

I.

COMPOSITION

*THE LANGUAGE OF DREAM*

"The purpose which guided him was not impossible, though it was supernatural. He wanted to dream a man: he wanted to dream him with minute integrity and insert him into reality . . . In the Gnostic cosmogonies, the demiurgi knead and mould a red Adam who cannot stand alone; as unskilful and crude and elementary as this Adam of dust was the Adam of dreams fabricated by the magician's nights of effort. One afternoon, the man almost destroyed his work but then repented. (It would have been better for him had he destroyed it.)"

- *'The Circular Ruins', Jorge Luis Borges*



*Book of Days* Meredith Monk

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MtB14SBBqk>

Dream Cells and Incubation Chambers: Solar and Lunar Composition

The ancient Celtic compositional technique used by the bardic schools in Britain was to compose whilst lying down in a darkened cell for the duration of a day and then to record mnemonically the lines created, the following night. Composition was conducted in darkness deploying memory as the attendant skill which was then used to commit the lines to inscription. In contemporary Western culture, much of that understanding of the exceptionally refined art of memory has been subdued. Indigenous oral cultures in Britain and Europe prized the faculty of memory as a superior sense and those who underwent many arduous years in the Druidic schools were highly specialised in the ability to assimilate, recall and retain their learned knowledge. The tuned voice; the use of lyre (lyric) and song, in keeping with rhythm and rhyme, were fundamental mnemonic devices, an aide-memoire to support the song-reporter musically convey information - often political. The intrinsic voice paths through these methods of acute reportage of wars and kingships were designated vocal architectures solely designed to conjure memory. That they also provided dramatic emphasis and a

rich song culture is par for the course. In 'An Lasair, Anthology of 18th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse', Ronald Black notes: 'In the absence of books and writing, the average young person's memory was such that a tune might be remembered after one hearing, a song or the bones of a tale after two, a complete story word for word after three.' He continues . . . 'The Gaelic verse of the eighteenth century was built on a solid foundation of music and rhetoric - motifs, symbols, pictures. The technique was both compositional and mnemonic. According to tradition Mairearad nighean Lachlainn used to be 'waiting for poetry to run along the green divots'. Waiting, that is, to visualise poems running along the row of divots that formed the intersection of wall and roof. The impression that the process was a highly visual one was confirmed by the late Donald Alastair Johnson from South Uist, who agreed that he could see traditional stories running round the walls of his house 'like a film'. Compare this, then to the often quoted Joseph Campbell: 'Life is like arriving late for a movie, having to figure out what was going on without bothering everybody with a lot of questions, and then being unexpectedly called away before you find out how it ends.' A kind of reverse composition of the Gaelic structure, Campbell reminds us that the act of living itself contains its own potential for epic and that the paths we track can contain the opportunity for outworking private mythologies. Certainly our days are still full of the remembered rituals of childhood from eating to cleansing, walking to earning. Though not the earliest form of surface, the white cell of the page presents to us formally a miniature symbol of this compositional process. It is the condition under which we open ourselves to the act of composing and recording, a portable room for envisioning. Here too, are the formal attributes of the traditional black and white - the glow of illumination against the necessary backdrop of darkness, the gnostic seed of ignition. Whether the illumination can be seen to echo the white page ready to be filled or the solar/lunar binary of what Robert Graves defines in his seminal prose poem 'The White Goddess' as Dionysian or Apollonian poetic instinct (the truer one being lunar and therefore in keeping with the goddess), has been worked out through centuries of poetry committed to paper from descriptions of the industrial mills of William Blake's London to the Laugharne Boathouse dreams of Dylan Thomas.

There is an interesting contradiction in all of this, though, which is that despite the explicit nature of learning by rote (a more negative perception of poetic recollection), much of the early British oral tradition relies on two elements. These are: circularity and the glimpse -

‘ . . . A tall tree on the river’s bank, one half of it  
burning from root to top, the other half in green leaf.’ - Peredur son of Efracw.

Matthew Arnold in his *Study of Celtic Literature* notes a passage from the *Mabinogion* as an instance of what he calls Celtic magic. ‘And they saw a tall tree by the side of the river, one half of which was in flames from the root to the top, and the other half was green and in full leaf.’ It was enough for Arnold to recognise this as magic, distinguishing it from the radiant, uncomplicated Greek way of handling nature, without prying into the mechanics of the image.

The absence of a centred design, of an architectural quality, is not a weakness in old Welsh poetry, but results quite reasonably from a specific view of composition, English and most Western European creative activity has been conditioned by the inheritance from Greece and Rome of the notion of a central point of interest in a poem, picture, or play, a nodal region to which everything leads and on which everything depends. The dispersed nature of the thematic splintering of Welsh poetry is not due to a failure to follow this classical convention. Aneirin, Gwalchami, Cynnddelw and Hywel ab Owain were not trying to write poems that would read like Greek temples or even Gothic cathedrals but, rather, like stone circles or the contour-following rings of the forts from which they fought, with hidden ways slipping from one ring to another. More obviously, their writing was like the inter-woven inventions preserved in early Celtic manuscripts and on stone crosses, where what happens in a corner is as important as what happens at the centre, because there often is no centre.’ - *The Burning Tree, Poems from the First Thousand Years of Welsh Verse*, selected and translated by Gwyn Williams.



