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Shamans, Tribes, and the Sorcerer's Apprentices: Notes on the Discovery of the Primitive in Modern Poetry¹

The search for the primitive, the desire to take on the role of the tribal shaman, and even to use his language, is one of the permanent fascinations of the modern poet. One must not exaggerate, however,—such a quest, significant though it may be as a cultural indicator, remains a rather minor trend in the whole development of modern poetry. It bears possibly the same relation to contemporary poetry as does Gauguin's or Picasso's "primitivism" to the total world of modern art: if one counts masterpieces, there are perhaps few. Nonetheless, what might be called the lure of the shaman for the modern poet can be documented so as to sharpen our perceptions of certain important cultural and aesthetic shifts, and that is my chief purpose here.

The "primitive" I refer to includes manifestations that have been largely left out of that "global cosmopolitanism" described by McNeill as characteristic now of the human community.² It takes in mostly those ill-named "pre-technological" societies, the relatively static and tribal societies existing in the past or present, non-native to the western orbit of literacy and science-inspired technology. These are societies where poetry is most often part of an oral tradition, and where the role of the poet is integral to the spiritual and cultural well-being of the group.

Specifically, I want to concentrate on one manifestation of this vast body of very complex literature, and to deal with the shaman, illustrating in particular how this tribal figure has been influential on certain modern American and Canadian poets, and explaining why this influence has occurred. A shaman is a tribal magician or medicine man, a devotee of what we would now call "altered states of consciousness", a priest, mystic and poet. Although the origins of the shaman are Siberian, shamanic practices occur among North and South American Indian tribes, and elsewhere, giving us a rich field of

possible sources for contemporary poetry. Before summarizing the particular character of the shamanic calling, however, I want to sketch in the general picture of primitive poetry that we get from contemporary anthropology. Such poetry occurs not so much as isolated inspiration but as part of a complex of activities that permeates the life of the tribe. It is seldom divorced from religious rituals, from dance, music, gesture and noisemaking, and in its oral status is closer to the body and breath than is usual in the sophisticated literary traditions we take for granted. Primitive poetry is repetitious, with a strong emphasis on sound values, and capable of energetic leaps into an imagery that to us may seem shocking in its linking of the grossest physicality with spiritual purpose. Primitive poetry, the product of mythopoeic thinking, generally assumes that the whole world is alive and that everything has will and purpose. As a concomitant of these qualities this poetry is most often functional, quite concrete, and difficult to translate out of the cultural context in which it appears. Yet it has had an increasing fascination for modern writers searching for a mask to wear against an alienating and demythologized world of narrowly rational purposes.

The shaman himself, in Eliade's classic description, is "the master of ecstasy".³ He is the tribal witch doctor who guards and guides the soul of the community by undergoing complex trance states out of which new knowledge appears, often in the form of poetry. During the trance state the soul is considered to have left the body and to have visited the over- or underworld in order to encounter the spirit-counselors whose mouthpiece the shaman becomes. The shamanic trance is a very lively and dynamic process indeed, as the various accounts show; in itself it violates whatever ideas of the decorum of creativity we inherit. The best analogy might be a beat poet on drugs, howling and shouting, and throwing things around; or a rock star in an ecstasy of physical gyrations, improvising one explosive line after another in front of an audience of semi-ecstatic young people. The shaman either inherits his position, or, more interestingly, is "called". In the latter case an ordinary member of the tribe falls into a kind of mental illness characterized by the reception of private messages from the spirit world, and is forced to become a shaman in order to bring his "delusions" under control.

Because his society has an understood means of dealing with this attack, this illness becomes a *nekyia* or "creative sickness" which results in the recruiting of a shaman, rather than in more dire consequences, but there is still a necessary initiation into the names and

processes of the priesthood. When one looks for connections between this kind of process and western experience, all sorts of analogies spring to mind, ranging from the so called "schizophrenic" episodes of a healer like Jung, to the sometimes traumatic "call" associated with becoming a prophet or poet, which is recognized as disturbing at least, and seen as potentially dangerous to the mental balance of the individual concerned.

