

Chapter Seven

Three Facets

The number three was important to our Celtic ancestors. The stability of a trinity is innately satisfying and threes can be found everywhere.

The philosophy of Druidry is built on reverence for the Earth, the ancestors and the gods. Both medieval texts and modern practice focus on the land, the seas and the skies. The bond of male and female, which brings of itself the child, is honoured, as is the play between head, heart and soul.

Both Irish and Welsh medieval literature contain Triads, threefold mnemonic statements used to remember stories, myths, law codes, regal duties, and so on, many of which have been lost. Iolo Morgannwg added his own, thick with his Druidic Philosophy.

The triskal and triple spiral occur frequently in Celtic design, emphasizing the flow of life energy in the sunwise direction, and the symbol of *awen* is perhaps the most poignant image of triplicity. There are many layers of meaning to this sign, which holds within it the importance of three: the dots are the sun's rising at the Winter Solstice (SE), the equinoxes (E) and the Summer Solstice (NE). The lines or rays flow out from the sun's light, encouraging life, giving inspiration.

Three Drops Of *Awen*

The notion of threes is a key in the stories which for many embody the spirit of *awen* and of Druidry. In the Irish tale of Finn mac Cumail, the young Finn comes across an old sage who, having spent seven years on the banks of the River Boyne watching its sacred waters, has just managed to catch the Salmon of Wisdom. Finn is happy to build a fire and cook the Salmon for the old man but, in checking whether it is done by pinching the flesh, he burns his thumb, which he instinctively puts into his mouth to soothe – and is filled with all the wisdom himself.

The action of sucking his thumb, expressing the innocence of a child and, in doing so, gaining the freedom of perfect knowledge together with the exhilaration of awe at the beauty of the world, is also relayed in the British tale of Cerridwen.

This relates how the dark goddess Cerridwen has given birth to a son who is so dreadfully ugly that she decides to concoct for him a brew which will endow him with perfect wisdom, so that his knowledge might present opportunities that would otherwise be closed to him. As she goes about her task, she sets a young lad called Gwion Bach (meaning 'Little Innocent') to stir the cauldron for the year and the day it will take to perfect. At the last moment, the bubbling brew spits three scalding drops onto the boy's thumb, which he instantly puts to his mouth to ease the pain. In those three drops are held the entire worth of the brew and Gwion is transformed with all

that was meant for the goddess' son. After the inevitable tussle with the furious goddess he emerges as the legendary Bard Taliesin.

The cauldron of Cerridwen is one of many in the myths, each holding some divine gift: nourishment, rebirth, abundance, courage, knowledge. The journey that is Druidry is the search for this sacred vessel, the motivation to continue is the thirst to drink from it, to receive the *awen*. Yet the myths imply that this is a search which can be satisfied and concluded, while in reality it is a journey which takes lifetimes, never truly ending, as we inch nearer those sources of inspiration, finding ways in which the flow of divine energy can move through body and soul unhindered, being enriched and not diminished by our experience, and then released, expressed with perfect grace.

While inspiration for most comes in a flash, out of the blue and out of our control, for the Druid this is not sufficient. As she journeys she learns how to access it, flow with it and use it with respect, gradually reaching deeper, higher and brighter.

We each find the exquisite gift of *awen* in unique areas, and in the same way we each use it differently. For some it is poured out as poetry, song or stories, while others use art, dance, relationships, gardening, parenting or politics as media for expressing the divine energy they have received.

This journey with no clear end also has no clear beginning. The start is marked only by our intention to understand more fully what it is that fuels us.

What inspires you, filling you, even if momentarily, with calm, exhilaration and freedom, soul deep? It may be visual, auditory, sensual: a sunset over the ocean, the sound of doves, Mozart, the Ramones, the touch of loving intimacy, ideas, colours, laughter ... Become aware of what fires you. Check that it is positive and in tune with your well-being and that of your environment.

