

Thomas the Rhymer in the Late 20th Century:
Some notes on the Social Construction of the Otherworld
in modern Wicca

Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to examine certain facets of the internal construction of the "other world" or "spirit world" of modern Wicca (Witchcraft). The paper starts with an examination of the symbolic sources (mythographic, experiential, and performative) upon which this construction is based. The second section examines the process of "designing" the symbolic sources into a series of coherent ritual components. The final section examines both the discourse surrounding the construction process and the definitional debates which attempt to define the discourse. The ethnographic data is drawn primarily from five years of fieldwork in the Ottawa Wiccan community.

1.0 Introduction

We often think of ritual as belonging to the realm of religion, but in fact, rituals are an integral part of nature and of our daily lives.... When you look at survival or social behaviour, you generally will see ritual. (Beck and Metrick, 1990:5)

The story of Thomas the Rhymer relates how a well educated man of the twelfth century encounters a reality that he is unprepared for. In the song, Thomas encounters a "lady gay" who he takes for the Queen of Heaven. After disabusing him of this notion, she takes him up on her horse and they journey "for forty days and forty nights" until they come to a garden. After eating, they climb up a hill, and the Queen of Elfland shows Thomas three roads.

Ah see ye not the broad broad road

Tha lies by the lily leven?

O that is the way of wickedness,
Tho some call it the road to Heaven.

And see you not that narrow narrow road,
All beset with thorns and briers?
O that is the way of righteousness,
Tho after it but few enquires.

And see yet not that bonny bonny road,
Which winds about the ferny brae?
O that is the road to fair Elfland,
Where you and I this night maun gae.
But Thomas you must hold your tongue,
Whatever you may hear or see,
For if one word you should chance to speak,
You will never get back to your ain countrie.

The symbology of the three roads is fairly plain. The first road portrays action in the world; an acceptance of that which is given. The second road is the road of personal sacrifice for a specific aim. The third road is both the middle road between the other two, and the road which, once travelled, changes the traveller forever. After such a journeying, the traveller is forever set apart from those who travel the other two roads. The vow of silence is not so much an imposition, as a safeguard. Thomas can "never get back to [his] ain countrie" not because he is under a curse, but because his experiences are so far outside of everyday life that, if he speaks of them, he will be considered insane and/or dangerous.

The story of Thomas the Rhymer is part of a larger collection of celtic tales which are grouped under the general category of *imrama* or "journeys". These tales recount

journeys of many types, both "real" and "mythological". Similar tales appear in many mystical traditions, and all of these tales illustrate the effects, and some of the consequences, of contact with an "Otherworld".

When these tales are analyzed at a structural level, they clearly show the tri-partite structure noted by Van Gennep (1960) in *Les rites de passage*: a) separation, b) margin or limen, and c) reaggregation. In the tale of Thomas the Rhymer, the emphasis is on a description of the phenomenal events taking place in the liminal phase. Other tales, such as that of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), concentrate on the reaggregation phase.

Regardless of which phase is emphasized, the effects of contact with the Otherworld and its inhabitants are clear. The person who experiences the Otherworld is transformed, and they no longer perceive the world of everyday life as totally taken for granted. The patterns that made up their taken-for-granted life are shown, through their own experience, to be just one set of patterns among many.

The purpose of this paper is to examine certain facets of the construction of these transformative experiences. I have chosen modern Wicca, rather than some other venue, for a number of reasons. First, most Wiccans are fully conscious of both the constructed nature of their experiences, and of their own ability to construct them. And yet, the effects of the experiences are accepted as "real". Second, as a result of a number of years of fieldwork within the Ottawa Wiccan community, I am fairly conversant with the processes involved in the construction of these transformative experiences. Third, modern Wicca, at least as it is practiced in the Ottawa community, is not yet institutionalized to the point where these rituals of transformation have achieved a status of "sacred text".

I have organized the main body of this paper into three sections: symbolic sources, designing the "Otherworld", and definitional discourse.