The historical roots of the modern idea of the poet as shaman lie in Romanticism, which built on the sketchy eighteenth century collections of folk poetry and on the theorizing of Herder, the Scottish school, and others, to develop an idea of "primitive" poetry which is perhaps most visible in Wordsworth's famous "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" of 1800. Even more significantly, the full-blown concept of the Romantic imagination, developing out of philosophical and aesthetic conditions peculiar to the west in a particular historical phase, made inevitable the search for those "tribal" affiliations which would give us the poet as shaman as soon as the necessary fieldwork had been done by modern anthropology.

The Romantics, in contrast to eighteenth century neo-classicism, asserted the primacy of the creative imagination, the necessary interlocking of mind and nature in the poetic process, and the truth of the concrete perceptions of consciousness in a heightened state of awareness. The imagination, organic, spontaneous, mysterious, they saw as connected with the powers of "the inner senses"; poems must begin in intuition and dreams, not in the narrow rational sphere of "wit". As Ellenberger and others have shown, the modern concept of the Unconscious develops out of Romantic psychology and philosophy.⁴ In rebellion against the nominal traditional collective order, and in favour of the personally experienced dynamic truth, the Romantics broke with the already coalescing materialism and "objectivism" of science, and condemned the actual order of society as corrupt at the roots, thus defining for the first time an extensive "counter-culture" projected against a mainstream of bourgeois, rational assumptions, the world of "getting and spending" in which, as Wordsworth saw, the creative powers might be lost. By affirming both nature and spirit, the Romantics sanctioned at once a poetry of concrete environmentalism, and a technique of access to the sacrality in process of being sacrificed in the drive of western man toward secularization and science. Their model of the psyche is clearly compatible with that of the primitive societies we referred to earlier, since it assumes that certain individuals, setting themselves in ritual rela-

tion to a specific order of nature, make contact with a reality which has significance for society as a whole. The Romantic poet standing in a particular environment, and activating his creative energies through a circumvention of ordinary consensus knowledge, begins to resemble the shaman who turns to dreams and visions to lead the tribe to wisdom and to resolve his own conflicts in an ecstatic therapy. The difference between the Romantic poet and the shaman, however, is critical, in that, where the one is accepted and sanctioned by the culture he operates in, the other is driven more and more into a position of isolation, as his visions lead him ever farther away from the increasingly materialistic and "everyday" bent of his fellows.

A very few, but I hope telling, examples from English Romantic writings must serve to illustrate these points. First of all, Blake, with his clear testimony to the "visionary" nature of his inspiration, his angels and voices from "Eternity", and in particular the famous letter of October 2nd, 1800 to Thomas Butts, which in its unitative perception, its depiction of an ascent toward a magical space in which "One Man" appears as personification and symbol of a heightened kind of seeing—represents one kind of parallel with the "calling" of the shaman. Coleridge, too, in "Frost at Midnight", testified to his awakening to higher things at a specific moment, to those "articulate sounds of things to come" that he heard in the bells in the town of his birth; while "Kubla Khan" must be the central example of Romantic shamanism, with its close attention to the processes of the body in the environment, its depiction of a ritual, sacramental entry into the visionary order via the "ecstatic" poet, and its creation of new sonorities in the name of communication of the virtually incommunicable. Wordsworth too, in his devotion to the visionary gleam, his cultivation of "spots of time", and his thorough documentation of the natural and psychical aspects of his calling in *The Prelude*, gives evidence of shamanic awareness. Shelley, describing himself "clasping his hands in ecstasy" as a boy at the visitation of the spirit of beauty, functions most obviously as a shaman in "Ode to the West Wind", in which nature is bent to the imperious demands of the assumed mask-voice ritually commanding its manifestations. Keats' poetry is notable for its trance-like excursions into altered states of consciousness. All the Romantics assumed that the poet was a mediator between ordinary existence and a higher order to which he had privileged access. They all acknowledged the phenomenon of the specific "call", cultivated visionary experience, sometimes with the help of drug-taking, and went about articulating, and ritually

celebrating, a special knowledge, one function of which was to recreate nature as a living texture of "presences" capable of inspiring joy or terror.

Yet even granting the Romantic poet's "rediscovery" of some aspects of primitive poetry in general and of the role of the shaman in particular, it is clear that he could have almost no direct contact with the materials of this primitivism, since these had yet to be collected. In the formal sphere, and as far as language goes, therefore, his "shamanism" was non-existent; only in his wishful relationship to the society around him and in his assumptions about consciousness and the creative powers of the seer, did the Romantic poet draw close to the tribal poet, and ironically, this very role-playing helped ensure the failure of his therapeutic and social mission, at least in immediate terms, since the arcane nature of his preoccupations made communication with society at large difficult.