Now, take some time for yourself undisturbed, work with this source of inspiration. Allow yourself to dive into it, surrendering to the flow of its energy. Journey into that place again and again, reaching deeper, breathing in more of its beauty. Let it fill you with energy and, when you return to your normal consciousness, make offerings of thanks.

Not only do your offerings honour the forces that touch you with the gifts of vision and strength, but in giving something in return you allow yourself more fully to accept those gifts you have been given.

Three Crafts

The drops which Gwion Bach sucked off his scalded thumb imbued him with three gifts: poetry, prophecy and shapeshifting. These skills are key elements in Druidry and explain the different facets within the tradition.

In the Classical texts it becomes clear that Druidry was made up of layers. There were Bards, referred to as *bardoi*; Ovates, called *vates* and perhaps *euhaiges*; Druids, known as *druides* and also *semnotheoi* (which translates from the Greek as 'revered gods')

and *gutuartri* (with a possible meaning of ‘father of invocation’). It was the Stoic philosopher Poseidonios who, in the first century BCE, mentions *bardoi*, *vates* and *druides* together, and these three groups are those most widespread in the modern tradition.

It is understood, although nowhere distinctly stated, that the novice began training as a Bard and progressed through the Ovate stage to become a Druid, and many courses of study today focus on each in turn. In some Orders they are called grades, while others call them Groves, levels or crafts. The idea of any hierarchy existing between the levels is avoided, with the emphasis being placed on the importance of each of the three roles. There is no dishonour attached to a person who decides to remain within any one in order to perfect the expression of his *awen* through the skills that craft teaches.

Bards

The Bards of ancient Britain and Ireland were the poets and the singers of the tradition. It was their task, through their dozen years of training, to augment their memory skills sufficiently to carry in their minds some 350 stories, numerous poems, the craft of ogham, the laws of grammar, the laws of their tribes, genealogies and histories, and the myths and law of the landscape and its sacred sites. They were the bearers of the (oral) tradition, the keepers of the past. Their role was both to affirm and inform the identity of the people and the rights of those people to the land on which they depended.

The Bards offered a source of stability in a world where the immediate future was less certain than it is today. They gave the people their foundation, their roots, and fed those roots with stories of bloody and magical glory, of heroic courage and total devotion, and in doing so they encouraged the people to stretch further towards their potential.

A critical part of their task was to deepen and enrich the connection between the people and the gods of the land. Stories were told of the bond of kings to the goddess of the land, of their success when the goddess was content and gave abundance, and of the times when the kings failed and the people were scorned by the goddess whose body nourished their land, bringing starvation and war. And through these tales were explained the laws of nature, with warnings woven in to be heeded by kings and priests and those who worked the soil.

There was, and remains still, a sense that the stories were – and are – told not only for the benefit of the tribes, but also for the spirits of the land, as if in their retelling the Bard is practicing the sacred art of awakening, enchanting and honouring the spirits of each hill, each lake and tree, each ocean wave and lunar tide. With the music of his words he honours each creature through its deity or collective consciousness. With each nod of intention, each tear and laugh evoked, he honours the ancestors and all humanity. In doing so, and only by doing so, will the spirits and elemental forces continue their task of constantly recreating the world within which we live.

So the Bard was not a simple storyteller, but an acknowledged magician of words.

Many Bardic colleges in these islands were overwhelmed by Roman culture, while others were reprogrammed by Christianity. Yet when the Druids were suppressed because of their political status, the Bards were able to adapt their craft to survive within the different cultural climate.

How the colleges worked is not entirely clear. The use of sensory deprivation is well documented, forcing the Bard to face the single point of stimulus within himself that would crack open into his poem. There is some suggestion that the colleges were only used during spring and autumn; during the summer and winter months the Bards would travel with their teacher to the courts of the land, learning the implementation of their craft.

