

Lleu: Invalid, Initiate or Redeemer?

We have suggested that in terms of both the deep-structure of the Four Branches and archetypal idiom of the Western tradition as a whole, the role enacted by Lleu at this stage is that of the spiritual culture-hero, the saviour-redeemer. However, according to surface or causal logic of the narrative Lleu is presented as a victimised invalid, requiring external assistance (in the form of an act of spiritual healing) to restore him to the human world. The intervention of an external agent is a small but significant detail – and reminds us of the essentially shamanistic background of this episode.

The climax of Gwydion's therapeutic intervention centres on his recitation of a series of englynion, each beginning with the *dar y dyf* ('There grows an oak...') formula. It is these verses which are used to call the Lleu (in eagle form) down from the branches of the tree in which he has taken refuge. We have already indicated the problematic nature of these verses, which would appear to be preserved from an older source.¹⁰¹⁴ Due to their linguistic and textual ambiguities, we are forced to deal with these verses in a same way as the *rosc* passages in Old Irish texts, which are generally understood as metrical, semi-nonsensical incantations uttered by druidic or bardic protagonists for magical purposes. It is possible that, to the initiated at least, these passages had powerful esoteric significance – though whether it will ever be possible to recover this meaning is another question. As with the druidic *roscanna*, these englynion would certainly be worthy of closer investigation: including a thorough-going review of the linguistic, metrical, and ritual context; and perhaps even a speculative reconstruction of an Old Welsh or even Gallo-Brittonic prototype. But until such investigations have been undertaken, however, there is little more that can be said about these verses in themselves. We have to take a wider view of this episode as a whole to understand what is being played out at this stage, with an eye on relevant magico-religious analogues from other cultural contexts.

We have seen how Gwydion embarks on his search for Lleu, tracks him down with the aid of an animal helper and then entices him down the tree with magical incantations. Broadly speaking, this entire process might be compared with ritual practice of 'summoning and searching for the soul', as attested amongst Central Asian peoples such as the Teleut and Buryat.¹⁰¹⁵ More specifically, there is the comparison with the widespread magico-religious motifs of the bird as soul and the world tree:

1014 See p. 536, n. 980. Although the precise significance of the references to 'rain' (*glaw*) and 'flashes' (*angerd*) is difficult to ascertain, it is hard to avoid the impression of some connection to the Lightning-Oak-Mistletoe complex discussed elsewhere. It is even tempting to believe that something of this kind would have been chanted by the druids, in the Gallo-Brittonic language of the ancestors of the Welsh, during the mistletoe-harvesting rituals alluded to above (p. 497).

1015 Elaide (1989) pp. 217-220

The Goldi, the Dolgan, and the Tungus say that, before birth, the souls of children perch like birds on the branches of the Cosmic Tree, and the shamans go there to find them. This mythical motif, which we have already encountered in the initiatory dreams of future shamans, is not confined to Central and Eastern Asia; it is attested, for example, in Africa and Indonesia. The cosmological schema Tree-Bird (=Eagle), or Tree with a Bird at its top and snake at its roots, although typical of the peoples of Central Asia and the ancient Germans, is presumably of Oriental origin, but the same symbolism is also found already formulated on pre-historic monuments.¹⁰¹⁶

There is little doubt that this sequence has been inspired, at some stage, by a similar cosmology. This seems to have been represented in the druidic belief system by something off the nature of the Lightning-Oak-Mistletoe cult, as we have already suggested above, but there is also a distinctively shamanic dimension suggested by the guiding/healing role of Gwydion son of Dôn. This brings us on to a further possibility: this passage may be seen as the representation of a magical initiation process, a process comparable with a meditation practiced attested amongst the Inuit people, described here by the explorer-ethnologist Knud Rasmussen:

Though no shaman can explain himself how and why, he can, by the power of thought alone, divest his body of its flesh and blood, so that nothing remains but his bones. And he must then name all the parts of his body, mentioning every single bone by name; and in doing so, he must not use ordinary human speech, but only the special and sacred shaman's language which he has learnt from his instructor. By thus seeing himself naked, altogether freed from the perishable and transient flesh and blood, he consecrates himself, in the sacred tongue of the shamans, to his great task, through that part of his body which will longest withstand the action of the sun, wind and weather, after he is dead.¹⁰¹⁷

We will remember that, on his return from the tree, Lleu is described as being 'nothing but skin and bones' (*nit oed dim onyt croen ac ascwrn*). As Eliade points out, 'in the spiritual horizon of hunters and herdsmen bone represents the very source of life, both human and animal', so by reducing himself to the skeletal condition, Lleu enters 'the primordial womb of life' and experiences 'a complete renewal, a mystical rebirth'.¹⁰¹⁸ Gwydion, in his role of *medicus* and healer, ensures the safe return of the soul of Lleu from this visionary near-death experience, and in doing so also performs the role of guiding initiator.

1016 *ibid* pp. 272-273

1017 quoted by Eliade, *ibid* p. 62

1018 *ibid* p.65

It is perhaps this element of renewal or rebirth which unites the various roles of the patient, initiate and sacrificial-redemeemer, which all seem to be imputed to Lleu at this stage. Although we can locate the magico-religious background of this episode variously to the cosmology of the Lightning-Oak-Mistletoe cult, and a more widespread (and probably more ancient) belief involving the ‘calling down’ of the bird-like soul from the branches of the World Tree, there is a powerful subjective core to this sequence – simultaneously personal and collective – to which the medieval audiences would have immediately responded. This has been established partly by the framework of the Four Branches itself, in which a complex language of animal symbolism has been used to articulate a sense of the encroachment of the Indigenous Underworld (or unconscious mind), necessitating a radical process of hierophanic fission, which is powerfully configured by this episode. In more general terms, the archetype of the heroic rebirth is one of profound and universal appeal. Death, as the ultimate Other, has been confronted and vanquished. The hero, focus of the audience’s innermost aspirations, has prevailed and survived. The ‘work’ of the Mabinogi, in psychodramatic terms, is now reaching its conclusion.