Through the eye of the skull

The metaphysical relocation of self in ritual narratives

Bob Trubshaw

Literature as diverse as Old English poems and the tales of Scottish Travellers uses the first-person to give a voice, and personality, to a diverse range of non-human artefacts. By using this device for the metaphysical relocation of self, the author's identity may become conflated with the artefact – or even a deity.

Although the direct evidence is lacking, plausibly this use of the first-person was used by Scandinavian seeresses before the Christian era. Their rites included something unmentionably 'bawdy'. Could this have been the original 'vagina monologues'? If so, this might account for the distinctive so-called 'sheela na gig' carvings on Romanesque churches.

This essay is intended to be both an investigation of Anglo-Saxon worldviews and also to offer inspiration for modern day rituals.

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Heart of Albion

2 Cross Hill Close, Wymeswold
Loughborough, LE12 6UJ

albion@indigogroup.co.uk
Visit our website: www.hoap.co.uk

Through the eye of the skull

In the mid-1940s, when about five or six years old, the Scottish Traveller Stanley Robertson (1940–2009) was walking one of the old roads to the west of Aberdeen with his great-aunt Maggie Stewart when they came across the skull of a dead animal. The old woman asked him what it was and he replied 'It is the skull o a deid animal like a sheep or goat.'

> 'Describe it tae me, bairn', the old woman said. 'Weel, it has big empty yak sockets, and teeth, and it his horns upon it, and it is covered wi little green, orange and ambier lichens, and it is sinking into the spagnum moss and being reclaimed by Nesmore [Mother] Nature.'
>
> 'Weel, that wis an awfie guid description, bairn. Noo, gang inside the riche ee [right eye] socket and tell me whit ys feel.'
>
> I immediately wint inside the yak o the deid animal and I came tae a place where there was canyons, caverns, waterfalls, mountains and animals o as kinds and colours, smells and the rick mi tick o the inside

Left: *Maggie Stewart photographed just before 1920.*
Right: *Stanley Robertson photographed around 2005.*

> unfolded tae me and awa in the distance I heard the aud woman cae me tae come back tae her again.
>
> (Robertson 2009: 106–7)

In all of Robertson's stories the Otherworlds are distinct from the mundane world by the thinnest of veils. The mundane landscape is the same landscape in which 'stories grow' – almost literally as Robertson retained the time-hallowed tradition of using places as mnemonics for memorising the tales. If his memory started to falter then he took himself back to the place where he learnt the story, and that brought it back to him clearly again

> First of all I try to remember the actual place where I heard the story, maybe Lumphanan or someplace camping. I try to remember the setting, everything, even the smells, everything to do with the senses.
>
> (Robertson, cited Reith 2008: 91)

And it was while walking along the old roads used seasonally by his family for many generations that he most enjoyed recounting his traditional lore. Robertson has evocatively described how just one of these sites – a green lane to the west of Aberdeen known as the Old Road of Lumphanan – resonates with multiple personal and cultural associations (Reith 2008: 81–92).

> Ma mither used to say that this particular land [here] between the river Dee and the river Don – and they used to say lang ago that the Don wis the warlock and the river Dee wis the witch. And this land between it wis for her bairns. This land wis oors aa richt because there's only twa hooses. But this road has been known for many, many supernatural happenings... there's a lot o happiness on this auld road. And every time I ging up it I could aye sort o feel the spirits o the past…
>
> (Robertson 1988: 128–9)

The view through the eye of the skull which Roberston experienced as a child – what Sara Reith has called 'a methodology for the metaphysical relocation of self, one that uses a material access point to elicit a departure into "narrative time"' (Reith 2008: 83) – was extended as an adult to seeing the world from the point of view of landmark trees and other aspects of the landscape.

Clues to the possible age of this world view – whether we think of it as metaphysical, rhetorical or 'shamanic' – comes from the original sense of the Greek word *ekstasis* – 'to stand outside oneself' (although the modern English word ecstatic has a different usage). We may also want to think of the original sense of 'enthusiasm' from the Greek *enthousiazein,* which derives from *entheos*, meaning 'god within'.

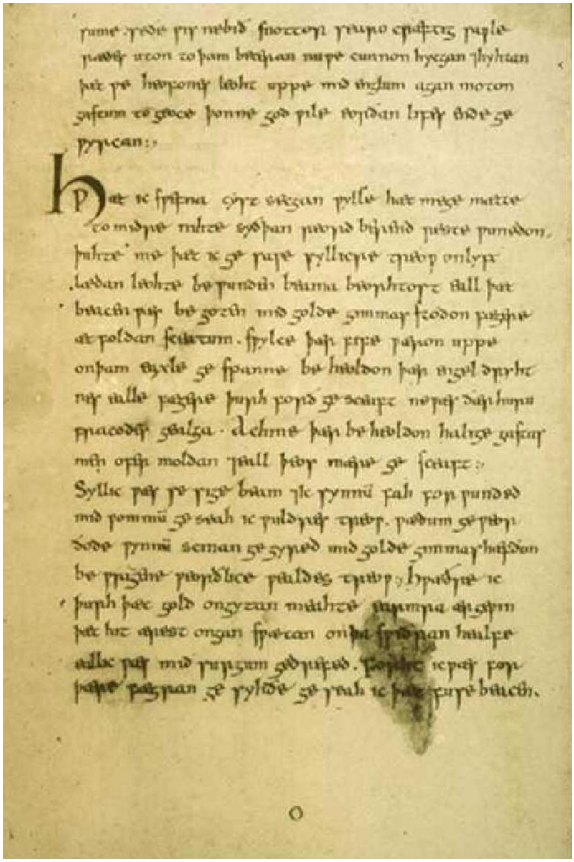
The speaking cross

Such a sense of *ekstasis* can be recognised among the small amount of Old English poetry that has come down to us – presumably a vast amount more was transmitted orally and was either never written down, or the written versions did not survive the destruction of the medieval monastic libraries by Henry VIII and lesser depredations. One work which has come down to us is known as *The Dream of the Rood,* in which the crucifixion of Christ is seen from the point of view of the cross – and this poem may, in part, be a Christianised version of a much older myth which sees the world from the perspective of the World Tree (North 1997: 275). Quotations from *The Dream of the Rood* are inscribed on the eighth century Ruthwell Cross although the oldest extant complete version is in the tenth century Vercelli Book, kept in the cathedral library of Vercelli in northern Italy. It was taken there by an Anglo-Saxon traveller, possibly a woman named Edith.