The rest of the nineteenth century, following on the demise of Romanticism, sees a split between the line of nature and the line of spirit, with the Romantic visionary impulse resettling itself in the Symbolist and Decadent writers and so fertilizing modern poetry, while "nature" is pretty much left to the scientists and to their would-be literary imitators in the Naturalist school. The Naturalists, however, not as one-sided as they are sometimes painted, performed the valuable task of transforming the rather bleak landscapes of science into a mythopoeically rich variety of literary environments, thus preparing the way for a rebirth of interest in the primitive in modern literature, this time in a poetry that could be both tough-mindedly aware of the ruthless processes of nature, and devotedly attentive to the visionary possibilities of the human psyche.

The modern poet's interest in the primitive, and his understanding of the role of the shaman owes something then to his Romantic predecessors, but also something to the Naturalists who took hints from anthropology and learned to penetrate the environment with a sometimes hysterical but often minutely accurate eye. While necessarily fighting a rearguard action against a rampant scientism, such poets as Hardy, Tennyson and George Meredith, remote as they themselves were from assuming the old Romantic poses, form a link between the first Romantics and later writers like D.H. Lawrence, who began to explore new areas of relationship between mind and environment, and who had access to a whole body of primitive sources which science had meanwhile unearthed.

Even more obviously, certain characteristics of Symbolist poetry extend the Romantic sense of the shamanic role and carry us toward the present. Here we have some absolute claims for the power of the word itself, an insistence, via the "correspondences" on a vision of metaphysical unity through the ritual of naming; in Rimbaud, a radical development of the Romantic idea of the poet as seer, and the explicit admonition to achieve a "derangement of the senses", which we can see as an hallucinatory condition somewhat evocative of the shaman. Later, the Surrealists were to develop the techniques of access to the unconscious to an even greater extent, and to provide in one extreme direction what the Naturalists were providing in another, so that both "psyche" and "nature" could be reunited in the vision of Lawrence, and the post-Lawrentian shamanic poets.

While it would be beyond the scope of these notes to document in detail the literary transformations outlined above, a few words must be said about the shifts in scientific thinking that had begun to be visible during the middle years of Lawrence's career, shifts which affected his work to some extent, but which are of capital importance for the recent writers who have made contact with primitive sources and assumed the mask of the shaman.

The great upsurge of primitivism that marks the end of the nineteenth century is a testimonial in part to the breakdown of the opposition between "us" and "them" in the minds of sophisticated Europeans. Social speculation of a positivistic kind had suggested an evolutionary view of stages of civilization which left mythopoeic and tribal thinking behind as a relic of the childhood of mankind. But the myths collected by Frazerian anthropology, at first partially used in the manner of the Enlightenment, to undermine Christianity in particular, ended up being a repository of stories that pointed to a way of knowing more comprehensive, potent and "scientific" than the armchair anthropologists would at first have admitted. When actual field anthropology began, cultural relativism seemed to rule the day, but again, this was to give way to an increasing tendency toward commitment and experiential involvement, so that it is relatively common now for anthropologists to participate in the life experience of societies they are studying, rather than to attempt to maintain an absolutely clear line between themselves and the practices of the group. This parallels the development of psychotherapy, which often began as

a reductionist analysis, and ended up advocating a "way", and of natural history, in which the distance separating the investigator from the species studied grows less and less all the time.

