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Crafting the Web:
Canadian Heathens and their Quest for a
'Virtuous' Self

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Declaration

January 2, 2015

I declare that this thesis has been entirely composed by me and is my own original work, with acknowledgement of other sources, and that the work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Joshua James Harmsworth". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J' and 'H'.

Joshua James Harmsworth

Abstract

Focusing primarily on a number of small Heathen communities known as ‘kindreds’ and their ‘kith’ near Ottawa, Toronto and Montréal in Canada, this thesis approaches Heathenry as a potential means of ‘everyday’ self- and world-making. It examines the ways in which the ‘virtuous’ words and deeds of my interlocutors helped them to actively effect certain formations of self and world, and attempts to capture the significance of Heathenry as a practical process of formative interpersonal engagement and self-fashioning. Paying special attention to the ‘playful’ character of this process, it explores Heathenry as an aesthetic and ethical project of self-making – a project that produces and underpins particular kinds of ‘excellence’ and ‘authentic’ subjects.

Emphasizing the creative poiesis entailed in this project, my thesis explores the ways in which Heathenry enables people to locate and orient themselves within a shared field of potentiality as subjects and agents questing for a ‘virtuous self’. I argue that both the end and means of this quest entails a reorientation in people’s aesthetic sensibility and personal ethical quality. The thesis concludes by illustrating how this highly personalized yet shared process of self formation facilitates people’s continuing journey to become increasingly ‘worthy’ Heathen subjects; that is, selves realized through their own virtuous acts of narrative objectification and those of others. As skillful and skillfully fashioned subjects, I suggest that my informants became able to experience their own potential virtuous development as a development of the ‘cosmos’ itself – a development, that is, of the very realms their quests embodied and manifested, and throughout which their virtuous selves came to be projected.

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Lastly, I would like to apologize. Being a community of accomplished scholars and self-identified individuals of 'strong conviction', I present this thesis knowing that some of those who were kind enough to speak with me may read what I have written and dislike or disagree with what has been said. Throughout my discussion I have attempted to depict their lives and experiences as sympathetically as possible while still adopting a critical perspective that they will hopefully find both interesting and insightful.

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Introduction

Hail & Horn 2012

I arrived at Raven's Knoll for the inaugural Hail & Horn Gathering early on the first day in the hope of doing a bit of exploring and photographing before the other attendees began showing up. Once I had finished registering and erecting my tent, however, I was distressed to find that a number of others had apparently had the same idea. Panicked by the thought that I had missed an opportunity to collect some priceless ethnographic tidbit, I anxiously collected my battered notebook and camera and began making my way towards the newly erected permanent Heathen vé (sacred enclosure).



Figure 1: Hail & Horn Odin god pole (by Jonathan D. assisted by Erik L.)

As I was walking past the Rúnatýr Kindred enclave, or camping space, Jonathan and Erik, who, judging by their sunburns, had already been at the Knoll for some time, yelled out a greeting. Deciding that my visit to the vé could perhaps wait until the scorching June sun had sunk a bit lower in the sky, I turned towards them and returned their salutation. Once we had shaken hands and exchanged pleasantries, Jonathan pointed to the recently carved Odin god pole (fig. 1) and quietly asked, 'So, what do you think?' After studying the object for a moment, I replied that I was

genuinely impressed. With his hammer and chisel still in hand and a smile on his face, he thanked me and continued:

You know, this is the first time I have made something like this and it means a lot. It fills me with pride that my word fame [as a craftsman] is good enough that I was asked to do this! I am also proud to know that this pole that I have sweated and bled for will be standing after I have gone. [...] I have put my initials in runes on the back so that people will always think of me when they see it.

‘[G]lory never dies, for the man who is able to achieve it’¹

Taken from the popular historical Heathen text known as the *Hávamál*, this quote was particularly popular amongst my interlocutors. This was in part because it supported their insistence that being Heathen meant fashioning one’s self into a being of such a high personal quality that it was recognized, by that self and others, as being ‘worthy’.² In the simplest sense, this personal worth was seen by them as being a product of their ‘renown’ – that is, notoriety both within and beyond the Heathen community – which was in turn generated by both them and others based upon the perceived virtue, or ‘excellent’, ‘desirable’ Heathen quality of their ‘everyday’ selves and actions. It was this personal virtue and worth that I would suggest Jonathan was pursuing above through his fashioning of the Hail & Horn Odin god pole.

Once, while Jonathan and I were chatting about his experience of carving the god pole, he said that it (or rather the effort and skill that had gone into making it) had helped him ‘become better’. The reason, he continued, was that the god pole allowed him to display, to both himself and others ‘who [he] is’ – that is, his quality as a contemporary French-Canadian Heathen. The way in which he believed this object and the skilled crafting acts that had produced it allowed him to display and increase his ‘worth and renown as a Heathen’ was striking. Though he regularly worked with wood and other materials as part of his ‘personal’ Heathenry (highly personalized Heathen practices undertaken in the absence of other Heathens) he said that he had never undertaken any task as delicate, ‘powerful and important [...] to me

¹ Translated by Larrington 1996: 24

² The *Hávamál* is one of a collection of short works that can be found in the Icelandic *Codex Regius*, which was compiled by an unknown author in Iceland c.1270.

and the community as [the god pole]’. Indeed, he said that he had initially been ‘both a little worried and scared but very honored’ when they had asked him to carve the pole. This was because he had never attempted to make anything like the pole in private, let alone ‘for the whole Raven’s Knoll community and for Odin!’ Despite this, he said he had decided to ‘accept the challenge’ as he felt it would allow him to ‘display [his] skill and pride in [him]self to any who see it, honor Odin [... and] build renown’. I would suggest both the carving practice and object itself allowed Jonathan to willingly and actively project the perceived virtuous quality of his carving Heathen self into the world where that quality could be observed, evaluated, affected and then embodied – by him and any others who came into contact with and indeed *through* that object.

Though the god pole was a particularly stunning example, I posit that each of my interlocutors were engaged in a similar, if highly personalized, process of virtuous Heathen ‘striving’ and ‘becoming’. It is this highly subjective and ‘private’ yet fundamentally shared and ‘public’ quest for personal virtue that I shall explore in this thesis – an exploration that will attempt to grasp how my interlocutors practiced, embodied and came to instantiate this Heathen virtue through a dialogical project of self-making. Throughout the following chapters I will suggest that my interlocutors’ engagement with and through Heathenry might be approached as an attempt on their part to actively reorient their everyday experiences of self, world and other so that each became sites where Heathen virtue could be encountered, embodied and increased. This process was dependent upon their effecting formations of self that were opened to and embedded simultaneously within the everyday world, the Heathen cosmos and the self-making attempts of others. I will posit that, within this conflated field, my informants became able to generate and experience an ‘authentic’ self whose rooted and holistic, yet ‘unfolding’ virtuous quality allowed them to alter the experiences of narrative proliferation and fragmentation believed to be a defining characteristic of our current era.

Before I can begin, I must introduce both my interlocutors and a few key concepts. First I will consider the contexts in which my fieldwork occurred, the methods I employed while undertaking my research and those who were kind enough to take part in it. I will then discuss the contemporary shift in Western social

sensibility that has, according to some, led to the formation and proliferation of contemporary fields of practice like Heathenry.³ The ‘anthropology of religion’ and some of the key queries that have helped define the anthropological exploration of ‘religion’ historically will then be discussed. As part of this brief examination, I will also explain why I have decided to avoid construing my informants’ quest as a form of religion. My Introduction will conclude with a short chapter outline.

Contextualizing the Quest

Just as my interlocutors appeared to be questing to realize virtuous Heathen selves, my attempts at encountering and investigating those selves became a sort of quest in itself. Indeed, my original research plan saw my fieldwork taking place over fifteen months in Iceland with members of *Ásatrúarfélagið*, one of the oldest officially recognized contemporary Heathen communities still in operation today. However, after spending only three months (October–December 2010) in the Icelandic capital of Reykjavík, I was forced to discontinue my efforts and begin searching for an alternate fieldwork site. This shift in context was by no means due to a lack of community access or data. In fact, the organization and its members were extremely helpful. Furthermore, at the time of my departure I was obtaining some fascinating information on what Tse (2014) has recently referred to as ‘grounded theologies’, or the role of place-making practices in the manifestation and experience of ‘immanent transcendence’. Rather, my work within the Icelandic context was cut short due to the escalating cost of living within the country at that time due to the then ongoing Icelandic economic crisis.

One bitterly cold afternoon as I was discussing the influence Icelandic Heathenry (*Ásatrú*) had exerted over Heathenry in North America and vice versa, one of my informants related how *Ásatrúarfélagið* had recently been contacted by a number of Canadian Heathens. They continued, ‘We’ve always heard from

³ Throughout the following thesis ‘field’ will be used to denote ‘a set of loosely integrated processes, with some patterned aspects, some persistence of form, but controlled by discrepant principles of action expressed in rules of custom’ (Turner 1987: 3). I would suggest that the ‘patterned aspects’ and persistent ‘form’ that help define these fields illustrate a certain discursive quality. In other words, they might be seen as ‘preceding’ and informing subjects’ experiences. That said, I would argue that they are not rigid ‘frames’. Rather, while informing the subjects generated within them, I would suggest those subjects are also agents who can engage with and act upon those fields.

Americans and American groups but the Canadian groups are new.’ Finding this observation interesting, upon returning to Edinburgh in December 2010 I located and began doing a bit of background research into these Canadian communities by visiting their community web pages, which I located on the *Irminsul Ættir Ásatrú Page* and the *Canadian Ásatrú Portal* networking sites.⁴ Though I found that many (indeed most) of the communities listed on these sites had disbanded, I was able to find a concentration of active Heathen communities, or ‘kindreds’, in and around Ottawa and Toronto, Ontario and Montreal, Québec. My interest in these groups only grew as I began noticing a number of interesting parallels between their communities and Heathen observances and those observed in Iceland. Foremost amongst them was a reliance upon similar ‘historic’ Heathen ‘source materials’, participation in similar forms of Heathen practice, a prevalence of a number of striking representational forms which I shall discuss at length in Chapter Three and a shared emphasis upon the ‘rooting’ capacity of Heathenry – that is, Heathenry’s apparent ability to draw participants into a space where they might encounter, experience and embody a sense of ‘pastness’, ‘presence’ and ‘otherness’ in practice. Deciding that these similarities – as well as the potentially novel ways those Canadian communities might manifest those shared qualities in practice – made these eastern Canadian kindreds a viable and interesting research alternative, I began contacting them through the above networking sites and via their Facebook pages. I soon began receiving favorable responses from these groups, each of whom expressed an interest in taking part in my research. As this correspondence continued, it became apparent that the seemingly high concentration of Heathens, communities and population centers in Ontario made it a possible and practical alternative research context. Thus, I quickly established relations with Rúnatýr Kindred in Ottawa, then one of the largest and most socially active kindreds in Canada, who subsequently provided me with additional contacts in the area. In April 2011 I departed Edinburgh and arrived in Toronto to begin an additional twelve months of research that would take me across Ontario and Québec, as well as see me working with three kindreds, a constantly shifting field of Heathen practitioners who did not associate with a

⁴ See: <http://www.irminsul.org/aw/awcan.html> and <http://www.asatru.ca/>

community and a stunning variety of ‘Heathen curious’, non-Heathen and ‘pan-pagan’ individuals from across Canada.

During my time in Toronto and Ottawa, I had the pleasure of working with a large number ‘key’ informants (that is, individuals from whom data was gathered on many different occasions), as well as a number of others I met at the many small ‘public’ Heathen kindred events and larger pan-community gatherings or ‘festivals’ I attended in Ontario and Québec. On the whole, my interlocutors were well educated, with nearly all of them holding some secondary degree, whether college, university or trades. Almost half of my key Canadian informants self-identified as male, half as female and two adopted alternative gender identifications. The majority reported being of ‘European’ – Scandinavian, Germanic, Celtic and Anglo-Saxon – ‘ancestry’, and a small number of those identified themselves as being French Canadian as determined by their fluent bilingualism and place of birth (i.e. Québec). Of the small percentage that remained, half quoted First Nations ancestry and those who remained quoted a ‘mixed’ background. The majority of my Canadian interlocutors characterized themselves as ‘economically comfortable’, a status they believed was reflected in the fact that many of them owned their own homes and enjoyed long-term employment. Roughly half of them (mostly those who lived in and around Ottawa) were either employed by or were contractors for the Canadian government. A number of others were self-employed in diverse fields including childcare, metal- and woodworking and massage therapy; others worked in the non-profit sector and the rest were with either privately employed, unemployed or ‘stay at home’ parents. The majority of the individuals I spoke with in Iceland – Heathen and non-Heathen alike (e.g. leaders in the wider Icelandic political and religious community) – were male and Icelandic, though I also spoke with individuals from Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Ireland and the Czech Republic. At the time of my research, half of them were undertaking or preparing to embark upon their university studies, while the others already held secondary degrees, including master’s degrees and doctorates. Despite the economic climate in the country at the time of my visit, all but two of my Icelandic informants were employed in a variety of fields including photography, travel writing, historical research and education.

Methods and Ethics

Data was gathered in both contexts through a combination of electronic and paper questionnaires, semi-structured and unstructured interviews and extensive observations undertaken at a variety of public and private practices and events. The questionnaires I distributed to my Icelandic and Canadian informants were of a ‘short answer’ format, and were intended to provide them with a general sense of what it was I was researching, as well as an opportunity to share their personal background and some of their initial experiences of and through Heathenry.⁵ When possible, these questionnaires were distributed after I had met with them initially in an informal setting and before any interviews were scheduled. This was primarily because, as I learned quite early in my research, Heathen practitioners tend to be rather ‘wary’. Jade, then a member of Rúnatýr Kindred said, ‘As a general rule we aren’t too open if we don’t know you. We need to meet you and figure out what kind a person you are before we open up about stuff.’ Thus, once I had met with my potential informants, explained who I was and why I was interested in Heathenry, and they agreed to take part in my research and gave me either verbal or written consent, I provided them with the questionnaires. In those unfortunate instances when I was only able to speak with the informant once, I simply presented them with the questionnaire in the form of an informal interview. Once the questionnaires had been returned and correlated, I organized and executed multiple informal though semi-structured interviews with respondents in a wide variety of contexts including in their homes, at Heathen events, coffee shops, libraries, restaurants and outdoors at parks, campsites and during long walks in the woods.

I also obtained extensive observational data. In Iceland, these observations tended occur at the Ásatrúarfélagið Saturday afternoon ‘open houses’. At these events, which any interested party could attend, members of the organization tended to discuss matters of ‘Icelandic, historic and community importance’ (Teresa) over coffee and cake. Observations were also made at the 2010 Landvættir Blót held near Keflavík, Iceland (where I was lucky to observe the ‘re-burial’ of Viking-age human

⁵ These questions included: Do you see Heathenry as a ‘religion’ or a ‘cultural life-way’, both or neither? Why? Are these different? When, how and why did you become involved with Heathenry? What does it mean to be a Heathen and has this changed for you over time? Does being Heathen influence you day to day? In what way?

remains at the Vikingaheimar Museum), and during a number of walks around Reykjavík during which my informants highlighted sites of historical and Heathen interest. In Canada, I had the opportunity to observe a number of highly personalized practices undertaken by my informants in their homes, as well as numerous shared practices undertaken by them at a variety of ‘kindred events’. I also gathered data at four large pan-community events I attended in the summers of 2011 and 2012 over the May, June and July bank holiday weekends. At these ‘festivals’ or ‘gatherings’, which were attended by individuals from a myriad of Heathen and pagan communities around Canada ‘to develop in whatever tradition they follow by expanding their knowledge and obtaining new experiences [... to] get away from the world and just be together’ (Auz), I took part in and observed practices ranging from the crafting and raising of idols, the ‘processing’ of gods and the making, sharing and (copious) consumption of ‘historic’ food and drink. Examples of each of these practices and contexts will be discussed at length throughout the following chapters.

In both contexts, my data collection efforts were structured by a number of key questions. First, I was interested in how and why my informants had discovered and the adopted Heathenry over the other fields of practice and potential experience they themselves reported present in our current world – that is, why they had left prior fields including Christianity, ‘popular culture’, Wicca, etc. for a ‘way of living’ that, in Canada at least, was seen as being ‘relatively unknown and very difficult’ (Gus). I was also interested in any ‘problems’ (however my informants defined them) they may have faced as a result of that adoption. Indeed, I had a number of chats with my interlocutors, Heathen and non-Heathen alike, to try and grasp how Heathenry, Heathens, their presence and their qualities were perceived and reacted to locally, regionally and nationally. I was also interested in how they as Heathens positioned themselves in relation to those other fields. I spent a great deal of time engaging with my informants on what, if anything, made Heathenry and Heathens ‘different’, and how, if at all, it had helped them effect similar changes in their experiences of self and world. In addition, I spoke with them extensively about those formative practices they suggested both facilitated and resulted from this shift, as well as how, where and to what end they articulated and instantiated each. Specifically, I explored how, when and where these practices were defined, undertaken and evaluated (by them and

others) and their possible role in effecting this seeming shift. As it became increasingly apparent that this Heathen ‘reorientation’ both reflected and helped fuel a quest for a type of self and world which were altered – that is, ‘Heathen’ – I became progressively more focused upon the question of whether and why they believed this shift in experience and ‘becoming’ was important (as defined by my informants), as well as what it was they were hoping to achieve through it. Furthermore, I also undertook extensive reading into the history and development of Heathenry within Iceland and Canada, as well as into the historical development of contemporary trends within those contexts.

Before I introduce my informants’ Heathenry and Heathen communities, I would like to say a brief word concerning the ‘ethics’ employed in my research. As stated earlier by Jade, one quality that all of my informants shared was that they were all quite ‘guarded’ about their Heathenry. Indeed, in both Iceland and Canada, one of the first questions I was unavoidably asked by potential informants was ‘So, are you Heathen?’ Upon confessing that I was, in fact, *not* Heathen, the inevitable follow-up question was ‘then why do you want to learn more about us?’ Once potential interlocutors became more comfortable with me – generally after the ‘informal’ chats mentioned above – and better understood what it was I was interested in exploring, I asked them why they had initially seemed so reticent to participate in my research. Their responses depicted a tripartite concern.

First, as will be discussed in Chapter Two, they stressed that within the contemporary Western world, a connection has come to exist between Heathenry – as ‘Germanic Paganism’ – and ‘racialist’ movements (see Gardell 2003 and Goodrick-Clarke 2004). As Erin from Ottawa put it, ‘Sometimes it seems that people associate Heathenry and Odin with White Supremacists and that is all, [...] but it isn’t that!’ In other words, my informants were concerned, at least at first, to take part in my research because they were afraid that I, as a non-Heathen, or someone who did not know ‘what Heathenry really stands for [...] not what they say on tv’ (Erik), might represent them in a way that propagated a stereotype that was, in their opinion, generally unwarranted. My informants also said that they had been reticent to chat with me because ‘whatever you say about us will come to affect our word fame in the community [...], it will either bring us renown or it will negatively

impact our worth' (Erik). Specifically, they suggested that, by depicting their daily 'deeds' – that is, those actions upon which their realization of virtuous, worthy Heathen selves depended – my research would directly influence the selves they were pursuing. Lastly, and along similar lines, many of them expressed concern as to how the others within the Heathen community around and with whom their virtuous selves were being realized might perceive of them if they learned of the highly personalized ways in which they were striving for those virtuous selves. This was because many of the practices they employed in their 'self-making' were, while 'identifiably Heathen', not as popular within the wider community as others (e.g. blood-letting, trance and possession, etc).

Both during the fieldwork and writing-up stages of my research, I took several steps to manage their concerns. For example, I 'educated' myself in the 'Heathen lore' (Erik) in an attempt to avoid unfairly misrepresenting my informants. I began reading many of the texts that they had engaged with as part of their own quest, in an attempt to gain a deeper knowledge of what my interlocutors 'did' as Heathens and why. Furthermore, when I witnessed someone say or do something which potentially reflected this stereotype, I engaged with them in an attempt to better understand what had been said rather than simply interpreting the event from my own 'non-Heathen' perspective. Thus, where I have included examples of such instances into the following pages I have also included the reason given for them *in addition to* my own interpretations. Concerning their second and third worries, one of the first lessons I learned from my Heathen informants was that, in the Heathen community, nothing is free. In other words, as Auz was fond of saying '[Heathenry] is a gift for a gift'; everything that everyone I spoke with did for or gave to anyone else in the community was seen as a gift, be it some beautifully crafted object, kind words or, in the case of our 'working' relationship, knowledge. Indeed, just as I made it clear to them that the data obtained during my fieldwork would be used in my doctoral thesis, many made it clear that one reason they chose to take part in that research was that they believed doing so might increase their 'word fame' and 'worth' as virtuous Heathens. How then to utilize the data I gathered that depicted them behaving 'unvirtuously' in ways that maintained the integrity of my research, while also recognizing and respecting the virtuous, formative 'gifting' relationship

upon which my research came to be based? Throughout the following pages there are instances where I have anonymized or changed the names and locations associated with certain observations. In some cases this was at the request of those with whom I spoke; in others I did so of my own accord in an attempt to maintain their standing in the community. My earnest hope is that the resulting narrative, while as *representative* of my interlocutors' questing experiences as possible, does not negatively affect the self and world they were attempting to generate within and through those experiences.⁶

Concerning Heathenry and Heathens

As will be discussed at greater length in Chapter One, Heathenry is one of a myriad of 'contemporary pagan traditions' and 'spiritualities' that have spread throughout Europe and North America since the 1960s.⁷ Contemporary Heathenry, or 'Germanic Paganism', began developing and spreading throughout North America and Northern Europe in the 1970s with the formation of the Odinic Rite in Great Britain, the Viking Brotherhood and Asatru Free Assembly in the United States and Ásatrúarfélagið in Iceland (see Harvey 1996; Strmiska 2000). The 1980s and 1990s saw an increase in the number of Heathen groups within these contexts, particularly in the United States with the establishment of the Ásatrú Folk Assembly and The Troth (see Strmiska and Sigurvinsson 2005). The new millennium has seen many of these group post record numbers. For example, I was told that Ásatrúarfélagið currently has 'over a thousand registered members in Iceland' (Viktor) and, according to the organization's website, The Troth now has more than five hundred registered members worldwide (*FAQS* at <http://www.thetroth.org>).