The opening verses of *The Dream of the Rood* read like a riddle as the identity of the 'I' is not revealed until line 44. Mary Rambaran-Olm has provided a fairly 'functional' translation that makes no effort to preserve stress or alliteration in the original:

> Lo! I will tell of the best of dreams,
> what I dreamed in the middle of the night,
> after the speech-bearers were in bed.

The opening of The Dream of the Rood *in the Vercelli Book.*



seemed to me that I saw a very wondrous tree
lifted into the air, enveloped by light,
the brightest of trees. That beacon was all
covered with gold. Gems stood
beautiful at the surface of the earth, there were five also
up on the central joint of the cross.
All those fair through eternal decree gazed
[on] the angel of the Lord.
[It] was certainly not a wicked person's gallows there,
but holy spirits, men over the earth,
and all this famous creation gazed on him.
Wondrous was that tree of victory, and I stained with sins
wounded sorely with defects, I saw the tree of glory,
honoured with garments, shining joyously,
adorned with gold. Gems had

splendidly covered the Lord's tree.
I was able, however, to perceive through the gold,
the ancient hostility of wretched ones, [that] it first began
t bleed on the right side. I was all troubled with grief,
I was afraid in the presence of that beautiful sight. I saw that noble beacon
change its coverings and colour; sometimes it was drenched with moisture,
soaked with the flow of blood, sometimes adorned with treasure.
Nevertheless, I, lying a long time there,
gazed troubled at the Saviour's tree,
until I heard it speak.
The most excellent tree then began to speak the words:
It was years ago (that, I still remember),
that I was cut down from the edge of the forest,
removed from my foundation. Strong enemies seized me there,
they made me into a spectacle for themselves, commanded me to lift up their criminals.
Men carried me there on their shoulders, until they set me on a hill,
many enemies secured me there. Then I saw mankind's Lord
hasten with great zeal, that he wished to climb upon me.
There, I did not dare break to pieces or bow down
against the Lord's words, when I saw the surface
of the earth tremble. I was able to destroy
all the enemies, nevertheless, I stood firmly.
The young hero stripped himself then (that was God Almighty),
strong and resolute. He ascended onto the high gallows,
brave in the sight of many, there, [since] he wished to release mankind.
I trembled when the man embraced me. However, I dared not bow down to the earth,
fall to the surface of the earth, but I had to stand fast.
I was raised [as a] cross. I lifted up the mighty king,
the lord of the heavens; I dared not bend down.
They pierced me with dark nails. On me, the scars are visible,
open malicious wounds. I did not dare injure any of them.
They mocked both of us, together. I was all drenched with blood,
covered from the man's side, after he had sent forth his spirit.

www.dreamofrood.co.uk

Numerous other translations are available online; notably Elaine Treharne's more recent translation (www.apocalyptic-theories.com/literature/dor/medora1.html) which brings out meanings in the original Old English that contrast with Rambaran-Olm's version.

Such ambiguous first-person viewpoints are also used in several surviving Old English riddles, for example:

> I am a wondrous creature: to women a thing of joyful expectation, to close-lying companions serviceable. I harm no city-dweller excepting my slayer alone. My stem is erect and tall – I stand up in bed – and whiskery somewhere down below. Sometimes a countryman's quite comely daughter will venture, bumptious girl, to get a grip on me. She assaults my red self and seizes my head and clenches me in a cramped place. She will soon feel the effect of her encounter with me, this curl-locked woman who squeezes me. Her eye will be wet.*

If this sounds a little risqué then bear in mind that the scholar Sarah Higley has suggested that another riddle – which is seeming about a woman holding a washleather to clean a cauldron – can also be parsed to give the possible double meaning of a leather dildo entering the vulva. If this is indeed the way an Anglo-Saxon listener may have construed it then it is all the more remarkable because the more risqué scenario is described in the first person – with the vulva speaking! (Higley 2003: 42–3). By way of supporting evidence Higley notes that in the Middle English of Chaucer the word *swiven* means 'fuck'. *Swiven* seemingly derives from the Old English *swifeð,* which has the sense of 'sweep' (Higley 2003: 50–1). So, after a pause for the penny to drop and you imagine how sweeping becomes shagging, could this be the reason why sweeps were, until quite recent times, significant in wedding processions and various folk customs?

Keeping with the notion of double meanings, although leaving bawdy interpretations behind us, the fragmentary Old English poem known to scholars as *The Wife's Lament* is also open to more than one interpretation. This work is conventionally thought to be the autobiographical perspective of an exiled noblewoman. However, as Sarah Semple has suggested, the text reads more convincingly as the first-person viewpoint of a dead woman in a burial mound. But the identity and even the status of that 'woman' is seemingly ambiguous.

The general mood of *The Wife's Lament* is gloomy, evoking a strong sense of emptiness and loneliness. There is a reference to a ruined defensive site – both physically decayed and evocative of a now-lost era. The woman is described as living in an 'earth cave' or an 'earth structure' – terms also used in *Beowulf* to describe the abode of the dragon – and, elsewhere in Old English literature,

* an onion.