By the twenties, therefore, with a great many examples of the potency of the primitive for the artist already in view, it was natural for a poet and novelist like Lawrence to have assimilated the theories of Frazer, Jane Harrison, and others, and to make personal contact with the primitive in a way that Victorian travellers might have sanctioned but the Victorian novelists would hardly have thought of. Lawrence's involvement with the primitive was, however, severely hedged, for many reasons, and though he often uses mythological themes drawn from, or invented so as to parallel, primitive literature, he never really took full advantage of the material which had by this time been collected. Whereas the first Romantics had sometimes assumed the shamanic role, but could not approximate a shamanic language, writers after Lawrence began to draw on very specific sources, confronting the great tradition of western poetry with a genuinely revolutionary aesthetic derived from oral traditions which were coming increasingly into view, and encouraged by the general tendency in anthropology toward increasing involvement with material formerly considered paltry, or even dangerous.⁵

The language revolution necessary for the real assimilation by modern poetry of primitive elements is probably largely due to the example of Ezra Pound, with his devotion to the concrete image, his interest, however inaccurately based, in Chinese pictograms, his adherence to the fragment, and his willingness to attempt to incorporate random or ritual sound patterns in his poetry. Pound himself, in the *Cantos*, makes limited use of actual tribal material, but both here and in his shorter poems, there were clearly models for others to follow. Pound's implicitly and explicitly stated challenge to the poet to break with the older, highly refined, literate and linear conception of verse was one the Romantics simply could not have mustered, whatever their thematic preoccupations; it required the perspectives of a century on the limitations of western civilization and art, and a vision of the modern wasteland created by misused technology and science, to inspire this latest and most serious turn to the primitive.

At this point, before engaging some of the shamanic poetry of recent American and Canadian practitioners, I should mention a few specific and diverse sources of inspiration for these poets,

developments which in some cases have influenced them, or in others have simply helped create a climate for this kind of poetic effort.

While scholarly anthologies of primitive material have appeared frequently since the beginning of the century, and a handful of striking books has elucidated such related areas as the oral traditions underlying the Homeric epics (some of these testified to the living survival of bardic traditions even in such relatively civilized regions as eastern Europe), the sixties saw a real explosion of interest in the subject.⁶ In 1962, C.M. Bowra published *Primitive Song*, a study of oral poetry, limited in some ways, but rich in speculation and in quoted examples of excellent poems. In 1964, Willard Trask's translation of Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* appeared in the Bollingen Series (Eliade had first published it in Paris in the early fifties), and a detailed and fascinating picture of Shamanic practices became available to all North American writers. Trask had meanwhile compiled his own anthology of primitive poetry from all over the world, and this appeared as *The Unwritten Song* in 1966. At almost the same time, Marshall McLuhan, in *Understanding Media*, was making important links between communication systems and consciousness, and throwing fresh light on the perils of literacy, while he documented the arrival of a new media tribalism. In 1968, Jerome Rothenburg published *Technicians of the Sacred* (exhibiting some striking texts) and showing how at home the post-Olson poets could be with the shamanic and tribal role. Stanley Burnshaw's well-documented study of 1969, *The Seamless Web*, argued strongly for the role of the body in poetic composition, further challenging the complacency of "linearists", while in 1969 Gary Snyder's *Earth House Hold*, a collection of new and previously published material brought the question of primitivism and of the poet's role into the explicit focus of a sixties commitment to an ecologically-minded counter-culture. As a result of all this, there is now a number of regularly established, if offbeat, academic explorations of the subject of poet as shaman, such as the course run by Anne Waldman at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, and a considerable number of poets (and other artists) who are closer to the shamanic vision than the most ardent and indefatigable Romantic practitioner.

The chief of these is probably Gary Snyder himself, a remarkable poet who links himself to the Paleolithic shaman, to the American Indian, and Eastern thought, and who argues for an inner and outer space revolution that would transform our attitudes to the environment and to ourselves. Snyder advocates a "tribal" revolt of those fed up with western puritanical materialism and mass life, and affirms the programs of a smaller scaled, spiritually and sexually liberated alternative society, not only in print, but in his own life-style. The prose statements which have accompanied his poems and sketches in some of his most important books reveal a spasmodic but profoundly intelligent writer who is knowledgeable about ecology, anthropology, eastern religions, and the ordinary working life of the Pacific Northwest where he was born. Snyder is very much in the tradition of Thoreau and Whitman, and cannot be dismissed merely as a Romantic anarchist, since many of his ideas are shared by small groups in the United States and Canada who are working for social change in very specific and practical ways. While it seems to me that *Earth House Hold* is one of the most important prose works in recent American literature, I want to call attention merely to the way in which, in his poetry, he assumes the tribal and shamanic role. Since Snyder's poetry is often rather complex, and is fed by many sources, these comments will barely suggest the point argued, while even a much longer discussion would be unlikely to do justice to the poet's repertory of masks and styles.