According to Auz, one of my key Canadian informants and a leader in the Canadian Pan-Pagan and Heathen community, 'Heathenry really didn't take off –

⁶ By 'representative', I by no means mean 'accurate'. I recognize that any narrative I tell is necessarily incomplete and my own interpretation of my informants' experiences (see Clifford and Marcus 1986; Fabian 1983).

⁷ As my discussion is not concerned with contemporary paganism *per se*, I have decided not to focus upon the topic at any great length. This is because, although Heathenry shares some characteristics with these other pagan fields, I would suggest that focusing on them at this time would weaken our appreciation of the diversity which also seems to characterize these 'spiritualities'. In any case, for a discussion of 'paganism' please see Adler 1979; Davy (ed.) 2009; Gardner 1966; Harvey 1997; Hutton 1991 and 2009; Jones and Pennick 1995; Jorgenson and Russell 1999; and Pike 2001.

you know really become visible – in Canada until after 2002 [with] the establishment of the Freehold Society in British Columbia [...]. Before that, it was just a bunch of individuals reading what they could in private.’ Since that time, Auz said that the Canadian Heathen population ‘seems to really be growing [...] there are more websites, festival attendance seems to be up and I am always chatting with people from across Canada who are active in Heathenry or interested in becoming active.’ Despite this reported increase in interest in Heathenry within Canada, however, Auz said that numbers remain low when compared to groups outside of the country. For example, W.K. Baldwin IV of the Freehold Society reported that, despite being the largest Heathen community in Canada, as of 2011 they had only ‘eighty-three registered members’, some of whom were American Heathens from the Pacific Northwest. Likewise, Jim of Austrugr Kindred, reportedly the only active kindred in Nova Scotia, told me that he knew of only around ‘thirty people in Atlantic Canada who profess to be Heathen’ and that his community, founded in 2004, currently has only ‘five permanent members’. While keeping these numbers in mind, it should be noted that all of the community leaders I spoke with in Canada maintained that the small size of their communities was not necessarily ‘representative of the actual number of Canadian Heathens’ (Erik). Unfortunately, they also tended to stress that ‘the exact number of Heathens in Canada or even in Ontario is impossible to tell because the groups are small and scattered [... and the Canadian census] doesn’t have a “Heathenry” option yet’ (Auz). As a result, as Kayla of the Frithling Society in the Canadian Maritimes once pointed out, ‘The size of the community is as vague to Heathens as it is to you.’

Despite this ambiguity, there are statistics available that provide some insight into the number of Heathens possibly present in Canada and beyond. For example, while no option exists for Canadian Heathens to identify themselves as such on the Canadian national census, they *can* identify as ‘Pagan’, which, according to the Canadian ‘National Household Survey’, 25,495 Canadians did in 2011.⁸ Interestingly, it was due to this tendency to conflate “Heathen” with “Pagan” and/or “Wiccan” in most surveys’ (Seigfried, the *Norse Mythology Blog* at

⁸ Statistics Canada, 2011 National Household Survey, <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/index-eng.cfm>.

<http://www.norsemyth.org>) that, in 2013, Dr Karl Seigfried held a voluntary ‘Worldwide Heathen Census’ across 98 countries. According to the data obtained, 805 Canadian Heathens took part in the census, as did 7,878 American Heathens and 1,000 Icelandic Heathens. Unfortunately, numbers were tallied at the national level, and as such, this census provides little insight into the number of Heathens possibly present in Ontario and Québec at the time my research was conducted.

Canadian Heathenry; Canadian Heathens

Before I consider my primary informants’ Heathenry and Heathen communities in greater depth, I would like to point out that, throughout what follows, I have decided to draw upon data obtained in both Canada and Iceland. This is primarily because my interlocutors suggested that Heathenry, wherever observed, displayed a number of unique qualities and characteristics – a ‘Heatheness’ that I will argue below was fundamental to their Heathen quests. In an effort to more fully capture this Heatheness and its possible role in helping my informants develop into ‘virtuous’ Heathen beings, I believe it is important that I explore those quests and this quality as they were observed within both research contexts. Importantly, by choosing to engage with my Icelandic and Canadian data I am not in any way suggesting that my Canadian and Icelandic interlocutors’ Heathenry and Heathen quests were the ‘same’, nor am I discounting the issues intrinsic to comparative research. Rather, I use both bodies of data cautiously and only to add depth to my exploration of my informants’ quests. That said, while I will call upon the information gathered in Iceland where possible and appropriate to support or refute my argument, my discussion will focus primarily upon my Canadian interlocutors’ experiences, as the Canadian context is where the majority of my data was obtained. It is towards that context, and those I encountered there, that I would now like to turn.

Despite coming from a variety of backgrounds, the vast majority of my Canadian informants actively recognized themselves as ‘Heathens’ – that is, they all quoted a familiarity with and an active and reflexive association with the history, pantheon, peoples, ‘culture and worldview’ (Erik) of pre-Christian Northern and Central Europe. This shared identification appeared to be based upon and instantiated in part through their ongoing engagement with a nebulous field of forms ‘derived

from [the] Scandinavian/Norse area, including the places they colonized such as England, Ireland and Iceland, etc [... and also] the related beliefs of the Anglo-Saxons, who derived from the same Germanic tribes' (Jennings quoted in Harvey 1996: 54).⁹ Reflecting upon these identifiable forms, most of my informants were quick to note that there are a number of 'important characteristics' that they believed differentiate Heathenry from other pagan fields. As related by them, these generally included 'tak[ing] part in certain types of practices [such as] honoring and gifting in specific ways' (Erik), 'recogniz[ing] the same kinds of gods [...] though some of them go by different names like Thor and Donor' (Shane) and a shared emphasis upon 'virtue and roots' (Katherine). That said, however, most also stressed that Heathenry was a loose, ill-defined field. To echo Auz, 'Contemporary Heathens [...] don't just have one tradition, one time from which we draw our practices. We take them from all over. That is what makes Heathenry such a complicated tradition, [...] it] cannot be essentialized into a single form.' Some suggested that this is particularly the case in Canada, where there are no 'national Heathen organizations like there are in the US and Iceland' (Auz). As a result of Canadian Heathenry's 'un-centralized' quality, one that Erik felt reflected the wider Canadian 'distain for national organizations [and] emphasis upon multiculturalism and cultural expression', most felt that Canadian Heathens had been afforded a 'chance to develop unique cultures [...] locally, regionally and nationally' (Jade). I believe this diversity was very much reflected in and by the Canadian Heathen communities with whom I worked.

The primary community I worked with in Canada was Rúnatýr Kindred. Based in Ottawa, Ontario and officially established in 2009 with the ratification of the community constitution, at the time of my research Rúnatýr was composed of six 'hearths' (family groups) and boasted an official membership of twelve. Through Rúnatýr I was introduced to the French Canadian Nine Mountains Kindred, which was based near Montréal, Québec. Established in 2011, this community originally had an official membership of five. However, in 2012, the group experienced a 'schism [...] someone said something disrespectful and we decided it would be best if we went our separate ways' (Martin). Despite this rupture, the community still

⁹ When I say 'Heathen' or refer to 'Heathenry' throughout the following thesis, I, like most of my interlocutors, will be referring to a highly flexible yet identifiable field of 'historical' forms popularly associated with the pre-Christian Germanic peoples of Europe.

reported having two members as of July 2012. Martin of Nine Mountains continued, ‘Yeah we are small now but it is about quality not quantity [...]. As long as you have someone to really count and do stuff with you are a community!’ In addition to Rúnatýr and Nine Mountains, I also had the pleasure of speaking with the Vikings of the Metal Age from near Toronto. Established in 2009, at the time my research was conducted this community of ‘proud warriors, Heathens and lovers of metal music’ (Derek) reported an official membership of six. Data was also gathered at a number of Heathen/pagan ‘festivals’ held at a privately owned and operated camping space near Eganville, Ontario called Raven’s Knoll. Though not Heathen communities *per se*, these gatherings became sites where members of the communities with whom I worked came together with other communities, solitary Heathens, non-Heathen pagans and non-pagans from across Canada and beyond to share in multi-day events. Though the communities that participated in these gatherings were small, attendance was often large, generally averaging between 30 and 60 at ‘Heathen’ gatherings (e.g. the Midgard Gathering held in May and the Hail & Horn Gathering held in June) to over 1,000 at the Pan-Pagan Kaleidoscope Gathering held in July.

While Heathenry’s ‘looseness’ was seen by my informants as helping generate these ‘really small, intimate [Canadian] groups’ (Jade), it must again be stressed that, at a basic level, those communities and their members were still seen by the majority of my informants as sharing qualities and characteristics that helped them ‘be Heathen’. Erik once suggested that this unifying looseness had manifested itself throughout the Canadian context in a very peculiar way. He maintained that Canadian Heathenry/Heathen communities were defined and structured in part by and through the establishment and navigation of closely related yet distinct fields of formative practice he referred to as ‘public’ (i.e. shared) and ‘private’ (i.e. personal) cults. For example, the pan-Canadian Heathen ‘folk’ might be seen as defining themselves by and engaging with one another with reference to certain shared Heathen forms. As I observed them, examples of these forms appeared to include an expansive body of shared knowledge developed through an ongoing dialogical engagement with popular Heathen texts like the Icelandic *Poetic Edda* (see Larrington 1996), as well as those identifiable Heathen practices they regularly undertook such as the ‘honoring’ and ‘gifting’ hinted at earlier. Indeed, as Gary once

stated, 'We all know and observe the [Heathen] gods in Heathen ways.' At the provincial, regional and 'local' level, however, Heathen communities became increasingly delineated from one another through their members' specialized interpretation and application of those forms in practice (e.g. some groups would emphasize 'Anglo-Saxon' Heathen forms at their events over 'Scandinavian' or 'Frankish' forms). The 'family hearths' that composed those communities often engaged with those shared Heathen forms in even more specialized ways, just as the individuals that composed those hearths further adapted those forms in ways they found personally relevant. So described, these manifold levels of Heathen practice (and the communities they helped structure) were distinct; a product of a process of individualization my informants stressed was 'desirably Heathen' in itself. At the same time, however, they were also informed by and helped generate an identifiable and desirable Heathenness that allowed those associated with them to engage in their quests with and even *through* Heathen others. Indeed, in what follows I will argue that it was this shared, identifiable quality, embodied and articulated in personalized Heathen practices undertaken in relation to others, which made the selves that were seemingly the aim of my interlocutors' Heathen quests realizable.

As my discussion of these questing selves unfolds, it will become increasingly apparent that this dual emphasis upon shared Heathen qualities and forms (and the formative interactions they facilitated) and my informants' active personalization of both in practice was a proverbial 'double-edged sword'. This was in part because, while Heathenry's 'looseness' allowed and indeed demanded that my interlocutors individualize their quests in order to 'quicken' their developing Heathen selves, its dialogical quality generating a shared space of potential disagreement and disruption that put both at risk. Interestingly, I would argue that this tension was particularly well reflected in the life-cycles of the Heathen communities many of my informants decided to associate with, as well as the conceptions of 'membership' that appeared to frame their connection with those groups and the non/Heathen others who helped compose them.

As I observed them, my informants' proposed quests for Heathen virtue appeared to be structured and regulated primarily by their own questing selves. In fact, as will be discussed at length in the following chapters, Heathenry's de-

centralized nature, the nebulosity of the aforementioned ‘Heatheness’ and the field’s emphasis upon individuals’ personalized articulation of that quality made it particularly well suited to such a process of reflexive self-making. That having been said, all of my interlocutors stressed that their quests occurred not in a void, but rather with, around and even through others, many of whom were Heathens themselves. Indeed, upon discovering Heathenry many of my informants reportedly began searching out other Heathens – first online and then in person – they could ‘begin learning from and doing stuff with’ (Erik). In an attempt to propagate these acts of formative engagement, most then joined a pre-existing Heathen community, either online or in their area. Alternatively, if no such communities existed, some took steps to establish one on their own with other ‘like-minded individuals’ (Brynn). As described by my informants, this was primarily done because these communities, and the individuals who composed them, acted as mechanisms through which they might ‘learn more about what it means to be Heathen, develop as a Heathen and have what I do [...] I guess “justified” in a way’ (Katherine). In other words, these communities – electronic and physical alike – became spaces within which my interlocutors were able to encounter, develop, articulate and then have recognized by others the personal yet shared Heathen qualities and characteristics they suggested helped define Heathenry and Heathen beings. As will be discussed at length in the latter half of this thesis, this dialogical construction and validation of their individual Heatheness was important in that it helped them ensure that the personal interpretations and understandings they began increasingly instantiating in their engagements with and through shared Heathen forms were generative and supportive of their Heathen quests and developing Heathen selves.

Despite the potentially formative, ‘validating’ influence these groups and their members exerted upon my informants’ quests, their relationships with both were far from static. Indeed, every kindred I spoke with explained how they regularly lost long-standing members, added new members and were constantly working to prevent schism. In fact, two of the groups I worked with had experienced such ruptures in membership; one had experienced *two* over the course of its development. Likewise, most of those I spoke with reported regularly becoming ‘close to’ and then ‘distant from’ their fellow community members, as well as individuals affiliated with

other groups. As was hinted at earlier, some of my interlocutors had even actively deciding against becoming involved with a Heathen kindred community. Instead, they chose to limit their engagements with Heathen and non-Heathen pagan others to highly flexible interactions online, encounters at local ‘study groups’ and punctuated engagements at the aforementioned festivals. Though numerous reasons were given by my informants for these acts of disassociation, an interesting trend emerged from their fragmented narratives. In each case, their decision to terminate their associations with and within these manifold communities had been predicated by a ‘realization’ that tension had begun developing between their quests and those of the others through whom they were attempting to validate their formative and highly personalized Heathen interpretations and practices. Thus, in an attempt to preserve the perceived Heathenness of their quests and questing selves, they had actively and reflexively removed themselves from the disruptive influence of those communities and others in search of an alternative means of validation.

Importantly, it is precisely because of the formative yet potentially disruptive role of others in my interlocutors’ quests that there are instances in what follows where I disassociate certain individuals from certain forms of practice. This was done either at their request or because I believed doing so would protect the perceived validity and efficacy of the quests and questing selves manifested in and represented by those practices and the understandings that informed them. Specifically, in each instance of anonymization that follows, either the anonymized party or I believed that the practices or personal qualities depicted were such that, while generally seen as displaying and imparting an identifiable and desirable ‘Heathenness’ by the individual involved, they might have been interpreted differently by those similarly ‘personalizing’ others with whom they were associated. Thus, in order to maintain the legitimacy of their developing Heathen selves and the personalized Heathen practices and interpretations that seemed at the core of their ‘becoming’, their name and community affiliation (if any) was either changed or removed. In that way, I was able to preserve the validating, formative influence of the others with and through whom their quests were, in part, taking place.

This ongoing search for others who might help them ‘ground’ and validate their quests and developing selves within the shared Heathen field extended far

beyond those individuals and communities with whom they might or did regularly interact. For example, many of my informants identified with one or more interpretive Heathen paradigms. Founded upon and primarily manifested through certain interpretative frameworks and their related practices, each of these broad communities of Heathen thought emphasized the fundamental qualities and characteristics that most of my interlocutors agreed ‘defined’ Heathenry and Heathenness. However, each of these perspectives tended to focus upon and emphasize these qualities and characteristics in different ways and to different extents. Consider, as an example, ‘Reconstructionism’ Heathenry and ‘Organic’ Heathenry.¹⁰ According to Bill Linzie, a predominate North America Heathen reconstructionist, Reconstructionism Heathenry involves taking ‘the worldview of XYZ-people, and apply[ing] it in our own lives [...] The basis of reconstructionism is to reconstruct the “worldview” of any group of people and apply it to gain experience’ (Linzie 2007). Erik and Jade, both of whom quoted an affinity for this perspective at the time this research was conducted, explained that this contemporary reconstruction of the ‘Germanic worldview’ occurred primarily through individuals’ active and ongoing study and everyday application of the cultural practices that defined the lives of pre-Christian Germanic peoples. As such, those who identified with this interpretive paradigm tended to prioritize Heathen forms and interpretations that were directly uncovered through and supported by engagements with historical sources over those that were not. Interestingly, while the Organic Heathens I spoke with placed a similar – if less ‘rigid’ – emphasis upon the daily embodiment and articulation of historic Germanic forms and qualities, they also maintained that this expanding body of knowledge and practice had to be applied and interpreted in personally powerful ways, regardless of if those interpretations and practices were directly associated with and/or reflected a historic Germanic worldview.

As with the communities already discussed, my informants reported actively associating with or distancing themselves from these ‘communities of thought’ and those who associated with them depending upon the extent to which they supported their own interpretative stance. In this way, their membership within in these

¹⁰ In Chapter Two I will consider two additional paradigms – ‘Folkish’ Heathenry and ‘Universalist’ Heathenry.

communities was highly fluid and often changed as individuals' quests progressed and their interpretive stance towards their own Heathenness and that of the world around them fluctuated. Auz explained the evolving nature of this association in the following way:

When you have been in the [wider Heathen/Pan-Pagan] community as long as I have you start to see a trend. Many new Heathens are very "Recon" – all that matters is what is or isn't in the source materials. But, as they develop, they become more flexible and the emphasis tends to shift towards experiences that are personally powerful. [As a result ...] their relationships with Heathenry and others also begin changing.

Thus, as will be illustrated time and again throughout the following chapters, while my informants' quests were greatly influenced by and undertaken in part through others, they were always directed by and focused upon their own developing selves. Specifically, the looseness of interpretation that informed Heathenry and my informants' Heathen quests meant that their development was shaped in part through their interactions with non/Heathen others. However, these engagements also represented a disruptive force that could negatively impact their quests. As such, my interlocutors actively monitored the in/validating influence of those others and, when necessary, removed themselves from their influence. In these instances, they began the process anew by seeking out and engaging with others who they believed might validate their questing experiences and the virtuous Heathen selves becoming within and through those experiences – that is, the 'like-minded' others mentioned earlier.

Heathenry and the 'Secular Age'

As noted earlier, Heathenry might be seen as being one of a number of related fields that have proliferated within the Western world since the mid twentieth century. That said, while 'Heathenism shares many of the same characteristics, interests and problems as other Pagan traditions [...] it also has distinguishing features' (Harvey 1996: 53). Indeed, throughout my thesis I will highlight a number of characteristics that my interlocutors themselves suggested differentiated Heathenry from other fields such as 'Wicca, Druidry and the like' (Erik). For the time being, however, I would like to briefly consider those fundamental characteristics that both my informants and a number of 'pagan studies' scholars have suggested these 'contemporary

paganisms' (see York 2003) might be seen as sharing. First, 'Modern Paganism is not a doctrinaire movement [...] it bases its argument for reform on experiences rather than blind faith' (Jones and Pennick 1995: 37). Specifically, these 'movements' are often depicted as helping participants change how they experience their world by providing them with the space to obtain formative personal experiences through highly personalized forms of practice. Indeed, one of the features all of my interlocutors maintained differentiated Heathenry from 'Christianity is that Heathenry doesn't have dogma [...], you can do what you feel you need to, how you need to in order to become strong [i.e. 'worthy']' (Angus). Furthermore, 'Pagan groups are usually non-centralised and non-hierarchical' (Hardman 1996: xiv). In fact, my informants' maintained that the greatest part of their quest for virtuous Heathen selves occurred 'as part of [their] day-to-day life [...] I enjoy doing stuff with others, but the majority of what I do takes place outside of kindred events' (Jonathan). In other words, while my interlocutors' proposed quest may have depended in part upon their ongoing encounters with others, these engagements tended to be highly personalized, and often undertaken by them outside of contexts they identified as being 'Heathen'. Lastly, most contemporary paganisms perceive of 'divine, transcendent powers [...] as being] present within Nature itself and by deliberate ritual and contemplation the devout Pagan can make contact with these' (Jones 1996: 37). As hinted at by my informants above, the same might be said about Heathenry. Specifically, they maintained that it was primarily within and through their 'lived' world and daily actions that the formative encounters with 'immanent otherness' (e.g. gods, ancestors, etc.) upon which their quest seemed in part to depend occurred. I shall consider the quality and aim of these powerful 'everyday' engagements at greater length throughout my thesis.