2.0 Symbolic Sources

The process of constructing a transformative experience involves reflexive action. This reflexive action may be termed as *pattern analysis and symbolization*. In effect, the ritual specialist who is designing the experience must analyze three areas:

- a) the initial starting point of the individual;
- b) the desired concluding point of the individual; and
- c) the "pathway" between a) and b).

In many cases, these areas are already defined within a given symbol system. Examples of this would include the rites of passage described by Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969). In other cases, these areas are not defined in a religious format at all, but

structurally identical rites of passage have developed spontaneously (Given, 1993; Tyrrell, 1994). Finally, in some cases, the two end points, a) and b), may be "known" at the level of metaphor, but the path between them may be unknown. It is this latter case that is the subject of this paper.

Unlike many religious groups whose rituals have been studied (e.g. Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, etc.), modern Wicca shows certain characteristics that are unique. First, there is no central "sacred text". The sole piece of "liturgical" writing that may qualify as "sacred text", the *Charge of the Goddess*, is recognized as being a modern construction (see Valiente, 1989; Kelly, 1991). Furthermore, the collection of semi-liturgical pieces known as the *Book of Shadows*, which is sometimes confused with a sacred text, has a number of features that clearly show it is not. First, no two Books of Shadows are the same - they are personalized by each individual. Second, the "core text" is recognized as being a modern construction, and the sources of this construction are equally well known (cf Kelly, 1991; Farrar and Farrar, 1981).

A second difference between modern Wicca and other religions centres on the lack of a recognized central authority. First, covens are almost universally considered to be autonomous. Second, anyone with sufficient rank, in the case of the "British" traditions (e.g. Gardnerian, Alexandrian, and their offshoots), or anyone with sufficient charisma in the case of some other traditions, may form their own groups and "traditions" which are recognized as legitimate by other members of the religion.

A third difference centers around the external, symbolic presentation of divinity. Unlike most religions, modern Wicca does not have a single, common presentation of the divine. This difference stems, in part, from the three main roots of modern Wicca: the Murryite revival in England, the development of radical feminist theology in the US, and the revival of pre-Christian religions (neo-paganism).

All of these differences have a considered impact on the pattern analysis necessary to develop transformative rituals. First, there is no single, coherent cosmology. In effect, there is no single *textual* definition of the structural causes of a pattern and no single remedy for that pattern. Second, there is no individual source of authority which can "legitimately" define all individual structural problems. Third, there is no single transcendent (divine) source of structural definition.

Another description of this state would be that there is no Bible, no Pope, and no God. But if this is the case, then how do the members of the Wiccan movement create the multitude of transformative rituals that they produce? The process itself varies from group to group but there are certain characteristics that are held in common. First, ritual construction is treated as a skill and most Wiccan Initiates are, at the minimum, somewhat conversant with the process. Second, Wicca is an eminently "pragmatic" religion. This can be seen in its adoption of the unofficial motto of "If it works, use it - if it doesn't, pitch it." Third, many Wiccan ritual specialists are, essentially, occult "scientists" in the sense that they are more than willing to experiment on a broad variety of material. Finally, few Wiccan ritual specialists will claim "infallibility", and these few

tend to be derided by other ritual specialists who usually have a higher status inside their communities.

What this situation translates to is a situation where Wiccan rituals are a) modular, b) highly eclectic, and c) tend to be highly personalized. The sources that are drawn on by Wiccan ritual specialists are equally varied including myths, folk songs, fantasy stories, personal experiences, pseudo-liturgical pieces (e.g. the *Charge of the Goddess*), historical works, anthropology, and the literature of comparative religion. I have divided the core sources into three, broad groupings: mythographic, experiential, and performative.

In order to better illustrate the process, I have decided to concentrate on a specific ritual, *The Descent of Innana* which was performed at a Grand Sabbat held on Samhain (October 31st), 1988. The ritual was designed to serve a multitradition (including non-Wiccan) audience (roughly 100 people), and involved a cast and crew of twenty-five.

