

# THE JEALOUSY OF THE GODS AND THE ORIGIN OF POETRY

*This is the last chapter of the book 'Ploughing the  
Clouds: The Search for Irish Soma' by Peter  
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“Guard the sacrifice! guard the lord of the sacrifice!’ whereby he utters freed speech ... meaning to say ... ‘Guard thou the Soma feasts all around!’”

This freed speech of the bard, this poetry, is also summed up in the seed-syllable mantra Hin. The Brahmanas explain that iv,2,2,1 1. Having then wrapped up (the bowl in) a fringed filteringcloth, he utters ‘Hin!’ Now that same speech (Vak. fern.), being unsupported, lay exhausted. By means of the ‘Hin’ the gods infused breath into that exhausted speech, for the ‘Hin’ is breath, the ‘Hin’ is indeed breath: hence one cannot utter the sound ‘hin’ after closing his nostrils. By means of that breath she rose again, for when one who is exhausted takes breath, he rises again. And in like manner does he now infuse breath into the exhausted speech by means of the ‘Hin,’ and through that breath she rises again. Thrice he utters the ‘Hin,’ for threefold is the sacrifice.

12. He then says (Vag. S. VII, 21), ‘Soma becometh pure!’ For that (speech) which, for fear of the Asura-Raksas, they (the gods) did not utter, he now utters and reveals when all is conquered and free from danger and injury: therefore he says, ‘Soma becometh pure,’

“Soma becometh pure: turn ye back!... for speech speaks not but what is conceived by the mind” (B iv,6,7,19). Turn back to Soma—and you too shall be Indra, Finn, Vena, Carroll O’Daly (and the Queen of Snakes) in one; your speech will be happiness, hope, joy, all in one; you will become the bard.

When the inextinguishable light shines, the world where the sun was placed, in that immortal, unfading world, O Purifier, place me. O drop of Soma, flow for Indra. (Rg Veda 9.1 13.7)

The road to Tir na nOg, the Irish “Land of the Young,” passes through every myth and fairy tale in the world. In stories that can be called structurally older, access to the Land is easy; in fact, in illo tempore (as Eliade says) the gods walked on the earth, animals spoke, and it was always June (the month in which one should drink Boyne water for poetic inspiration). But in later tales, some difficulty has arisen, some blockage of the way. In the Fenian Cycle, Finn’s son Oism (or in some variants the hero Caoilte) attains the Land of Summer, but after a time grows homesick for Ireland. His fairy wife reluctantly gives him permission to visit the mortal world again, but warns him never to dismount from the enchanted white horse, nor let his foot touch the soil of Ireland. Oism returns, but unknown to him, centuries have passed. No one has ever heard of Finn and the Fena except one old storyteller; even the people have grown smaller and weaker.

Oism sees a group of peasants struggling to move a boulder. Out of pity he removes one foot from the stirrup and kicks the stone out of the road. But he loses his balance and falls from the horse, which vanishes in a puff. Oism at once is transformed into a weak old man. Stranded in Ireland, alone and bitter, he meets St. Patrick. Oism hates Christianity, which appears to him as the antithesis of every Fenian value—but despite himself, he rather likes St. Patrick. The decrepit and unrepentant pagan spends his remaining years regaling (and shocking) Patrick with tales of the good old days and with unflattering comparisons of priests and Druids, prayer and the hunt. Patrick is repelled but also fascinated. He causes Oism’s words to be written down, thus acting as Ireland’s first folklorist. The amorphous freedom of oral culture gives way to the linear constraints of literacy, the

authoritarianism of the author. Tir na nOg is recalled but never regained. The snakes have been banished; the Soma-function is “lost.”