Described in this way, Heathenry, and its pagan counterparts, might be approached as formative contemporary fields of practice and experience which attempt to 'find meaning and value in the diverse ordinary lives of human beings' (Harvey 1996: 51). Specifically, they provide participants with the practical means and space to generate and employ an internalized authority that 'serves to ensure that [participants ...] feel that they – and they alone – are responsible for their lives' (Heelas 1996: 25). In other words, they become mechanisms through which

participants pursue formative and potentially *transformative* experiences they believe might allow them to reorient their understandings of self, other and world in ways that are personally desirable and relevant. This is not, of course, to say that an ‘external’ authority does not act upon these practicing, experiencing selves. Indeed, my informants’ quests were dependent upon their ongoing encounters with such an authority, a fact implied above by the role reportedly played by ‘others’ in their quests. That said, I would stress (and will show) that when designing and undertaking their quests and their encounters with these others, my informants’ primary authority was their own selves.

The ‘Secular Age’

It has been suggested that this contemporary emphasis upon individualized forms of practice, the reorienting personal experiences believed to result from them and even these fields themselves are a product of a wider process of ‘secularization’ that some have suggested at work within the contemporary contexts in which they have developed. In his *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994), Casanova suggests that ‘secularization’, as a transformative social process, has historically been defined by three key developments:

[T]he historical process of differentiation in Western modernity through which religion has come to be objectified and separated out from other functions, particularly politics and economics; (b) the idea that religion necessarily exits the public sphere in modernity and becomes privatized; and (c) the claim (dating back to Enlightenment philosophy) that religion as sentiment and practice will ‘tend to dissipate with progressive modernization’. (1994: 7)

While Casanova agrees that ‘religion’ has in fact undergone a process of objectification and separation through which it has become differentiated from other social fields within the ‘modern’ Western world, he stresses that the privatization and dissipation of religious thought generally associated with secularization (and, with it, modernity) is not a *necessary* characteristic of this process. Specifically, he (and others – see Martin 2005) draws attention to the important fact that, like ‘modernization’ more generally, secularization is not a concept that can be applied with a broad brush cross-contextually. Rather, the way in which secularization occurs

(if it can be seen as occurring at all) varies from context to context, as do the concepts of ‘religion’ and ‘modernity’ with which it is often associated.

Talal Asad (1993, 2003) has developed an alternative approach to secularization that attempts to move beyond the cross-contextual application and firm religion/modernity and public/private juxtapositions that have, in part, defined classical Western approaches to secularism. He maintains that “the secular” should not be thought of as the space in which *real* human life gradually emancipates itself from the controlling power of “religion” and thus achieves the latter’s relocation (2003: 191 [original emphasis]). Rather, it is a discursive and highly (spatially and temporally) contextualized process through which certain ways of living have become prioritized, whilst others have become less so. Thus, as outlined by Asad, the contrast that has traditionally existed between ‘religion’ and ‘secular modernity’ becomes a ‘false binary’ (Cannell 2010: 91) whose aim has been to effect particular ways of living within certain contexts.

In his 2007 publication *A Secular Age*, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has proposed another approach to secularism that questions the binary of secular modernity and religion, as well as its supposed affect upon and place within the contemporary world. According to Taylor, our current age has not seen the slow death of religion, but rather ‘a new placement of the sacred or spiritual in relation to individual and social life’ (2007: 437). Indeed, he suggests that the contemporary Western world is not defined by the dislocation of the theological by the teleological, but rather an increase and diversification in religious sensibilities and practice – a ‘galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane’ that he refers to as the ‘nova effect’ (2007: 423). Though firmly rooted in nineteenth-century Romanticism, he proposes that this seeming proliferation of religious thought and practice is both indicative and a product of the ‘expressive individualism’ he argues a defining characteristic of our current epoch (see Taylor 1989). Specifically, due in part to the shift in religious and social sensibility that accompanied ‘the cultural revolution of the 1960s’ (2007: 526), in the Western world today it has fallen upon individual agents to find (or formulate) their own ‘individual originality [... often through the creation of] new kinds of religion and spirituality’ (León & Leeuwen 2003: 79). In this way, our current epoch has become an ‘opened’ space within which ‘people can wander between and around

all these options without having to land clearly and definitively in any one' (Taylor 2007: 351). 'It is this shift', Taylor concludes, 'in background, in the whole context in which we experience and search for fullness, that I am calling the coming of a secular age' (2007: 14). According to Taylor, then, the secularization of the contemporary Western world is defined not by the diminishment of 'religious belief', but a *reformulation* of belief; a fundamental alteration resulting both in and from a shift in 'experience and sensibility' (*ibid.*). Thus, like Asad, Taylor's 'secular' does not denote a movement away from the 'religious' towards the 'modern'.¹¹ Rather, it denotes a shift in social sensibility – a shift, that is, in how the former has come to be understood and enacted by and upon subjects within the everyday realm of the latter.

Returning to my earlier discussion, I would suggest that Taylor's theory of secularism and secularization potentially provides important insight into my interlocutors' adoption and subsequent development through Heathenry. Specifically, similar in some ways to Heelas's New Age 'Spiritualities of Life' (1996, 2008) and Cusack's 'invented religions' (2010), Heathenry might be approached as an example of the alternative fields of practice Taylor suggested provides contemporary Western individuals with the means and space to develop in personally relevant and desirable ways – that is, pursue and embody a 'fullness'. For example, as will be discussed in Chapter One, my interlocutors' quests began with their journey to find a field of practice and potential experience they believed might allow them to realize a self and world they found personally satisfying. Towards this end, they adopted Heathenry, as they believed it represented 'a way of doing things [...] a powerful way of living' (Jonathan) through which they might affect their own selves and world, while Heathenry's aforementioned 'looseness' was seen as providing them with the 'freedom' to practice how they needed to in order to 'make [those] changes' (Katherine). Thus, in being "'of' the self in that it facilitates the celebration of what it is to be and to become; and "'for' the self" (Heelas 1996: 173–4) in that it allowed my informants to undertake highly personalized 'becoming' quests, I would argue Heathenry became a reflection and manifestation of the expressive individualism,

¹¹ This similarity aside, numerous fundamental differences exist between the approaches adopted by these two authors, especially with regard to the conditions under which secularization occurs and the motivations that potentially drive individuals to pursue and adopt (or not) certain forms of religious practice. For an extended discussion of these differences, see Bangstad (2009).

search for ‘authenticity’ and associated reorientation in sensibility and experience that Taylor suggested a fundamental characteristic of our current secular age.

The ‘Heathen Imaginary’

While I shall return to Taylor’s emphasis upon expressive individualism and authenticity in Chapter Six, I would like to note that this thesis is not about secularism *per se*. Rather, I introduce the concept to highlight an important characteristic of my informants’ Heathenry; like many of the other fields with which it has come to be popularly associated, Heathenry appears to function as a highly personalizable, practical mechanism through which individuals like my informants attempt to generate and embody formative experiences as part of their ‘everyday’ living. By alluding to this fundamental quality, the above discussion also provides important insight into the approach I *have* decided to adopt when considering my interlocutors’ Heathenry and Heathen quests. Specifically, in what follows I have decided to not approach their Heathenry as a ‘religion’ or a ‘spirituality’. Instead, I shall adopt a perspective that I believe accounts more fully for the reorienting potential of the subjective experiences obtained by my interlocutors while ‘living’ their Heathenry in personalized ways, as well as the unique quality of the shared everyday spaces and practices within and through which that experiential reorientation occurred. In order to properly introduce this approach, I would like, somewhat oddly perhaps, to briefly consider the ‘anthropology of religion’.

From the ‘Anthropology of Religion’ to Heathenry as a ‘Cosmic Imaginary’

The anthropological study of religion has generated a spectacular variety of approaches to, definitions of and explanations for religion and the possible role of religious phenomena within human life. Despite this variety, however, they have also, in one way or another, tended to be concerned with:

[H]ow certain religious acts and utterances become the ground against which social acts and cultural facts can themselves be established, validated, or, to use a religious word, sanctified [...] and how they relate to forms and distributions of political power, to changing social, material and economic constraints and opportunities. (Lambek 2008: 6)

In this way, the anthropology of religion has generally focused upon how religious discourses, structures and phenomena affect individuals' understandings of and embodiment of, as well as their ongoing association with, both the 'social order' and the wider world (and vice versa). According to Durkheim (1976[1915]), for example, members of 'society' embody a social order through their participation in 'religious rituals'. In other words, through religion the 'social' becomes part of the individual – that is, society is sanctified and becomes, in a sense, their 'soul'. Similarly, Geertz (1973) has suggested that religion might be approached as a shared system of 'cultural symbols' that members of particular cultures embody and propagate through their participation in cultural practices. In the process, those individuals also embody the meanings associated with and derived from those religious symbols (and their related cultures), meanings which then generate 'long-lasting moods and motivations' (1973: 90) within them that fundamentally shape their experiences of their world. Others, such as Talal Asad (1983, 1993), have suggested that religion does not exist as traditionally defined – that is, as a concrete, universally recognized category – but rather exists only as a 'historical product of discursive practices' (Asad 1993: 29). In being a discursive formation, however, Asad (like Durkheim and Geertz) argues that 'religion' operates upon and within subjects, effectively instilling/maintaining certain social formations within them that influence their understandings of and actions within the social world.

Though admittedly quite general and, by necessity, incomplete, these examples highlight three important characteristics of many traditional anthropological definitions of and approaches to religion. First, religion has often been approached as an identifiable, if highly contextualized, category of practice and experience. In other words, certain contexts and ways of 'doing' and 'being' have been deemed 'distinctly religious'. These contexts, phenomena and experiences have often been defined thus due to their seeming association with a realm other than the 'everyday'. Specifically, 'the religious' has generally been associated with the realm of the 'sacred' and 'transcendent', not the 'profane/mundane' realm of the everyday world. Lastly, religions and religious phenomena have been approached as a key means through which the 'public' realm with which they are associated (and within

which they are encountered) comes to reside within and influence the ‘private’ realm of individual understanding and action.

I have decided not to approach my informants’ Heathenry as a religion in what follows because, as it was experienced and depicted by them, Heathenry appeared to lack these key characteristics. For example, while my informants may have employed Heathenry as a means to generate, interpret and embody formative experiences and understandings of self and world, the majority actively stressed that those experiences – and Heathenry more generally – were not specifically ‘religious’ in nature. Indeed, in both Canada and Iceland, many of my interlocutors suggested that Heathenry was or could be seen as being ‘non-religious’ (Samuel). Even those who maintained that Heathenry was ‘potentially religious’ (Katherine) stressed that its religious quality ‘is a lot different from many other traditions like Christianity, Islam or even some other pagan traditions’ (Jade). Thus, according to many of my informants, Heathenry and their Heathen experiences did not necessarily reflect the discursively determined qualities and characteristics that defined ‘religion’ and ‘the religious’ in the contexts within which they encountered Heathenry (a fact made even more interesting by the fact that, in Iceland, Ásatrú is a recognized religion).

When I asked them why this was the case, most gave two reasons: because Heathenry lacked the ‘dogma’ they believed defined most religions, and because the field represented a ‘total’ way of ‘living everyday’ (Gus). As the first of these will be discussed at length in Chapter One, for the time being I would like to consider the second. As has been briefly noted, my informants maintained that Heathenry was fundamentally embedded within and operated through/throughout their everyday contexts, actions, selves and experiences. In other words, whereas “‘religion’ [...] has demarcated an illusory line between matters of faith and secular spaces of the purely social and political’ (Tse 2014: 214), my interlocutors suggested that Heathenry ‘makes no distinction between the sacred and mundane [...] they can both exist as one within the world’ (Erik). Indeed, one of my informants said that he dislikes using the term ‘sacred’ when discussing the sites where he engages with ‘the gods and ancestors because it insinuates a dangerous duality that doesn’t really exist in Heathenry’ (Joshua). Shane continued, ‘In Heathenry we are focused on the “here and now” [...] we can encounter gods and ancestors in [everyday] tasks and places’

(Shane). As depicted by my informants, then, Heathenry was not only ingrained within their daily lives, it made those lives, selves and their daily world into sites where the ‘boundedness’ that traditionally defined religious phenomenon became neutralized. In other words, my informants and their ‘mundane’ world became sites of ‘immanent transcendence’ – that is, the ‘transcendent’, here taken as any ‘[otherness] that exceed[s] the immediacy of space and time [... the] *alter ego* [and the] boundaries of what is taken for granted in everyday life’ (Knoblauch 2008: 142), became a fundamental aspect of their everyday world and selves.

Described in this way, Heathenry appeared to operate as a mechanism of everyday ‘conflation’. That is, it seemed to generate and propagate a space within which my informants were able to draw together different fields. Indeed, I will argue below that the conflating capacity of Heathenry actually allowed their quests, selves and experiences to become open to and then combined with those of others. Of course, as was illustrated by Asad, Geertz and Durkheim above, religions might be seen as doing something similar. Specifically, they act as a medium through which certain public, social formations become embedded within the private realm of individual experience. What was striking about my interlocutors’ Heathenry, however, was that, by taking part in shared Heathen practices with others, they came to infuse their world and those others with *their* highly personalized Heathenry, Heathen quests and questing selves. In other words, it was not the ‘public’ that was made ‘private’ as Durkheim, for instance, suggested, but the other way around.

Of course, as was hinted at in my earlier discussion of Taylor’s secular age, Heathenry is only one of a number of related contemporary fields that might be seen as displaying many of these qualities. In an attempt to separate these fields of practice and experience from their ‘religious’ counterparts, some, including Heelas and Luhrmann (2012), have begun referring to them as ‘spiritualities’; a term meant to emphasize their highly subjective, holistic, and ‘immanent’ quality. Indeed, as Knoblauch has noted, ‘Spirituality extends far beyond that marked area that is culturally identifiable as religious and thus blurs the boundary between the religious and the non-religious’ (2008: 146). Despite being similar in a variety of ways to my informants’ Heathenry, I would argue that, like religion, this category does not adequately reflect Heathenry’s unique character, or that of my informants’ quests.

Specifically, in focusing almost exclusively upon personalized experiences, these spiritualities represent a highly ‘subjective category’ (2008: 145) of practice that fails to account for the dialogical nature of my interlocutors’ Heathen development.

Thus, in an attempt to capture the process of highly individualized yet shared everyday conflation and experiential reorientation seemingly at the core of my informants’ Heathenry and Heathen quests, I have decided to forego both the ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ categorizations. In their place, I would like to adopt a concept that simultaneously reflects Heathenry’s personalized, ‘lived’ quality, allows for the shared, dialogical development that informed their quests and emphasizes the formative and transformative potential of the experiences obtained through them. Towards this end, I shall adopt the idea of the ‘social imaginary’. As Taylor puts it:

By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations. (2004: 23)

Mirroring Taylor, throughout the following chapters Heathenry will be approached as an expansive, alternative field of ‘doing’, ‘experiencing’ and ‘understanding’ generated by, reflective of, and, in turn, generative of a particular social imaginary. Specifically, I will approach it as a ‘cosmic imaginary’ that allowed my informants to shift their experiences and understandings in a way that conflated their everyday world and the ‘Heathen cosmos’ in a fashion not captured by the term ‘religion’ and its usual emphasis on the movement from the ‘public’ to the ‘private’, or from the ‘outside’, ‘inside’. I believe this approach will allow me to more fully explore the unified (or rather *unifying*) space within which my informants’ everyday selves and lived world were transformed into sites where the ‘otherness’ of other beings, the past, present and future, other worlds and even their own unfolding experiences became rooted and encounterable within the space of ‘the self’. Indeed, I will show how, by becoming increasingly conflated with and within the various fields that structured and populated this imaginary, my informants effected a self who gained both a biography and a history – indeed, a biography that became its history.

Chapter Outline

Before I conclude my Introduction with a brief chapter-by-chapter outline of my argument, I would like to pause and say a word concerning the narrative style I have decided to adopt throughout my discussion. In an attempt to more accurately depict my informants' questing (as well as my own as an anthropological field researcher), I have decided to depart from the 'case study' narrative style often employed in ethnographic works. Instead, I will present a series of narratives that, like the individuals, experiences and concepts they attempt to depict, are 'emergent'. Specifically, I shall introduce my informants, their communities, Heathenry and both their and my unfolding understandings of each in narratives that are 'fragmented' – that is, in stories that mirror the shifting, evolving nature of the quests, questing beings and formative experiences they informed. I recognize that such a style may impact how the reader engages with my argument and those it portrays. Despite this, however, I believe such a style is appropriate. This is because, like the quests they depict, these narratives endeavor to reflect the gradual, ongoing process of 'becoming' that defined their formative journeys – unfolding transformations, that is, that extended throughout time and space, as well as the manifold multifaceted beings that populated those chronotopes.

In Chapter One, entitled 'The Heathen Project', I will begin my exploration of my interlocutors' proposed quests by considering those 'journey narratives' they shared that depicted their initial adoption of Heathenry, as well as the reasons they gave for doing so. In an attempt to contextualize those journeys, the quests they facilitated and Heathenry more generally, I will then discuss what Giddens (1991), Heelas (1998) and Lyotard (1984[1979]) have termed Late or Post Modernity. Having done so, I will argue that neither periodization fully accounts for my interlocutors' journey experiences (nor those key qualities they suggested define Heathenry) and that an alternative periodization needs to be applied. I shall refer to this epoch simply as 'the contemporary'. In an attempt to better define the form of their 'contemporary' Heathen quests, I will consider some of the implications of what Foucault (1987) has referred to as 'ethical projects'. Using examples taken from my informants' journey and questing narratives, I will then posit that their Heathen development might be approached similarly. Specifically, I will suggest that, by

adopting highly reflexive ‘Heathen practices-as-technologies’ as part of their quests, my informants were attempting to effect and propagate an active and ongoing process of critical self-formation.

In Chapter Two, entitled ‘Encountering the Web’, I will posit that my informants’ ‘Heathen projects’ actually occurred within two contexts simultaneously – the ‘contemporary world’ and the ‘Heathen cosmos’ – and that it was the formative potential represented by the second and the fashion in which it was instantiated within the first that made their ‘becoming’ possible. I will show how the ‘self-fashioning’ that appeared to be both the means and aim of their questing Heathen projects was dependent upon their entry into the Heathen cosmic realm, as it was within that cosmos where they became able to engage with a myriad of formatively influential, ‘powerful’ beings. I will argue that, by engaging with those beings in ways that displayed fundamental and desirable Heathen qualities, my informants began developing, employing and increasing a personal ‘power’ that allowed them to ‘intertwine’ themselves with those cosmological others within a formative web of causal relationality they referred to as the ‘Web of Wyrð’. In an attempt to grasp this process, I will outline the Heathen cosmos as it was depicted by my informants, the many beings they suggested inhabited that realm, their key qualities and the manifold practices through which those beings actively encountered one another. I will conclude by illustrating that the specific ways in which my informants conceptualized of that cosmos was of far less importance to their projects than the practices they employed and personal qualities they displayed in their engagements with others within that realm.

In Chapter Three, entitled ‘Aestheticizing the Everyday’, I will explore the shift in sensibility and action that helped make my informants’ engagement with and within the Heathen cosmos, and the web of formative connectedness that animated both it and their projects, possible. In an attempt to better understand this process, I will, after discussing Saito’s ‘everyday aesthetics’ (2007, 2007b), consider the ‘everyday Heathen aesthetics’ that arguably facilitated my informants’ identification and ongoing instantiation of a desirable ‘Heatheness’ within and throughout their daily actions, contexts and selves. I will conclude by suggesting that their ongoing application of this aesthetic framed and fuelled a process of ‘aesthetic reorientation’,

which began altering the way in which they experienced, interpreted and reacted to everyday contexts, actions, others and even their own selves.