In early medieval Irish texts *filidh* are mentioned, a *fili* originally meaning a 'seer' but more commonly understood to be a poet. While in Ireland Bards had enjoyed high status in society, by the sixth to eighth century CE the term had slipped to refer to no more than a wandering minstrel, with the word *filidh* replacing it to describe the traditional educated and aristocratic poets and satirists still called Bards in Britain. When the Irish tradition was given a burst of reconstructive energy inspired by the threat of English (Norman) culture in the twelfth century, a *fili* once more became synonymous for a Bard.

The Irish texts talk of a Bard carrying a branch adorned with bells of bronze, silver or gold, the metal declaring his rank or status. This Branch of Peace would be shaken as the Bard prepared to recite, silencing those gathered and calling upon the ancestors and spirits to attend and inspire the recitation.

The Bard's power of language, spoken or sung, was the measure of his talent and he would hone his craft to a point where he was a master of emotion and human desire. He could augment the standing of an individual with eulogies, increasing or assuring a person's status in society. He could deflate or destroy by satire, causing an individual irreparably to reveal his own weakness. It is said that through satire a Bard could cause a person's face to break out in blemishes.

He could invoke the gods of the land, of love and war.

The modern Bard is no less concerned with the use of language, though this has now broadened to include the language of music, sound, colour and movement. Skills of poetry are still greatly honoured, through understanding that poetry uniquely weaves the left (linear) and right (spatial) sides of the brain. Through his words the Bard shifts the emotions of those gathered to hear, shifts their perception of reality, their concepts of boundaries and potentials. Through his own *awen*, he uses his craft in order to inspire others.

While there are few female Bards in the documented history of the tradition, in modern Druidry there are equal numbers of men and women learning the craft, all expressing the *awen* in their own way.

The creativity of the Bard stems from his ability to listen. He has been attuning his ability to access his inspiration, by listening, by opening himself to ideas and relaxing to receive the divine energy that inspires him. By continuing to listen to the worlds

around him, he sharpens his ability to express what has been given, releasing it into the worlds with honour, respect and the power to evoke change.

Often that change is focused on the human soul, with the source of inspiration coming from the beauty and the power of the land. However, many Bards work to inspire the land, to encourage its own processes to adapt and strengthen itself despite the abuse of mankind, enchanting the spirit folk who have fled or flinched from the destruction of the environment to return and dance their sacred dance, recreating the beauty of the wild and joy of fertility.

Each hill, each stream, woodland and moor, each circle of stones and sacred spring, each place of potent energy, has its own stories, myths, songs and poetry. The modern Bard will use archaeology, medieval literature and more recent folklore to find these ancestral stories which marry us and our communities to the land, but more often than not he will use no second-hand evidence. The Bard's craft teaches them to listen to the Earth, to the stones, to the water and the wind, and hear the voices that sing within them.

Many Bards spend time listening to the other worlds at places known to contain high energy, where the spirits of the Earth, deities and faery folk are more easily heard. Some choose the wilderness, where evidence of humanity is scarce. Others choose ancient sacred sites, barrows, circles and mounds. Sacred mounds such as the Hill of Tara in Ireland and Silbury Hill in Wiltshire are still sources of much inspiration.

The ancient mounds where kings were inaugurated and tribes gathered together for important occasions were called in Welsh gorsedd mounds, gorsedd meaning 'high seat'. Nowadays a gorsedd is more often translated as the gathering and not the mound itself, in particular a gathering of Bards.

Nowadays, when an individual begins training in the Bardic craft, he first studies the nature and qualities of Earth energies and elemental forces, learning to understand the world around him. The focus is powerfully on the spirits of place, so the Bard will be able to relate what is found out and adapt his work to attune with it, expressing the harmony of the web of connectedness, singing the songs of the land, giving voice to the spirits.

During or after every Druidic ceremony, within the celebration, there is time for these songs, poems and stories, this music and dance to be shared in the eisteddfod. There are occasions when such an event is competitive, with Bards vying with each other to take the Chair of a particular gorsedd. This happens in the gorseddau of Wales and Cornwall, with equivalent competitions in Ireland and Scotland, and increasingly such events are being organized with substantial support around England.

