

The Poet and the Shaman

by Brian Lee

reminding us that things have souls

I'm not saying that shaman and poet are the same.

Not all poets are shamans
Not all shamans are poets

But they have some things in common.

According to Martin Buber in his book "I and Thou", the scientific mind looks at the world and nature as "it". Something to be prodded and poked, to be chopped up and analysed. The mathematical mind counts things in order to know them, turning the world into lots of its and bits. In addition the capitalist system reduces everything to a particular type of "it", namely a commodity, something that has value only by virtue of being bought and sold. In this way the essential quality of things is lost.

On the other hand, holistic/animistic thinking looks at nature and the world as "you" or "thou". Something we are in a relationship with. Something with a soul that deserves respect. Certainly something that we can communicate with. To a non-musician a guitar is just a musical instrument. To the guitar player however, his or her guitar is more than that, it is something with a soul.

When we recognise that things can have souls, then so can the earth, so can plants, so can animals and so can people. There is relationship between us all.

When we deny that things can have souls then it is a short step to treating the earth as a mere commodity to be exploited, to treating animals and people as things to be bought and sold. We have become autistic, out of relation to anything else.

This animistic consciousness is shared to some extent by both the poet and the shaman. They both deal with the souls of things. The shaman speaks to and negotiates *with* them. The poet speaks *for* them, giving them voice.

looking at the invisible

Animistic consciousness is consciousness of different realms or realities; realities that are for many people not part of their everyday existence. Science denies these realities because they are "subjective"; they cannot be replicated, measured or photographed. Machines cannot perceive them. Only people can.

Shamans deal with these invisible realms that are known by different names in different cultures:

The Australian Aborigines call it the dreaming.

The Mayans (and after them Carlos Castaneda) call it the nagual.

In the Celtic cultures that once held sway on the British isles it is known as fairyland.

Modern psychics call it the world of spirit or the astral planes.

This reality cannot be spoken about directly.

It is something you may notice out of the corner of your eye.

You look at it directly and it's gone.

You put it into words and you've lost it.

You look away and it's there again.

Always there.

To illustrate this, here is an Inuit story told by Inugpasugjuk and recorded by Knud Rasmussen.(1).

One night a house suddenly rose up from the ground and went floating through the air. It was dark and it is said that a swishing, rushing noise was heard as it flew through the air. The house had not yet reached the end of its journey when the people inside begged it to stop. So the house stopped.

They had no blubber when they stopped so they took freshly drifted snow and put it in their lamps and it burned.

They had come down at a village. A man came to their house and said:

Look they are burning snow in their lamps. Snow can burn!

But the moment these words were uttered, the lamp went out.

Look at this story from the point of view of the harsh and dangerous life of the Inuit in the frozen zones of the Arctic. Imagine what their life would be if snow could burn! No more hunting for whales to use their blubber in lamps. And then this guy spoils it all by saying "Look! Snow can burn!" The moment you name it, the magic ends and the lamp goes out.

Here's another example from William Blake.

*Never seek to tell thy love,
Love that never told can be;
For the gentle wind does move
Silently, invisibly.*

*I told my love, I told my love
I told her all my heart;
Trembling, cold, in ghastly fears,
Ah! she doth depart.*

*Soon as she was gone from me,
A traveller came by,
Silently, invisibly:
He took her with a sigh
#*

Again here, putting an expression of love into words kills it and the beloved is taken by a silent traveller.

You see, in the world of magic, things cannot be named or identified.
You name them and they're gone.
They can only be suggested.

Or you can create a space where it may exist as Austrian poet, Rainer Maria Rilke shows in this poem from his Sonnets to Orpheus (2):

*This is the creature there has never been.
They never knew it, and yet, none the less,
they loved the way it moved, its suppleness,
its neck, its very gaze, mild and serene.*

*Not there, because they loved it, it behaved
as though it were. They always left some space.
And in that clear unpeopled space they saved
it lightly reared its head, with scarce a trace*

*of not being there. They fed it, not with corn,
but only with the possibility
of being. And that was able to confer*

*such strength, its brow put forth a horn. One horn.
Whitely it stole up to a maid - to be
within the silver mirror and in her.*

"They fed it, not with corn, but only with the possibility of being" These words of the mystic poet Rilke, look right into the inner process of making one's own soul. Allowing oneself to be, regardless of the pressures of the world. And the unicorn is not "out there" in some imaginary "forbidden forest" but within. It is the sense of one's own sacredness which cannot be named, for to name it is to lay it open for public gaze and thereby destroy it.

where things have no names

Shamanic or poetic consciousness is raw, unmediated by words or images.