## 1. 'Briggflatts'

Brag, sweet tenor bull,  
descant on Rawthey's madrigal,  
each pebble its part  
for the fells' late spring.  
Dance tiptoe, bull,  
black against may.  
Ridiculous and lovely  
chase hurdling shadows  
morning into noon.  
May on the bull's hide  
and through the dale  
furrows fill with may,  
paving the slowworm's way.

A mason times his mallet  
to a lark's twitter,  
listening while the marble rests,  
lays his rule  
at a letter's edge,  
fingertips checking,  
till the stone spells a name  
naming none,  
a man abolished.  
Painful lark, labouring to rise!  
The solemn mallet says:  
In the grave's slot  
he lies. We rot.

The brilliantly gifted Basil Bunting would also recognise the centrality of motif in his master work 'Briggflatts' (excerpt above). He says 'the graphic arts, of course, begin with the dance frozen' and in this he is talking about the Lindisfarne Gospels - a huge influence on 'Briggflatts' - but also about his fixation with sound and sound as rhythm. Bunting's idea is that all art came from the dance and that in poetry the dance becomes fixed, or the film paused . . . and so to return to mnemonic devices, compositional cultures, life itself as a chaotic, extraordinary act of memory, desire, movement and fixity or fixation. And where can some semblance of fixity happen? It is apparent in Bunting's description of the visual arts but it is also possible in attaching magical formulae, the scrapes, marks, strikes and spatters on the blank page. If we take the page as our cell and the dream as outlined by sleep as our compositional work - the mind still cooking up images, bad movies, white noise, rehearsals, premonitions and focus on our ability to recollect, quite literally, then we come across our most fundamental task for this course: the dream diary.

## Somnaglyphs: Nocturnal Lithography



We are going to begin by using our sleep as our studios. Conjunction or composition by dream will give us our subject matter and these images will be documented in dream diaries. Sleep will lay the foundation stone of our working material and release us from the pressure to compose ideologically or become inspired to engage with specific subjects. By doing so, we will release the imagination from process, cause and effect, conscious and cognitive thought, and instead focus on dream sequences as cinematic substance. And so, despite the reputation of dream, this aspect of the course is quite direct and matter of fact. The bare bones of instruction are to create and maintain a dream diary across the five week period of the course, recording *immediately* (pre-conversation, pre-coffee, pre-washing, pre-children) and simply the content of the dream in words, diagrams and drawings. The language you evolve can be intimately designed only to be understood by you; can deploy symbolism, shorthand, etc. or can be communicated descriptively as narrative or can be recorded as image, letter, sign or diagram. Another aspect of this process can be used to heighten awareness and conditions of dreaming - not so much in terms of lucid dreaming or the tradition of Carlos Castaneda (whose Don Juan is a fictitious and imagined shaman invented by Castaneda himself - much like the dream figure mentioned in the Borges quote above), but to foreground or focus this substrata of awareness in preparation for the dream work. A subtle shift in the lens of your perception is sufficient - to know you are going to enter into the contract of sleep in order to harvest dream. (For those of you who don't recall or experience dream or whose dreaming is more akin to white noise than succinct imagery, please see the paragraph\* below - you will be able to engage in an alternative and potent way). You will not be asked to consider the dream notes as documented for reader or listener, for the canon or for your peers. The dream work is entirely for you to draw on as raw matter for the course and not to be shown to anyone else, neither presented in online discussion. The final part of this strand of the course will be to destroy the dream diary completely by fire, water or earth. This burial, drowning or immolation means that I would like you to annotate or record as if for flame, water or soil. The work is to be entirely given to one of these properties. The relinquishment of the diaries is to take place the night before the final online lesson, within the time span you would normally be sleeping and to be conducted in private. This dream task requires that you attempt to create a work of innate commitment and value. Decoration, personalisation, scent, placing and keeping of the diary; secrecy, size and width are all careful considerations. You may choose to buy or create your diary, it may be something already to hand in an old drawer or belonging to a member of your family. Though to be destroyed, it is crucial that the dream diary is not treated as throwaway. It is of great importance that you relinquish the final object of the dream diary which may have become of great worth to you - and that is the true ambition and scope of the task. It is most likely then, that you will be rewarded and this will be revealed at the end of the course.

