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THE INITIATION OF A SORCERER

The Way of Wyrd is a path to psychological and spiritual liberation practised by sorcerers in England one thousand years ago. It had its own teachings based on the culture of the Anglo-Saxons, but also close links with the spiritual traditions of other cultures of the same period, including the Celtic magic now preserved in mythical stories about Merlin. The only mythical version of Anglo-Saxon magic is Tolkien's sorcerer Gandalf, and the Way of Wyrd is a historically documented path of liberation from the 'Middle Earth' period of history known as the 'Dark Ages'.

I am a psychologist, and for a number of years I have been researching the Way of Wyrd because I believe that it is a way of being-in-the-world which is as provocative and challenging now as it was a thousand years ago.

I began the project when I was studying, in my personal and professional life, the teachings of Tao and Zen. But I soon became interested in Western parallels to these great Eastern traditions, and began to research some of the systems of psychological thought and action from our own historical past. Eventually I came upon a manuscript in the British Museum which seemed to be the key to a whole new world hidden within the academic translations of Anglo-Saxon scholars. Called the **Lacnunga**, the manuscript is a collection of magical and medical remedies from the pagan Anglo-Saxon tradition. Historians reckon that it was probably written by a Christian scribe in the tenth century but, in contrast with most monastic writings, it presents a picture of pre-Christian shamanic healing. Using the manuscript as a focus, I set out to build a picture of the psychological world of the practitioner of such spells. This was a task which led me into a number of disciplines including history, folklore, mythology, Old English literature and anthropology. Eventually the project revealed a system of belief based on **wyrd**, a way of being which transcends Western conventional notions of free will and determinism. All aspects of the world were seen as being in constant flux and motion between the psychological and mystical polarities of Fire and Frost. Following from the concept of **wyrd** was a vision of the universe, from the gods to the underworld, as being connected by an all-reaching system of fibres rather like a huge, invisible, three-dimensional spider's web. Everything was connected by strands of fibre to the all-encompassing web. Any event anywhere, resulted in reverberations and repercussions throughout the entire system.

The Anglo-Saxon sorcerer dealt directly with **life-force**, a vital energy which permeated everything but which in humans was generated in the head, flowed down the spinal column and from there throughout the body. Life force connected individual human functioning with the pulse of earth rhythm.

A dynamic and pervasive world of **spirits** coexisted with the material world. The spirits were visible to the sorcerers, because sorcerers were people with abilities to see, hear and experience things which we would probably consign to the realms of the paranormal or madness. The sorcerer operated as a mediator between the world of humans and the realm of spirits. I found these various aspects of the world of Anglo-Saxon sorcery exciting conceptually, but I wanted to know what it **felt** like to experience the world as a Middle-Earth sorcerer. The next stage of the project was then to research how a person became initiated into the Way of Wyrd. I decided to write the first report of this project as a book which explained the **ideas** of sorcery through the **experiences** of a person who is entering that world for the first time. In constructing the book, I first mapped out the sequence of events which characterized a typical process of training in Anglo-Saxon sorcery. The ideas of **wyrd** were then written into this sequence in the form I believe most closely fits the actual events. The whole process was anchored to specific evidence from the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts.

Then, to bring the material to life, I set it against the imagined story of how one man was led into the world of the Anglo-Saxon sorcerer. In choosing an appropriate story, which would carry all the documentary evidence I had prepared, I went back to the original **Lacnunga** manuscript with which I had begun my investigations. Historians have suggested that the original author of the Anglo-Saxon magical/medical manuscript was a scribe or cleric attached to a Christian monastery. I therefore took as the background of the book a historically documented mission which in the late 600s travelled to the still pagan South coast of England. I have told the story of **The Way of Wyrd** through the eyes of a scribe attached to the mission; a man whom I imagine to be the original creator of the Lacnunga manuscript. The book chronicles, as a dramatised documentary, the path followed by a sorcerer's apprentice in the Way of Wyrd. And it is this process of psychological transformation in the initiation of a sorcerer that I have outlined below, with quotes taken from my reconstruction of the events.