Of course, a connection has long existed between what is seen as being aesthetically ‘desirable’ and that which is seen as being ethically ‘good’ or ‘excellent’. In Chapter Four, entitled ‘An Ethics of the Ordinary’, I posit that a similar connection was not only made in Heathenry and by my informants, but was, in fact, fundamental to their questing Heathen projects. Specifically, I will suggest that my interlocutors’ projects required that they develop and articulate a highly personalized, yet aesthetically informed ethics during and through their everyday encounters with potentially formative cosmological others. I will begin my discussion of their ethics by considering the ongoing shift within the social sciences away from the ‘Enlightenment morality’ of authors like Durkheim (1953, 1976[1915]) towards the ‘virtue-centered’ or ‘ordinary’ ethics outlined by authors like MacIntyre (1981) and Lambek (2010). After suggesting that my interlocutors’ projects were both dependent upon and generative of a similar ‘ordinary ethics’, I will consider the ‘pastiche’ quality of those ethics, the aesthetic field from which they were actively developed and the individual Heathen fields through which they were reflexively employed. I will illustrate how, through their and others’ daily acts of ethical ‘striving’ and evaluation, my informants fashioned and began applying an evolving Heathen ‘ethics of the ordinary’ through which they actively affected the perceived quality and formative potentiality of their everyday selves, actions, relations and world. I will then conclude the chapter by suggesting that, through their application of and reflection upon these ethics and ethical selves in shared Heathen practices, my interlocutors ‘projected’ their projects, selves and the Heathen cosmos into the ‘public realm’, thus conflating the ‘private’ with the ‘public’.

In Chapter Five, entitled ‘Playfulness and Performance’, I will consider the fundamental process of ‘opening up’ and performative instantiation that made this conflation, and thus their projects, possible. Drawing upon the work of authors like Luhmann (1989), Schechner (1988, 2002) and Turner (1976, 1986), I will show how my informants’ projects facilitated and required their development and application of a ‘playful disposition’ that allowed them, their world and others to exist as many things at once. Specifically, I will argue that their reflexive application of this

disposition transformed them and their world into ‘opened’ fields within which the cosmological, the everyday, the self and others might exist as distinct yet ‘conflated’ fields simultaneously.

In my final chapter, entitled ‘Crafting Ancestors’, I will consider the virtuous Heathen selves that were the apparent aim of my informants’ quests. I will begin by suggesting that, as part of their highly individualized yet fundamentally interpersonal questing projects, my interlocutors applied their ethics as a means of self ‘crafting’ – that is, an act of practical production that, despite its emphasis on personalization and individual skill, depended on the presence and cooperation of others; a presence which itself required the conflation of the self with those others. I will posit that, through this ongoing and reflexive ‘crafting’, my informants became able to experience their own potential development into a very specific type of ‘unbounded’ Heathen person. Echoing the expressive individualism and search for personal authenticity that Taylor (1989, 2007) has suggested constitutes a fundamental characteristic of contemporary Western experiences, I will go on to suggest that, through their participation in these shared crafting acts, my informants were also being fashioned into authentic contemporary ‘collages’ – that is, ethically unified, ‘holistically Heathen’ agent-subjects whose Heathenness was seen by them and others as permeating and helping to hold together their ‘fragmented’ contemporary experiences of self and world.

After beginning my ‘Conclusion’ with a brief review of my discussion, I will suggest that, by allowing my interlocutors to ‘open up’ and then conflate their selves with the world and others, as well as their own past and future selves, the Heathen cosmic imaginary acted as a mechanism of ‘re-enchantment’. Specifically, I will argue that, through their ongoing engagement with and instantiation of this aesthetically defined and ethically unifying field, my informants’ Heathen selves and world became ‘porous’, which allowed them to then ‘root’ and connect their experiences and understandings of each within and throughout others, their own selves and even space-time. In so doing, Heathenry became an everyday mechanism through which my interlocutors and their everyday world became sites of de-fragmentation, connectedness and ‘immanent transcendence’.

Chapter I: The Heathen Project

Hail & Horn Gathering 2012 Midnight Rune Ritual

Though it was difficult to discern who was present due to the shifting shadows cast by the low ‘hearth fire’, it appeared that over twenty of us had gathered ‘in frith’, or ‘good relations’, around the Hail & Horn Gathering communal fire pit that evening to chat and share drinking horns of beer and mead. As some sat quietly discussing recently discovered ‘Heathen-relevant source material’ (Erik), and others, loudly ‘hailing’, raised their horns in honor of those scholarly efforts, there was a noticeable buzz of excitement in the air.

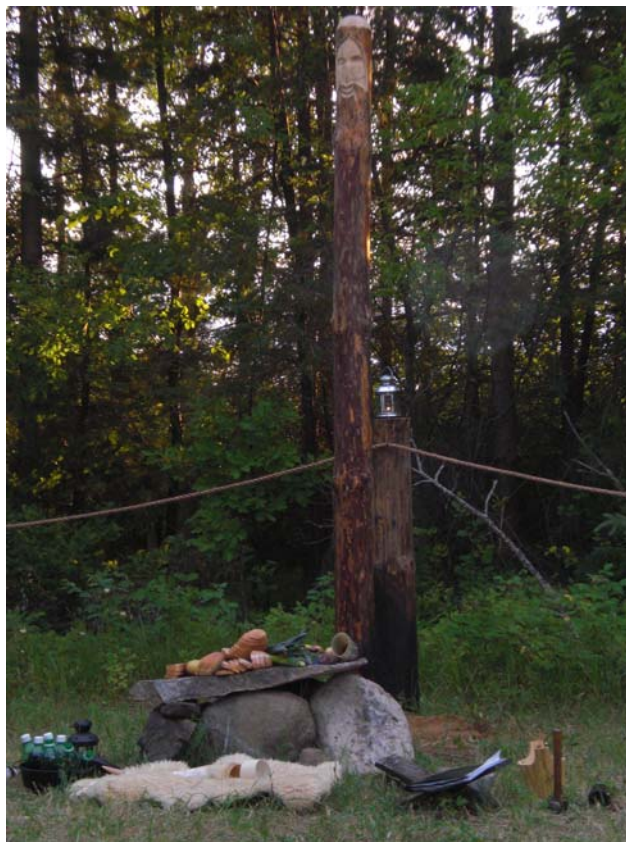


Figure 2: Hail & Horn Odin god pole (by Jonathan D. assisted by Erik L.)

This was due in part to the thrill of the Odin Blót we had all attended earlier that day. At the event, which had been held in the permanent Heathen ‘sacred space’ (Auz), or ‘vé’ that had recently been established at Raven’s Knoll, we had ‘raised’, planted and honored the Odin ‘god pole’ idol (fig. 2) with ‘personal gifts and worthy words’

(Erik). The impressive wooden idol consisted of a felled tree that had been carved by a member of the community with the likeness of the one-eyed Germanic god Odin, and was the first of many such poles to inhabit the space.

As I sat quietly scribbling notes in the flickering light cast by the fire, I overheard many of those present excitedly recounting how they had felt the event had been ‘powerful and meaningful’ (Brynn), not only because of what the space represented for the community – the ‘first such collection of idols [and the] first such space in Canada’ (Auz) – but also because of what the space and pole provided, namely a place of ‘divine immanence’ (Auz). Indeed, as with other contemporary Pagan fields like Druidry and Wicca, many of my Heathen interlocutors maintained that the ‘divine’ was present within the world, an immanence concretized and potentially encountered through the establishment of sacred space, the careful fashioning of idols and their ongoing, frithful and respectful interactions within and with both.

In addition to the earlier blót and its implications, I think many, including myself, were also excited about the ‘Rune Ritual’ Jade, Brynn and Auz were conducting in the vé that evening at midnight. Frustratingly, despite pestering all three of them incessantly for details about the event, each had remained tight-lipped. Indeed, every time I had approached them with questions about the ‘rit’ or ritual, I had been jokingly told, ‘if you want to know what it is, you need to come take part’ (Jade). Despite its secretive nature, however, Brynn had been kind enough to reveal to me that, any who ‘dared to take part in the ritual’ would have the opportunity to ‘test their luck’ and ask Odin for guidance by ‘drawing a rune’. As I sat considering Brynn’s words, I glanced up to see Jade suddenly appear out of the darkness dressed in black. Without a sound, she began slowly and deliberately walking around the circle of camping chairs that surrounded the fire pit, just outside of the dim circle of light cast by the hearth fire. Soon her breathing became heavy and she began softly chanting, ‘Hail Odin, Hail Odin, Hail Odin.’ As suddenly as she had appeared, the chanting ceased and she retreated into the darkness. Then, as the moon began rising above the trees, she loudly called in the distance, ‘Hail Odin!’ Recognizing this as our call to the event, many, though not all, in the circle stood, gathered their chairs and followed her voice into the darkness.

As we made our way along the ribbon of gravel and sand towards the vé, some in small murmuring groups and others alone, the slow, soft, deliberate sound of a pounding drum became audible. As we drew nearer to the vé, the flicker of candles became visible through breaks in the trees. This dreadful ambience was made all the more disconcerting when NaTasha, a newer member of the local Heathen community, suddenly stopped in the middle of the road, turned and faced the moon and began shouting in a deep voice: ‘My people, they come!’ With her words still audible in the distance, the rest of us soon gathered at the mouth of the path that would lead us into the grove of trees where the vé had been established. Appearing in the middle of the path before us, Brynn suddenly halted our loose procession with an outstretched arm. Pausing for a moment, she then glanced at us each in turn while solemnly asking us to ‘beware and enter with an open mind.’ As she spoke, the drumming became louder and soon a strained voice could be heard yelling: ‘Nine nights I hung on the windswept tree! A sacrifice of myself to myself!’ Somewhat shaken, we nodded to Brynn and entered the grove.

Emerging from the dense ring of trees that encircled the space, I was struck by what I saw (fig. 3). Aside from the newly risen moon and stars, the vé was lit only by nine lanterns sitting atop the nine wooden poles that formed the boundary of the space. (Brynn explained later that each pole and lantern symbolized one of the ‘nine worlds of the ‘Heathen cosmos.’) In the center of the vé stood the towering god pole and at its base sat the stone altar upon which the offerings to Odin had been placed earlier that day. In front of the altar sat a large tree stump, at the base of which was a black artificial animal pelt that held twenty-four, six-inch-long wooden staves and a bowl of thick liquid. Once our small group had arrived at the entrance to the vé space, Brynn stopped us again and reminded us to ‘remember and respect the oath [we] took earlier at the blót.’ She was referring to the ‘sacred promise’ (Jonathan) we had made earlier that day to Odin and one another to ‘maintain frith’ (Erik) while within the vé, namely by acting ‘hospitably’ while in the space by respecting the god who potentially resided within it, as well as one another and the space itself.



Figure 3: Hail & Horn permanent vé the evening before the Rune Ritual

After each of us had agreed in turn to observe our oaths, we entered the vé and arrayed ourselves into a rough semi-circle, the focus of which was the pole. As my eyes adjusted to the weak light, I realized that it was Auz who, sitting atop the stump with his eyes closed and head lowered, had been and was still loudly chanting. Once we were all seated, the drumming became louder and faster, as did Auz's chanting until he was nearly screaming: *'Nine nights I hung on the windswept tree! A sacrifice of myself to myself!'* His chant was highly relevant to that evening's event, as it referenced an instance from the 'Heathen Lore' (the fictional and historical source materials referenced by many Heathens when structuring and practicing their Heathenry) that recounted how the god Odin had sacrificed himself to himself in order to achieve the power of divination. Specifically, after driving his spear 'Gungnir' through himself and into the trunk of Yggdrasil, the tree depicted within these 'sources' as standing at the center of the Heathen cosmos, Odin had hung nearly dead for nine days and nights to receive an understanding of the runes. Having earned knowledge of these 'magical characters' (Katherine) through his sacrifice, he became able to use them in divining and affecting his fate and the fate of others.

After a few moments, both the drumming and chanting abruptly stopped, leaving us in silence. Auz lifted his head and, along with Jade and Brynn, quietly

welcomed us. They then provided a brief introduction to the runes, both as communicative and ‘magical’ forms, ‘Heathen’ divination practices more generally and Odin’s connections to both. After that, Brynn began ‘calling out’ (in both Old and contemporary English) each of the twenty-four runes we might encounter that night.¹² As each was called, Auz took a stave from the pelt and, chanting the rune hypnotically, cut the form into the stave using a small knife. After the stave had been marked, Auz took some of the liquid from the wooden bowl and rubbed it onto the inscribed character. Once all of the runes had been ‘cut’, Brynn then invited everyone to ‘come forward and have a reading.’ In no particular order, each of us approached and sat upon the stump at the base of the idol. Auz, who was sitting with the staves on the heavy black pelt at the base of the stump, then loudly called out ‘Hold your question in your mind!’ After a moment of silence, we were directed to stand, approach the god pole and ‘ask [our] question to Odin’ (Auz). With eyes closed and heads bowed, each participant approached and touched the idol with their hands or forehead. Once contact had been made, each asked their question, some silently and others in a faint whisper. Finished, they returned to sit on the stump, where Auz lifted the stave bundle before them so that they could ‘touch the staves.’ Commanding the ‘seeker’ to ‘look to the sky’, Auz lifted and dropped the bundle loudly, scattering the staves across the pelt. Each participant was then directed to ‘reach down and pick [their] rune without looking’, which they did. After we had ‘pulled’ our rune, we passed the stave to Auz who, in all but two cases, loudly called it out into the darkness.

Once everyone had pulled their rune, Jade appeared behind us and began reciting Auz’s ‘Nine nights’ chant. As she did so, Auz set to the task of breaking the staves one by one upon the altar, quietly saying ‘Thank you Odin’ as each splintered and fell. After he had finished, the remains of the staves were gathered so that they could be ‘burned in the hearth fire as an offering to Odin – his wisdom was a gift and

¹² The runic alphabet used that evening was only one of three referenced by my informants. In addition to the ‘Elder Futhark’ employed at the Rune Ritual, many reported also studying the ‘Younger Futhark’ (sixteen characters) and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ (thirty-three characters) runic alphabets as part of their private practices. Interestingly, despite displaying a number of differences, all three alphabets shared certain characters including ‘F’ (*Ansuz* - e.g. knowledge), ‘Þ’ (*Thurisaz* - e.g. force; destruction) and ‘R’ (*Raidho* - e.g. travel). For more, see Aswynn 1998; Elliott 1959; Paxon 2005; and Thorsson 1984.

we will return his gift by burning the runes' (Brynn). We then all loudly 'hailed' or verbally honored Odin for his gift of insight. As we stood to leave, Brynn suggested we 'take the insight given and consider it carefully. Its truth and significance will only become clear after consideration.' With this, the event concluded and we quietly and reflectively made our way back to the hearth fire.

Introduction

The Rune Ritual was held late on the second day of the inaugural 'Hail & Horn Gathering' Heathen festival. This multi-day event, which took place over the 2012 Canada Day long weekend, was held at Raven's Knoll, a privately owned and operated Pagan-friendly camping site near Eganville, Ontario (fig. 4).



Figure 4: Raven's Knoll campsite near Eganville, Ontario

When asked to describe Hail & Horn, Auz, a self-identifying Heathen, co-owner of the Knoll (along with his wife Maryanne) and one of the event's organizers, explained that essentially, it was intended to be 'a meeting of people [...] who practice or are interested in practicing Heathenry.' Agreeing, Erik, the other organizer and a founding member of the Ottawa-based Heathen kindred 'Rúnatýr' continued: 'Hail and Horn is a gathering of modern heathens that long to live their lives and worship in a way most reflective of the manner of historical heathens.' Earlier that summer, Erik had emphasized the 'historical' and 'Heathen' quality of the event and the many forms and practices that would compose it, and had explained that the 'workshops, rituals [and food] that will really make [Hail & Horn] will be as

accurate as possible to the historical sources available.’ Suggesting that such an attention to detail would ultimately affect attendees’ experiences, he concluded:

At Hail & Horn we will be trying to generate an experience according to those historical sources, [...] a more authentic experience. The hope is heathens will come together and foster our heathen culture by experiencing the world in some way similar to how historical heathens would have.

I would suggest that Hail & Horn had been carefully designed by the organizers to function as a mechanism that might actively generate ‘Heathen’ experiences within participants by allowing them to undertake and experience ‘Heathen’ practices. Specifically, by facilitating attendees’ participation in ‘authentic’ Heathen practices, an ‘authenticity’ and ‘Heatheness’ stemming in part from the careful ‘reconstruction’ (Jade) and ‘historical accuracy’ (Erik) of those practices, the organizers had hoped that Heathen and Heathen-curious participants would have experiences that might help them to embody the Heathen ‘worldview’ (Erik) they maintained was reflected in and potentially encountered through those practices.

Keeping this event’s intended formative quality in mind, it is interesting to note that both the Rune Ritual and Hail & Horn more generally shared a number of characteristics that I would argue are central to every Heathen event and practice I observed in Canada, regardless of context, scale or focus. First, throughout both events there had been an emphasis placed upon those present taking active part. In other words, those who chose to attend both events (and it was a choice – some in the wider community decided not to attend Hail & Horn, just as some around the hearth fire that evening had decided not to take part in the Rune Ritual) were not passive observers, but rather volitional agents and willing participants. Indeed, just as everyone who had decided to attend the Odin Blót earlier that day had actively taken part in the offering and honoring practices that defined it, those who decided to attend the Rune Ritual actively echoed Auz’s chanting, freely approached and spoke to the idol and willingly drew a rune. No one had coerced them into participating in either of these events or the practices that composed them. Rather, they took part of their own volition as Heathen or Heathen-curious agents. In fact, my interlocutors placed considerable emphasis upon the Heathen individual’s volitional ‘doing’ of Heathen practices and they all maintained it was a fundamental part of ‘being a

Heathen everyday [...] it comes down to your own effort and desire to develop' (Martin).

Secondly, participation in both Hail & Horn and the Rune Ritual had not been 'solitary', but rather had been undertaken amongst and with regard to others. Indeed, many attendees explained that they had attended Hail & Horn specifically to 'meet and be around other Heathens' (Paul). Likewise, when asked why they had chosen to take part in the Rune Ritual, some, including Jonathan, Auz and Jade, reported that it had been to engage with and experience Odin directly. Interestingly, even those who confessed to not having 'any real belief in the gods or the runes' (Anonymous) said that they had attended the Rune Ritual out of 'curiosity' and a desire to 'take part in a ritual with others.' This emphasis upon interpersonal engagement was clearly observable at the Rune Ritual. For example, during the event participants had processed to and experienced the vé space with others. Afterward they had returned to the hearth fire where they discussed those experiences with other participants. Furthermore, those who believed in the existence of Odin had been given the opportunity to engage with him at not only the Rune Ritual, but also the Odin Blót through his idol and his gifts (his insight as manifested through the runes). Importantly, I would suggest that the ability of these events to realize their organizers' desired aim, namely to generate formative Heathen experiences, was dependent upon those involved engaging with one another in these and other event practices. Whether it was an individual Hail & Horn participant's active engagement with another around the hearth fire, or at the Odin Blót, or in the Rune Ritual asking Odin for his insight, the potentially formative Heathen experiences of those involved were partly defined by and partly dependent upon their engaging with the other beings present within and through these practices.

Lastly, I would suggest these events provided participants with an opportunity to actively consider and directly affect some aspect of their self through these acts of willing participation and interpersonal engagement. Indeed, some of the newer members of the Raven's Knoll community such as 'Star' reported attending Hail & Horn precisely to 'learn more about Heathenry from the people present so that [she could] develop as a member of the community.' This also appeared to be the case with the Rune Ritual. For example, when asked why they had decided to

take part in the event, many reported that they had done so in the hope of gaining ‘foresight’ or ‘insight’, as, going into the event, they had ‘a big question weighing on [their] mind and [they] wanted a way forward’ (Erik). Discussing his rune following the event, Jonathan explained how he was ‘going to really think about it [...] it will take some time to figure out its meaning but I know it is important to my future!’ His statement was not unique, and in the days following the Rune Ritual I overheard many discussing how they were going to ‘spend some time really thinking about the meaning of it all’ (Erik), namely how the runes they had pulled ‘could be applied to [their] life’ (Katherine). Interestingly, many attendees took the opportunities provided by the educational ‘workshops’ and other events that composed Hail & Horn to do precisely this. For example, within these shared contexts, I observed many discuss their rune or some other ‘powerful experience’ (Brynn) or literary source they had encountered with the other participants present. When asked why, they said they believed that these discussions might provide them with some new perspective or insight that would help them ‘work on’ (Jonathan) themselves. It would seem then that these events, and the acts of engagement, discussion, interpretation and application they entailed, provided my interlocutors with private and shared opportunities for reflection and active self-fashioning.

Chapter Aim and Outline

With these key qualities in mind, I would like to begin my discussion of my informants’ Heathenry by suggesting that their development as Heathens might be approached as an attempt on their part to ‘make’ themselves in a certain way. Specifically, I will argue that, by actively engaging in Heathen events like Hail & Horn and the Rune Ritual with, around and towards others, as well as in ‘private’ or semi-private everyday Heathen practices such as ‘study’, they were actively attempting to formulate and realize a specific type of self. Importantly, the aim of this chapter is not to outline this process or the type of self they were striving to manifest. Rather, my aim is to simply show how the practical, reflexive and interpersonal quality of Heathenry and Heathen practices made them possible mechanisms of self-construction and articulation. Towards this end, I shall begin by considering their narratives of disassociation, searching and discovery. Specifically, I

will start by exploring those personal narratives they shared that depicted their early engagement with Heathenry and development as Heathens. I will then contextualize both their experiences and Heathenry more generally by considering the contemporary context within which Heathenry and their journey towards and discovery of it occurred. I will then consider their quests as ‘projects’, or reflexive and active attempts at self-making that Foucault has suggested are fundamental to the construction of a specific kind of subject. Suggesting that my informants’ Heathen development hints at such a project, I will conclude by arguing that Heathenry might be approached as an ‘artifice’ in the classical sense – a skilful mechanism they employed in their formation into ‘an object or product created by art or skill [...] by knowledgeable agents [...] that] need to be interpreted with art and skill’ (Hall 2014: xvi).