2.1 Mythographic Sources

Mythographic sources include myths, legends, songs, works of fantasy, etc. In essence, they are all stories of one form or another. While individual groups may have a penchant for using particular cultural collections of stories (e.g. Celtic, Norse, Greek, Sumerian, etc.), there are few groups that adhere to a single source. The most common practice is to find a story that fits the situation, regardless of its provenance, and modify it to suit the occasion. The choice of a particular story depends on numerous factors: familiarity or unfamiliarity; closeness of fit with the perceived situation, symbolic "distance" from the "audience", etc. Ultimately, the choice depends on the individual or group that is designing and conducting the ritual.

In the case of our example, the choice of mythographic material sprang from a number of considerations. First, "descent" myths of some form usually play a part in Samhain rituals (see Farrar and Farrar, 1981). Second, the Wiccan Church of Canada (WCC) had in its possession a number of large group mystery plays that they had already performed, and these were made available to the organisers in Ottawa. This group included an abbreviated form of *the Descent of Innana*. Third, no local group used Sumerian mythology as their central cosmology, but many people were familiar with the story.

Once the initial choice was made to use *the Descent of Innana*, the local organizers felt that it had to be expanded and changed to fit the specifics of the community in Ottawa. This change involved a number of additions to the original abbreviated script to make up for perceived, structural flaws in the play.

First, an introductory cosmological section was added (section 1). This involved drawing on the first two verses of the Babylonian Creation epic, *Enuma Elish* (Sandars, 1971:73), and modifying it to meet the scripted role of Shamash. Sections two and three

were composed using an outward symbolic form from Sumerian mythology, but were based on the standard structure of Murryite Revival circle casting and Quarter calls (see Farrar and Farrar, 1981).

Section four and five drew their initial form from the fifth verse of the *Enuma Elish* (Sandars, 1971:74), but were modified heavily to fit into the neo-Gnostic cosmology of the organizers. This neo-Gnostic influence shows clearly in the following lines:

None shall remember this, their home.

Once they leave this Council, it shall be cloaked from the

Once they leave Irkalla, it shall be cloaked from them.

Section six recapitulates part of the initial creation but, in place of the initial threefold creation of Heaven, Earth, and the Underworld, there is now a sevenfold creation of the connections that bind the initial three "worlds" together. Section seven serves as an introduction to the current plot line, and leads directly into the rest of the mystery play.

The changes in section seventeen and nineteen are designed to bring the plot in line with the changes introduced in section five. The hymn/speech of Ereshkigal in section seventeen is a shortened form of a poem entitled *The Sumerian Underworld* (Sandars, 1971:115) with the second and third sentences removed., and the last sentence modified so that the speaker is female. Finally, sections twenty-two and twenty-three drew directly on the modern Wiccan wineblessing and on community standard forms for ending a ritual respectively. From this short description, one can see how a number of different mythographic sources have been drawn together into a single ritual.

2.2 Experiential Sources

Experiential sources include both experiential knowledge (*gnosis*), and practical knowledge. "Experiential knowledge" (*gnosis*), refers to a form of knowledge based on an intuitive sense of "rightness". "Practical knowledge", as the term is used here, refers to a series of heuristic routines similar those noted by Darrah (1992:267). Both of these forms of knowledge have been noted as operating in the Wiccan community (e.g. Luhrman, 1989).

In the case of our example, both forms of knowledge were used extensively by the organizers. First, the selection of the ritual itself came about partly as a result of a feeling

of inherent "rightness". This related both to use of a mystery play format, and to the selection of a descent type mystery play. The initial decision to use a mystery play format appeared quite early in the decision process (sometime during the summer of 1987). It was felt that, due to the large numbers of non-Wiccans who might be in attendance, and to the variety of Wiccan traditions represented, that the mystery play format was the best ritual form option. The selection of a descent type play stemmed from a feeling that, since this was a Wiccan ritual, its topic (pathway) should be appropriate to general Wiccan traditions, otherwise it would merely be a "play".

Second, the initial ritual script was subjected to a questioning process: "What do we have to change to make this work for us?" Next, the changes were subject to a process of heuristic testing both during their composition, and during their rehearsal. The criteria for judging what changes were needed were based on the experiential knowledge (*gnosis*) of the organizers, while the effectiveness of those changes was judged using the practical knowledge of the cast.