This loss is again reflected in every folklore of the world. It symbolizes every loss, both individual and collective; the loss of the original order (or chaos) of intimacy, the loss of primitive anarchy and tribal autonomy, the loss of excess and its replacement by scarcity, the loss of the Gift and its conquest by the Commodity, the loss of polymorphous co-sensuality and its absorption into the rigid structures of kinship and marriage. The Land of Youth is now also the Land

of the Dead. Utopia recedes into time and space, which are now experienced and defined as dystopian, as a vale of tears, and a realm of becoming and corruption. If body and soul or spirit were once one (as in the ecstasy of Soma), they are now irrevocably two. Spirit recedes farther and farther from body: the gods are in heaven and no longer walk on Earth. The “Gnostic trace” is now embedded within

every form of spirituality. Distrust of the body grows throughout the Late Neolithic, which learns to propitiate the violence of the sacred with the violence of human sacrifice and cannibalism. With the Age of Bronze the full-fledged State appears, making use of a proto-dualist theology to legitimize its realm of scarcity and immiseration. In such a religion, the Soma-function plays no real role, and can only be ritualized out of existence by allegorizing the real “drug” into an emblem of itself—an empty husk upon the altar of regret—and finally

into a mere story for children. If Soma was forgotten in all the Old World (except for a few remote corners of Siberia or Africa), it was not because such-and-such a plant or mushroom literally disappeared. No climatic changes or other mysterious freaks of nature were responsible for the loss of Soma. The Soma-function was repressed because it finally had to be repressed in a religion and society

The Soma-sacrifice “is” Soma because he is an intoxicated god; he offers the oblation (he obliterates) Soma as sacrifice to the intoxicated god who is Soma himself: a continual circulation or ourbours of Soma from itself to itself, from disappearance to reappearance, from theft to rescue. From the pure light of this whirling mandala emerges the Logos, the word of words, the magical formula that links self and Self, poetry as the obliteration of all semantic traps and the restoration of language as divine intoxication, poetry as joy.

“The [Soma-priest] asks, ‘Sacrificer, what is here?’—‘Happiness!’ he says.—‘(Be) that ours in common!’ says the [Soma-priest] in a low voice” (B

111,5,4,16), as if revealing a secret. In a passage explaining how the Soma-priest must thank the Sacrificer for various gifts given during the ceremony, these words occur: “‘Who hath given it? To whom hath he given it? Hope hath given it, for Hope hath he given it: Hope is the giver, Hope the receiver’” (B iv,3,4,32).

Soma (as Benjamin or Bloch might say) is the site of utopian desire.

no other giver of joy, O lord!” (B iii,9,4,24)

“May the mind obtain thee! ... I walk [or move] along the wide air” (B 252-

3, n. 3). Like the Maruts, the storm gods, like the Taoist Immortals who have eaten the magic mushroom, the bards walk on air and ride the clouds.

“Wherefore it has been said by the rsi, ‘The sky hath not reached thy greatness’ ... And verily, for whomsoever, knowing this, they draw that cup of Soma, he stands forth over everything here, and everything here is beneath him” (B

iv,5,3,3).

humanity. I sympathize with Vrtra, Sharvan, and Medb, as representatives of oppressed autochthonous people, but more relevant here is the negative symbolism of Vrtra as the “bad father,” the oppressive power of false authority and mauvaise conscience, the jealous giant who stands between us and enlightenment. Against this power, Indra and his companions can be seen as rebels, ontological guerrillas, raiders of the lost Ark, models for our own struggle, for our own will to power (or self-empowerment, in the jargon of the New Age). The Dublin Uprising of 1916, for all its morbid romanticism, must be seen as an attempted rescue of Soma—because it was fought in the name of Poetry. Soma is Poetry; the origin of poetry is Soma. On this point (as we have seen), Irish and Vedic sources agree. On one level, the whole Soma story concerns language. Consciousness and language are one, as a flower and its scent, and yet also two. Language is a trap into which consciousness

falls, a Procrustean bed or torture grill that cuts off the self from its divinity; and yet it is precisely language itself that overcomes language, that restores the divine and reconciles all disharmonies by the meta-linguistic power of poetry.

Soma is not merely a plant; poetry is not merely language. In the Karmodyabrdhmodya, verse 34, we read:

“I ask you: What is the ultimate limit of the earth?

I ask you: What is the central point of the Universe?

I ask you: what is the semen of the cosmic horse?

I ask you: What is the ultimate dwelling of speech?”