In the Anglo-Saxon culture, people who experienced vivid dreams, visions, hallucinations, profound mystical states, in fact any of a wide range of altered states of consciousness, were watched closely as potential sorcerers. They were considered to be people with the facility for entering

a separate reality, transcending the layers of conventional reality to experience a dimension in which the normal constraints of time, space and causality are suspended. In my reconstruction, a young Christian scribe named Brand has accompanied the sorcerer Wulf into the vast forests of southern England. Brand is attempting to discover the teachings of Wyrð, but Wulf has told him that if he seeks real knowledge, he must experience the spirits directly. Almost all accounts of the early stages of apprenticeship into sorcery emphasize the fear and anxiety involved. It is possible that the build-up of psychological tension is necessary to achieve the eventual breakthrough. Brand describes his feelings at dusk in the forest:

'I tried to clear my mind of fears by concentrating on the sun as it dipped below the tree line. Huge, jagged, black clouds spread like enormous ink stains across a crimson sky. On the opposite bank the trees melted into the descending darkness like hunched, prowling giants.

Suddenly Wulf snapped his head around and scanned the trees behind us. Warning pangs of fear crawled up my back, and automatically I put a hand to my chest to feel the comforting bulk of the crucifix. Wulf turned back to face the fire, and calmly continued eating. I looked at him questioningly, but he said nothing. He did not even glance at me.

Nervously I picked at my food. The fish seemed to have no flavour, and I chewed mechanically, jaws stiff with tension. Suddenly I shivered violently and dropped my food. My chest felt completely empty and, wheezing, I sucked in a long, rasping gasp of air. Wulf jumped up and slapped me on the back as if I were choking. Gradually I regained control of my breathing. I sat erect, watching and measuring each breath, trying to rid myself of a strange sensation in my stomach.

Suddenly Wulf stopped eating again.

"Do you hear that?" he murmured, his head cocked on one side, eyebrows raised quizzically as if he were discussing the location of a spring cuckoo.

I had heard nothing, but I nodded stiffly, guessing that he must have heard the buzzing sound again. The gloom of nightfall took a step closer to the fire'.(p.133)

The spirits begin to contact Brand, until one night Wulf claims to be able to see the spirits in a tree:

"Can you see them?" he whispered excitedly. "In the crack willow". I edged a little closer to Wulf to look at the trees from the same vantage point, my eyes wide and staring, unblinking. It was difficult to make out anything about the tree except its huge bulk. In the darkness the spread of the old tree was enormous, looming twenty yards high, its top branches cutting deeply into the grey night sky. I had seen the tree in the daylight, and I tried to recall details of its appearance. Two thick trunks were joined at the base, one leaning over at a steep angle towards the river, and the yellow branches were covered by a mass of feathery, silver-green slender leaves.

Wulf rose slowly to his hands and knees. "Stay here and don't move" he whispered.

"You're going to leave me here?" I whined. The idea of lying alone on the river bank terrified me

"Stay here" he repeated irritably.

Bent almost double, Wulf started to creep noiselessly towards the tree. He seemed to be gliding over the ground. There was a dip in the bank near the tree, and as he moved into it I could just make out the hump of his back, his head and feet out of sight.

Suddenly Wulf screamed and bounded across the ground with enormous strides, took off and flew into the tree like a bird. I raised my head higher, trying to pierce the shroud of darkness which enveloped the tree. I could just see Wulf clinging to the lowest branches, writhing and kicking. Then he screamed again, the tree erupted into a deafening explosion of cracking sounds, and I saw dozens of black, screeching objects catapulted from the branches and swooping towards me like demons from hell. Gasping with terror, I scrambled backwards towards the river bank, slipping and sliding on the grass wet with night dew, and stepped into the river, squatting down on the flat rock from which I had fished earlier.

"Brand, get off that rock" Wulf screamed. "Get back onto the land".