How well do you listen? The Bard can touch with his fingers, feet or eyes, and hear. What do you hear as you walk, touching the Earth with your footsteps? What do you hear, with your fingers, in the walls of your home, in a seashell or stone? What do you hear when you look out over your environment?

Ovates

The Bardic craft is concerned with that drop of scalding *awen* from the cauldron of inspiration which gives us poetry. The Ovate's drop offers the gift of prophecy.

While the Bard develops his ability to listen to the worlds that surround him, both manifest and spirit, in order to retell what he hears, the ability of the Ovate is in vision and interaction. The Ovate not only hears the voices of those in the spirit worlds and those that inspire our reality of leaf and paw, mud and star, but also converses with the spirits. With his ability to enter into dialogue with those spirits that create the worlds through which we walk, he has the opportunity to discover what is being made, why and how, to look into the potential of the future and the patterns of the past, and to bring that information back into mundane reality.

The spirits with which the Ovate interacts are not only those of the environment, the trees and streams – the Ovate hones his gift of vision to see and communicate with the spirit of those creatures who live around him, the animals of the land, sea and sky, and his fellow human beings. Learning more of his own spirit energy and the spirit powers around him, by making offerings and petitions, with knowledge gleaned, he effects change in the spirit web and guides through connectedness to health and well-being.

In the same way that not all Bards begin as or become unnervingly good poets, so the level of psychic vision or clairvoyance varies in the Ovate practitioner. For some the vision is profoundly shamanic and the Ovate will interact with exquisite sensitivity with the worlds beyond. There are also the Ovates whose sight is so deeply grounded in the simplicity of reality that they are able to access the information they need where others are befuddled by the clutter of distraction.

Though training varies within the tradition, for many the work of the Ovate begins by learning tools of communication, while simultaneously increasing awareness of his own sensitivity, of the dozens of 'eyes' which cover our bodies, from the back of our heads to our hands and feet, and learning how to use these consciously to see in many worlds.

As a healer and seer, an Ovate will use many forms of divination. Some use runes, tarot or other decks of cards, such as the Druid Animal Oracle and the Celtic Tree Oracle (details of which can be found in Chapter Nine). More traditional Ovates will use Ogham staves, reading the threads of connections, past, present and future, in the qualities of the trees. Many use no physical aid other than the world around them, reading messages in cloud formations, in the flight of birds, in spiders' webs and hedgerow plants. While our ancestors in the tradition, as in most spiritual practices of the time, used animal sacrifice and the patterns of entrails in order to know the will of the gods, the Ovate now – understanding that all creation has its own spirit force and therefore holds within it the wisdom of nature – will read the signs given by and through the *living* world. Some will simply ask and be given the answer by spirit guides and teachers, be they dryadic or devic, of animal or human form, or indeed divine.

The very word 'divination' speaks of the way in which the Ovate seeks his *awen*, reaching to touch the gods and through that communion be filled with divine

inspiration, his vision and communication clear and sure, both between himself and the spirit world and between himself and those he is working for in the mundane world. So his *awen* flows, clear and bright energy of healing.

There is little evidence of what position vates held 2,000 years ago, and prior to that it is likely that the role of the Ovate was blended with that of the Druid, as a priest and physician. When the Roman culture became politically dominant, while the Bards survived and Druids were suppressed into secrecy, the Ovates as healers and seers, slipped into the background, becoming the wise folk of communities, the herbalists and magicians.

They remained elusive; there is no mention of Ovates in the medieval literature, though the Welsh word *ofydd* is mentioned, translating as ‘philosopher’, and the Classical texts most often described the *vates* as ‘natural philosophers’. In Ireland, the word *fathi*, derived from *vates*, means ‘prophets’ or ‘seers’, though there is no direct evidence that these were a specific section within the educated classes of society; in the medieval literature prophecies are attributed to Druids, *filidh* or Christian monks.