2.3 Performative Sources

The links between performance and ritual have been studied extensively. In his introduction to Victor Turner's (1987:13) *The Anthropology of Performance*, Richard Schechner describes ritual as "the cultural arena where the reptilian and old-mammalian brains meet the neo-cortex." While his description draws on the debates in ethology and biogenetic structuralism, it is also applicable to the process of constructing ritual.

I would suggest, following the arguments of Turner (1987:156-178) and D'Aquili et al (1979), that the performance of ritual activities is one method of achieving neurological and neurochemical changes in the brains of ritual participants (e.g. the creation of "experiences" and the transformation of "perceptions"). I would further suggest that knowledge of the efficacy of a number of these neurochemical "driving" techniques is contained in a set of heuristics, some of which were discussed in the previous section ("practical knowledge"), and some of which are grouped under the general heading of "good theatre".

Given these assumptions, I would argue that "performative sources" are heuristics that concern the ways in which symbolic representations may be presented to an audience so that

- 1) the presentation will effect a phenomenal change within the audience such that
- 2) the event symbolized during the performance will achieve an "aura of factuality"
- 3) which will allow the event to become part of the experiential knowledge base, or "lived reality" of that individual.

As such, these performative sources are, in effect, a series of techniques designed to elicit, or aid in the elicitation of, certain emotional states.

A number of these techniques are apparent in *the Descent of Innana*, but it is only necessary to consider a few of the more obvious techniques: control of light and the use of vocal repetition. The control of light, and the concomitant control of visual input, is strictly controlled in the first three sections. At the start of section 1, the entire hall is in darkness. The first twenty-two lines are spoken in this darkness, with the voices alternating in a repetitive way.

Before the first days,	Before the very first days
Before the first night	Before the very first night
Before the first years	Before the very first years

.....

The gods were nameless, natureless, futureless

Light central/source candle

The lighting of the first candle serves as a visual cue to the introduction of change into the previous, static, imagery. This candle is held by Shamash who is initially kneeling. As the next eleven lines are spoken, Shamash rises from this kneeling position, until he is standing at full height with the source candle held at maximum extension over his head. His face is covered in a gold-coloured sun mask. The sword used to cast the circle in section two, immediately following, is gold plated and, as Shamash moves around the perimeter of the circle, it tends to blur into a golden "bar of light". Next, candles are lit as each of the Quarters is called ("From the light and the deep came the"; section three). The final changes in lighting occur during section six, with the creation of the seven gates which connect Heaven, the Earth and the Underworld. The "stage" is now, visually, set for the remainder of the play.

2.4 Conclusions on Sources

In this section, I have concentrated on the level of reflexive awareness used in constructing transformative rituals: pattern analysis and symbolization. This has meant an examination of the various sources used to construct one modern, Wiccan ritual, *the Descent of Innana*. I have argued that mythographic sources are the "stories" that one tells to describe a particular "pattern" or process of perceptual change. I have also suggested that the experiential sources, both experiential knowledge and practical knowledge, serve as the selection and modification guidelines for this construction process. Finally, I suggested that performative sources, including certain "practical

knowledge" heuristics, serve to develop that medium or techniques used to transfer the pattern from a "story" to the personal, lived experience of the audience.

3.0 Designing the "Otherworld"

While the process of designing transformative rituals depends on pattern analysis and symbolization, the process of designing the Otherworld is much more complex. This complexity stems from the nature of the Otherworld as both an individual and a social creation. At the level of the individual, the Otherworld is the world of interior symbols - that part of the sensorium with which an individual may interact at both a conscious and unconscious level. At the level of social creation, the Otherworld is a world of transmitted symbol sequences, usually in the form of "stories", which individuals may transform into internal experiences. In short, the Otherworld is not a place, but rather it is a state of mind, perception, and experience

In effect, the Otherworld is constantly being created and transformed each and every time it is entered. How then can we speak of "designing" the Otherworld? First, each time a transformative ritual is created, a section of the Otherworld is re-created. In the case of *the Descent of Innana*, the Otherworld in which the play takes place and to which the audience are transported, bears little resemblance to the Otherworld described in the Innana hymn cycles (cf Wolkerstein and Kramer, 1983).