Part of the seventh century Franks Casket with Hos on her mound to the left. The runes start herh os sitæþ, *'Here sits Os'. Most of the casket is in the British Museum but this panel is in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence.*

dragons are specifically stated to be the guardians of burial mounds. The passage in *Beowulf* reads:

> I was bidden to dwell among a thicket of trees under an oak tree in this earthen dug-out. Ancient is this earthen abode – I am quite consumed by longing – the dales are dark, the hills high, the bastioned town grievously overgrown with briars, their habitations void of pleasures. (translation Bradley 1995: 382–5)

She describes 'my friends, loved while they lived, are in earth, possessed by the grave.' (translation Semple 1998: 111)

This first-person account is seemingly that of a dead woman. This in itself is an interesting first-person viewpoint for an author to take and rather akin to Stanley Robertson's view from the eye of the sheep's skull. Semple goes on to argue that this poem may be the Christian euhemerising of legends regarding the goddess Hos sitting on the 'sorrow mound'. Her main evidence is the curious depiction on the Franks Casket of human-like figure with a horse's head and hooves sitting on a small mound – perhaps intended to be seen as a barrow. The runes around that panel of the casket start *herh os sitæþ,* 'Here sits Os' (Semple 1998: 110–11; 121–2). If this interpretation is correct, then the apparently human posthumous viewpoint of *The Wife's Lament* is not what it seems. It is metaphor – an euhemerisation if you like – for a pagan deity 'exiled' by the christianisation of late Anglo-Saxon culture.

If so, the poet is expressing the first-person viewpoint of a deity. And, bearing in mind how little Old English poetry has come down to us, we must assume that

Hos on her mound. Based on the depiction on the Franks' casket.

the so-called *Wife's Lament* is the sole survivor of a much more established literary tradition, one which has its roots deeply in the oral bardic traditions which preceded the literacy of the Church.

The phrase *ic gefraegn* 'I have heard… ' is a common opening line to Old English poems (Raw 1978: 6; 30). One is tempted to call it a cliché but, like the word *hwaet* (which is often translated as 'Lo!' but has the implicit sense of 'Listen!') which also starts many such poems, such standard phrases are a practical way to get the attention of the audience. Equally standardised are nursery tales which start 'Once upon a time… '. However *ic gefraegn* is a quasi-autobiographical statement, without any sense of 'metaphysical relocation' that is present in *The Dream of the Rood* or *The Wife's Lament*. But it does confirm that the audiences for Old English poetry *expected* the poem to be from more-or-less fictionalised first-person viewpoints.

There are certainly parallels in Irish literature. *The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare* is one of saddest and most evocative of the medieval Irish tales. The oldest surviving versions may go back to the ninth century. The Old Woman of Beare is also known as 'the Hag of Beare', a more literal translation of the Irish *An Cailleach Bhéara*. She seemngly mourns for the life, and youth, now in her past. There is nothing remarkable about the use of the first person in this lament – no 'metaphysical relocation of self' – but the evocative language of *An Cailleach Bhéara* has much in common with *The Wife's Lament*. Whether or not we should consider the later versions of *An Cailleach Bhéara* to be successors of a ninth century euhemerisation of a pre-Christian goddess must remain an open question. As the whole poem is a remarkably moving image of old age I will reproduce it here in its entirety. There have been a number of translations into English; this one is by Anthony Weir.

My life is ebbing: let it drain -
unlike the sea which flows again,
The boiling, unbegotten sea.
I whose gown was always new
am now so pitifully thin
that this old shift will outlive me.
They want only money now.
When I was young, love was what
I wanted – and so richly got.
People then were generous,
and in return they asked a lot.
They ask and give so little now.
I had chariots and horses then,
given by admiring kings.
I drank mead and wine with them.
Now among old onion-skins
of withered women I drink whey,
myself a withered onion-skin.
My hands are bony now, and thin;
once they plied their loving trade
upon the bodies of great kings.
My hands are bony, wasted things,
unfit to stroke an old man's head,
much less a young man's glowing skin
Young girls are happy in the Spring,
but I am sad and worse than sad,
for I'm an old and useless thing.
Nobody round me is glad;
My hair is grey and going thin.

My veil conceals what is well hid.
I once had bright cloth on my head
and went with kings - now I dread
the going to the king of kings.

The winter winds ravish the sea.
No nobleman will visit me -
no, not even a slave will come.
It's long ago I sailed the sea
of youth and beauty wantonly.
Now my Passion too has gone.
Even in Summer I wear a shawl
It's many a day since I was warm.
The Spring of youth has turned to Fall.
Wintry age's smothering pall
is wrapping slowly round my limbs.
My hair's like lichen, my paps like galls.
I don't regret my lust and rage,
for even had I been demure
I still would wear the cloak of age.
The cloak that wooded hillsides wear
is beautiful; their foliage
is woven with eternal care.
I am old: the eyes that once
burned bright for men are now decayed:
the torch has burned out its sconce.
My life is ebbing; let it drain
unlike the sea which flows again,
the man-torn and tormented sea.
Flow and ebb: what the flow brings
the ebb soon takes away again
- the flow and the ebb following.
The flow and the ebb following:
the flow's joy and the ebb's pain,
the flow's honey, the ebb's sting.
The flow has not quite flooded me.
There is a recess still quite dry
though many were my company.
Well might Jesus come to me
in my recess - could I deny
a man my only hospitality?
A hand is laid upon them all

whose ebb always succeeds their flow,
whose rising sinks into their fall.
If my veiled and sunken eyes
could see more than their own ebb
there's nothing they would recognise.
Happy the island of the sea
where flow always comes after ebb:
What flow will follow ebb in me?
I am wretched. What was flow
is now all ebb. Ebbing I go.
After the Tide, the Undertow.

(source: www.beyond-the-pale.co.uk/lament.htm)

The 'I' in Irish

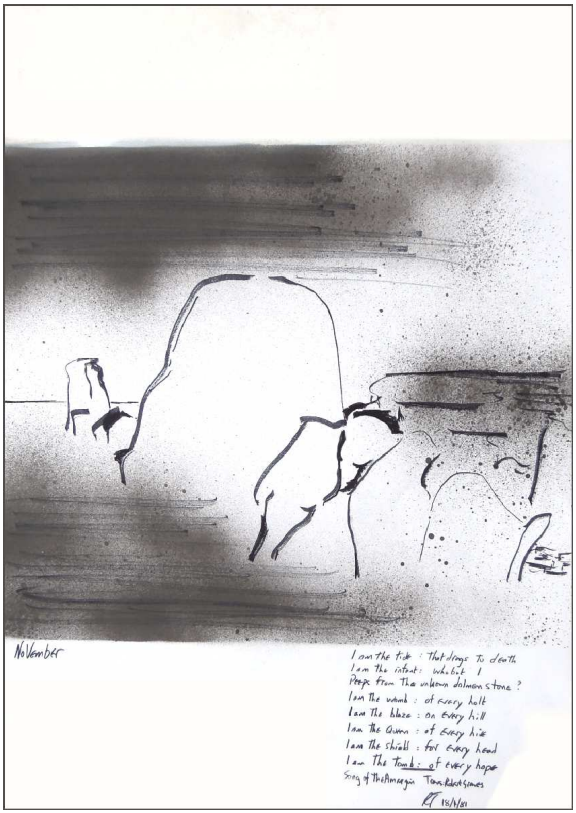
Such 'straightforward' use of the first person is common in early Irish literature. Those who want to follow up on this remark should track down the poems about Mad King Sweeney and rather substantial numbers of poems attributed to monks and hermits. Such conventional use of the first person is not my interest here. Rather I want to continue with the more dramatic 'metaphysical relocation of self' identifiable in Old English literature.