A Heathen Journey

During a recent visit to a small drinking establishment in the Edinburgh Grassmarket known locally as having some of the finest beers and whisky in the area, I overheard a customer explain to the publican how, at present, he only drinks ‘craft beer. Beer is important to me! The type of beer a man drinks says a lot about his character.’ While, admittedly, the self-professed connoisseur’s observation made me chuckle a bit, I found his statement striking. He spoke with such conviction that I was left with little doubt that, for him at least, the type of beer consumed does in some way affect and reflect the quality of the drinker. Though not everyone may share in his belief that ‘fine’ beer (and the ‘posh’ pubs where it might be imbibed amongst like-minded others) and its consumption necessarily produces and reflects a ‘fine character’, his active adoption and articulation of certain desirable forms and practices thought to embody a ‘desirable self’ is not unique. Indeed, while this gentleman might have been attempting to formulate and articulate a self defined and expressed in part through knowledge and practices related to beer, might something similar not also be said about those who actively purchase and then proudly display a certain brand of electronics on the bus or at Starbucks? How about those who regularly and actively support certain ‘online causes’ through the private and public ‘liking’ practices they undertake on their Facebook pages?

Though perhaps a little simplistic, I would suggest that in each case the agents involved were attempting to affect certain changes upon some aspect of themselves through their engagement with and embodiment of new qualities in practice. Specifically, by choosing to actively engage with new forms – material, practical or conceptual (i.e. forms of knowledge) – I would posit that these agents were attempting to embody the qualities associated with those adopted forms in the hope of effecting a formation of self that possessed those qualities. Of course, I am not suggesting that this is the only possible explanation for these behaviors, nor am I suggesting that the forms adopted by these agents alone defined the subjects they were attempting to generate through their engagements with them. Rather, I am simply suggesting that actively, reflexively and intentionally engaging with new fields and forms in one's everyday actions and contexts is one way in which contemporary agents might be seen as attempting to fashion themselves as and into the subjects they would like to be. Though somewhat different from the beer connoisseur, electronics enthusiast and online activist in the type of self they were attempting to realize and the means employed, I would suggest that something similar might be said about my interlocutors' adoption of and development through Heathenry. Specifically, I would suggest that they were attempting to develop and then apply upon themselves a 'gaze' that projected and was a product of a very specific kind of self-awareness – an awareness that was both the means and end of their self-making 'projects'.

'Leaving', 'Searching', 'Finding'

I would argue that the first step towards uncovering the type of subject-self my informants were attempting to realize through their engagement with Heathenry is to ask why they began associating with Heathenry in the first place. Though there was an interesting tendency amongst them to retrospectively suggest otherwise, none of my interlocutors were 'born' Heathen. Rather, in personal narratives they shared at events like Hail & Horn, on Heathen-friendly social networking sites such as the *Ontario Heathens* Facebook page and in casual chats they had with one another in non-Heathen contexts, they regularly related how they had discovered and then 'adopted' Heathenry in their teens or early twenties. Interestingly, these narratives of

‘disassociation’, ‘searching’ ‘discovery’ and ‘adoption’ generally specified a surprisingly small number of factors as having motivated their disassociation from a prior field of practice that led to their eventual adoption of Heathenry. For example, many explained that they had begun ‘searching’ because they no longer found the ‘emptiness of consumer culture’ (Erik) and the ‘types of living and types of people’ (Jonathan) associated with it agreeable. Relating her experience, Jade began, ‘I find in contemporary society we experience such rapid change as well as alienation from others [...], change that destroys community and makes us distant from one another.’ Erik continued, ‘Yeah, our world is largely fake. It is made up of trinkets and pop-culture fads. This way of life is anathema to many peoples’ psyches. People are tired of feeling hollow inside, tired of feeling like a number.’ Agreeing with a sigh, Jonathan concluded, ‘I guess the fact that people of my generation don't care about anything except instant gratification made me search for something better.’

Others explained how, after becoming tired and disillusioned with the contradictory and ‘hypocritical’ nature of traditional mainstream religious institutions, they had set out to find an alternative field with which they felt more of a ‘connection’. Angus, a non-member ‘friend’ of Rúnatýr Kindred continued:

After I read [the Bible] a few times, I saw contradictions between that and the loving, merciful message of the gospels. It really kind of produced a lot of disturbance let's say. I was very disturbed that I could condone through my worship, through my devotion, the actions of a God that would instigate [mass murder and rape]. I've talked to numerous Christians about these passages [and they say] ‘well, it's just a...’ they just don't have an answer for it basically. [...] I didn't feel comfortable giving any kind of honor to a god that would do that.

Similarly, Brynn and Katherine from Ottawa, as well as Martin from Montréal, explained how the ‘dogmatic control inherent to Christianity’ (Martin) had also fuelled their disassociation from the tradition. According to Katherine, ‘I didn't need someone telling me what to think and do [...] I want to do what I feel is right. I decided to start looking for something that allowed me to do that’. Importantly, this ontological discontent was not solely associated with Christianity. Indeed, Auz reported how he had once been ‘what I guess you would consider an Atheist – well, non-religious.’ He continued, ‘I started thinking a lot about transcendence – I wanted

to know that something lasts, that something goes on, [...] I wanted to live in an enchanted universe and that is what I went looking for!’

Whether they disassociated from some prior field of practice because they found the subjects, relations and experiences seemingly generated by and experienced within it undesirable, or because they wanted the ability to freely engage in practices they found personally relevant, or in the hope of finding ‘satisfaction’, following this disassociation they began what they referred to as a period of ‘searching’. During this period, many engaged with a variety of fields including Atheism, ‘nature worship’ and a variety of contemporary Pagan traditions such as Wicca and Druidism. For example, Marc and Coco from Montréal engaged extensively with the Wiccan tradition after having left the Catholic Church, before adopting Heathenry. Likewise, Auz explained how he ‘studied and experimented with a variety of animistic and tribal traditions from around the world’ before adopting Heathenry. In a small number of cases, some, such as Erin, reported that they had discovered Heathenry almost immediately after leaving ‘the Church’, but had decided to ‘try Wicca, Druidism and the like’ before ‘returning to Heathenry a few years later.’

Following this period of searching, which for some lasted years, they ‘at last discovered’ (Shane) and subsequently ‘adopted’ Heathenry as a new field of formative practice. Most often, this occurred through their engagement with some popular Heathen form such as a collection of Norse Myths. In other cases, they were introduced to Heathenry by a practicing Heathen or a non-Heathen pagan who had knowledge of Heathenry. Regardless of the form this initial exposure took, they soon decided that the field represented a way of living and a type of self they ‘found fulfilling, something that just fit with what [they] believed and that would allow [them] to live that way’ (Martin). Interestingly, as with their narratives of disassociation and searching, while the details of these discovery and adoption narratives varied somewhat, adoption of this ‘desirable’ field seemed to be due to a relatively small number of characteristics and experiences. One of the most often mentioned was Heathenry’s ‘lived’ quality. Martin explained:

You know, in my experience at least, [Christians] baptize their kids when they are born, they go to the funerals of their dead relatives and they get

married in front of a priest usually, but that is really the extent of it. They don't go to church on Sunday, they don't really read the Bible, they don't care about it all that much. It is more a societal thing. And to me, that just struck me as being somewhat banal. If I was going to have a faith, I want it to be real, something I could stand by and not pretend it was my faith or just give it cursory acceptance or whatever, or overlook all of the crap that is written and just cherry-pick the parts that I like. That is what Heathenry is to me – it is solid and it is something you live every day in every interaction you have with people.

Shane from near Ottawa continued: 'One thing that drew me from Wicca to Heathenry was the fact that Heathens are always Heathens, it is a way of living! It seemed to me that many [Wiccans] were only Wiccan when they got together. I wanted something a bit more.' Though the details differed from person to person, this refrain was an often-heard one. Indeed, all of my informants recognized and applauded the fact that Heathenry, more than the other fields they had encountered, was a total 'way of living' (Jonathan) realized in 'everything we do' (Erik).

In addition to its 'total' lived quality, some had 'felt drawn' to Heathenry due to the ties they felt existed between it and 'where [they] come from' (Brynn). Martin explained: 'It wasn't really until I landed upon [Heathenry] that I thought, "well, if I am going to follow any kind of faith in my life, it is going to be one that my ancient ancestors in my bloodline followed".' This association between Heathenry and informants' family and cultural backgrounds manifested itself in a very interesting way. Specifically, there was a noticeable tendency for their interest in and association with Heathenry to coincide with an increased interest in history and their family genealogy. That said, the direction of influence was often unclear. For instance, in some cases their interest in Heathenry developed or increased because of genealogical research. This seemed to be the case with Erik, who explained how he had become interested in the 'worldview of [his] pre-Christian, Frankish ancestors' upon discovering that his family was 'from Europe and not of Irish descent.' In other cases, they had become more interested in their 'ancestry', Heathen or otherwise, after their initial engagement with Heathenry, an engagement that in turn reinforced their interest in the field. Katherine is a good example: 'I suddenly realized that the stories were about and part of the world my ancestors lived in [...] It made me want to learn more about them and Heathenry.' At a 'pub moot' (an informal social gathering) I attended in Montréal, Marc, formally of Nine Mountains Kindred,

summarized this trend thus: ‘Heathenry is about roots! It is about where you come from, who you are.’

Others explained how the field’s emphasis upon individual effort, accomplishment and self-determination had made it attractive. Gus explained, ‘You know, we do not just let anyone in. You have to prove that you want to be there and that you are working hard to be [Heathen]. I like that people have to actually *work* at being Heathen.’ In a conversation I had with Erik about a popular Heathen forum called *Ásatrú Lore* he expressed a similar view:

‘Newbies’ [new Heathens] come on [to the forum] and start talking about what they ‘believe’ and some of us are like ‘Yeah, really? Why?’ Some never come back and you know that they weren’t *that* interested, but some do! They do their homework, they work hard and they come back and defend what they do. [...] That is one thing that drew me to Heathenry. Part of being Heathen is working hard. It is about creating something that is real. [Original emphasis]

In addition to being a dominant feature of my interlocutors’ Heathenry and Heathen narratives, this emphasis upon individual action also manifested itself within their relationships with non-Heathens. One interesting example of this tendency was the relationships they maintained with their children. In Canada, I spoke with a number of individuals who had children of different ages. At various points in my research, I asked them if they planned to ‘raise their children Heathen.’ Interestingly, in all but two cases they replied that, while they would expose their children to the ‘Heathen tradition’ by including them in their practices and taking them to events if they so desired, they would not ‘make them be Heathen.’ Natasha, who had a young daughter, explained: ‘I chose this path – though sometimes I think it chose me! – and [my daughter] can choose whatever path she wants.’ Brynn voiced a similar opinion, stating that she also did not plan on ‘raising’ her five children Heathen but rather would allow them to pursue and adopt Heathenry if they decided that it ‘is for them [... Shane and I] expose them to it just as their [biological] father exposes them to Catholicism. If they want to take part, great! If not, that’s fine too.’

While my informants stressed that Heathenry’s emphasis upon agents’ active and willing participation in highly individualized acts of personal striving had appealed to them, they were also often quick to point out that this emphasis had an

important interpersonal dimension as well. Jonathan explained: ‘In Heathenry you are expected to work hard. By being a strong, worthy person you get rewarded with word fame and renown because you deserve it! But, what you do also affects others and those you are close with share in your rewards.’ Thus, while Heathenry and my informants may have prized individual effort and accomplishment, they did so while actively recognizing that those efforts and accomplishments were ultimately ‘shared’ with and had an impact upon others. In other words, both my informants and Heathenry stressed individual agents’ striving acts because, within the field, every striving agent was also a subject who was ultimately affected by not only their own acts, but also those of others (and vice versa).

Lastly, some of my informants reported that an unexpected yet formative interaction with the ‘Heathen cosmos’ had led them to adopt Heathenry.¹³ Importantly, in every case, these experiences had occurred after those involved had already begun engaging with Heathen forms such as source materials or other Heathens. Katherine explained:

When I started with Heathenry as a teenager, there wasn’t much reading material available. I finally found a book and read it through a couple of times. [...] One night I was sitting on my bed reading when I suddenly felt very far away. The next thing I knew there was a woman standing in front of me. She had thick blond plaited hair, a beautiful, strong face. She didn’t say anything; she just stood there smiling. Then she leaned towards me, placed her finger in the middle of my forehead, and pushed! The next thing I knew I was falling back in my bed. [...] It was Freya [the Germanic goddess of divination, war and love]! From that moment on, I have followed her.

Gary from near Toronto shared a similar experience:

So one day while driving home through bad traffic, as it usually was, I realized that I was reaching the point where I actually *wanted* some other driver to cut me off so that I could yell and get all ranty. That was no good. So on a silly whim, I sort of looked up and said, ‘Thor, if you can hear me, I promise that I’m going to work to get a handle on this.’ Suddenly, out of a clear blue sky comes a peal of thunder. Now, it was probably a truck backfiring on the next block, but in that moment, I *felt* it,

¹³ By the ‘Heathen cosmos’, I am referring to that realm of possibility and potentiality that is associated with Heathenry within certain shared Heathen source materials. In addition to being inhabited by humans, many, though not all, of my informants maintained it was also potentially inhabited by other categories of Heathen beings. I shall discuss this realm at length in Chapter Two.

I *chose* to believe that it was Thor, he was really out there, he'd heard me and he was going to hold me to my promise. I'd never felt anything like that before in my life, and I never really looked back. [Original emphasis]

Returning briefly to what was said earlier concerning the Heathen emphasis upon individual choice and effort, it should be noted that, in both of these instances, Katherine and Gary actively chose to interpret a potentially 'everyday' occurrence in a way that had certain 'Heathen' implications. Specifically, referencing their expanding body of Heathen knowledge, they adopted an explanation that reflected that knowledge and provided them with access to and a connection with the cosmological field outlined within that knowledge. For example, by deciding that her experience was an engagement with a Heathen goddess and not a dream, Katherine generated a space where she might engage and form relations with that recognizable Heathen being in the future. Likewise, by actively choosing to interpret the sound he heard as indicating Thor's presence, Gary opened himself to the implications associated with that presence and attentiveness, as well as the realm where both became possible. Importantly, I am in no way suggesting that these experiences, and the events they involved, were anything other than what Gary and Katherine believed them to be. Rather, I simply wish to point out that their active and reflexive recognition and response to the perceived 'Heathen' quality of those experiences supported and concretized their resulting association with Heathenry, as well as their potential quality as striving Heathen agents.

Of course, just because my informants discovered and actively chose to adopt Heathenry did not mean they all remained Heathen. Indeed, two of my Canadian informants stated that, while they believed Heathenry 'had a lot of positive qualities', it was ultimately 'not for them'. At the time of my research they had begun distancing themselves from the field and the Heathen community so that they could eventually resume their searching. One of these individuals, a gentleman named Jonas, continued, '[H]eathenry is not a good fit for me. Truth be told I'm not sure [anything] will ever be "right" for me [...] Heathenry has much to recommend it [...] So, I'm not going to call myself a Heathen when I'm not really one, or if there are things [about Heathenry] that don't suit me.' These instances aside, however, most of those I spoke with had been self-identifying Heathens for at least a decade and did not foresee themselves resuming their journey anytime soon. Indeed, when asked if

they thought they would ever ‘leave Heathenry’, most replied they had ‘worked very hard to be [Heathen]’ and as such, were ‘not going to change. I am Heathen and I am proud of it! I don’t think I could change if I wanted’ (Jonathan).

Interestingly, my Canadian interlocutors’ narratives of disassociation, searching and discovery-adoption were not unique. In fact, some of my Icelandic informants shared narratives that depicted a very similar process. For example, as was the case above, some of them began searching for an alternative field of practice following their disassociation from a ‘mainstream’ religious institution. Teresa explained:

I was really Catholic! I attended Mass one to three times a day [...] but decided to leave the Catholic Church for two reasons: First I was almost kicked out for standing in line for the new Harry Potter book and I thought that was ridiculous [...] and my older brother, or step-brother, is gay and he no longer exists in my family because he is gay [...], my family is all still very Catholic. That way of thinking just isn’t for me.

Following this disassociation, Teresa and others ‘dabbled in other stuff like Atheism but it just didn’t seem right’ (Viktor). They related how their searching ended once they discovered and then joined *Ásatrúarfélagið*, the largest Heathen organization in Iceland at the time of my research. When I asked why they had joined, both said it was because the organization and Heathenry more generally had ‘just really connected with [them]’ (Teresa). The explanations given by my Icelandic informants for this ‘connection’ were in many ways similar to those given by my Canadian informants. For example, some said it had been, if not forged, then at least ‘strengthened’ by a formative experience with the Heathen cosmos. Samuel related such an experience, ‘During my gap year in the north I had a copy of the [Icelandic] sagas and started reading them as I traveled. Read, read, read! That is all I did! One day was I was standing in this Finnish forest [...] I felt something with me. From that point onwards, I began practicing.’ Others reported that they felt a connection with Heathenry due to the historical ties they perceived as existing between *Ásatrú* (Icelandic Heathenry) and their biological and cultural ‘roots’. Teresa explained this connection well: ‘I am proud of my Icelandic heritage and culture and [Heathenry] makes you interested in where you come from and how those people lived [...] it helps you connect to them and that world.’ Of course, my Icelandic interlocutors are

not the only ones who have noted the connection within Iceland between Ásatrú, the literary, linguistic and mythological forms that popularly define it within that context and certain shared conceptions of Icelandic history and culture. For example, Michael Strmiska, who worked with Ásatrúarfélagið in the late 1990s, has noted: ‘The everyday, Pagan-derived nomenclature of streets and persons in Iceland is a mundane but significant indicator of how the lore of the ancient gods remains a living part of the Icelandic cultural memory as well as a source of national pride’ (2000: 109). He concludes that, ‘By highlighting the Pagan, pre-Christian aspects of the Icelandic past and attempting to reconfigure these to suit modern times, Ásatrú helps to preserve a link to [Icelandic] cultural resources’ (2000: 111). Lastly, like my Canadian informants, some had also found Heathenry’s emphasis upon choice and effort appealing. Teresa continued, ‘[we] don’t proselytize, we only want people who want to be here. It is up to you to learn and take part and I like that.’

These similarities aside, there were also some important differences between my Canadian and Icelandic informants’ narratives that should be noted. For example, all of my Icelandic informants were quick to stress the fact that some of the key sources referenced by many contemporary Heathens were in fact composed in Iceland. Being native Icelandic cultural forms, many related how they had been ‘raised listening to the stories about the gods and what they did’ (Teresa). Due in part to the historical and cultural quality of these forms in Iceland, some, as was suggested by Strmiska above, maintained that a firm connection existed between those forms, Ásatrú, Iceland and a shared Icelandic national identity. This of course differed greatly from my Canadian informants’ experiences. They had generally not engaged with Heathen forms prior to their ‘searching’ and there were only a handful of instances in which they explicitly associated their Canadian national identity with their Heathenry.¹⁴ Further, unlike Canada, which maintains a strict separation between church and state, Iceland has a ‘state-supported’ national church, which receives funds from the Icelandic government. While, according to Steinunn Arnþrúðer Björndóttir of the ‘Ecumenical Affairs and Interfaith Communication’ office in Reykjavík, the church has experienced ‘decreased attendance’ in recent

¹⁴ Auz reportedly held an event at the 2008 Midgard Gathering during which he had discussed the connection that exists between Canada as a Commonwealth country and the Saxon ancestry of the British monarchy. Erik also discussed this connection at workshop I attended at Midgard 2012.

years, my informants still recognized the church as a ‘cultural institution’ (Teresa) that exerts a ‘powerful hold’ (Viktor) over many Icelanders. For example, as a state institution, the national church receives a portion of the taxes collected from those citizens who are its registered members. Some of those I spoke with in Iceland explained how they had officially left the church and actively registered with Ásatrúarfélagið in order to ensure that the church did not ‘get and use [their] money to finance school trips to churches and support their public projects’ (Viktor).

Even with these differences, many of my informants’ early experiences of and through Heathenry in both contexts were surprisingly similar. Specifically, most had decided in their past that some aspect of their life or self was unsatisfying. In an attempt to effect a change, they began distancing themselves from the formative field of practice (whether a ‘religious’ institution or some element of ‘pop’ or ‘dominant’ culture) they believed to be the cause of that dissatisfaction. They then began actively looking for an alternative field that they believed more representative of the kind of living they found appealing. Through a sometimes lengthy and solitary process whereby they began embodying and articulating new fields and their associated qualities through an engagement with the forms associated with them, they discovered and subsequently adopted Heathenry. The reason quoted in nearly every case was that they believed that Heathenry, more than any other field they had encountered, represented and might potentially help them to realize a way of living and a type of self they found desirable. Specifically, they seemed to believe that its emphasis upon totalizing, ‘everyday’ action, ‘rootedness’ and striving agents’ interpersonal development represented possibilities for self and world they found appealing. Thus, in an attempt to realize those possibilities they began engaging with the forms associated with them, including historic ‘Heathen’ texts, certain forms of practice and even other categories of ‘cosmological’ beings.