"Through the Smoke Hole" from *The Back Country*, for example, is an extremely successful combination of poetic prose and the open field verse that re-creates the Indian shamanic vision, moving succinctly and sharply from primitive ritual to a modern and universal frame of reference, so that the "levels" of being assumed in the shamanic mythology become part of what we can experience, both as extension in time and as extension of spirit and seeing. Using the basic concept of bodies rising out of and returning to the earth, Snyder takes the poem beyond the Indian context of kiva and mythical Coyote, Raven and Magpie, and by means of a series of apparently illogical or random transitions, gives us the feeling of a complex intertwining of myth, history and ecology, facing the fact of death and the Darwinian ruthlessness of nature, but ending up on a note of joy and potential immortality. This is a poem that draws heavily on primitive poetry in many ways (in its

mythology, ritualistic flavour, imagery of shocking juxtapositions, sound values) and yet manages to be entirely relevant even to someone who does not share Snyder's ideological commitments.

This is also true of "A Berry Feast", a remarkable poem from the same collection, and of many of the poems in *Myths and Texts*, for example, the poems for birds, deer and bear, as well as numbers nine, eleven and twelve. In these, Snyder is creating unique structures that link contemporary experience to the deepest tribal past and to nature. Sharply evoked moments appear and quickly disappear; we zero in on the specifics of an object, and are thrust away into myth and legend, colloquial conversations become sound patterns, or the speech of a ritual, and such terms as "inside" and "outside" or "primitive" and "civilized" become pointless. There is space here to point to only one example of Snyder's shamanistic transformation of our everyday reality, and to note that, in his hands, Coyote, that trickster out of Indian myth, becomes a most successful embodiment of the ornery, indomitable spirit of destruction, trouble, and fun-loving contradiction.

Sleep on needles through long afternoons
 "you shall be owl
 "you shall be sparrow
 "you will grow thick and green, people
 "will eat you, you berries!

Coyote: shot from the car, two ears,
 A tail, bring bounty . . .

"You can't be killers all your life
 "the people are coming—
 —and when Magpie

Revived him, limp rag of fur in the river
 Drowned and drifting, fish-food in the shallows,
 "Fuck you!" sang Coyote
 and ran. ("A Berry Feast")

Among poets now writing, Snyder is the only full-time shaman, and thanks to the quality of his work, he alone would make the phenomenon significant. If logging camps, Zen Buddhism, and Levi-Strauss seem unlikely elements in the matrix of a significant poet, we can only point to Snyder's achievement to make them seem a plausible mixture.

The peculiar "bite" of Snyder's poetry is unthinkable without his real commitment to the role of counter-culture shaman, evoking

for us the myths and dreams we have tended to forget, in a context of familiar twentieth century reality. By affiliating himself with the apparently superseded tribes, he has reinforced the uniqueness of his "beat" vision and ensured himself access to a repertory of highly individual life-styles and texts that lend strength to his experimental verse forms. By means of a well-controlled technique of shifting viewpoints, and thanks to his strong roots in both worlds, he uses his "tribal vision" to give the mainstream or conventional reader the jolt of experiencing a familiar yet somehow lost vision, and challenges him by concretizing a life-experience which flies in the face of his most cherished values.

By comparison, the primitive-inspired poetry of Jerome Rothenburg, (whose anthology *Technicians of the Sacred*, we have already mentioned as one of the key sources of modern shamanic poetry), may strike one as too narrowly formalist in its concerns. Rothenburg may be at his most powerful in poems relating to his Jewish, Eastern European heritage, but his pursuit of authenticity, and his devoted search for the unconventional and contra-linear sources of oral poetry, force the reader to take his work seriously. Rothenburg's pamphlet, *Ritual: A Book of Primitive Rites and Events*, published in 1966, is a collection of actual tribal ceremonies, modified and adapted by the poet, amounting to a series of "found poems", which illustrate Huizinga's conception of poetry as play.⁷ These witty "events" succeed in extending our sense of what poetry can be, as do the more serious pieces in Rothenburg's *Poems for the Game of Silence: 1960-1970*. One of these, "A Shaman Climbs up the Sky", makes an interesting test-case of the interaction of the modern shamanic poet and the primitive material, since it is modeled directly on a ritual poem found in Eliade. It might be argued that Rothenburg deals in too sophisticated a fashion with this material, not only clearing out the needlessly archaic tone of the translation used by Eliade, but actually countering the "primitive" feel by removing the repetitions even where they could be effective. One might also ask whether there is real point in this kind of adaptation other than its obvious function as a "touchpiece" for the poet's skills, since, unlike most of Snyder's work, it does not force the contemporary reader to deal with his own experience, but reveals the poet locked into a language game which he chooses not to relate directly to anything in our world. This is rather less true of the Australian "Kunapipi" songs, which Rothenburg adapts and places in his collected