However it is not unique to Old English. Staying for the moment with Old Irish literature, something of the same *ekstasis* and *enthousiazein* underpins the rhetorical device of the medieval Irish *Song of Amhairghin* (often anglicised as Amergin) which declares:

I am a wind on the sea,
I am a wave of the ocean,
I am the roar of the sea,
I am a bull of seven battles,
I am a hawk on the cliff,
I am a teardrop of sunlight,
I am a gentle herb,
I am a boar enraged,
I am a salmon in a pool,
I am a lake in a plain,
I am the vigour of man
I am the meaning of poetry,
I am a spear on the attack (pouring forth combat),
I am the god who fires your mind.

Who lights the mountain's stony places?
Who announces the ages of the moon?

A drawing of the facade of West Kennett long barrow, Wiltshire, made during 1981 and inspired by my first encounter with Robert Graves' translation of The Song of Amergin.



Who tells the place where the sun will set?
Who calls the cattle from the Sea King's house?
On whom do the cattle of the Sea King smile?
Which troop, which god takes a knife through gangrene?
Penalties in a spear - enchantments of wind?
(translation Graham 2010)

This form is echoed in the Welsh *Book of Taliesin.* Although the oldest extant version is from the fifteenth century, the idiom suggests it evolves out of the same tradition as the *Song of Amhairghin*:

I have been a blue salmon.
I have been a dog; I have been a stag;
I have been a roebuck on the mountain.
I have been a stock, I have been a spade
I have been an axe in the hand;
I have been a pin in a forceps,

A year and a half;
I have been a speckled white cock
Upon hens in Eiddyn.
I have been a stallion over a stud.
I have been a violent bull,
I have been a buck of yellow hue,
As it is feeding.
(translation Graham 2010)

From roughly the same time as the *Book of Taliesin*, but again showing much older roots, is *The Battle of the Trees* or *Cad Godeu*. This is attributed to Taliesin and begins with the series of transformations undergone by him. The surviving texts use Irish in a manner which has been described as 'perplexing'. The following translation combines a scholarly and fairly 'literal' version of the complex metaphorical images with a much less scholarly version which attempts to get the 'sense' or 'flavour' of the original. I have omitted two lines where the literary allusions no longer impart any sensible meaning.

I have been a raindrop.
I have been the brightest of stars.
I have been a word in a book,
I was conceived in that book.
I have been the light of lanterns
For a year and a day.
I have been a steadfast bridge
Over three score rivers.
I have been an eagle in flight.
I have been a coracle in the seas.
[…]
I have been a sword in the grasp of the hand.
I have been a shield in battle.
I have been a string in a harp
Disguised for nine years in bubbling water.
I have been a sprig in the fire.
I have been tree in a thicket.
(translation adapted from Graham 2010 and Clouter 2003)

Note the remark 'I was conceived in [a] book' – the recognition that Taliesin thinks of himself as, if not a 'fictional character', then someone whose 'life' is very much part of the literary tradition. Even post-modern authors are rarely so reflexive!

Poems in medieval Welsh attributed to Taliesin abound in these 'I was… ', 'I have been… ' and 'I am… ' constructions. Gregory Clouter has provided translations of *The Chair of Taliesin, The Ox-pen of the Bards, The Elegy of Uther Pendragon*

and *The Contention of the Bards*. (Clouter 2003: 193–200). Each is worthy of quoting in full but copyright restrictions prevent me. I will simply sample one or two lines from each of the first three:

> 'I am he who animates the fire to the honour of the god Dovydd… '
> 'I am a skilful composer, I am a clear singer, I am a tower.
> I am a druid, I am an architect, I am a *Vate*, I am serpent… '
> 'I am the master of the harp, the pipe, and the crooth.
> I am the mighty enchanter, privileged on the covered mount.'

The extent to which this literary device entered Christian literature is revealed from the last of these four. Different verses commence:

> 'I was in Canaan when Absalom was slain.
> 'I have been in Asia with Noah in the Ark.'
> 'I strengthened Moses through the water of Jordan.'

although, in the final line, we are left in no doubt about the identity of the 'I':

> 'I was originally little Gwion, at length I am Taliesin.'

'I' was there back then

Temporal omnipotence is also to the fore in the oldest example of such first-person proclamations known to me. This is a hymn from the Egyptian Ptolomaic period (305–30 BCE) in which Isis says:

> I separated the earth from the heaven
> I showed the paths of the stars
> I regulated the course of the sun and the moon
> I devised the activities of seamanship
> I made what is right strong

Similar first-person pronouncements continue in the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas* (composed 60–140 CE) where Jesus states 'I am all: from me all came forth, and to me all has reached.' There is also a Gnostic hymn from the Nag Hammadi library dated to well before 350 CE which starts:

> For I am the first and the last.
> I am the honoured and the scorned,
> I am the harlot and the holy one.
> I am the wife and the virgin.
> I am the mother and the daughter.
> I am the members of my mother.

Interestingly this Gnostic hymn is once again from the *female* viewpoint – that of Eve.

Eve is part of the biblical creation myth. Interestingly, the Scandinavian counterpart, the saga known as *Völuspá*, is 'channelled' by an unnamed seeress.