So, how can we talk about a world where things have no names?

Maybe in other societies that live close to the earth, where the intuitive faculty is not derided and sidelined, where spirits are allowed their reality, maybe there is a shared language for talking about these realities - a shared iconography of winds and crows, of wolves and snakes and moons that is more than just a fancy cloak of gothic images, but an iconography that communicates that which cannot be expressed directly.

But in our contemporary world we have to use words to point beyond words; to use images to point beyond images.

As T.S.Eliot said:

"The poet is occupied with frontiers beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist."

Or as the philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein said:

"If you can't say what you mean, point!"

(a very useful technique when in cake shops.)

shape shifting

Another reason it's difficult to identify directly is that it's a shape shifter. Shaman is known for ability to change shape as in this poem by 13th century Welsh poet, Taliesin.

*I have been a blue salmon,
I have been a wild dog,
I have been a cautious stag,
I have been a deer on the mountain
And a stump of a tree on a shovel.
I have been an axe in the hand,
A pin in a pair of tongs,
A stallion in stud,
A bull in anger,
A grain in the growing.
I have been dead, I have been alive.
I am a composer of songs -
For I am Taliesin.*

In the world of the unnamed, things do not have defined shape. Shape can change.

Even in our world of named things, things look different. I can look at a cup one way and it's one shape. Another way and it's another shape but I know it's the same cup. If I look at it from close or far away it's bigger or smaller but I know it's the same cup.

With a plant like a rose bush. It is different in spring with its leaves, in summer with its blossom, in autumn with its fruit, in winter it is bare stems. But it is the same plant.

With a person, at different ages they look different, as a baby, as child, an adult, an old person. I know it is the same person.

That recognition, when I say "It is the same." That's interesting. Maybe you recognise someone from another life and you say, "I know you, you are the same person I know then, in that other life."

And Taliesin's poem opens up that recognition across many different identities and says "I am that. It is me. I am the same."

As a shape shifter, the shaman can appear to us in different ways and the shaman enjoys playing with identity.

As American poet Gary Snyder writes "The shaman-poet is simply the man whose mind reaches easily out into all manners of shapes and other lives, and gives song to dreams."(3)

the reality of poetry

Everyday language communicates everyday reality (the here and now).

The language of priests, bureaucrats, lawyers and scientists communicates the official reality.

The language of politicians, journalists and advertisers attempts to manipulate us and our reality. (*"for reasons of national security", "ethnic cleansing", "collateral damage", "because you're worth it", etc*)

True poetry communicates inner reality. For when we are in touch with our inner worlds (our dreams, our inner sense of what is right) we cannot be manipulated by any so-called authority.

In this way the poet or the shaman is like the snake in the garden of Eden, leading us to an inner sense of what is right and wrong rather than being dependent on the whim of an authoritarian creator or what is written in any "holy" book.

Once we have this inner connection we can break the spell of external authority and open ourselves to other experiences beyond the everyday. It is the job of the poet to communicate this consciousness, to send back postcards from the other realms where things have souls, to enable people to connect with their own inner realities.

As Tuvan Poet/Shaman, Galsan Tschinag argues "As civilisation advances, people suffering from the madness that is poetic sensibility are less and less tolerated. Defence of poetry thus means: defence of humanity, defence of authenticity."

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References:

- (1) Quoted from "Technicians of the Sacred" edited by Jerome Rothenberg.
- (2) Rainer Maria Rilke, Sonnets to Orpheus 2.4
- (3) Gary Snyder from "Poetry and the Primitive,".

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