poems, and which the reader can make direct contact with because of the universally understood sexual references. However, as they appear in one of the appendices of *Technicians of the Sacred*, these songs are perhaps even more interesting, since the ethnographical context adds relevance and piquancy to them. These problems attendant upon Rothenburg's approach should not cause us to forget that he has done a great deal to give contemporary poets access to a difficult and elusive body of material, and while experiments like his translation of the Navajo "Horse Songs" of Frank Mitchell, seem rather sterile, there is no telling in what ways they might be picked up by others, and brought into sharp contemporary relevance.

In its own way, Canadian poetry, with a tradition of sensitivity to the natural world, and with access to unique tribal sources, and a primitivist fervour evident in such figures as Grey Owl and Emily Carr, has fostered the shaman. British Columbia, with its spectacular landscape, its complex and highly visible tribal sources, and its contact points with the American sixties, has naturally been the centre of such activity. In the fifties, Charles Olson went to Yucatan, partially inspired by references to Frobenius and the primitive in some of Pound's later Cantos, and was at the same time exploring the poetic possibilities of the writings of Carl Sauer on landscape and habitants. The appearance of the *TISH* movement in Vancouver in the early sixties made a natural channel for this kind of influence, and some Canadian poets, strongly aware of Pound and Olson, and encountering also Eliade, or breathing the atmosphere stimulated by his book, began working with local traditions so as to create their own kind of shamanic poetry.⁸

Probably the single most impressive result of these influences is George Bowering's long poem "Hamatsa", which appeared in his collection of 1969, *The Gangs of Kosmos*. The poem is remarkably structured, with none of Snyder's occasional self-indulgences, and shows how the modern poet can use his shamanic role to elicit a complex contemporary reality. "Hamatsa" derives from the Kwakiutl Cannibal Society ritual, and is partially told in language that Bowering models on primitive poetry:

Baxbakualanuxsiwae now stood up,
walking around in the smoke, crying
Hap! Hap! Hap! Hap!

Hamatsa, who is the cannibal initiate, speaks part of the poem and sometimes falls into the grittiest modern language of disillusionment ("what I have is a fucking awful job"), an important touch, since the other voice in the poem, the collective voice of the Vancouver poet, speaking for all modern poets, and modern men and women in general, is realistically presented as the inhabitant of a dangerous and frustrating wasteland. Refusing to romanticize the Kwakiutl, Bowering links the recalcitrant, sometimes nasty, business of their world to ours, without suggesting that the magnificence and mystery of their ritual life is necessarily tarnished by its connection with the miscellaneous muck and offal of existence. Though the Kwakiutl, the people of the sea, the mountains, and the dark forests, have a rooting through myth in nature that we lack, the vocation of seer and poet is never easy, and Bowering does not opt for an obvious irony in either direction. If the modern poet suffers from a kind of confusion and ennui in the midst of his fragmented world, his temptations to cannibalism are not merely vicious. Thus, although the superb ending of "Hamatsa" might on first reading seem to be largely negative about our innate drives, what has gone before has been a sufficient reminder of the enlarging dimensions of myth, and the communal and sacral aspects of cannibalism, to urge us to a more strenuous effort at unity of vision and dedication to vocation. In "Hamatsa", Bowering, like Snyder at his best, works from a complex grasp of primitive material, opting for the shamanic mask, not to bamboozle us with the supposed splendours of the tribes, but to force us to reflect on our own existence in a wider, more sharply defined physical, cultural and environmental context.