This makes more sense when we realise that *Völuspá* contains both an account of the creation of the universe and a prediction of the end times, known as Ragnorök. In the translations of *Völuspá* I have encountered there is no overt 'metaphysical relocation of self' – although the ability to be 'all knowing' about the future is, in itself, more than partway towards having the gnosis of a deity.

Given such precedents for female perspectives, what if we read the *Song of Amhairghin* from a *female* first-person perspective too? Given the bellicose passages, perhaps that of Mórrígán, the most important Irish war-deity? Certainly it conforms with modern political correctness in that all the exemplars of near-omnipotence are 'gender-neutral'.

'Alfred ordered me made'

Moving back to more solid evidence, although perhaps even more strange to modern minds, the inscriptions on Anglo-Saxon and Viking weapons, scabbards and other prestigious objects are written in the first person. The most famous of these is the one on Alfred's Jewel, with translates as 'Alfred ordered me made'.

In the Scandinavian sagas weapons had individual names – just as in a later era King Arthur's sword was known as Excalibur. So perhaps it is not too surprising that this sense of individuality – of weapons as other-than-human persons – should be associated with inscriptions which read in the first person.

The ninth century Alfred's Jewel with the inscription Aelfred mec hewt gewyrcan, *meaning 'Alfred ordered me made'.*

All these examples reinforce the notion that Anglo-Saxon culture was familiar with such *ekstasis* relocations of self akin to looking 'through the eye of the skull', and this singular survival into twentieth century Scottish Traveller culture has much more extensive origins with the British Isles.

For example, this tradition persisted in the inscriptions cast into English church bells. Sometimes it is the name of the donor but sometimes more sobering thoughts, such as this one from a bell cast in 1745 for Amersham, Buckinghamshire:

> Unto the church I do you call
> Death to the grave will summon you all.
> (Camp 1988: 36)

You call it shamanism, I call it animism

The shape-shifting of Amhairghin and Taliesin have been deemed 'shamanic' by any number of popular writers. As I have recently opined in *Souls, Spirits and Deities,* shamanism has become one of those 'Humpty Dumpty' words that means whatever the person using it wants it to mean. So those who think that such shape-shifting is shamanic are entitled to use the word in this manner – but I am equally entitled to say that using the word in this way is all-but meaningless! (Trubshaw 2013a: 25–8) In this study I have no interest in what Mircea Eliade misappropriated under the rubric 'techniques of ecstasy' – but I am deeply interested in the 'techniques of *ekstasis*' shown by these first-person viewpoints and 'metaphysical relocations of self'.

For present purposes there are much more useful words than shamanism – such as 'animism'. Or at least 'animism' as it has been redefined by scholars such as Graham Harvey to denote whole realms of 'other-than-human-persons'. Again, *Souls, Spirits and Deities* offers an overview of Harvey's approach (Trubshaw 2013a: 4–6). Suffice to say here that, whereas in English the word 'person' has a fairly narrow sense, in non-Western cultures there is often a sense that human persons are just part of a spectrum of person-like entities. Irving Hallowell invented the phrase 'other-than-human-persons' to describe Ojibwe beliefs (Hallowell 1960) and it is a phrase which provides a useful way to think collectively of souls, spirits and deities.

More importantly, this collective idea of 'other-than-human-persons' also provides a convenient approach to the metaphysical relocation of self that is achieved when looking through the eye of the skull – whether of a dead sheep, a dead woman, a deity, or even perhaps the World Tree.

The Old Testament reveals that giving prophecies in the first person – acting as the 'mouth of Jahweh' – happened quite frequently. But in pagan Europe such pronouncements are most commonly associated with female seeresses, such as

the Pythia of Classical Greece, or the *volur* and *nornir* of north Germanic and Scandinavian legends. I have already noted that the predictions of the end times in the saga *Völuspá* are given by an unnamed seeress.

Given that there is plenty of evidence for the use of trance in the rituals when such oracular pronouncements are made (see Price 2002; Tolley 2009; Bek-Pedersen 2011) then there is a strong possibility that these prophesising women spoke in the first-person along the formulaic lines of 'I have seen…' and 'I have heard tell… '. If my suspicion is correct then it would bring such first-person pronouncements – the first-person personification of 'fate' – into the repeated experience of everyone within those societies. Little wonder that this technique of *ekstasis* would also be an 'Otherworldly' way of composing more formal poetry.

Later in this study I will speculate further about such 'ecstatic' women. But for the moment note that this technique for the 'metaphysical relocation of self' is very much alive and well in our time. The most successful modern day oracle – at least commercially – has been James Redfield's New Age catechism published in 1992 as *The Celestine Prophecy*. If you are not one of the twenty million people worldwide who have bought a copy (or one of the countless readers of a borrowed copy) then this too is told in the first person, with the 'I' of the story never identified as to gender, age, race or culture.

The invoking 'I'

Anyone with any sort of magical training would already be well aware that speaking in the first-person is a powerful technique for the 'metaphysical relocation of self' into a spirit or deity, whether the intention is divinatory or otherwise. We are talking here about the powerful techniques of 'invoking' a supernatural entity, as opposed to merely 'evoking' one. Early modern magicians, such as John Dee, mostly evoked such entities – that is, summoned them to the outside of the protective magic circle inside which the magician was standing. But sometimes the intention of the rites was to *invoke* – as it were, manifest the entity inside one's own body. And if that sounds fairly hair-raising, then what if the entity to be invoked is a deity?

But bear in mind that priests do it every time they celebrate Mass. Almost. When the celebrant lifts the bread and the blood at the pivotal moment of the liturgy he says '… this is my body… this is my blood'. These Words of Consecration (also called the Words of Institution) are of course not true first-person accounts but are reported speech – the priest is quoting the words of Jesus at his Last Supper. The preceding part of the liturgy has summarised that event.

The following version of the Words of Institution from the Book of Common Prayer are still used by Anglicans:

> For in the night in which he was betrayed, he took bread; and when he had given thanks, he brake it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take, eat, this is my Body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' Likewise, after supper, he took the cup; and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink ye all of this; for this is my Blood of the New Testament, which is shed for you, and for many, for the remission of sins. Do this, as oft as ye shall drink it, in remembrance of me.'

