of it. And if you write

ten neat lines in Lallans about the whooping-cough of your baby boy when you were on holiday in the Mearns, that is Scottish literature, is it not? I'm reminded at this point of a talk I did recently in Edinburgh on the subject of Scottish culture, a lecture in which I suggested it needed both radical re-reading and enlargement of scope.

After it, a woman came up to me and said "But I like my Scottish identity." I said I liked mine too, but it wasn't the same one. She looked at me as if I had horns... So I'm back on the subject today, suggesting again the necessity of re-reading and enlargement. What I've been saying about shamanism, for example, seems to me to shed quite a lot of new light on our longlost, long caricatured sentimentalised background.

Let's go right back into the Celtic past, to one of the finest pieces of Celtic archeology, the famous Gundestrup cauldron discovered only a few years back in a Danish peat bog. On it you see represented many figures, not all of which are easy to identify. But one of them is certainly the god Cernunnos, whom you see seated in a kind of yogic posture, horns on his head, a torque in one hand, a snake in the other, surrounded by animals, mainly deer. The Gundestrup cauldron probably stems from south-east Europe, and dates to about the first century before our era. Now just compare the figure of Cernunnos on this cauldron with, say, a stone engraving I've just seen, made by an Eskimo woman at Baker Lake, North-West Territories, Canada, in 1971. The connection, I submit is obvious, the correspondences clear. Well, the Eskimo engraving is of an Inuit shaman surrounded by his auxiliaries, his familiar spirits. In other words, I am suggested that the figure of Cernunnos, one of the most ancient and most central in the Celtic pantheon, is part of the Shamanist tradition.

And what has this to do with art and literature? A great deal, I think. I