Contextualizing Heathenry

I would suggest that my informants’ individual Heathen journeys, much like those potentially being undertaken by the craft beer drinker, online activist and branded electronics aficionado introduced earlier, were greatly influenced by the historical context within which they occurred. Indeed, Bauman (1997), Giddens (1991), Heelas

(2008), Taylor (2007) and others have all suggested that my interlocutors' reported experiences of dissatisfaction, disassociation and searching are not novel, but rather pervasive characteristics of the current historical epoch. Specifically, they have suggested that the processes that have shaped this era have affected the ways in which individuals like my informants have come to perceive of and fashion themselves into social beings. As such, in an attempt to better understand the nature of their development as Heathens, I would like to briefly consider this era, its characteristics and its relationship to Heathenry and my informants' Heathen quests.

Modernity; Late Modernity; Post Modernity

Anthony Giddens has suggested that the Western world has entered into what he refers to as the 'Late' or 'High Modern' era. Defined by heightened levels of 'institutional (and self-directed) reflexivity', the 'reorganization of time and space' and 'mediated' experiences (1991: 2–4) of self, world and other, he suggests that our current epoch represents a 'radical turn from tradition' (1990: 175–6). In so being, he posits that it has also become defined by a pervasive sense of 'radical [institutionalized] doubt' (1991: 2), one result of which has been the increasing rejection of 'any notion of transcendence' (León and Leeuwen 2003: 78; see also Taylor 2007) and overarching social authority. Indeed, he maintains that the era is one in which there are no longer 'determinate authorities' (1991: 194) that exercise power over many areas of social life simultaneously, but rather multiple authorities that social 'agents' must actively navigate within their daily lives.

Due to their disengagement from the forms of transcendent moral authority, 'history' and embedded concepts of self, place and other that traditionally helped organize the social world, late modern agents and their experiences have fallen into a state of what Giddens refers to as 'narrative fragmentation' (1991: 31). Specifically, as the authoritative narratives that traditionally structured experience have succumbed to doubt, critical reflection and deconstruction, what and who they once helped define have become, as Bauman has put it, 'fluid [and] ambiguous,' ultimately existing 'in a state of perpetual becoming' (2000: 209). As a result, agents and institutions within the late, 'liquid' modern world have become unrooted, ultimately being responsible for their own self-construction. With reference to their

own experiences and those of others, late modern agents have become embedded within a perpetual process of narrative construction and revision, the aim of which is the composition, expression and propagation of a coherent biography. In other words, by actively navigating and engaging with the multiple fields, authorities, agents and forms that have come to populate this ‘fragmented’ late modern world, these agents are perpetually attempting to construct and ‘keep a particular narrative going’ (Giddens 1991: 54).

Of course, many of the characteristics that seem to define Giddens’ Late Modern era and agents are not unique. Rather, they have roots in an earlier historical context often described as ‘Classical Modernity’ (see Berman 1982). Beginning with the Enlightenment, this historical period was defined first and foremost by an increasing emphasis upon rationalism and ‘[a] certain set of attitudes towards the world, the idea of the world as open to transformation, by human intervention’ (Giddens 1998: 94). Indeed, it was believed that the era itself represented just such an instance of development, being a ‘result of a transition from the old to the new [...] inspired by modern science’, which both represented and propagated a belief in the ‘infinite progress of knowledge and in the infinite advance towards social and moral betterment’ (Habermas and Ben-Habib 1981: 3–4). As this ‘reason’ and its progressive application in all areas of life spread, the ‘traditional’ discourses, institutions (particularly religious institutions) and authorities that had historically informed and organized the social world were either transformed to reflect this emphasis or were replaced. In other words, like late modernity, this historical context was in part defined by a ‘turning away’ from traditional social orders; a ‘bringing in of calculation into the traditional brotherhood’ (Weber 2003 [1927]: 356) and those ways and realms of living that had hitherto been structured by those traditional authorities. As part of this process, the period also saw the proliferation and spread of political institutions and a global capitalist economy throughout the world. According to Marx (1976 [1859]), as these new institutions (and their associated ‘moral’ and ‘social’ orders) developed and spread, the individuals in relation to which and upon which they operated also began changing, as did the relationships they maintained with others. Specifically, they became fragmented beings; individuals who were no longer complete social persons defined through their

fulfillment of traditional roles and relationships, but rather beings who were ‘mediated’ and incomplete.

Not everyone maintains that our current epoch is reflective of and/or a product of modernity’s enduring influence. Rather, some have suggested that the Modern era, however conceptualized, experienced a ‘rupture’ in the mid-twentieth century and entered into a state of ‘post modernity’. In the most general sense, post modernity has been defined as a historical context defined by increased levels of disbelief in ‘transcendent and universal truth [... an] incredulity toward metanarratives’ (Lyotard 1984[1979]: xxiv–xxv). James Beckford has provided a more comprehensive description, suggesting that the Post Modern era is differentiated from modernity most notably by its:

- 1) Refusal to regard positivistic, rationalistic, instrumental criteria as the sole of exclusive standard of worthwhile knowledge.
- 2) A willingness to combine symbols from disparate codes or frameworks of meaning, even at the cost of disjunctions and eclecticism.
- 3) A celebration of spontaneity, fragmentations, superficiality, irony and playfulness.
- 4) A willingness to abandon the search for over-arching or triumphalist myths, narratives or frameworks of knowledge. (1992: 19)

Thus, post modernity might be approached as a historical context defined by a plurality of ‘truths’; an epoch within which the shared rationalist discourses of modernity have been replaced by a multiplicity of contextualized narratives that emphasize creative formations over progressive developments.

The post modern emphasis upon plurality is reflected within the types of agents some have suggested are a product of the epoch, as well as in the manner of their development. For example, Bauman has suggested that ‘To be rational in the *modern* world meant to be a pilgrim and to live one’s life as a pilgrimage. To be rational in the *postmodern world* means to be a vagrant or a tourist, or to act as one’ (1993: 51[original emphasis]). In other words, post modern agents might be seen as being fluid or constantly ‘in process’; as being on a journey to formulate a sense of self through their purposeful development of certain qualities and narratives in practice. That said, however, the exact nature of this post modern ‘collaging’ is contested. Bauman has suggested that these post modern agents, like Giddens’ late modern agents, are essentially self-constituted through their reflexive acquisition and

articulation of certain qualities (see Bauman 2007). Other thinkers (see Butler 1990) have suggested the opposite. They maintain that individuals ‘must be regarded as so many effects of the fundamental implications of power/knowledge and their historical transformations’ (Foucault 1991: 27). In other words, they are not products of their own fashioning activities, but rather those that are directed at/employed upon them by ‘powerful’ others.

Whether approached as distinct historic contexts or expressions of the same epoch, modernity, late modernity and post modernity might be seen as sharing some important similarities. Most notably, all three periods are *post* ‘pre-modern’ – that is, they might be seen as being characterized, at least in part, by a process that Heelas has referred to as ‘de-traditionalization’. Specifically, all three have witnessed a slow ‘shift of authority: from “without” to “within” [...] the decline of belief in pre-given or natural orders of things. Individual subjects are themselves called upon to exercise authority’ (1996b: 2). In other words, they feature, albeit to varying extents, ‘people [...] stand[ing] back from, critically reflect[ing] upon, and los[ing] their faith in what the traditional has to offer’ (Heelas 1996b: 4). In classical modernity, this shift was represented by the turning away from traditional forms of ontological authority towards forms identified through and by human rationality, as well as the disruption of pre-modern social roles and relationships. This process has then continued and intensified within the late/post modern world as grand social narratives have been increasingly called into question and critically deconstructed, as have the authorities, institutions, agents and social relationships informed by them. Furthermore, the agent-subjects generated within these periods (and the means of their production) also share some interesting characteristics. Specifically, as they have become increasingly disassociated from the ‘traditional’ forms of organization that historically informed social roles, relations and experiences, they became able (were forced) to actively and reflexively consider their own selves and means of realization. Thus, however defined, our current epoch might be seen as being characterized by ongoing processes and shared experiences of de-traditionalization, authority decentralization, narrative fragmentation and acts of reflexive self-formation undertaken by striving agents.

Or is it? While discussing de-traditionalization, Heelas has pointed out that people, and the historical contexts within which they develop, ‘are never *simply*

tradition-informed [or vice versa ...] neither are people *simply* autonomous. [...] We can, of course, speak as individuals. What we cannot do is speak as individuals without being informed by all of those sustained voices of external authority' (1996b: 9). In this way, no context or agent, including the hyper-reflexive agents and contexts just described, develop or exist in a vacuum. Rather, they are in part a product of or informed by that which has preceded them. In other words, just as Giddens' Late Modern era and agents are defined as radicalized manifestations of classical modernity, and post modernity is often defined through its oppositional relationship to modernity, each has developed from (and seemingly in opposition to) those historic discourses and institutions associated with pre-modernity. As such, our current era, however conceptualized, is not de-traditionalized, just as the agents that inhabit it are not fully autonomous and self-constituting.

Heathenry as 'Contemporary' Practice

Contextualizing Heathenry and my informants' Heathen journeys is not a simple task. This is in part because, in addition to being products of (and thus reflective of) the contested historical contexts just described, I would argue that they also displayed many 'pre-modern' qualities as well. For example, the 1960s, 1970s and the decades that followed saw a 'radical turn in religion and morals' (Pike 2004: 74) in both North America and Britain. This was in part because, within these contexts, increasing doubt in and distrust of traditional institutions began leading people away from many established fields of practice. Calling to mind the 'nova effect' referred to by Taylor in my Introduction, new alternatives constructed by those increasingly reflexive agents began to proliferate and take their places; alternatives believed to be more representative of late/post modernity, as well as those individuals developing within it. As has already been discussed, it was within this context that many contemporary Pagan traditions, including Heathenry, began developing and spreading, first in Britain and the United States, and then Canada, Iceland and beyond (Magliocco 2004: 70; see also Strmiska 2000). However, while Heathenry's current incarnation might be approached as a product of this process of de-traditionalization, institutional deconstruction and reflexive self-formation, many of

the forms utilized in the development of this ‘reconstructed historical worldview’ (Erik) are ‘pre-modern’ in origin.

In an attempt to counteract the increasing industrialization, rationalization and institutionalization that many believed characterized Europe in the late 1700s and 1800s, artists and intellectuals throughout Europe began turning towards nature and history in a search for cultural forms they believed represented a desirable alternative to the modernity of the period. This was particularly the case in Germany, where a growing nostalgia for the past and an increasing desire for a unifying national identity led authors such as Goethe, Eichendorff and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm to begin gathering and incorporating local natural, historical and regional folk forms into their writings. In an attempt to experience forms of esoteric knowledge that represented a welcome alternative to the Enlightenment rationalist project, many of the German, English and French ‘romantics’ of the period also began experimenting with the ‘superstitious belief systems’ supposedly ‘uncovered’ and ‘reconstructed’ as part of this process (Magliocco 2004: 37–40). This experimentation was particularly prevalent amongst the English and French elite, and often took the form of participation in ‘occultist practices’ such as ‘ritualistic magic’ (Greenwood 2005: 31). These practices eventually spread, became more organized and led to the formation of numerous ‘secret societies’ and ‘brotherhoods’ across mainland Europe and Britain including the Freemasons, the Hell Fire Club, and the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia. It was from these ‘secret societies’, or rather the historic forms used in their formation, as well as the desired process of experiential reorientation that had framed their assembly, that today’s Pagan traditions, including Heathenry, eventually developed (Hutton 1999: 56–8; Magliocco 2004: 33–4).

Described in this way, the Heathen field adopted by my interlocutors might be approached as an ‘invented tradition’, or a ‘tradition invented, constructed and formally instituted [... in response] to novel situations which take reference to old situations’ (Hobsbawm 1983: 1–2).¹⁵ Specifically, by calling upon ‘elements of the

¹⁵ I refer to Heathenry as an ‘invented tradition’ while recognizing that this phrase has negative connotations, both within and outside of anthropology (see Linnekin 1991). However, I have decided to adopt the phrase in an attempt to conceptualize the process of ‘drawing together’ and ‘opening up’ that seemed to frame my interlocutors’ engagement with the tradition. Thus, I use it cautiously and in a way that is not intended to cast doubt upon my informants’ sentiments or the ‘authenticity’ of the ‘truth’ they believed was represented by or encountered through their engagement with Heathenry.

pre-modern Pagan past' (Strmiska 2000: 106), Heathenry, like other contemporary Pagan traditions, became a field of practice 'rooted in romantic ideas of place, history and identity [... that developed] in response to [the] feelings of dislocation and alienation from nature, culture and divinity' (Davy 2009: 1) believed by many to define the 'post pre-modern' world. In so being, it represented an alternative field of formative practice and experience that existed both beyond and because of the 'fragmentation' and de-traditionalization of the historical contexts of its development. The irony, of course, is that this field, and the 'traditionally' informed possibilities for self and experience it represented, was a product of the very rational, progressive Enlightenment discourse it aimed in part to offset. Thus, as a 'late' or 'post' modern field of practice supposedly constructed from 'pre-modern' forms, Heathenry displays the same manifold, 'liquid' quality (see Bauman 2000) as the contexts from which it developed and within which it has subsequently been applied by my interlocutors.

I would suggest my informants' Heathen engagement and development reflected the heterogeneous nature of the tradition and its contexts of development. For example, their ability to consider, doubt and actively disassociate from their prior fields in an attempt to fashion themselves as particular types of agents was in part a result and reflection of the increased reflexivity, narrative plurality and 'critical distance' associated with late/post modernity. These qualities were also potentially illustrated by the 'searching' they undertook prior to adopting Heathenry. Indeed, as hinted above, Bauman has suggested that this process of 'shopping around' is a fundamental quality of our current era. Specifically, he argues that contemporary agents' self-understandings are both 'organized around' and defined in their 'consumption' (see Bauman 1998) of material objects, new fields of practice and the qualities associated with them. My interlocutors' 'sampling' of alternative fields in an attempt to find one that was 'just right' might be seen as reflecting just such a process. Importantly, however, none of them characterized their searching as 'shopping around'. Rather, some described this period as a 'trial by fire' during which they, through acts of 'research', were actively searching for the 'right tradition for [them]' (Katherine) rather than 'settling' (Martin) for one that was not.

Heathenry's late/post modern (and 'secular') quality was also potentially illustrated by the space it provided individual Heathens to engage with forms and practices that, while identifiably 'Heathen', were also personally relevant. As an example, consider the Rune Ritual. Participants were given the choice whether or not they wanted to take part in the event, just as they chose whether and to what extent they would ruminate upon and apply the insight provided by Odin to their own experiences. Indeed, while some chose not to participate because divination practices 'just aren't really [their] thing and it would be disrespectful [for them] to take part if [they] don't really believe in it' (Anonymous), others did so because rune work was 'a big part' (Katherine) of their Heathen self-narrative. Likewise, while some were still discussing the ways in which they had applied their runic insight to their lives months after the event had concluded, others never spoke of the event again. Thus, it appeared that the tradition provided them with a 'looseness' of practice and interpretation that might be seen as a manifestation of the late/post modern emphasis upon choice and individualized attempts at active self-making.

Interestingly, the developing Heathen selves depicted within my informants' journey narratives, as well as those present at the Rune Ritual related earlier, also seemed to display a number of 'pre-modern' qualities. For example, by adopting and emphasizing historic forms of knowledge, historical objects and even 'traditional' forms of interpersonal engagement within their practices, contemporary Pagan traditions, including Heathenry, 'root' themselves in a distant past. Then, by providing adherents the space within which to engage with those rooted forms, they become a means to draw that 'antiquity', or rather adherents' understandings of it, into the present. In so doing, they potentially provide those agents who engage with them a means to actively generate and experience forms of self, other and world informed by a perceived 'pastness' that stands outside of the 'fragmentation', 'mediation' and fluidity often associated with the 'post pre-modern' world. Consider my informants' narratives. Tired of the fleeting quality of aspects of the modern world, they adopted Heathenry in part because it allowed them to establish and experience a sense of 'roots', rooted self, 'history' and 'connectedness'. For example, those who attended Hail & Horn and the Rune Ritual were provided with an opportunity to encounter Odin, a historical deity who was, in many cases, associated

with the ‘land of [participants’] ancestors’ (Brynn). This was done through their participation in a practice that utilized a thousand-year-old language system that was connected, within certain historical source materials, to a particular historical period and cultural context. Lastly, by allowing them to consider and apply their rune to their own experiences, Heathenry, or rather Hail & Horn, provided them with an opportunity to reflect upon their developing Heathen selves, as well as the possible connections that existed between them and the historic places, agents and forms they came to encounter through it.

Thus, like Heathenry more generally, I would suggest that my informants’ narrated Heathen experiences and developing Heathen selves displayed the same contested quality as the historical contexts within which each had developed. In an attempt to capture this ‘liquid’ quality, I have decided to ‘periodize’ the historical context within which Heathenry developed, and during which my informants’ Heathen journeys occurred, simply as ‘the contemporary.’ This is because I believe ‘contemporary’ provides space for both the late/post modern and pre-modern qualities and characteristics suggested above as being present within the current age, Heathenry and my informants’ Heathen journeys. In other words, it does not, by definition, differentiate and divorce itself from those historical formations still present within the world as it is experienced, nor does it over-emphasize the reflexivity and criticality I suggest is reflected within my informants’ narratives. Furthermore, I would argue that the ‘contemporary’ neither discounts nor dwells upon the influence those formations potentially exert upon contemporary individuals’ experiences of and actions towards self, world and other. Likewise, I would posit that the ‘contemporary’ neither ‘fetishizes’ nor denies the ability of contemporary social beings to actively effect changes upon their own selves, nor does it discount the role played by other agents in these ongoing (and interrelated) attempts at ‘becoming’. Thus, the ‘contemporary’ might be approached as a space inhabited by agent-subjects who can and do fashion their own self-understandings by constructing and propagating life-narratives with others in ways that actively conflate and are informed by both pre-modern and late/post modern discursive formations.

Heathenry as ‘Project’

It was within this pluralistic context that my informants embarked upon a ‘quest’ of sorts. Specifically, they actively undertook a process of generative, purposeful searching and striving to discover, embody and articulate within their experiences and biographies qualities they found desirable. It was during this quest that they discovered Heathenry. Upon adopting the tradition, they began engaging with the alternative field of ‘Heathen’ forms and qualities it represented. Finding them (and the possibilities for self and living they represented) personally relevant and agreeable, they began actively and reflexively integrating them into their daily lives. In so doing, I would suggest that they were attempting to ‘make’ themselves in ‘Heathen’ ways – that is, into beings who displayed those Heathen qualities.

The idea of self-making as a kind of ‘project’ associated with practices of self-reflection and the incorporation of certain truths into one’s life forms a large part of Michel Foucault’s late work. Near the end of his career, Foucault devoted a considerable amount of time to considering how subjects throughout history had undertaken similar processes of self-fashioning. For example, he suggested that by exercising the ‘freedom’ afforded within and by the webs of often conflicting discourses within which they exist, individuals become able to exercise ‘power’ – that is, the ability to affect the actions of other individuals. This ability to effect change was not wielded solely by the ‘other’, but could also be exercised by individuals upon their own selves. He suggested that, by actively exercising this formative influence upon their own selves through acts of self-reflexive practice, individuals became ‘subjects’. Specifically, he maintained that individuals could ‘make’ themselves in certain ways through their construction or adoption of ‘forms of subjectivation’, which represent ‘models proposed for setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination [...] for the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object’ (Foucault 1987: 29). He referred to this process of self-fashioning as ‘subjectivation’ and I would argue that this notion can be usefully applied to my informants’ quests.

Before I do, however, two important characteristics about this process should be noted. First, Foucault spoke about subjectivation in relation to a specific type of fashioning. Specifically, he suggested that individuals’ ability to reflect and act upon

themselves in this way is how they ‘establish the relation with oneself and with others, and constitutes the human being as an ethical subject’ (Foucault 1997: 200). Subjectivation and the reflexive self-making it denotes was, to Foucault at least, fundamental to the ‘ethical’ projects undertaken by subjects in an attempt to align themselves with the moral standards imposed upon them by others. Thus, and departing somewhat from the hyper-reflexive, self-determining late modern agents depicted by Giddens, Foucault stressed that this process was not undertaken by agents free from the influence of others. Instead, he maintained that ‘subjects are gradually, progressively, really, and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc’ (1980: 97–98). In other words, while individuals have the capacity to reflect upon and effect changes in their own perceived quality, they are not objects and products of their own striving acts alone. Rather, they and their projects are defined by certain ‘regimes of truth’, that is:

System[s] of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements [...] Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extends it. (1997: 74)

Thus, as Heller has noted, ‘like mechanisms of power, individual subjects are, for Foucault, always produced by a pre-existing system of power-relations – the power-diagram – that makes their existence possible’ (1996: 91). That said, Foucault’s ethical, reflexive subjects were not ‘automatons’. Rather, he recognized that ‘Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free’ (Foucault 1982: 790). Thus, while this process, and the ‘ethical’ subjects it produces, may exist within a wider field of truth, power and others, it ‘does not make the active, reflective freedom involved in actualizing them any less real’ (Laidlaw 2014: 102).