Volvas and vulvas

However our minds do not necessarily distinguish 'subconsciously' between actual first person statements and events reported in the first person. They open up a 'sleight of mind' – and in this case to intentionally enhance the dramatic effects of the rite.

So far in this study I have speculated about the use and possible significance of the first-person in early literature. I hope that these suggestions are, if not provable, at least worthy of some consideration. However in the rest of this study I want to speculate more wantonly. I am going to assume that such metaphysical relocation of self was a commonplace part of north European and south Scandinavian culture. Having made that assumption I want to look at some of the all-but-unmentionable aspects of that culture – the ones the medieval clergy found so 'troublesome' they would not clearly record.

These Christian scribes refer to 'professional seeresses' called either *seiðr, volur, volr* or *volva* (the apparent similarity between *volva* and 'vulva' is however merely a red herring). These seeresses also appear in Scandinavian sagas. So far as we can tell they travelled around in groups and, once a year, foretold the future of each farm as they visited. Whatever they did involved one of them sitting in something referred to as 'the high seat' or 'high tower'. In the saga known as *Sólarljóð* ('Song of the Sun') the seeress recounts:

> On the chair of the *nornir*
> I sat nine days,
> then I was raised up on a horse,
> the giantesses' sun
> shone grimly
> from the cloud-dripper's clouds

But there was something indecent about this process of prophecy which the writers – by their very nature Christian converts – deliberately left out of the accounts. A focused account of 'professional' Dark Age divination has yet to be written but provisional information is available, although dispersed in a number of scholarly works (such as North 1997: 87; DuBois 1999: 122ff; Price 2002: 78, 113, 168–9; McKinnell 2005: 95–108; Tolley 2009: 25–6, 152, 419ff).

Clive Tolley has discussed in some detail the formulaic start to the *volvas'* prophecy ritual described in *Voluspá*. In summary, the seeress declares how:–

- her knowledge stretches back to the beginning of the world;
- she was reared by the denizens of primordial time (the giants);
- she remembers the nine worlds and the nine giantesses;
- she remembers the world tree under the ground (i.e. before it had sprung).

She recites the lore of this ancient time in the first person, in other words as her own experience. In a subtle use of both the first and third person, at one stage in the rite the soul of the *volva's* predecessor speaks through her (Tolley 2009 p476–7; 481–2). While these details are only partly relevant to the main purpose of this essay, they reveal that the rites were part of a complex myth, with the seeress having an essentially timeless existence.

'I have dreamt for you…'

Many of these mythic traits can also be discerning in the rites associated with 'theraputic dreaming' in India discussed by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty in her book *Dreams, Illusions and Other Realities* (O'Flaherty 1984). The literature associated with such dreaming contains a number of examples of transpersonal dreaming, including such expressions as 'I have dreamt for you… '

While any worthwhile discussion of dream therapy would be inappropriate in this short essay, suffice to note that 'dream incubation temples' are known throughout the Greek and Roman empires. In Britain the Roman temple at Lydney, Gloucestershire, is interpreted as such a place, and the unexcavated Roman temple at Thistleton, Leicestershire, has a similar plan.

In such temples a person went through purification ritual and then slept in a special part of the temple. In the morning the *theraputes* (the origin of our word 'therapist') interpreted the patients' dreams and advised them on appropriate

Part of Lydney temple in 1992.

Breedon angel.

cures. Presumably the pre-sleep rituals involved consuming food or drink which helped both sleep and memorable dreams. Perhaps it is not entirely coincidental that a tenth century depiction of an angel, now in the church at Breedon on the Hill, Leicestershire, is shown with two opium poppies. Is this the angel of sleep? Or the angel of healing? Or tantalisingly inconclusive evidence that the tenth century minster at Breedon functioned as a successor to Roman dream incubation temples? After all opium is still a very effective painkiller and until less than a hundred years ago used to be something of a cure-all – and the side-effects include inducing sleep and vivid dreams. [See also Trubshaw 2017.]

What's in a name?

If this study was only concerned with pre-Christian Scandinavia then any of the words *seiðr, volur, volr* or *volva* could be used to describe them. If there were originally differences between, say, a *seiðr* and a *volva* then such distinctions

seem to have been lost to us. However there is something of an unbridged chasm between Scandinavia and contemporary inhabitants of Britain. The relatively few surviving documents in Old English simply make no reference to such women and their activities. On the face of this the absence of linguistic evidence should lead to the presumption that this is evidence of absence. But, as I will justify in the next section, that would fly in the face of a substantial amount of medieval iconography in Britain.

What does not help, in my opinion, is to refer to the supposed British women by Scandinavian words such as *seiðr* or *volva*. So I have adopted the word 'seeress', with apologies for such unpronounceable derivations as 'seeresses's'. Although the sense of 'seer' as denoting one who sees divine revelations only appears in vernacular translations of the Bible from the late fourteenth century (rendering the Latin *videns*, Greek *bleptor* and Hebrew *roeh*) the root word is Old English, *seon*, which becomes the Modern English verb 'see'. So for the rest of this study I will use the word *volva* to refer to Scandinavian women, even though the original sources might deem them to be *seiðr, volur, volr* or *volva*. And I will use the word 'seeresses' to refer to their putative Anglo-Saxon counterparts. And, in this context, 'Anglo-Saxon' most certainly includes 'Anglo-Scandinavian'.

Vagina monologues

We have no recorded examples of what the Scandinavian *volva* said and only a broad indication of the whole ritual. However, as already noted, *ic gefraegn* 'I have heard… ' is a common opening line to Old English poems (Raw 1978: 6; 30). So did Anglo-Saxon seeresses – and maybe the *volva* too – express their prophecies in the first person, but while 'impersonating' a deity or spirit of place? Presumably this would have been the female tutelary spirit, one of the *dísir*.

If so – and using 'if' to take giant strides – was the source of the *volva's* and seeress's insights thought of as the 'original chaos' out of which everything is created, and out of which a primordial creative energy is continually emanating? (Trubshaw 2013a: 45–7) The source of this all-pervading energy is sometimes envisaged to be a supernatural cauldron – and magical cauldrons (although not explicitly primordial ones) feature prominently in some of the Irish and Welsh myths.