While the inhabitants of this world share the same names and perform many of the same actions of the "originals", the plot (pattern of action) is very different. In *the Descent*, Innana and Dumuzi are reunited to rule in Heaven. In the original, Dumuzi is dragged off to the Underworld at Innana's command after he attempts to assert sole rulership over Heaven. In the "original" Innana cycle, there is no "council of Irkalla"; no hidden purpose behind the events portrayed. In *the Descent*, all of the actions portrayed in the main body of the play stem from the decisions taken at the council. No longer are the actions portrayed tied to a seasonal cycle (cf Wolkerstein and Kramer, 1983:167-8). Rather they are shifted to a specific, linear, series of events that has its inception in time (the council of Irkalla), and a specific end point. Time, as well as space, are mutable.

A second point about designing the Otherworld stems from our means of accessing it using varied symbologies. In 1980, Mark Webber showed how a number of radically differing techniques from numerous cultures were all able to initiate the "same" experience. As Webber (1980:85) notes in his conclusions: "the analysis of meditational phenomenology strongly indicated that the initial "outer" symbols used in the ritual have no "rational" structural connection to the core [experience] evoked." If this is so, then several "features" of the Otherworld become apparent.

First, the symbols that portray events, beings, and patterns within the Otherworld are all shadowy projections onto the individual sensorium and cultural symbol systems of certain "essential" experiences. Second, these "inhabitants" (events, beings, and patterns)

of the Otherworld can and sometimes do exert very real influence in the social world. This influence may be either as an exemplar of a particular event, pattern or natural force, or in their "own" right, as interpreted and acted upon by individuals who "encounter" them in their journeys through the Otherworld. This ability to influence the social world is dependant upon the mutability of the external symbolization of experiences. For example, social conflict may arise over the "correct way" to access the "true" nature of an experience, especially in situations where specific modes of access are controlled by particular groups.

A third feature stemming from Webber's analysis is that the Otherworld does operate on a system of "natural laws" and is subject to experimentation and manipulation. The difficulty with applying a natural science methodology in order to discover these natural laws, is that the "objects" available for study are the externals: the symbols, rituals, and visible actions of people. How can you describe an experience or a perception?

Webber (1980:85) argues that the researcher must have "direct experience of a wide range of cognitive transformations (alternate phases of consciousness) so that cross-cultural studies are possible." I would suggest that this is only one alternative. Another would be to find direct linkages between activity in the brain and nervous system and the reports of specific experiences. In effect, certain "natural laws" of the Otherworld may be "visible" in neurological activity and vice versa.

All three "features" stemming from Webber's analysis (symbols as projections of experiences, symbols acting independently in the social world, and experiences visible through neurology) have a direct bearing on the processes surrounding designing the Otherworld. Each of these features is a potential source of power and control in both the social world, and at the level of individuals. This "power" may be most visible to us in the realm of "religion", but it can also be shown to operate in the economy and in politics.

The "power" of the Otherworld is the power of meaning and individual experience. And the power that stems from control over the design of and access to the Otherworld is the power of definition and legitimation of those experiences. For example, in the debates of the second and third centuries ce, the Church Fathers wrested design control of the Otherworld of Christianity first from the Church in Jerusalem, the direct descendants of the Jesus movement, and then from the Gnostics.

In the case of modern Wicca, we can see an interesting series of parallels with the early Christian church. First, design control of the Otherworld is not centralized and, hence, is open to change and mutation from group to group. A similar situation existed in Christianity until the development of the canonical New Testament. Second, alternate designs of sections of the Otherworld (e.g. rituals, myths, etc.) are passed between groups and used as source material for further creations. A similar situation is apparent in such artifacts as the Nag Hammadi Library (fourth century ce). Third, general groupings of similar constructions aggregate as "traditions" in modern Wicca. These "traditions" are similar to the "sects" of early Christianity. The movement is "extensive", while the

individual traditions (and "sects") tend to be "intensive". It remains to be seen whether or not the Wiccan movement will follow in the same pattern as did Christianity.