"Hamatsa" offers the modern poet a difficult challenge; more accessible, and at a distinctly lower level of achievement, is "Windigo", also from *The Gangs of Kosmos*. "Windigo", which is a "touchpiece" in the Rothenburg vein, though powerfully evoking the arctic landscape, and the myth of the cannibal giant of Indian legend, is an example of a more straightforward assumption of the shamanic mask. It leads us directly to the work of two more recent West Coast poets, both women, who have immersed themselves, at least for part of their formative years, in primitive environments and Indian myth, though they sometimes have written out of much more sophisticated impulses.

Susan Musgrave, living in Cambridge, England during the winter of 1971, and "taking refuge from the rigours of the English climate in the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology", was stimulated

both by artifacts from the Canadian northwest, and by a unique collection of reports and manuscripts, including Swanson's *Haida Songs and Tsimshian Texts*, to produce the first of what became a series of *Kiskatinaw Songs* that she and Sean Virgo originally submitted to the Welsh magazine *Second Aeon*. Together with Section IV of *The Impstone*, these *Kiskatinaw Songs* represent an interesting evolution from direct imitation/ translation of Indian materials to a position shared, not so much with Snyder and Bowering, but with the Purdy of "Lament for the Dorsets" and with Sid Stephen's recently published *Beothuck Poems*. While Musgrave's *Kiskatinaw Songs* are limited in range, they have a toughness and humour that is likable, and gave promise that the poet might incorporate some of her discoveries in whatever overall style and vision she was moving toward. What has happened, however, is that her later poems on Indian subjects have been cast in that terse but rather monotonous sub-Atwood tone of voice that Musgrave seems now to have settled for, while her position has become that of a sensitive, but somewhat predictable, ironist of the inevitable disparities between what might be and what is—not so much the female shaman we had hoped for, but a later day Susanna Moodie who has roughed it once too often in the bush. This is not to say that poems like "Against", "Shadow Shamans", "Lure" and "Kaisun" from *The Impstone* don't owe something of their real swiftness of insight and language to Musgrave's contact with Indian poetry, but simply to point out that the poet's attitude and sensibility seem to have congealed. She has not yet found a way to use the immediacy and physicality of her earlier "Creation Song" or "Counting Song" to lift herself to a new perspective on the themes that presently interest her, and has passed up the complex "inside-outside" role of the modern shaman poet for a language and vision that seem somewhat formulistic and facile.

Marilyn Bowering, in her recently published collection, *The Killing Room*, seems to be at the stage of Musgrave's *Kiskatinaw Songs*, though her shamanistic poems are only one aspect of what she offers in that book. Once again, we see a poet obviously experimenting, in the characteristic manner of Rothenburg, finding out what images, rhythms, and sound effects can emerge out of a dedication to Indian poetry. The limited nature of the achievement here must give us a certain pause; one hopes the poet can move beyond these rather tight-lipped measures, and this terse rendering of mostly violent experience, toward complexity and

richness of perspectives. We now have an idea of what some kinds of primitive poetry can do, and some of us can write parodies of various kinds of "animal" songs in our sleep. What we are looking for is an extension of sensibility and vision and not the narrowing of a vein that is already becoming too familiar.

Tracing the modern poet's path to the shaman, I have tried to distinguish between the general theme of the primitive in poetry and the actual assimilation of primitive styles, the assumption of the shamanic role. The later path is the narrower one in some ways, but it probably can lead to the widest horizons. Shamanic poetry doesn't necessarily mean escapism, an attempt to go back; nor should it be a pathetic attempt at retroactive atonement for the sufferings of the decimated tribal cultures, or of two or three generations of Indian derelicts in the white man's cities. The shamanic role can be the poet's way of realizing a kind of physical, environmental knowledge western culture has often sacrificed. It can be a path to spiritual vision by the most direct means, an option of the personal psyche for dreams, spells, visions and prophecies that our rationalistic predilections would often censor at birth. The modern poet can learn from traditional poets how to deal with his own myths and traumas, and can vastly enrich his language by incorporating new images, rhythms, materials; he can learn to see a poem in a broader context of physical movement, gesture, and ritual occasion, and so work consciously toward assuming a role not unlike that of the rock musician, who in some ways is the real shaman of our mass culture. The most valuable modern shamanic poetry, I believe, incorporates a tension between sophisticated and primitive, not rejecting the actual present for remote tribal possibilities, but reminding us of skills we have lost, and of evils we have unconsciously chosen to live out in the most dire and sterile forms. It would be presumptuous of us to dismiss the possibility that in the future the poet will be much closer to the tribal role than he has been in recent literate culture; one might even guess that a new shamanism will develop in the context of the most sophisticated communications technology. The success of any considerable proportion of the goals of the groups presently striving hard for a society almost the reverse of our present one might guarantee the continuing relevance of the poet as shaman. In that case, the search for the nearly vanished primitive by some of the most gifted modern poets and artists would turn out to be a prophetic discovery of our emerging future.