I stayed on the rock and tried to hide below the bulk of the river bank, but I saw the creatures circling over the treetops and plunging up the river towards me, their heads jutting forward like arrowtips. Frantically I tore at my tunic, wrenched the crucifix from around my neck, and held it high above my head. A tremendous gush of cold wind swept over me, my body shuddered with the rhythm of beating wings, and at that instant I felt a terrific blow in the chest, which hurled me bodily into the mud of the river bank. The crucifix flew from my hand and splashed into the river behind me.

Wulf appeared at my side. He gripped my head in his hands, and stared into my eyes, tipping my face towards the moonlight.

"The spirits have stolen your soul" he howled'.(pp.141-142)

Soul-loss was considered by the Anglo-Saxons to be the precursor to serious illness. In an initiation procedure, the loss of the soul was the starting point of a quest by the apprentice, ostensibly to recover his soul:

'When Wulf spoke again, it was in a calm, quiet voice.

"You are now an empty shell, Brand. Your soul has journeyed to the spirit world. This is a special privilege, for the spirits will reveal to your soul the ways of wyrd. But if you can retrieve your soul, the secrets of wyrd will be yours, for the spirits will have imparted their knowledge. If you fail to recapture your soul, your life will be extinguished like a fire in a rainstorm". (p.143)

In our terms, Brand has been given the task of searching for an aspect of his self, for knowledge resides there. But the search takes place in a dramatically enacted 'external' world, rather than an internal searching through meditation or depth analysis.

Wulf now tells Brand that he must obtain an ally to help him in his search for his soul. The ally was a force which occasionally appeared in animal form, but more often manifested as a plant. The emphasis on the dangers involved are still clearly stated. Wulf explains that the collection of the plant, spearwort, is a perilous hunt.

' "Be careful!" he hissed. "Now listen. Spearwort is an extremely powerful and dangerous force. It will be expecting us, and as soon as it knows we are coming, it will lay a trap. It will send forces after us".

He paused, and glanced into the tree cover at the back of the clearing. Then he whispered into my ear.

"We must hunt in absolute silence. When we reach the plant, try not to look at it directly, for it has been known to kill with a look of power. Keep your gaze to one side of the spearwort, and watch it out of the corner of your eye. You must try to get as close as you can to the plant moving so slowly that it cannot even detect that you are moving. I shall give you my knife. When you are within two or three paces, leap in and plunge the knife as deeply as possible into the ground at the base of the plant".(p.148)

After a night of tense and difficult work the plant is captured. In his desperate state, Brand feels an immediate connection with it.

' "I followed Wulf back through the forest, cradling the plant protectively in the crook of my arm. It felt heavy and strong, like a small, adult hunting animal".(p.153)

They spent the rest of the night sitting in vigil over the plant, which must be allowed to die before Brand can use it:

'Occasionally my thoughts would wander, and linger over events recent or long ago. The faces and voices of people dear to me drifted in and out, each as clear and bright as candleflame. But always my attention returned to the spearwort, my ally, lying at my feet.

After a long time, the night wind died down to a murmur, and the sky streaked with dawn light. Suddenly the clearing around us took on an eerie luminosity; the spearwort eye seemed to glow brilliant yellow, then faded completely. Wulf placed his hand on the dead root, and carefully withdrew the knife. I felt a tightness in my throat, and hot tears coursed down my cheeks as if we had conducted a vigil over a dying friend'.(p.154)

Spearwort was prepared as a drink, and used as a catalyst in inducing an increase in the level of life force. The apprentice sat between two fires, and life force increased along with body-heat. Wulf explains the process to Brand:

' "Your life-force is now increased ten-fold. Soon your cauldron of power will be boiling over and pulsing along your fibres. This is where lies the power of the sorcerer: the ability to control the source of inner life-force, and raise the level to such an extent that power radiates along his fibres and throughout the web of wyrd. If you can generate enough power, you will be able to project your shadow-soul along your fibres and into the Underworld, where your fibres will be re-woven like a pattern-welded blade. The magical smiths of the

Underworld fire the swords and knives of sorcery by transmuting Mother Earth's metals in the flames of wild-fire. Likewise they will forge your fibres in the cauldron of your own inner fire".(p.161)

Sometimes the apprentice sat between the fires for twenty-four hours or more: the timing of this ritual was the responsibility of the sorcerer:

'I sat and sweated until the sun sank behind the horizon, and the wildfires on each side of me seemed like twin, earth-bound suns, lighting up the whole clearing with their brilliance. Flurries of moths, attracted by the flames, wheeled and dived about in the smoke. At the bottom of the slope the river surged past, silenced by the crackle of the flames, reflecting the firelight like a river of blood.