*\*What happens if I decline to dream?*

Then you are closer to the white page of blank cell, desert, or blizzard condition and should day dream or recall images from your history of dream. You may request dreams from your family, partner or lover, you may also invent an ideal period of dream sequences. It may also be possible to induce dreams through certain ingredients or by sleeping with focus in specific geographies or to find objects to ignite dream. You may also want to consider a compositional piece designed to invite dream to be evolved throughout the course.



'Dream Mapping', 1973, was an art event by Susan Hiller provocatively poised between an experiment (social or scientific) and a performance without an audience. Seven dreamers slept for three nights inside "fairy rings" in an English meadow marked by an abundance of circles formed naturally by *Marasmius oreades* mushrooms, a landscape feature that occurs in a number of British folk myths. The field became a site for dream experiences which were discussed and mapped the following morning. The dream maps of each participant were collected and copied onto transparent paper, sandwiched together, and traced to compile a composite group map for each night. A number of shared features were noted.

### TASK I

It has now been proven that human beings are actually constructed of star dust. There is also a rather out-dated understanding within human biology circles that cellular memory exists. Scientifically controversial, this thesis sprang out of organ transplant cases where the recipient seemed to inherit characteristics, allergies and in some cases, the dreams of the donor. New evidence pointed towards memory cells being held throughout the human organism as opposed to being situated in the brain. As such, the body - poetically speaking - presents a living mnemonic chamber with the division of day and night roughly activating sleep and waking. This solar and lunar division also tends to separate these states and the body remembers this. Our first task is to borrow from the ancient Celts (with a nod towards ancient Greek memory palaces; please see the reading list below) and compose a piece using the Druidic cell model. For those of us without a whole day and night at our disposal - and if you do, then it might be best perceived as a long distance flight into a poetic time-zone that may need recovery - we shall miniaturise the task to an hour of daylight and an hour of darkness. How you arrange these is up to you - they could be simulated (ie both at night but 'daylight' created by a bright lamp OR by timing your night to compose during the hour leading up to dawn and then recording in the new daylight). The task involves lying in a darkened room (or space) for an hour and composing. Using your memory, you then use an hour of daylight (or simulated daylight) to record your compositions. The material for your compositions should be provided by images drawn from your dream diary and so this task should be completed at the earliest, half way through the first fortnight. It may be repeated as many times as you wish and you are required to present only ONE mnemonically constructed poem. If anyone finds this ancient memory practice deeply engaging, then it can be deployed in the woods, for example.

## Overview

1 - The Dream Diary. An intimate, secret document used to record your dreams *immediately* on waking. For those students whose dreams are challenged, please use one of the alternatives outlined in the task. This is a non-competitive, non-professional task solely and purely for your own intimate development and curiosity and to increase your aptitude for perceiving in myth as a poetic lens. This task is wholly removed from notions of aesthetics, excellence, technicality and proficiency and is to be used as active fuel. It is crucial that you complete this task and continue to engage with it throughout the course as we will not be working from the history of poetry but using the personal archive of dream to create individual poetic languages. It is also important to fully create and fully destroy this work and reasons for this will become clear towards the end the teaching.

2 - Immersion in reading and watching lists which are optional and serve as immolation by the inner and outer eye and the inner and outer ear. These are lists for artistic exposure. Should anyone wish to expand on the material with suggestions of other inspirations, please bring them to the online discussion.

3 - To compose a poem using light and dark across two hours, composing without paper - solely in your head - in the dark and then writing down from memory in an hour of light. Please compose in silence. You may hone and refine your piece but not by example (ie; please do not try to reference examples of oral poetry. We are solely relying on ancestral memory within the bone and musculature of your own entirely unique physiognomy. You *are* the poem.) However, you may work with the imagery created from the other task - your Dream Diary - which is to be composed in secrecy throughout the course and destroyed the night before the last online meeting.

## Materials

Dream Diary - an intimate notebook

### (Select) Composition Reading List

Basil Bunting on Poetry, Edited by Peter Malkin, The John Hopkins University Press.

Briggflatts, Basil Bunting, Bloodaxe Books.

The Art of Memory, Frances A. Yates, Routledge.

The Golden Bough, James Frazer, (abridged version Dover Publications - with images), AND/OR <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3623/3623-h/3623-h.htm>

Joseph Campbell, The Power of Myth, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group.

The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth, Robert Graves. This edition has a superb introduction by Grevel Lindop. Faber.

Dreams Visions of the Night (Art and Imagination) David, Coxhead, Susan Hiller, Crossroad/Herder & Herder, New York, NY, U.S.A.

### (Select) Composition Watching List

The Colour of Pomegranates <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4PYE1k2yF3Y>

Meredith Monk <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MtB14SBBqk>

Basil Bunting <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZ7greLmS3I>

Patrick Jolley <https://vimeo.com/35882401>

Patrick Jolley <https://vimeo.com/35886158>

Patrick Jolley <https://vimeo.com/20706577>

Robert Graves <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JcJXrfwUiS4>

Jean Cocteau <https://vimeo.com/215847905>