Returning to the process itself, Foucault suggested that instances of subjectivation might be considered and compared through four related questions. Laidlaw has summarized these questions in the following way:

First (ontology), what is the part of oneself that is the object of thought and work? The answer to this question Foucault refers to as ‘ethical substance’. Ethical judgment is not always concerned with the same part of oneself. [...] Second, (deontology), what are the ways in which people position themselves in relation to their ideals or injunctions or rules? [...]

Third (ascetics), what form does one's self-forming activity take? How is the ethical substance worked upon? What techniques and kinds of activity are available, and in what patterns and combinations are they deployed, so that subjects act to shape themselves over time? [...] Fourth (teleology), what is the mode of being the subject aims to achieve? What kind of being does the ethical subject aspire to be? (2014: 103–4)

Thus, this process of active, reflexive and 'ethical' self-fashioning might be seen as being defined by four interrelated concerns. First, one must determine what aspect of the self is potentially problematic and in need of augmentation – what part should/could/might be changed? Second, the way in which subjects orient themselves to and associate with their moral 'authority' (however imagined) should be considered. In other words, their relationship with truth must be considered. Third, the actual practices employed by subjects in effecting the desired changes must be identified. Lastly, the type of self actively being pursued through the application of those practices must be determined. In other words, what type of self-subject (as defined by what kinds of qualities?) are they striving to realize?

For reasons that will become clear shortly, I would like to draw special attention to the ascetic aspect mentioned above, or the actual means (practices) employed by subjects in their self-fashioning. Foucault referred to these transformative mechanisms as 'technologies of the self', or formative practices that:

[Permit individuals] to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (1988: 18)

He argues that these mechanisms were integral to the process because they helped subjects to embody and subsequently instantiate the 'truth' according to which and towards which their self-fashioning was being undertaken. Specifically, by employing these technologies upon their own selves, subjects' experiences of self, world and other were actively (and willingly) reoriented so that they reflected and propagated the ideals, qualities and characteristics highlighted in the field within which they were undertaken. For example, in the second and third volumes of his *History of Sexuality*, as well as in a number of lectures and interviews given in the years just before his death (see Foucault 1987, 1988; see also Rabinow & Dreyfus 1984), Foucault

discussed how males in Ancient Greece actively undertook desirable practices such as letter writing and exercise in an attempt to reflexively consider and affect their physical, social and intellectual quality. This process of ‘self-knowing’ and ‘self-mastery’, and the many practices employed in its realization, was seen as desirable within the Classical Greek context as it produced virtuous Greek citizens. Thus, by employing technologies that allowed them to achieve and maintain this mastery, Greek subjects embodied, realized and propagated a self and citizenry that possessed those desirable qualities. Departing from the ‘aesthetics of existence’ (Laidlaw 2014: 120) that he believed defined the Greek ethical project, he also explored the ‘hermeneutics of desire’ (*ibid.*) that defined the evolving Christian project. Specifically, where the historic Greek subject was attempting to establish a relationship with his desires through acts of critical reflection, Christianity stressed subjects’ engagement in practices that helped them to identify and act upon their perceived sinful nature. These practices, which included acts of physical penitence and confession, both required and assisted the penitent Christian subject in their examination of the quality of their actions and thoughts so that they might identify their (potential) sinfulness and have it forgiven. Thus, the technologies they employed helped them embody and instantiate a Christian ‘truth’ of their own potential sinfulness, the intimate personal knowledge they had to develop of it and their rumination and externalization of that knowledge in practice.

In each of these instances, the ethical subjects involved were undertaking actions prioritized by certain ‘truths’ that helped them affect their perceived quality in positive ways. Specifically, by adopting and applying transformative technologies upon their own bodies and minds (or having them applied by others), these subjects embedded themselves in an ongoing process of ‘becoming’ through which they were actively striving to embody, articulate and maintain certain desirable qualities within their selves and the world they inhabited. I would suggest that my interlocutors’ active adoption and ongoing engagement with Heathenry could be seen as a similar process of reflexive self-making – a sort of ‘Heathen project’.

The 'Heathen Project'

One predominate feature of the projects Foucault discussed were the practical 'technologies' subjects applied to their own selves in an attempt to effect a formation of self that reflected a certain truth. For example, as Christians began searching their experiences for sins to confess, so too did they begin considering the potential sinfulness of every act they undertook and every thought and feeling experienced or potentially experienced. In other words, it became their 'duty to know who [they are], that is, to try to know what is happening inside [them], to acknowledge faults, to recognize temptations, to locate desires' (Foucault 1988: 40) and in so doing, see themselves (and be seen by others) as pursuing and realizing a certain type of self. I would suggest something similar could also be said about my interlocutors' Heathen practices and quests.

As I emphasized in my discussion of Hail & Horn and the Rune Ritual (and Heathenry more generally), all of my informants stressed the importance of their regular and willing participation in Heathen practices. The reason, according to most, was that it was this active, reflexive and everyday Heathenry 'doing' that not only defined Heathenry as a field, but also helped define the Heathens developing within and through that field. Erik expressed this opinion at Hail & Horn when he suggested that, through attendees' participation in certain 'historical'/'authentic' Heathen practices, they might have 'Heathen' experiences that would help them develop new ways of understanding (i.e. a 'Heathen worldview'). I suggest that such an 'alteration', or rather 'reorientation', of understanding was believed possible because these practices were seen as both being and manifesting a fundamental, identifiable and desirable Heathen quality – a 'Heatheness'. Reflected and made encounterable in part through these practices, I would argue that this Heathen quality, or rather the Heathen knowledge and potential it represented, came to represent a form of Heathen 'truth' for my informants. Thus, these practices became mechanisms through which they actively exposed themselves to and began embodying this Heatheness, and in so doing, started making themselves into individuals whose experiences and self-understandings reflected that quality. In other words, their Heathen development was informed by and became realizable through their engagement with this truth through certain 'Heathen technologies'.

There is one key practice-as-technology potentially employed by my interlocutors as part of this ‘Heathen project’ that I would like to pause and consider – ‘study’. This is because, as mentioned in my earlier discussion of their journey narratives, all of my informants reported identifying, engaging with and incorporating forms of ‘Heathen knowledge’ from relevant source materials into their developing Heathenry and Heathen selves through acts of study. When asked why, many suggested that studying historic texts, archaeological reports, mythological works, etc. imparted knowledge about the ‘customs’ and ‘beliefs’ of pre-Christian peoples that helped them better understand ‘what it is to be Heathen [...] What we do, why we do it and what it all may mean’ (Auz). In addition to engaging with forms of Heathen knowledge on their own, they all also reported regularly ‘studying’ with others at shared events like community ‘discussion groups’ and pan-community workshops held at festivals. When asked why this shared study was so popular, most agreed that it was because it gave them the opportunity to ‘share in the knowledge of others’ (Katherine). Brynn continued, ‘it is just nice to learn what other people are doing and why [...] it helps you better understand what you are doing.’ In other instances, their study occurred through comments they read or posted on Heathen forums and social networking sites that noted the perceived accuracy or inaccuracy of some television program about Vikings or Norse mythology, in discussions about new sources they had recently discovered or in conversations about some ‘historic craft item’ they had recently completed (e.g. a drinking horn). Furthermore, many Heathen event organizers and hosts regularly provided participants with background on their events that reflected their ‘researched’ quality, as well as the organizer’s own ‘researching’, study practices. This was seen at the Rune Ritual when Auz, Jade and Brynn provided attendees with background on the runes, Heathen divination and Odin.

In highlighting and helping them embody the ‘Heatheness’ of certain practices, contexts and objects, study also helped my informants engage in other Heathen practices with others in Heathen ways. This was important as, while they all agreed that ongoing study in whatever form helped Heathens learn ‘what Heathenry is *actually* about’ (Erik [original emphasis]), most agreed that ‘reading about it isn’t enough, you have to go out and actually do it’ (Auz). The influence of study upon

other practices, as well as the subjects and relations potentially generated through them, was illustrated at the Rune Ritual discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Specifically, before gaining entrance into the vé, those who attended the Rune Ritual were required to first remember, or ‘recognize’, the oath they had taken earlier that day. In other words, their ability to engage in the Rune Ritual and the honoring and divination practices that defined it, as well as with the others present at the event (human and non-human alike), was dependent upon their ability to take part in the oathing practice. Their ability to ‘properly’ engage in that practice was itself dependent upon their application of knowledge gained through their study of relevant historical and mythological texts that depicted such acts, as well as their own and others’ past oathing experiences.

In this way, these Heathen study practices not only provided them with an opportunity to acquire knowledge fundamental to ‘being Heathen’, through the subsequent instantiation of that knowledge in a variety of other practices, it also allowed them to begin affecting how they understood themselves and the world through facilitating and informing their ongoing striving acts and resulting experiences. For example, Katherine once related how one summer a batch of the mead she was brewing for Rúnatýr Kindred ‘went off’ because a small fruit fly had made its way into the carboy (glass fermentation tank). When I asked her to explain why she thought it had happened she continued, ‘Well, that is what I get for not making an offering to Loki, eh? He is a shapeshifter you know – he crawled in there and took a bit for himself!’ Chuckling, she paused for a moment and then continued, explaining that while she ‘knew’ it had been the ‘bacteria on the fly’s body’ that had altered the liquid chemically, she still felt the ‘fly might have been Loki’ as it was something ‘he would do’.

Others I spoke with shared similar stories that illustrated how, as part of their reflexive application of their growing ‘Heathen knowledge’, they had either begun actively or passively identifying and interpreting everyday occurrences as being indicative of a Heathen cosmological being or force. For example, one cold day as Viktor and I were walking towards the Ásatrúarfélagið burial plot in Reykjavík, two large ravens circled over us before landing nearby (fig. 5).



Figure 5: Ásatrúarfélagið burial space, Reykjavík

As they sat watching us, Viktor suddenly declared, ‘The All Father [Odin] is watching over us and what we are doing!’ Asked if he really believed the ravens to be a sign that Odin was present he replied, ‘They are associated with him in the stories, he looks after the honorable dead and we are visiting dead [Heathens]. Seems reasonable to me!’ The day after the Odin god pole had been erected in Raven’s Knoll, Jade had said something similar upon noticing an ‘unseasonable’ murder of ravens roosting near the Hail & Horn Mead Hall. The narratives Katherine and Gary shared earlier concerning their initial engagement with a Heathen cosmological being are other possible examples of this process.

Returning briefly to Foucault, it should be noted that this process of study-based reorientation did not occur in a void. Rather, while individual informants may have been actively affecting their understandings of self and world through their willing and reflexive engagement in practices like study, their ‘becoming’ as Heathens was also influenced by the formative fashioning practices of others. For example, my informants reported that, informed by the knowledge gathered through acts of study, they had begun altering their speech so that it reflected the polytheistic

nature of the Heathen cosmos. Some, however, seemed to need a little help making the transition. For instance, as a number of us were sitting in the shade one hot afternoon at Hail & Horn, a ‘newbie’ passively mumbled ‘God it’s hot.’ Standing nearby, Erik turned and slyly corrected, ‘Nope, “GodS” it’s hot.’ Smiling, the individual shook their head in recognition and remarked, ‘Sorry! GodS it’s hot! GodS it’s hot! Thanks for correcting me.’ For the rest of the weekend, this and a number of other individuals seemed particularly cognizant of the noun forms they employed when referring to the Heathen cosmos and those believed to reside within it.

The Heathen Practice of ‘Practice’

I would suggest that each of the above examples illustrate instances when my informants’ participation in practices they had identified, through acts of study, as displaying and imparting ‘Heatheness’ influenced how they constructed, interpreted and articulated their experiences of self, world and other. I believe the formative power of these practices stemmed primarily from *how* they were engaged with, not simply that they had been undertaken. In other words, as these ‘Heathen’ practices were developed and undertaken in a contemporary context defined in part by experiences of pervasive doubt and reflexivity, I do not think my interlocutors’ projects were furthered simply through their ‘doing’ of such ‘Heathen things’. Rather, I would suggest that the formative potential of these Heathen technologies was primarily a result of the reflexive and intentional nature of their execution.

Lou, a self-identifying ‘Witch’ from Ottawa once explained that she used to actively attend Rúnatýr Kindred events, and, when she ‘has time’, still does at pan-community, pan-Pagan events like the Kaleidoscope Gathering held annually at Raven’s Knoll. Despite engaging in these Heathen events and practices, however, she had never considered becoming Heathen. She explained: ‘I went because I liked the people. I enjoyed what they did, I liked that they did stuff together regularly and I liked that they care for one another. I never considered “converting” though. I can still offer to the [Heathen] gods and share a horn without being Heathen.’ Conversely, I spoke with some Heathens who, while they regularly attended Heathen events and engaged in identifiable ‘Heathen practices’ such as study, divination, honoring, etc., they did not feel that those practices ‘made’ them Heathen. Rather,

they maintained it was how they approached the actions undertaken, explicitly Heathen or otherwise, that determined their Heathenness. For example, while Brynn and Shane maintained it is ‘very important to make offerings to the gods, gift people and act well around others’, because ‘that’s a big part of what it is to be a Heathen’, they did not believe it was always necessary. Instead, they suggested it was the intention that framed the practices they undertook that made both those practices and themselves Heathen. Brynn concluded, ‘I don’t need to do stuff “by the book” all the time to be Heathen [...] it comes down to intention!’

In each of these cases, what seemed to determine the formative quality of the acts undertaken was the doer’s reflexive identification and application of Heathenness in, upon and through them, as well as the experiences they generated. In other words, the way in which those involved reflexively conceptualized and actively undertook certain practices seemed to determine, at least in part, the formative potential of those practices and the quality of the selves generated, articulated and embodied through them. I would suggest that this quality was exemplified in the ‘study’ and ‘application of study’ practices discussed earlier. My informants’ identification of, engagement with and application in practice of the knowledge gained through acts of study was fundamental to their Heathen development. This was because study seemed to help them align themselves with (and begin manifesting) the Heathen cosmos, Heathen others and even the becoming Heathen selves depicted within those sources. Indeed, as they pointed out above, the aim of this practice was the attainment of knowledge that would help them to ‘better understand’ and ‘live’ what it means to be Heathen. This practice required that those involved develop and employ a certain ‘awareness’, or reflexive and volitional acknowledgement of what was being done, the quality of the forms used in the process, who was doing it and why. Specifically, they actively sought out sources through acts of study and discussion that displayed Heathenness, and then actively embodied and instantiated that knowledge in practice in the careful development of certain key Heathen qualities.

That said, I would posit that there was a point at which their intentional ‘practice’ of these practices no longer determined the formative potential of those actions or the Heathenness of the selves and experiences that resulted from them.

For example, if an informant interpreted an act as being a formative Heathen practice, yet the others viewed it as being ‘un-Heathen’, that informant’s perceived Heathen quality within the community would be questioned unless they could justify the action with reference to shared experiences or sources.¹⁶ Thus, the practices they undertook as part of their projects were never ‘blind’, or undertaken without some degree of reflexivity and volition. Likewise, they were never necessarily ‘formative’, or conducive to the construction of Heathen subjects. Rather, the practices, the agents that employed them and the subjects that resulted only became ‘Heathen’ when they were actively recognized, applied and interpreted thus by those involved.

Conclusion

Through actively and reflexively undertaking ‘Heathen practices’ such as study and the Hail & Horn Rune Ritual, I would suggest my informants were on a purposeful quest to realize a self they believed displayed the ‘rootedness’, awareness, ‘connectedness’ and striving quality they suggested defined Heathenry more generally. As such, those selves became ‘artifices’ – that is, fictions ‘in the sense of “something made or fashioned”, the principle burden of the word’s Latin root, *ingere*’ (Clifford 1986: 6 [original emphasis]). In other words, Heathenry represented a formative field of forms constructed and embodied by my informants in an attempt at ‘skilful fashioning’ (*ibid.*). In their case, this was their active and reflexive ‘making’ of a desirable and identifiably Heathen self. In so being, their development as and into contemporary Heathens became a type of highly personalized yet shared ‘Heathen project’. Specifically, by employing certain formative Heathen ‘technologies’ upon themselves, they began effecting an altered formation of self, other and world that displayed the desirable Heathenness they believed represented by and manifested through those technologies.

While, as I have shown, Heathenry and my informants’ proposed Heathen projects were structured by and reflective of the ‘contemporary’ context within which they occurred, it was not the only context that exerted a formative influence upon them. Rather, as was illustrated at the Rune Ritual and within many of the journey narratives discussed earlier, their projects actually occurred within (and were

¹⁶ I will explore possible instances of this ‘aesthetic drift’ in Chapter Four.

influenced by) two contexts simultaneously. In addition to the contemporary world, I would suggest they were also influenced by a second context whose experiential possibilities and personal and interpersonal potentiality my interlocutors were attempting to manifest in practice within their 'everyday' self and world. The influence exerted by this second context was so great, that I would argue it – or rather the agents and forces believed to animate it – holds the key to understanding the formative potential and possible aim of my interlocutors' Heathen projects. It is this context – the 'Heathen cosmos' – that I will discuss in Chapter Two.

Chapter II: Encountering the Web

Rúnatýr Kindred Midsommer Blót 2011

Despite having gotten very lost along the way, I managed to arrive at Jonathan and Annick's home in southwestern Québec just as the rest of the 'Rúnafolk', or the members of Rúnatýr Kindred and their families and close friends, were pulling up to the house. As we all stood in the front garden exchanging hearty 'Good mornings!', 'Happy Midsommers!' and 'Hails!', Jonathan and Annick emerged from their home smiling and made their way towards us. After Annick had hugged us all and Jonathan had shaken our hands, they both loudly exclaimed, 'Welcome to our home! Welcome to this Midsommer Blót! We are happy to see you all!' Once the greetings had concluded and the foodstuffs we had brought along for that day's feast had been unloaded from our cars, Brynn and Shane produced a floral wreath around two feet in diameter, which they then affixed atop a slender five-foot wooden pole. After assembling the 'sun-wheel' (a 'pre-Christian Northern European' symbol consisting of a circle often divided into four quadrants by a cross and believed to 'represent the sun' – Shane), they quietly made their way to the crown of the steep hill that connected our hosts' front garden with the space where the day's festivities were to be held. Recognizing this as the start of the Midsommer event, the rest of us quickly gathered our camping chairs, formed a loose procession and followed them and the bright floral wreath into the shade of the back garden.

Upon arriving in the garden, we quickly hung the Rúnatýr Kindred banner over the event space and set up the chairs and tables that would be used later during the feast. With the 'chores' completed and everyone pleasantly chatting in the house's cool shadow, I turned to examine the dense patch of forest that encircled the space. Jonathan approached me and, following my gaze, quietly observed, 'I really like holding things here. It's a lot different here than it is in town. It makes me feel closer to my roots somehow.' Before I could respond, Jade made her way into the center of the garden and loudly began heralding: 'HAIL! HAIL! HAIL!' As she continued calling, three times in total, I, along with the others present, quickly gathered the coins, flowers and butter Jonathan had suggested we bring with us to the event as gifts to the 'spirits and gods' that he believed inhabited his property. With

our ‘offerings’ in hand, we quickly formed a semi-circle facing the forest. With Brynn holding the sun-wheel behind him, Jonathan turned and welcomed us all once again to the event. After pausing thoughtfully for a moment he continued, ‘I hope that everyone keeps frith today, with each other and the land. I know you are all good people but be careful – there is power here!’ With that, he stepped aside and Shane, the blót co-organizer, took his place in front of the wreath. After extending his own welcome, Shane briefly outlined the day’s schedule and said a few words concerning the historical Midsommer celebrations upon which he and Jonathan had modeled the day’s event. Once he had finished, Jonathan asked us to form a line at the mouth of the small path that led from his back garden into the forest. As we began slowly and silently entering the wood, he turned and advised us to ‘Give [our] gifts to the wights to bless us! They will give us safe entrance to their woods and the vé.’