At one instant Wulf appeared in front of me silhouetted against a sky glowing with an orange sunset, but when I looked again he was lit instead by the flicker of flame from the wildfires; more time had passed, and the sky behind him was dark with night.'(p.162)

When the sorcerer judges the apprentice to be ready, he leads the apprentice into a journey very like those we now identify in parapsychology as out-of-body experiences:

'Slowly I inched my body backwards, then leaned forward very carefully, but I felt as if I were perched on top of a mountain, and any movement would plunge me into an abyss.

"Rock", Wulf repeated sternly. "You now possess enough life-force to enable your shadow-soul to slip out through your shield-skin. Relax, and allow your shield-skin to move aside".

I tried to rock back and forth, but my body became rigid with fear. I felt sure that I would fall.

"Brand, you are afraid because inside your shield-skin you feel soft and vulnerable. You are like a tortoise in its shell. Now rock; let your shadow-soul out of your body. It knows where to go".

I tried it again and this time I was able to set up a very slight rocking motion. I felt sure that I would fall, but I was determined to let it happen. I rocked a little further each time. Suddenly I pitched forward out of control, my body trembled violently, and I felt myself floating out. I shut my eyes tightly and let it happen. I knew that I was journeying to the Underworld.' (pp.163-164)

The Underworld, in Anglo-Saxon sorcery, was the source of great insights. We are used to thinking about spiritual transformations as 'high' states, often associated with the imagery of mountains and perhaps influenced by the suggestion that such states are in some way 'higher' or nobler than those of ordinary consciousness. The orientation towards high states, both geographic and psychological, is present in the Way of Wyrð, but the power of the Earth and Underworld is also emphasized.

Brand plunges into the imagery of an underground cave; an enormous space dominated by a smithy. A giant, with an immense body proportioned like that of a dwarf, places Brand on a huge slab of rock.

'The smith reached into the nearest steaming cauldron, and pulled out the piece of metal he had hammered. It dripped and gleamed, two razor-sharp edges winking in the strange light, a long knife of such beauty and elegance as I had never seen before. My eyes were held in bonds by the blade, fascinated by the handle of horn he slid onto the hilt.

Suddenly the dwarf snatched me from the slab, I saw the knife flash, and instantaneously I flew to the roof of the cave like a stone from a catapult. Floating high against the roof of rock, I had the incredible sensation of being in a body still, but a body with no substance: my being seemed indistinguishable from the steam which swirled around me like a winter fog. For an instant the engulfing steam cleared, and I glimpsed myself far below, or rather, I glimpsed my body lying still on the slab of rock. My mind registered terror, but I felt no grip of emotion; only an acceptance, a resignation, a sense of helplessness. Steam poured across my vision, and then cleared again, and the body far below looked familiar, and complete, yet strangely sparkling and iridescent.

Then the dwarf grabbed the body and lifted it from the slab. The great knife flashed again and I gasped in wonder; he had sliced my body free from a mass of shimmering fibres, then cut the body into pieces, flinging the parts into the various cauldrons boiling furiously on the fire.

