The Wild Hunt: A Mythological Language of Magic*

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Metamorphoses, cavalcades, ecstasies, followed by the egress of the soul in the shape of an animal—these are different paths to a single goal. Between animals and souls, animals and the dead, animals and the beyond, there exists a profound connection. Carlo Ginzburg (1992: 263).

The discussion developed in this chapter will show how the mythological corpus of the ‘Wild Hunt’, a generic name given to numerous folk myths associated with ‘soul-ravening’ chases, often led by a god, goddess, or mythological figure accompanied by a cavalcade of souls of the dead, opens awareness with the cyclical process of nature through magical consciousness, an expanded sensory awareness. The mythology of the Wild Hunt, as a language of magical consciousness, creates a framework to experience what Carlo Ginzburg, in the quote above, calls the ‘profound connection’ between animals, souls, the dead, and the beyond; it primarily concerns an initiation into the wild, untamed forces of nature in its dark and chthonic aspects. This mythology comprises what Ginzburg has termed a Eurasian substratum of shamanic beliefs (1992) and forms a significant component of contemporary practitioners’ ideas about otherworldly spiritual realms. For those engaging with the Wild Hunt the aim is not only participation with animals, souls, and the dead, but also with the ritualized cycle of life and death. This experience runs counter to anthropologist Maurice Bloch’s (1992) universalistic and dualistic assertion that there is an underlying theme to all ritual that negates biological life processes in favour of a transcendent realm of spirit.

Soul-Ravening Chases

The night flight is an ancient theme in folk beliefs and it involves an ecstatic journey made by the living into the realm of the dead.

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According to Carlo Ginzburg, in Europe from the eleventh century onwards apparitions of furious armies were frequently referred to in references in Latin literary texts. A ‘throng of the dead’ consisting of anyone from soldiers killed in battle to unbaptized children were led by various mythological characters on a journey to the beyond (1992: 136). One such leader was Gwyn ap Nudd. In Celtic folklore Gwyn ap Nudd is a wild huntsman who rides a demon horse and hunts in waste places at night with a pack of white-bodied and red-eared ‘dogs of hell’. Cheering on his hellhounds in a fearful chase, he hunts souls. A British god of battle, the otherworld and the dead, Gwyn ap Nudd is a psychopomp who conducts the slain into Hades and then rules over them. He knows when and where all the great warriors fell, for he gathered their souls upon the field of battle, and now rules over them in Hades, or upon some ‘misty mountain-top’ (Squire 1912: 255). Later semi-Christianised stories place Gwyn ap Nudd over a brood of devils in the Celtic otherworld of Annwyn, lest they should destroy the present race. In Arthurian romances he was king of the underworld and had a duty to control imprisoned devils and prevent them from destroying humans (Briggs 1976: 212–213).

There are many leaders of the Wild Hunt in folklore.1 In Teutonic mythology it is Woden (Odin or Wotan) who leads the hunt accompanied by fearsome ghostly dogs.2

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1 Le Grand V eneur hunted with dogs in the forests of Fontainebleau in France; Hackelberg sold himself to the Devil for permission to hunt until doomsday in Germany; and in Britain King Arthur served as goblin huntsman. The same mythology is said to prevail among all Aryan peoples with little difference in detail. The souls of the dying, according to Wirt Sikes, we carried away by the howling winds or the dogs of Hermes. Hermes conducted the souls of the dead to the world below and was, at times, interchangeable with his dog. This relates to the early Aryan conception of seeing the wind as a howling dog or wolf which speeds over the house tops causing the inmates to tremble with fear lest their souls should follow them ([1880] 1973: 144).

2 The spirit of this folklore has been captured recently by the poet Martin Newell in a poem about ‘Black Shuck’, a ghostly black hound of Odin. The story of Black Shuck apparently originates with the Vikings who brought the tale with them when they invaded East Anglia—as they ‘sprang from their long ships and stormed ashore in the mist, they brought with them the legend of their ghostly dog’. Black Shuk has remained part and parcel of the local folklore of the region. ‘Padding the quiet roads at night’, he is described as having a shaggy black coat and eyes as big as saucers that glow like red-hot coals. He must be treated with respect because a sighting of him is thought to mean that you, or somebody who you know, will shortly die. You might meet Black Shuck at a crossroads, on a bridge, ford, or in a lonely country lane. He is said to haunt the boundary lines of ancient parishes, and is often encountered on