The answers to these questions are given in the following verse (35): this altar is the ultimate limit of the earth; this sacrifice is the center of the Universe; this Soma is the semen of the cosmic horse; this brahman is the ultimate dwelling of speech. (NicoUs 1978, 66)

based on rigid hierarchy. With Soma anyone could be a brahmin; nothing is more democratic than the entheogen, the god within.

111,1,4,1. All formulas of the consecration are audgrabhana (elevatory), since he who is consecrated elevates himself (ud-grabh) from this world to the world of the gods. He elevates himself by means of these same formulas, and therefore they say that all formulas of the consecration are ‘audgrabhana.’ Now they also (specially) designate these intermediate ones as ‘audgrabhana,’ because these are libations, and a libation is a sacrifice. For the muttering of a sacrificial formula is an occult (form of sacrifice), but a libation is a direct (form of sacrifice: hence it is, by this same sacrifice that he elevates himself from this world to the world of the gods. Could it be that Soma was lost because the gods were jealous, angry at Promethean humanity for its aspirations to godhead? (We recall that the Tuatha Dc Danaan are jealous of the quicken tree and have set Sharvan to guard it from

humans. Medb too is Jealous of her berries.)

The Rg Veda’s authors (at least the later ones, including the commentators of the Brahmanas) are already aware of this conflict. Indra (the “nobles”) would like to keep Soma from the Maruts (“the people”) but cannot; in fact, his generosity seems more like a geis (Irish for “magical injunction or prohibition,” binding upon the one on whom it is placed) than a real attribute. Like Finn, Indra is both generous and jealous.

Now, once upon a time,

3. By means of the sacrifice the gods obtained that supreme authority which they now wield, “they spake, ‘How may this (world) of ours be unattainable by men!’ They then sipped the sap of the sacrifice, as bees would suck out honey; and having drained the sacrifice and effaced its traces by means of the sacrificial stake, they disappeared: and because they effaced (scattered, yopaya) therewith, therefore it is called yupa (stake).

In other words, the gods take advantage of their central position, symbolized by the stake or axis mundi, to absorb back into themselves all earthly traces of

Soma.

4. Now this was heard by the rsis. They collected the sacrifice, just as this sacrifice is collected (prepared); for even so does he now collect the sacrifice, when he offers those (audgrabhana) libations.

The rsis, primordial sages, outwit the gods and counteract their jealousy: they rescue Soma not from evil Vrtra, but from the “good” gods themselves. This explains why “the sacrifice is a man’ (B iii,2,1,1, my italics)—in fact, the sacrifice is Prajapati (the cosmogonic Adam) or Manu (the first man). The Soma priest’s head is the Soma cart or hut, his “crest-lock” the sacrificial stake, the tent his belly, the two fires his feet (B iii,5,3,1-6). He recreates the cosmogenesis, since his various offerings and oblations circulate within the enclosed and sacred space of Earth and Sky conjoined and held together by the Soma ecstasy. Soma resists the splitting apart of spirit and body into any dualistic antagonism; Soma reconciles water and fire, earth and air; Soma balances the in-breathing and the out-breathing, the day and night; Soma creates the poetic meters or sacred measurements

of time itself; Soma reaches heaven and earth. “Svaha!” as the hymn puts it; “Hail!” (B iii,8,4,17-18).

17. ‘Go thou to heaven and earth. Hail!’ For, Pragupati, having created the living beings, enclosed them between heaven and earth, and so these beings are enclosed between heaven and earth. And in like manner does this (offerer), having created living beings, enclose them between heaven and earth.

18. He then makes additional by-offerings (atiupayag). Were he not

1960s would still dare dream that psychedelics make everyone and anyone into Blakean bards; nevertheless, no one would dare claim that nothing has changed. On some psycho-seismic level, in some deep tectonic stratum of the

Imaginal and the Social, the psychedelic revolution has already occurred.