In addition, this primordial creation is frequently linked in myths with primordial acts of procreation and gestation – the goddess giving birth. So let's take another giant stride and speculate what caused the clergy to 'turn the other way', at least when it came to recording what they knew. Were the *volva* speaking 'on behalf' of the tutelary goddess by adopting a birthing position? A modicum of ventriloquism skills (or a handy scarf, mask, veil or whatever covering the lower face) would add to the effect. As would something akin to a Punch and Judy

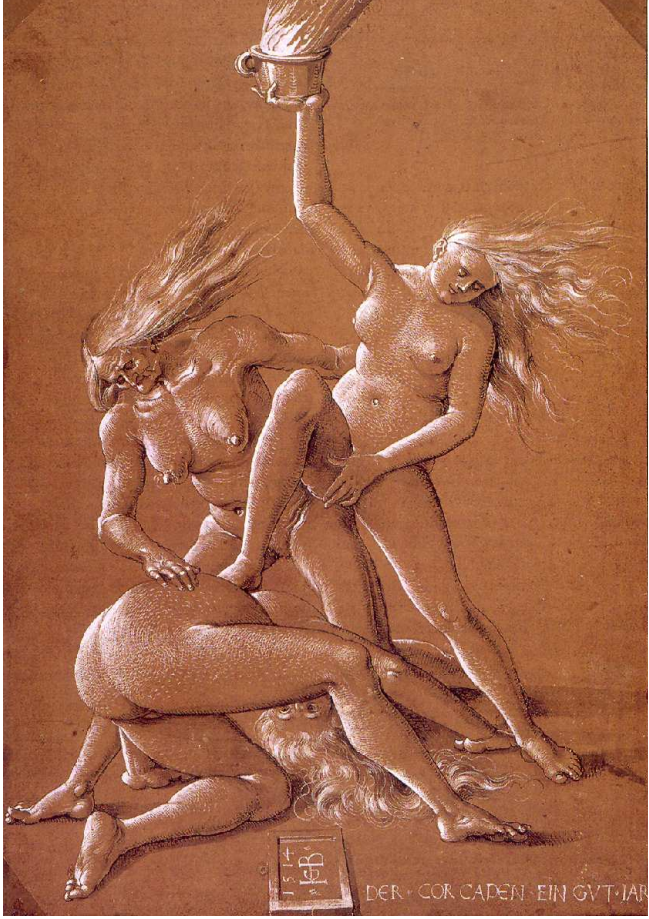
Mary on Throne of Wisdom, from a late fourteenth century book of hours. Is this an entirely Christian image. Or was it in some way a successor to a volva *sitting on her High Seat?*

professor's swazzle. The *volva* would, to use a current vernacular expression, be 'talking out her arse'…

Alby Stone has suggested that there may be something about these rituals which made them even more offensive to the clergy – in some manner they involved menstrual blood. To this day there are strong taboos which, if transgressed, incite considerable emotional impact (Stone, pers. comm. Jan 2013). Both the women and their blood are regarded as ritually impure, an attitude which may – as with Judaism – extend to *all* blood, whether human or animal, being regarded as 'unclean'. Indeed, in a great many traditional societies menstruating women are, in various ways, temporarily excluded. The 'high towers' of the *volva* just *might* be such places, or ritual emulations of them.

The Christian worldview breaks with Judaism with respect to blood. Nevertheless all blood, not specifically menstrual blood, is highly charged because of the crucial significance of blood in the Eucharist rite. For example, the adjectives

Hans Baldung Grien's well-known drawing of three witches.



'bloody' and 'bleeding', while innocuous and merely descriptive if followed by, say, 'hand' or 'inside', take on entirely different sensibilities if followed by, say, 'hell' or 'idiot'. The Christian view of blood arises from – although in some ways 'against' – preceding Judaic outlooks. With the above thoughts in mind, now consider just how transgressive the Last Supper was for the disciples – brought up within a Jewish worldview – when asked to imagine that the wine they were offered had been transformed simultaneously into human and divine blood... But Christian veneration of the blood of Christ does not extend to positive associations with the blood of women – early medieval clergy would find any ritual use of menstrual fluids exceptionally 'transgressive'. It was perhaps less a case of not wanting to discuss this, but of having no place in their worldview where this could be 'accommodated'.

If there is any validity to this suggestion that the *volva* uttered such 'vagina monologues' then they would have adopted a position akin to either of the two of the most traditional birthing postures – either laid back, feet in the air, head

The twelfth century sheela-na-gig corbel at Kilpeck, Herefordshire.

between the knees, or kneeling down with the head facing outwards below the buttocks (see Hans Baldung Grien's illustration).

One of these postures would also add the right amount of parody to the naked male contortionists depicted on stone corbels and wooden roof bosses in the thirteenth to fifteenth century. This posture is still a gesture of contempt among women in eastern European. The other posture is 'parodied' in the less common female exhibitionist carvings referred to as 'sheela na gigs' or a recognisable variant.

The earliest known instance of the phrase 'sheela na gig' is about 1770. But it makes no sense in Irish or etymologically. Much ink has been spilt by non-Irish speakers as to what this phrase meant in Irish before it was corrupted. But the pseudonymous 'Galteeboy' seemed to put the matter to rest in an online posting in 2006. He argues that sheela na gig is a corruption of the words *shee lena gig***.** Rendering this as 'sheela na gig' is an easy enough mistake to make, doubly so for an eighteenth century English-speaker unfamiliar with Irish slang.

'Shee' is just a phonetic spelling of *Sídhe,* the widely-used Gaelic word for 'fairy woman' or sprite; after the eighteenth century it also begins to be used for a fairy mound or a mound beneath which the fairies lived. But in the eighteenth century – when the corruption 'sheela na gig' is first attested – *Sídhe* meant 'fairy woman'. The word *lena*, then and now, means 'with her'. So, *folaíonn díthostú fostaí d'fhoirceannadh a conartha fostaíochta* ***lena*** *fostóir* translates as 'dismissal includes the termination by an employee of her contract of employment ***with her*** employer'.