There is little to tell us then who the Ovates were. But if we cast our imagination back to Iron Age Europe, the priest working the Ovate role would have been a source of great security through the hardest moments of life, taking people through their greatest fears, guiding them with his profound understanding of the natural world. He would have brought women through childbirth with herbs and incantations, and held people through sickness, through insanity and through crises blamed on the spirit worlds. He would have ushered them into death. We know that the power of these priests was strong, if only through the comments made by Classical writers on the way in which the Celtic people lived and died without fear of death, assured that they would live again.

The modern Ovate, too, works with these mysteries of time and the cycles of life. His focus is on the nature of life and death, on the healing powers of release within life and at its end, and within the nourishing darkness of the cauldron of rebirth: the womb. As he calls through the mists to the ancestral spirits, he is aware of the current of life, from spiritual wisdom to genetic inheritance, that flows from those souls through us and into our descendants. As he honours the flow, on every level he prepares the way for creation, for the beauty of birth.

Connecting with your source of inspiration, if possible outside, allow a question to arise until you have it clear in your mind.

Without losing the energy, remain open and relaxed, look around you, letting some aspect of your environment draw your attention. What does it tell you, in its pattern, that answers your question?

Druids

First learning to listen, the Bard extends his powers to hear the worlds of spirit and express them perfectly through his own craft. The Ovate extends further, to see and interact with spirit, allowing *awen* to flow through his soul as vision and healing. The Druid goes further still: he walks into the otherworlds.

The third drop of *awen* which landed on Gwion's thumb conferred the gift of shapeshifting: the ability to leave one's normal form and the mentality to slide into another, to perceive the world from that alternate state and either to respond from there or to bring information back and then take appropriate action.

So the Druid walks between the worlds, between forms, and acts as a bridge linking realities.

With these skills, the Druid of two millennia past was the peace-maker, the judicial authority, the principal source of learning, the official in all matters of religion, ceremony and etiquette. In a widely uneducated society, Druids were the learned few. They created and maintained the social structure of their day, to such an extent that, despite the shifting tides of peoples and influences across our nations, it is easy to imagine how much of modern society is based on that distant Druidic framework.

It was said by Classical writers to have taken up to 20 years to become a Druid, though as the Druids measured their calendar in lunar cycles, it is possible that the time may have accorded with the lunar span of 19 years.

Through much of the Classical literature Druids were acknowledged as profound philosophers. Their reputation was widely known: Clement of Alexandria even suggested that the study of philosophy itself has its origin amongst the Celtic people. Though the Druids' spiritual doctrine was retained in memory as an oral tradition, being kept both sacred and exclusive to initiates in that way, it was not as if they were isolated from the development of thought across the rest of Europe and Asia. They used Greek letters for all matters needing literacy and were highly numerate, reportedly using Pythagorean principles, with which they developed their knowledge of astronomy and astrology. It is recorded that Druids knew of mountains on the moon, and the size and shape of the Earth. And as the holders of knowledge, they controlled the education of their society.

In terms of science, the calculations that gave prediction and understanding about natural phenomena also gave power to the Druids, as did their knowledge of the Earth's resources. Within Bronze and Iron Age Europe the art of metal working was critical to a community's strength and safety; in the main this is what gave the Celtic people their cultural advantage. A specialist group of Druids, alchemists called the *Pheryllt*, mythically based in the town of Emrys in the mountains of north Wales, were said to be responsible for developments in smithcraft.

Druids also held power in matters of law, acting as judge and jury in disputes within the community. Able to listen and see beyond what was superficially presented, working within their own complex legal system, they would settle arguments and make decisions to resolve crises. We may presume that such decisions were taken in consultation with the gods, the spirits of the land and the ancestors, for if the wrong decision were made the spirits would be angered and chaos ensue. As well, the Druid dealt with criminals and set punishments, Classical texts stating this to be especially true in the case of murderers. So the Druids held power over the lives of all in the community and could effectively shame a wrongdoer into the position of an outcast, an untouchable, by banning the individual from attending rites of sacrifice. This was

understood to be the ‘heaviest penalty’ – with a cultural belief of reincarnation, capital punishment was understood to be a significantly easier fate.