Outwardly, on the level of law and the consensus-discourse, we may have lost the battle of the sixties. When power adopted LSD (in the CIA’s MK-ULTRA project), the “jealousy of the gods” appeared to win over the democratic agitation of the rsis. But Power’s victory proved pyrrhic at best, and in the long run quite empty. The Soma-function refused to be perverted to the uses of oppression—it unleashed its wild powers to thwart this theft of its secret, and in the fallout a great

many brains were fried. Spooks and hippies alike (and sometimes it was hard to tell the difference) fell prey to the Queen of the Snakes in her most nightmarish form. But Indra protected his own: a few gandharvas, apsarases, and Maruts survived.

The struggle is for Earth herself, mother of plants and animals, and for the sky, our atmospheric Father. Every material substance, every imaginal experience serves potentially to unlock the doors of perception. The function of those who would be Soma protectors has widened to include an engagement with the intricate wholeness and multivalent complexity of all relations between consciousness

and Nature. I see the entire liberatory project of our era transpiring under the sign of Soma. In the course of this experiment in comparative literature, I have not only thoroughly convinced myself that the ancient Celts possessed a Soma ritual, but I have also come to see the entire “revolution of everyday life” as an insurrection

of intoxicated bards. Soma has restored my faith (however existentialist) in the uprising that promises “all power to the Imagination”—and to the sacred body of Earth—and to the material bodily principle of festal

opium and hashish carried out by such writers as DeQuincy, Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Mikhail Bakhtin, Ernst Jünger, and Mircea Eliade.

Artaud's peyote journey to Mexico should also be considered in this light. In Ireland, I believe, knowledge of the Soma-plant (probably Amanita) may have 57 See B iv,5.1() for a list; and Persephone's Journey contains a discussion of the putika mushroom, one of the traditional substitutes. Ephedra is used in Iran, where Zoroastrians still celebrate the Haoma ceremony. I once corresponded with S. Mahdihassan, a Pakistani scholar (whose work is cited in Needham 1954), who claimed that pomegranate was in fact Soma, and not merely a substitute survived as late as the eighteenth century, and vanished only with the dissolution of the College of Bards (see Daniel Corkery, Hidden Ireland). Even today, the visitor to Ireland must admit that porter and whiskey (uisce) unleash torrents of spontaneous poetry, or at least witty banter, in those insular Celts who have stubbornly preserved so much archaic lore. If television threatens to erode the viable cultural traditions of Ireland, as it has done elsewhere, nevertheless the Somafunction will not vanish. Soma was broadcast wholesale to the world in the 1950s and 1960s in a dozen new forms, and some very ancient ones as well. Soma has been rescued again and everyone knows it. The forces of hierarchic order may engage in violent and expensive attempts to rebottle the genie, but short of universal brainwashing (which would itself require some negative form of Soma such as Huxley envisioned in Brave New World, and for which the CIA once searched so diligently)—such attempts will all prove quite futile. As I write, "United Europe" seems in the process of decriminalizing hemp—and no doubt a rational policy on other psychotropics will follow, unless, of course, the War on Drugs proves simply too profitable to abandon to the forces of legalization. A discussion of the psychedelic revolution lies beyond the scope of this essay; I would simply like to underline three of the motifs in the Soma-complex—that of spiritual egalitarianism, entheogenesis, and poetic inspiration. No one who lived through the

to make additional by-offerings, there would only be as many living beings as were created in the beginning; they would not be propagated; but by making additional by-offerings he indeed propagates them; whence creatures are again born here repeatedly.

It is true that separation has already occurred, "long ago"—but it is also true that Soma restores this loss. Soma is the antithesis of all loss. Approached via the correct ritual (the proper set and setting) Soma makes us god because Soma "is" humanity in its true and theomorphic form. "Soma doubtless is the visible

Prajapati" (B 341 n. 1). In discussing why the sacrificer must make gifts {daksinas) to the officiating priests, the Brahmanas explain:

iv,3,4,I. Now, they slay the sacrifice, when they spread (perform) it:—to wit, when they press out the king (Soma), they slay him; when they quiet the victim, they slay it; and with mortar and pestle, with the upper and nether millstone, they slay the havis offering.