In this section, I have suggested that the Otherworld is "a state of mind, perception, and experience." I have also argued that the Otherworld has a number of features. First, it is constantly changing as experiences become symbolized and symbols become experienced. Second, I have argued that the Otherworld is a source of "this worldly" power. Finally, I have suggested that control over the design process of, and access to, the Otherworld is a source of conflict in the social world.

All of these features are apparent in modern Wiccan constructions of the Otherworld. The mutability of the Otherworld is obvious - no two rituals are ever the same, and no two Wiccans ever describe their beliefs in the same way. In modern Wicca, the Otherworld is used as a source of personal, "this worldly" power. This usage appears in both the use of the Otherworld as a transformative "space" for perceptions, and also in the use of Otherworld beings as a source of guidance, and material and emotional goods and services.

4.0 Definitional Discourse and Debates

Definitional debates in modern Wicca centre around five major areas: constructing the Otherworld at a "tradition" (intensive) level; constructing the Otherworld at a "movement" (extensive) level; ethical use of the Otherworld; legitimacy of access to the Otherworld; and the validity of Otherworld experiences. Each of these debates has generated millions of words, and it is clearly beyond the scope of this paper to go into detail on any or all of them. What I would like to examine, however, is the basic epistemological position that underscores these debates.

I would suggest that the primary epistemological difference between a syncretic religious movement, such as modern Wicca and early Christianity, and an institutionalized religious movement (e.g. Roman Catholicism) lies in the location of "truth". In syncretic movements, the locus of "truth" is in the experience of the individual. In institutionalized movements, the locus of "truth" lies in the socially constructed ideology of the institution.

In the case of an institutionalized movement, the "truth" of personal experience serves only as an indicator of the "transcendent 'truth'" of the ideology. In the case of a syncretic movement, the "transcendent 'truth'" of an ideology serves only as an indicator of where other, personal, "truths" may lie. In short, do we know what we know from personal experience or from socially constructed "knowledge"?

This point has been argued in a very different format by Nuala Beck (1992) in relation to economic restructuring. Beck has argued that the economic indicators currently in use, the socially constructed "knowledge" of the economy, can no longer be

considered useful since they have little bearing on the way the economy is moving. She has also argued that a continued reliance on these outmoded indicators has severe negative social impacts (hopelessness, depression, resignation, stress, etc.). In effect, Beck argues that the Otherworld created during the manufacturing era is now source of danger to society.

I would suggest that the same processes that engendered the creation of the Wiccan movement (dissatisfaction with established ideologies, a lack of coherence between ideological "truth" and experienced "truth", etc.) serve to create other, non-religious, "movements". I would further suggest that many of the features of these "movements" may be illuminated by examining them as if they *were* "religious", at least in as much as they involve the construction and re-construction of the Otherworld.

5.0 Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to examine certain facets of the internal construction of the Otherworld in modern Wicca. This examination started with a consideration of the sources from which the Otherworld was constructed during the production of transformative rituals. The next section discussed the process of constructing the Otherworld, and the social effects of such a construction. This discussion then led to an examination of the epistemological differences between syncretic religions and institutionalized religions. Finally, it was argued that the same processes that lead to the development of syncretic religions may also be at work in "non-religious" areas of society.

I would suggest that an understanding of the processes used to construct the Otherworld of religious experience, may also prove useful in examining the world of non-religious experience. At the least, such an examination would increase our understanding of the role of non-religious areas of human social life in the construction of individual (and social) "meaning" and action. I would also suggest that the technical insights that can be gained by an examination of the "religious" construction and transformation of meaning and perception can be used to increase the effectiveness of the non-religious construction and transformation of meaning.

If religion is, as Geertz (1973:91) argues, a symbol system that clothes "conceptions of a general order of existence" in an "aura of factuality" such that "the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic", then what of our work? What of our families, communities and nations? Are these not also "conceptions of a general order of existence" that are "clothed in an aura of factuality" that is "proven" by our everyday experience? We may never "know" in the positivist sense whether or not the Otherworld exists. What we can know, however, is how we create and recreate it constantly in everyday life and how it, in turn, creates us.

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