I felt no pain, only the shock of the spectacle I was witnessing. The network of light that lay on the slab, conforming still to the shape of my body, was a wondrous sight. Running down the entire length of the spine was a strip of intense, blue light, and as I looked closer through the shifting curtain of mist, I could see that the light was a length of moving liquid webbing, and woven across and spraying out from the spine were countless more fibres, brilliant slivers of light, waving

slowly like the white heads of seeding dandelions blown by a gentle breeze. Spasms of yellow or orange light pulsated along the blue spine, beating rhythmically like blood in a vein, and spinning whirlpools of sparkling fibres bright as stars in a winter sky.' (pp.168-169)

The dwarf prepares Brand's body for the task of travelling to the spirit-world:

"Everyone has the essence of their guardian spirits within them, but very few people know how to manifest their guardians, and how to use them. The secret of the guardian spirits lies in the ability to extend the self beyond the boundaries of the physical body, and to shoot along the lines of power into other worlds. The same ability applies to the guardians: if they can be projected into the world outside the body, they make available untold powers, they advise and protect you, they are with you whenever you need them". (p.179)

Guardians are a central feature of most sorcery traditions, though their precise nature differs from one culture to another. In the culture of Anglo-Saxon England, the guardian was contacted from a power-spot, often on high ground:

'The view was breathtaking. The distant hilltops shone with the soft glow of the setting sun, and cast deep shadows over the forest stretching out below us. The sun hovered just above the lip of the world, and as I looked towards it, the entire landscape shattered into shimmering streaks of light. The effect was exhilarating.

"Brand, when your guardian has arrived, this is the point at which you will leave for your journey to the spirit-world. With your guardian, you must jump off this precipice on a fibre, and your shadow-soul will fly". (p.181)

Once a guardian spirit has been contacted, the apprentice was able to journey to the spirit-world in an attempt to retrieve his soul. Brand spends a night attempting to attract a guardian spirit, until:

'The rain had almost ceased, and lay in the air like a heavy mist. The sky began to clear. The moon eased into view, and poured wet, twinkling light down through the mist. I looked into the shrubbery from which I had just crawled. The moonlight illuminated the leaves, glistening wetly, and as I watched I suddenly realised that one of the shiny leaves had become detached, and seemed to be shining directly at me. I stared at it in fascination. The bright spot began to grow in

size and intensity, and I had to squint to keep it from blinding me. Suddenly it disappeared, and another, equally bright spot replaced it, just a few inches to the right. Then, in an instant, I realised that I was looking at a hawk, a beautiful, powerful bird. It was perched on a branch, perhaps four feet from the ground, its eyes glittering as it turned its head to look at me. As I watched it, I began to tremble with excitement, until my body fluttered like a leaf in the wind.

The hawk glided silently from the branches and perched on the edge of the precipice. Slowly, I walked towards it, my heart hammering in my chest. Above the river, huge clouds rolled through the grey sky, twisting and turning, watching my every movement. Then they eased away again from the moon, and the river shimmered far below like a jewelled belt of silver lying across the forest.

I stepped onto the rocky spur and stood next to the hawk. It stood motionless, waiting for me. My guardian had arrived, and I knew what I must do. I took ten steps backwards, shut my eyes tightly and looked into the darkness. Almost immediately, I saw a fibre, arching skywards high over the valley towards the horizon. I took a deep breath, opened my eyes, launched myself towards the precipice, and jumped.'(p.187)

From this point on, the initiation of a sorcerer must take a very individualistic course. The search for the soul reflects the particular life-state of the apprentice. But most importantly, the apprentice is in the land of the spirits, a psychological world which comprises an alternative reality. It is from this reality that the ways of wyrd can be **experienced**, as well as understood intellectually. In the case of Brand, his recapture of his soul encompasses the realization of a major part of his psyche which he had neglected, and similar themes are echoed in the sorcery literature of many cultures. The experiences which, for us, sound like vivid guided fantasy are, in the world of the sorcerers, more real than our 'reality'. The compromises involved in our agreement on a 'waking-life state of ordinary reality', in which we each share an aspect of our psychological world in order to construct a time and place in which we can communicate, is suspended in sorcery. And a psychological reality from our own past, I believe it speaks to us with the relevance and vitality of a living system.

The passages quoted in this article are all from:

Brian Bates *The Way of Wyrd: Tales of an Anglo-Saxon Sorcerer*
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