NOTES

1. This essay had limited distribution in *ARC II* (Ottawa, Spring 1979).
2. Cf. W. H. McNeill, *The Rise of the West* (New York: Mentor Books, 1963), p. 792.
3. Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton: Bollingen Series, 1964). A schematic comparison of Eliade's shaman, and the modern shaman poet, or the rock star, gives us the following striking parallels: a) A separation from society in general, a singling out, thanks to special talent; b) the cultivation of visions, dreams, possible use of drugs; c) a mastery of language, techniques of expression; d) occasional existence of a muse figure; the opening up of sexuality (cf. Eliade, p. 80); e) a new sympathy for the animals, among contemporary shamans taking the form of ecological awareness; f) "flying", or in contemporary hip language, being in touch with the spirit, getting up to a new consciousness level in performance; g) costume, the special clothes favoured by hippies, the sometimes outlandish dress-up of rock stars; h) taking on the healing role, returning to modern society its soul (Eliade, p. 182); i) the missionary role. "In a general way, it can be said that shamanism defends life, health, fertility, the world of 'light', against death, diseases, sterility, disaster, and the world of 'darkness'" (Eliade, pp. 508-9). And finally, from Eliade's concluding paragraphs: "Poetic creation still remains an act of perfect spiritual freedom. Poetry remakes and prolongs language; every poetic language begins by being a secret language, that is, the creation of a personal universe, of a completely closed world. The purest poetic act seems to re-create language from an inner experience that, like the ecstasy or the religious inspiration of 'primitives', reveals the essence of things . . ." (cf. *Shamanism*, pp. 510-11). I would like to thank Robert Hogg and Joan McConnell for some very helpful suggestions on specific points.
4. Henri Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (New York: Basic Books, 1970).
5. To take one striking example: while the English Romantics sought the exotic in the Mediterranean, Lawrence followed Chateaubriand, Gauguin, and others, in attempting direct contact with the primitive. It is interesting to note, for example, how New Mexico in the 1920s became the lodestone of various quests. While Lawrence and Willa Cather deepened their art and their cultural perspectives there, Jung got what he called "an outside view" on white society. One of Jung's guides during his visit was Jaime de Angulo, an anthropologist, whose writings influenced Snyder.
6. Publication data as follows: C. M. Bowra, *Primitive Song* (New York: World Publishing Company, 1962); Willard Trask, *The Unwritten Song* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964); Jerome Rothenburg, *Technicians of the Sacred* (New York: Doubleday, 1968); Stanley Burnshaw, *The Seamless Web* (London: Allen Lane, 1969); Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold* (New York: New Directions, 1969).
Poetry collections referred to in this article, as follows: Gary Snyder, *A Range of Poems* (London: Fulcrum Press, 1966), the only edition including most of Snyder's early work; Jerome Rothenburg, *Ritual: A Book of Primitive Rites and Events* (A Great Bear Pamphlet, 1966); Jerome Rothenburg, *Poems for the Game of Silence: 1960-1970* (New York: The Dial Press, 1971); George Bowering, *The Gangs of Kosmos* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969); Susan Musgrave, *Grave Dirt and Selected Strawberries* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1973); Susan Musgrave, *Selected Strawberries and Other Poems* (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1977); Susan Musgrave, *The Impstone* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976); Marilyn Bowering, *The Killing Room* (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1977).
7. Cf. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), chapter VII.
8. Some critics, of course, see the Pound-Olson influence in British Columbia as a lamentable example of American deflection of Canadian poetry from its own themes and language. The influence is clearly there; no doubt it is also possible to see such poems as "Hamatsa" as distinctly Canadian art made possible by both a turning outward to international influences, and a turning inward to native sources.