2. When slain, that sacrifice was no longer vigorous. By means of daksinas (gifts to the priests) the gods invigorated it: hence the name daksina, because thereby they invigorated (dakshay) it. Whatever, therefore, fails in this sacrifice, when slain, that he now invigorates by means of gifts to the priests; then the sacrifice becomes indeed successful: for this reason he makes gifts to the priests.

3. Now at the Haviryagna, indeed, they give as little as six or twelve (cows), but no Soma-sacrifice should have daksinas of less than a hundred. For he, Pragapati, forsooth, is the visible sacrifice; and man is nearest to Pragapati, and he has a life of a hundred years, a hundred powers, a hundred energies. Only by a hundred he invigorates him, and not by less than a hundred: wherefore no Soma-sacrifice should have

daksinas of less than a hundred; nor should any one officiate as a priest for a sacrificer at a (Soma-sacrifice) where less than a hundred are given,—‘lest he should be an eyewitness when they will but slay and not invigorate him (Soma).’

4. Now, truly, there are two kinds of gods; for the gods, forsooth, are the gods; and the learned Brahmans versed in sacred lore are the human gods. And the sacrifice to them is twofold, oblations (being the sacrifice) to the gods, and gifts to the priests being that to the human gods, to the learned Brahmans versed in sacred lore. With oblations, forsooth, one gratifies the gods, and with gifts to the priests, the human gods, the learned Brahmans versed in sacred lore. These two kinds of gods, when gratified, convey him to the heavenly world.

The giving away of property at the Soma feast bears a close typological resemblance to potlatch. The Brahmanas mention a special cup of Soma that must be drawn and consecrated “at a (sacrifice) where the entire property is given away” (B iv,6,1,15). Soma is treated as a commodity when it is purchased from its autochthonous owners—but Soma restores the economy of the gift and of excess by means of an ecstasy that manifests as a mad generosity.

56 The priest has taken over the former role of the shaman: to insure the fertility of the animals by propitiating the spirits.

The Soma-function obviously survives the loss of Soma—otherwise there would be no “in-wit,” no poetry. This survival is symbolized by the use of Soma substitutes. But just as the Soma-function does not depend on any one plant, it might also be said that the Soma-substitute-function may attach itself to a myriad plants, objects, or procedures. Tantra restores the Soma-function by transcending

caste, and by ritualizing the use of meat and wine (forbidden to pious Hindus), of sexual pleasure outside marriage (maithunci), by using kundalini (snake) yoga, and hemp. Alcohol cannot be considered as a candidate for Soma-hood, as some early Western scholars believed, since the sources never mention any interval of time, which is necessary for fermentation, between the preparation and consumption

of it. Nevertheless, alcohol in its Dionysan mode (e.g. mead) must be considered a substitute. Cannabis is consumed nowadays in India, as bhang, in a liquid form prepared in a manner very reminiscent of Soma. It is pulverized between two stones or with a mortar and pestle, then held in a cloth while water is poured over it. The strained green liquid is consumed (always with some prayer to Siva), while the husks are discarded. Hemp lacks the power of the major entheogens but is nevertheless a dependable psychotropic; thus it simultaneously exhibits some Soma-function and some Soma-substitute-function.

The point is that the Soma-function is never completely “lost.” Wasson, for example, found the mushroom cult alive and thriving in Mexico, and Meso-America knows of tribes that use as many as sixty different psychotropics. If all natives of Turtle Island are descended from Siberians (it seems unlikely to me, but it’s current academic orthodoxy)—and if all mushroom cults are descended from Arctic shamanism—then Maria Sabina’s psilocybe mushrooms may be Soma plants, not only typologically, but historically. Even in Europe, an author as late as Rabelais explicates the Soma-function of food and wine, and often indicates the entheogenic properties of hemp, which had perhaps never been forgotten, at least at the sub-literate level of European wise women and herb doctors. The witches, who (as C. Ginzberg has demonstrated) inherited certain myths and practices from ancient chthonic paganism, experimented with the dark side of the Soma-function, using poisons like belladonna and aconite, datura, DMT-containing toad skin, and so on. The modern rediscovery of Soma by literate civilization begins not with Wasson or the lab work of A. Hofmann, but with experiments in