Gee or *gig* – pronounced with a hard 'g' as in 'go' – are two ways of spelling the same slang word. If you look again at the photograph of the Kilpeck carving and think of her as a *Sídhe* then the phrase 'The Fairy woman with her… ' should be fairly easy to complete. The word is still current slang. Galteeboy also states that an unspecified online dictionary of Irish slang confirms this: 'Gee, Gee-box (n): female genitalia'. The Irish-born writer Tom Murphy, in his 1994 book *The Seduction of Morality*, provides confirmation that this use of 'gee' is still current:

> She withdrew her arm and then took her hand upwards to stroke the curve of her belly, then downwards again, through the hair, turned the fingers in between her legs to find the it of the girl, the what, the quem, gee, the job, the word that offended her, the font, the nothing, the everything, the hole, to find it wet. Good.
>
> (Quotation supplied by Anthony Weir, pers. comm. August 2004)

Wanton women

We should not be surprised that somewhat obscene activities were performed by women. Classical Greek statuettes of a deity known as Baubo or Babo depict her with exaggerated genitals. 'Obscene' worship of Babo continues in rural Greece in communities which are in all other respects Orthodox Christian – the only break with beliefs going back over two millennia is that she has been demoted to a saint who is regarded as a 'sacred midwife' (Håland 2013: 258–60).

The Scandinavian sagas give the impression that the *volvr* were dangerously independent, at least by the standards of a society in which women's status was defined in terms of their fathers or husbands. Were they also somewhat wanton? If so we have an Old English word, *hygegalan,* means 'wanton' but also has the sense of 'innuendo'. The riddles about the onion and the washleather, quoted earlier would, I strongly suspect, have been deemed *hygegalan*.

By the sixteenth century the idea of women gathering together for more-or-less ritual purposes becomes subsumed into the fantasies of 'witchhunting' clergy and subsequent popular writers. Everything about popular perceptions of medieval 'witches' is misleading. Most of what they purportedly did is merely a product of male fantasies – although from court records it does seem that after a few generations the 'witches' themselves began to 'act out' these fantasises. But any

understanding of what ritual activities women might have been doing – and not doing – in Europe and Britain before the Inquisition is almost entirely lost to the mists of time.

However, even if most of what we think we know about medieval witches is little more than 'sexploitation', what little more reliable evidence there is from elsewhere (mostly southern European) suggests that there is no smoke without fire. Something about women's 'rituals' was at best bawdy. There is every reason to suppose that these Mediterranean traditions were some sort of survival, within a Christian society, of ribald and obscene pagan customs associated with such deities as Demeter, Persephone, Artemis and Cybele. The extent to which similar customs were once prevalent in northern Europe is unknown.

There are simply too many unknowns and too much prior speculation which needs to be cautiously examined to be able to establish whether such 'wanton women' were wont to perform vagina monologues, and still less to establish whether such monologues were once uttered as if first-person prophecies by a deity. However there is some evidence from Scandinavia which leads towards just such a inference.

Óðinn and *ergi*

What we do know is that prophecy in Scandinavian sagas was almost without exception a female pursuit. But the exception is a significant one – the deity Óðinn. Yet because of this ability to foretell the future he was deemed *ergi*. There has been considerable academic speculation about what *ergi* was and wasn't. But one of the key pieces of evidence is the law codes which clearly state that this was one of the worse insults a man could make. If someone called you *ergi* then you had the right to kill him without paying *wergild*, the 'fine' (*geld*) for taking a man's (*wer* – as in 'werewolf') life.

Margaret Clunies Ross seems to sum things up though when she wrote than *ergi* 'connoted the act of… sexual denigration of one man by another through the suggestion that the aggressor had been able to use his rival sexually.' (Clunies Ross 1998: 180)

But what has buggery got to do with prophesising rituals? We need to look in more detail at what the women did. They had some sort of staff, referred to in the sagas as a*tamsvondr* or *gambanteinn* – a 'taming wand' – which seemingly had runes carved on it (Price 2002: 179–80). We even have an idea how it was used:

> With the taming wand I touch you
> for I will make you tame
> girl to my wishes.
> (Price 2002: 179)

Quite who the 'you' is in this passage we need to leave open. Despite the explicit sexual reference, we should assume that 'you' is an Otherworldly entity.

The implication is that we are dealing with a 'taming wand' which had at least some of the attributes of a dildo. Neil Price suggests that masturbation was part of the seeresses's rite, a suggestion first proposed by Jenny Jochens (Jochens 1996; Price 2002: 178–80; 217). Another leading scholar, Clive Tolley, simply notes that the rites of prophecy has 'unacceptable sexual aspects' (Tolley 2009: 259).

While there is room for considerable debate, the suggestion that seeresses made ritual use of the 'taming wand' in a manner akin to a dildo would be consistent with the claims that Óðinn was *ergi*. Putting things bluntly, if such use of a taming wand was essential to the rite, then it was necessary for Óðinn to bugger himself.

As a minor aside, Óðinn sacrificed an eye in his quest for 'wisdom' – although this could be construed as divinatory skills to know the future. Think of the likely auto-erotic consequences of my suggested use of a taming wand by Óðinn. And now think of the folk belief, still current in the 1960s, that masturbation will make you blind… Probably a red herring but as good an explanation as any of the origin of this somewhat odd folk warning.

Summary

The later parts of this study require several giant strides in the direction the angels fear to tread. Yet, for me, there is a strong sense of plausibility about linking the 'unmentionable' aspects of the *volva's* rites with both the first-person narratives so prevalent in more-or-less contemporary literature and the enigmatic female exhibitionist carvings. If this study prompts more knowledgeable researchers to look harder at the available evidence – either to confirm or confound my suggestions – then I will be most happy.

However even if my suggestions of 'vagina monologues' fails to convince, the previous observations about the metaphysical relocation of self – often conflating the author with a deity – offer insights into pre-Christian worldviews, which extend into pivotal Christian liturgy and ideology. I have dealt with these in a separate study *Continuity of Worldview in Anglo-Saxon England* (Trubshaw 2013b).

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