The Druids’ involvement in human sacrifice remains an awkward issue. Druids were the theologians of their society, orchestrating and overseeing every rite and celebration, and offerings made to the gods and the spirits of the land changed over time. One of the complaints levelled against the Druids of Gaul by the Romans was their use of human sacrifice, be it by impaling, hanging, burning, drowning or eviscerating. There are also references to human sacrifice as a form of divination, victims being disembowelled and omens read in their death throes. It is tempting to want our spiritual ancestors to be less bloody, yet we know before the Romans stopped the practice Celtic warriors took the heads of their enemies as trophies. It is an expression of the era: Vercingetorix, the leader of the Gallic rebellion, was ritually killed in Rome as part of Caesar’s triumph in 45 BCE, despite Caesar being one of the writers who most vigorously condemns the Celts for practicing human sacrifice.

As soon as the Romans took over they outlawed the practice and, though archaeological evidence is somewhat lacking, we assume it ceased by the end of the first century CE in Britain and Gaul, though it may have survived a little longer in Ireland and Scotland.

The Druids’ use of animal sacrifice was not a problem for the Pagan Romans, who practiced it themselves. When Christianity spread through Europe, practises did change, though slowly. Giraldus Cambrensis refers to horse sacrifice in Ireland being part of the inauguration rite of kings as late as the twelfth century, while folklore tells of animals sacrificed well into the last century, though these offerings were made by farmers, not Druids.

With power over religious practice, education and law, the areas of trade and no doubt marriage and other contracts were also under the Druids’ control. They were advisers to the tribal kings, defined protocol and taught the heirs. The Druid in modern society has, needless to say, none of the political power of his spiritual ancestors and on the whole he would not want it. Yet there are many underlying aspects of practice which are still present today.

The role of the Druid is still based on the ability to work as a bridge and the training he undertakes for this role is focused on his increasing abilities to empathize and shapeshift, walking deeper into other worlds and understanding the nature of different realities and illusions.

The realities which the Druid brings together are many and varied, and depend upon the special knowledge and interest of the individual. Some Druids teach, passing on their spiritual and philosophical heritage and bridging gaps in understanding, either working closely with a few apprentices or teaching many students, if less directly and intensely. There are a number who work as teachers in general education, sharing their enthusiasm for learning and their spiritual inspiration with the children of our society.

Others work as counsellors and guides, in law, business or government, or as Druids in their community, resolving conflicts and creating bridges where communication

has broken down in personal relationships or between organizations. Bridges may be forged between the sexes, between cultures and religions or in any area affected by a chasm of separation.

The modern Druid might also work as a priest to his community. With the clear premise that Druid priests do not present themselves as the only possible medium between the gods and the people, he will act as a facilitator of ceremony where every person can be as deeply involved as they would wish to be. For those who cannot yet themselves access the realms of the gods or the power of *awen*, the priest offers an open door, while for those who can experience the beauty and exhilaration themselves he merely guides the form of the communal rite. The Druid priest or priestess also performs rites of passage, enabling individuals to cross into new areas of their lives, including those spiritual rites of passage that are levels of initiation.

Druids who work shamanically will often work for their community or for the land as a bridge between the worlds. Walking through the spirit planes, the Druid can make changes closer to the energy, more precisely moving aspects with the pattern of creation. As a shapeshifter, the Druid can bridge the separation between species, between souls, guiding us to a world of tolerance and harmony.

In what way do you work naturally as a Druid? Think of a conflict in your world, perhaps a personal relationship, a misunderstanding, and, connecting again with your source of inspiration, work on bridging the gap, healing the problem, giving thanks to your inspirers.