Figure 6: Jonathan D. wight home

Within moments we approached the first ‘wight home’; a ‘place of power’ Jonathan believed inhabited by a being with the ability to affect his ‘fate’ and that of his family and land. As each of us passed by the colorful ceramic gnome statue he had used to signify the wight and its abode, we knelt and deposited a combination of butter and coins at its feet as a sign of respect. Shortly thereafter, we came upon the second wight home, which Jonathan had marked with a small decorative door he had affixed to the base of large nearby tree (fig. 6). Again, to thank the wight for its

hospitality, we paused and made our offerings. After a longer walk, Jonathan halted the procession near a bloated tree with a twisted trunk. Pausing to note the small wooden shelf he had affixed to the tree and the eerie gargoyle statue he had placed upon it, we made our offerings and quickly moved on. Next, we came upon a small sapling that had grown in a high arch across the path. Recognizing this as the fourth wight home, each of us paused and placed coppers and butter on the ground under the small gnome figurine Jonathan had hung from the slender wooden bough. After an uneven walk up a rocky incline, we arrived at the fifth and final wight home, which was represented by a pair of trees that had grown parallel to one another on either side of the path. Honoring the beings thought to reside there, we passed between the trees and arrived at the vé.

The ‘vé’, or sacred space within which the main blót ritual would occur (fig. 7), was around twenty feet in diameter and demarcated by a small grove (circle) of trees. The space was also defined by a circle of stones that Jonathan had once proudly stated he had gathered and placed himself. He continued, ‘I carried each stone upon my back and placed them where they are. This is a permanent space and it is powerful because I made it with my own blood and sweat!’ A gap between two large trees served as the vé’s entrance, and just inside and to the right of that entrance was a tree stump that Jonathan used as a ‘natural altar’.



Figure 7: Jonathan D. permanent vé, Rúnatýr Kindred 2011 Midsommer

In preparation for the day's main ritual, a large wooden bowl and a bottle of mead had been placed upon the altar and a tall, unlit torch had been driven into the ground nearby. With Brynn and the sun-wheel once again behind him, Jonathan moved to the mouth of the vé. After pausing for a moment he quietly began, 'This is the vé and certain rules must be followed once you enter. Please answer the questions I am about to ask you honestly.' One by one, he invited each participant to approach him. Once they were standing before him he continued, 'Do you swear to uphold the values of frith and grith in this home? Do you know not to mention the name of Laufey's son [Loki] within the vé? Are you free of all weapons?' Once the respondent had answered 'yes' to each, Jonathan allowed them entrance into the vé by saying, 'You may join your kin.'

After everyone was inside, we formed an inward-facing circle around the large fire-pit that marked the center of the space. Following a moment of silence, Shane stepped towards the fire-pit and loudly declared, 'Today we celebrate Midsommer!' As he spoke, Jonathan knelt and, with a flint, set the kindling within the pit ablaze. Standing, Jonathan continued, 'The fire represents the sun that blazes in the sky – Sunna! It is her we blót today.' Retrieving both the bottle of mead and the wooden vessel from the altar, he then carefully poured some of the liquid into the 'offering bowl'. Once the bowl was nearly full, he lifted it into the air above the fire and said, 'We praise the mead that is as golden as the sunlight around us.' Shane then approached Jonathan and dipped the end of a small, fresh branch he had gathered from the forest into the mead. With the sprig coated in the sticky substance, he turned to Jonathan and, raising the branch in the air before him, exclaimed 'Hail Sunna!' Once Jonathan had replied similarly, Shane then touched him on the forehead with the sprig. As the mead ran down Jonathan's face, Shane continued, 'Hail Rúnatýr!' Replying in kind, Jonathan was once again touched with the mead-covered sprig.

Once everyone had been similarly 'anointed', Shane lifted the bowl above the fire and poured its contents into the flames as an 'offering to Sunna'. As the fire sparked and hissed, Jonathan invited us to 'offer [our] flowers to the mead fire!' He continued, 'You may also test your luck for the following year by dancing around or jumping over [the fire].' With this, everyone approached the pit and, after tossing the flowers they had brought with them into the flames, leapt over or danced around the

fragrant blaze. With our ‘luck’ or ‘personal power’ tested and affirmed – no one was burnt – Jonathan knelt by the fire and, placing his hand into the flames, removed some ash, which he then placed into his drinking horn. Filling the vessel with the remaining mead, he then passed the horn around the circle, allowing each participant to ‘raise the horn’ to Sunna with a mighty ‘Hail!’ before drinking some of the ashy liquid ‘for its good properties’ (Jonathan). After everyone had partaken of the substance, he then retrieved the nearby torch, which he lit in the blót fire so that it could ‘continue to burn with us outside of the vé!’ With the torch and sun-wheel before us, we then exited the space and headed back into the secluded garden where a day of feasting, dancing, games and storytelling awaited us (fig. 8).



Figure 8: Rúnatýr Kindred 2011 Midsommer sun-wheel and hearth fire

Introduction

While in Canada, I had the pleasure of attending two Rúnatýr Kindred Midsommer Blóts at Jonathan and Annick’s. I also had the opportunity to observe one organized by two other kindred members, as well two executed by other groups at large pan-

community events such as the Hail & Horn Gathering.¹⁷ Despite being organized by different communities and being held in different contexts (e.g. privately in rural and urban homes, as well as publicly at a camping ground), all of these events shared a number of interesting similarities. For instance, in every case blót organizers and hosts integrated objects (e.g. drinking horns) and practices into these events that had been drawn from source materials that depicted similar ‘historical’, or ‘pre-Christian’ Germanic, Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian events. Indeed, as Shane noted at the blót just described, similar practices were widely undertaken across pre-Christian Europe. At these historical events, an officiant would often sacrifice an animal as an offering to a deity, and then, using a sprig, flick the blood of that offering upon both the blóting space and those present as a form of ‘blessing’. This blessing practice, whether performed with mead, herbs, smoke or ‘powerful words’ (Brynn) was one such ‘historical’ Heathen practice regularly integrated into these events by my interlocutors. In addition, each blót I attended was held to honor a god, mark the passing of the seasons, celebrate an important community event such as the raising of the Odin god pole, or a combination of all three. In the case of the Rúnatýr Kindred Midsommer Blóts I attended, participants were honoring both the Germanic goddess Sunna and the summer solstice. Perhaps most importantly, my interlocutors’ participation in these events was always informed by and dependent upon their adherence to particular expectations of conduct. Whether this took the form of their making and observing ‘oaths’, as was the case at the Hail & Horn Odin Blót, or ‘swearing’, as was the case above, participants were always asked to explicitly and ‘mindfully’ (reflexively) adopt ways of acting that were seen as being ‘respectful and hospitable [...] frithful’ (Erik). To this end, these events always featured participants making offerings with and towards the others beings involved. These offerings tended to take the form of precious objects (e.g. money and flowers), substances (e.g. mead) and even ‘words’, particularly those that ‘honored’ the others present. Erik once explained that these shared characteristics were intentional, as their presence at these and other Heathen events helped those present to ‘act in ways similar to

¹⁷ In addition to these Canadian events, I also attended a ‘Landvættir Blót’ organized and hosted by Ásatrúarfélagið near Keflavík, Iceland in December of 2010.

historical Heathens [...] in frithful ways [to] establish relationships with others that will hopefully last and grow.’

Despite being modeled upon similar sources and displaying a number of shared characteristics, the blóts attended also displayed a number of interesting differences. This variability was largely due to the fact that event hosts and organizers were always given the freedom to ‘personalize’ (Jade) their events so that they ‘reflect[ed] their own “private cults”’ (Erik), or personal Heathen focus. Allowing for this freedom was seen as being highly important, as failing to provide the host that honor and respect was thought to ‘break frith [...] their hall, their rules’ (Erik). For example, the Rúnatýr Kindred Midsommer Blóts I attended featured a wide variety of Frankish and Swedish Heathen forms including a ‘Frankish garland’ (a glass jar that had been filled by Erik with eggshells and a specific mixture of herbs and flowers), the sun-wheel wreath described above and a ‘frog dance’. These forms had been adopted, I was later told, because they reflected Jonathan and Erik’s Germanic/Frankish Heathen focus and Shane’s Swedish Heathen focus. Erik continued, ‘[the] blót is going to be both Frankish and Swedish because the organizers are!’ Likewise, the Rúnatýr Kindred Winterfinding (‘harvest’) Blót I attended, which was hosted by Brynn and Katherine, featured Anglo-Saxon linguistic forms and ‘leechcraft’ (‘herbcraft’) practices that reflected their Saxon Heathen focus. In each instance, the objects, practices and forms of knowledge integrated into the event by the hosts and organizers emphasized and reflected the ‘cultural’ focus of their personal Heathenry, and, in most cases, their own genealogical backgrounds. In addition to the events featuring different ‘historical’ Heathen forms, the categories of Heathen beings emphasized also varied somewhat. For example, in addition to Sunna, the ‘land wights’, which will be discussed at length in this chapter, were honored extensively at the Midsommer Blót discussed above. However, at the Hail & Horn Odin Blót discussed in Chapter One and Brynn and Katherine’s Winterfinding Blót, they played a much smaller role. Lastly, whereas some blóts placed a great deal of emphasis upon large acts of communal offering and honoring, such as the Midsommer Blót described above, others emphasized different forms of shared practice such as the communal meal that was always a part of these events. Indeed, in an interview I conducted with Brynn prior to the Winterfinding Blót, she explained

that, ‘while there will be offerings [tonight], I don’t really think you need the pomp of a big fancy ritual. All you need is to get people together and honor one another and the gods with a meal. That is what tonight is really about.’

I would suggest that these differences are important in that they illustrate an interesting characteristic of Heathenry as I observed it. Specifically, these blóts featured a certain freedom of interpretation and practice; a ‘looseness’ that provided hosts, organizers and even attendees a space within which to focus upon, articulate and embody a variety of Heathen forms and experiences with and around others. This flexibility also seemed to inform my interlocutors’ Heathenry more generally, being observable at not only the other shared events they held and attended, but in their private practices as well. Despite this freedom, however, those present at these events still seemed able (and appeared to be actively attempting) to recognize, embody and articulate a mutually identifiable ‘Heatheness’ through their engagement with the practices and forms that helped structure them. I would suggest that doing so provided them entrance into a cosmological context where they might engage in formative acts of self-fashioning; a Heathen realm of potentiality wherein they could undertake their Heathen projects and potentially realize the aim of those projects. It is this realm, its inhabitants, the ‘connectedness’ they were striving to realize with one another and the possible influence exerted by each upon my informants’ projects that I will consider below.

Chapter Aim and Outline

I shall begin my discussion by considering the seemingly shared and interpersonal nature of Heathenry and my informants’ Heathen projects. I will then look at the possible form taken by the Heathen cosmological realm within which these projects occurred, as well as the categories of cosmological beings with whom my informants interacted within this realm. After considering a number of the communal and private practices frequently undertaken by my informants within this ‘cosmos’, I will then conclude by considering the Heathen cosmological ‘Web of Wyrð’. Specifically, I will explore that formative matrix of associative influence that my informants suggested connected them and their projects with others within this context, as well as the personal and interpersonal forces and qualities they believed animated that

matrix. Doing so, I believe, is the first step in illustrating how these beings, cosmological forces and this web of causal relationality facilitated and informed the development of my informants' Heathen selves and the cosmos those selves were striving to become part of.

'Connectedness' and the Heathen Project

As has already been noted regarding the Rune Ritual and the Rúnatýr Midsommer Blót, the events my interlocutors attended (and the many practices they undertook at these events) were rarely, if ever, undertaken in the absence of others. Rather, in every instance their participation saw their active engagement with others through practices such as 'hailing', the making of offerings, their abidance to expectations of conduct, their sharing of a drinking horn, etc. Interestingly, even those I spoke with who were not active members of a Heathen kindred community and did not often attend communal events said that they 'regularly have a drink with Odin or go online and see what people are getting up to. It is nice to know what is going on' (Gus). In other words, even in the absence of physically 'present' others, they still reported undertaking practices that allowed them to engage with other Heathens and 'potentially' present (i.e. not physically present) beings. Their 'journey' and 'questing' narratives also hinted at the important role played by others (and their interactions with them) in their Heathen development. For example, many explained how their Heathenry and 'development as a Heathen experienced a real Renaissance' once they began actively engaging in practices with others, regardless of whether it was 'just having someone to discuss stuff with [... or] sharing a horn' (Katherine). Jonathan continued, 'When I realized there were others out there like me I was so happy! It just seems to mean more when you have other people to do things with [...] it is how it always was back with our ancestors, you know?' I would suggest that these examples illustrate that my informants' development into and as Heathens was greatly shaped not only by their personal engagement with Heathen forms like 'source materials' through practices like solitary study, but also by those practices actively undertaken with, around and towards other beings. Specifically, I would argue that my interlocutors' Heathen 'becoming' was dependent upon and 'quickenened' by their active engagement with and within a matrix of formative

relationality populated by actively striving, reflexively ‘becoming’ Heathen ‘cosmological’ others in particular ways.

Whether their personal Heathenry featured Scandinavian, Saxon, Frankish, or other forms, all of my informants agreed that as striving, becoming Heathens they were developing within a shared realm of experiential possibility and developmental potentiality. Despite having different understandings as to the exact nature of this realm, they all maintained that it was inhabited by ‘beings’ (Jade) that could exert a formative influence upon them and their lives. As a result, they regularly strove to forge connections with (or, alternatively, actively avoid) these beings in practice in an attempt to potentially affect those others and the influence they exerted upon them and their developing Heathen selves. Indeed, when asked why they attended events like the blóts discussed earlier, nearly everyone replied that they had done so because they provided them with opportunities to ‘establish and strengthen relations with one another and the gods’ (Erik). They stressed, however, that these active, reciprocal and potentially formative ‘relations’ were not simply the product of their presence at these shared events, but rather their participating in them in ways that displayed and imparted certain qualities. As Jonathan at Midsommer had said, one such quality was ‘frith’. According to Bainbridge (2003):

Although Frith is often translated as ‘peace,’ it means that only in a very specialized sense: for Frith to remain whole and powerful, the relationships within the frithstead must be maintained correctly, which is to say, according to the traditional laws and principles, with due concern for the rights and dignity of the individuals concerned, but with the interests of the frithstead accorded the highest consideration.

In other words, by actively engaging in practices such as making offerings with and towards others that displayed frith at these events, participants come to generate frith between them and the others involved. In so doing, they created a space within which further interactions could occur and the formative relationships stressed by them (and Heathenry more generally) could be established and developed.

As an example, consider the Hail & Horn Rune Ritual discussed in Chapter One. Before those at the event were able to approach Odin and ask him for insight (knowledge that came to inform their subsequent Heathen development), they first had to gain entrance to the vé. To do this, they were required to establish and

maintain a state of ‘frith’, not only with Odin, but also with the others present, including the event hosts. This was achieved through their making and observing of an oath to respect and honor the rules of the vé; a sign of respect they compounded earlier that day by having actively offered Odin beer, mead and other gifts at the raising of the god pole. By engaging with Odin, Auz and Erik and one another in ways that illustrated their quality as ‘good and gracious guests’, frith was established, demonstrated and observed by and between all involved. In other words, by acting in ways that were informed by and displayed this ‘Heathen’ quality, they entered into a ‘cosmological’ space where they could generate connections with the others present. Once within this space, they were also able to enter into and affect the field of formative influence they maintained existed between these ‘powerful’ (in both a Foucaultian and more colloquial sense) cosmological beings. Thus, by ‘doing’ and ‘being’ in recognizably ‘Heathen’ ways with others, they entered a new realm of potentiality within which they became increasingly able to ‘affect [their] own fate and that of those around [them]’ (Jade). I would argue that it was their capacity to willingly and reflexively enter into and then act upon this field of formative influence through their establishment of a type of cosmological relationality or ‘connectedness’ that gave their projects form, as well as the selves they were attempting to fashion through them. It is this cosmological realm, the ‘web of subjectivation’ it seemed to represent, these influential others and the means and quality of their engagement within that realm that I would now like to consider.

The Nine Worlds of the Heathen Cosmos ¹⁸

The Heathen cosmos began as a void called Ginnungagap. This void separated into two realms, the North, or Niflheimr, which was a land of freezing mist, and the South, Muspellsheimr, a land of fire. The first being to inhabit the universe was Ymir, a giant born from the miasma that developed where the mist and fire of the north and south met. Another creature was also born from the noxious fog of Ginnungagap, the great cow Aðumbra, and it was from her teats that Ymir fed. Whilst Ymir slept, the heat of Muspellsheimr caused sweat to drip from the palms of

¹⁸ What follows is a generalized account of the Heathen cosmos as understood and described by my informants.

his hands. It was from this sweat that the Frost Giants formed. While they grew and multiplied, the ancestors of the gods – Buri and Bolpörn – also came into being. However, unlike the Frost Giants, they were not formed from Ymir but rather the great cow Auðumla – that is, they grew where the beast licked the stones of Níflheimr while feeding upon the salt contained within them. As time passed, the descendents of Buri and Bolpörn – Odin and his brothers Vili and Vé – killed Ymir and used his body to construct seven worlds. First, they built Ásgarðr, often depicted as a great walled fortress, for the gods to inhabit, and then Miðgarðr for humanity. They then constructed Jötunheimr, often described as a wild forest across an icy sea, for the Frost Giants to inhabit and Vanaheimr for the fair Vanir (fertility deities). Alfheimr or Ljóssálfheimr was erected at the border of Ásgarðr for the light elves (the dark elves are thought to reside in the caverns beneath Alfheimr), Svartálfaheimr for the dwarves and Hel for the deceased. Each of these worlds were connected by Yggdrasil, the ‘Great Ash’ or ‘World Tree’. Under one of the tree’s great roots was thought to sit Mímir’s Well, from which all wisdom and knowledge flow. Another was believed to house Urðr’s Well, where the three Norns sit and ‘spin’ the fate of every being who resides within the Nine. Importantly, as my interlocutors stressed, these worlds are not eternal, but, much like those who inhabit them (including the gods), destined to end. They will be destroyed in the fires of Ragnarök, but new worlds and beings will be born from the ashes.¹⁹

Interestingly, all of my informants displayed a shared knowledge of these worlds and their characteristics. This was primarily a result of their regular engagement with certain ‘Heathen source materials’ (Erik), mythological and otherwise, that depicted these worlds. Indeed, to some extent all of them reported having ‘come to know the Nine’ (Auz) through ‘reading about [them], both when I was just getting interested in Heathenry and after I began doing it’ (Shane). While they reported engaging with a stunning variety of sources as part of their ongoing familiarization with these worlds, there were a number of shared or ‘key sources’ (Erik) that nearly all of them ‘knew about’, had ‘heard of’ or had directly engaged with as part of this process. These included Grönbech’s *The Culture of the Teutons*

¹⁹ For more information about these worlds, their creation and their destruction, please refer to Bauschatz 1982; Brantson 1955; Davidson 1993; Dumézil 1974.

(1931)[1909], *Beowulf* (trans. Heaney 2000), the *Prose Edda* (trans. Brodeur 2006[1916]), the *Poetic Edda* (trans. Larrington 1996), Paxson's *Taking up the Runes* (2005), Thorsson's *Book of Troth* (2003) and many more besides.

It should be noted that my informants' regular engagement with and even production of textual sources relevant to Heathenry is not unique, but rather a dominant characteristic of many Heathens and Heathen communities worldwide. Indeed, just as Erik, Shane and others I spoke with had published texts on a number of 'Heathen-relevant' topics, numerous other local and 'large' (i.e. national and trans-national) Heathen groups also regularly produce and disseminate texts on a variety of topics, including the Heathen Nine Worlds. For example, the 'Odinic Rite' has published *The Book of Blots* (see Yeowell 1991) and maintains a newsletter called *The Moot Horn*. Likewise, the international Heathen organization 'The Troth' publishes a quarterly journal entitled *Idunna*. Some of my informants also reported engaging with a variety of independent Heathen journals such as *Óðroerir* and pan-Pagan and 'Pagan Studies' journals including *The Pomegranate*. Of course, as Clifton (2006) and Heelas (1996, 2008) have noted, this tendency to produce, circulate and regularly engage with source materials is not unique to Heathenry, but rather a key feature of many contemporary traditions. For example, while discussing Wicca, Clifton explains, 'It is one of the paradoxes of Wicca [...] that its propagation and its ongoing life occurred through textual means [...] (including books, letters, correspondence courses, magazines, email and Web pages)' (2006: 13).

As was briefly touched upon in Chapter One, in addition to their ongoing engagement with these shared source materials, my interlocutors' knowledge of the Heathen Nine Worlds was also informed by the regular discussions they had with knowledgeable others, both online and at communal events such as the many blóts discussed earlier. Similar discussions also took place at Heathen pan-community gatherings like Hail & Horn, as well as pan-Pagan events such as the Kaleidoscope Gathering held annually at Raven's Knoll. While many of these discussions, whether online or in person, were informal, others were more formalized. For example, many of the discussions held at these pan-community events took the form of 'discussion groups' and 'workshops' where participants were given the opportunity to learn about the cosmos and its 'significance' in presentations made by others, as well as

the chance to instruct others by organizing presentations of their own. These large pan-community events also often featured ‘bardics’, or public performances where participants could perform stories taken from the source materials, as well as original compositions that depicted their more personalized understandings of these worlds and the wider cosmos they were thought to help structure.

Some reported expanding their knowledge and understanding of these worlds through more solitary and personalized forms of practice such as ‘divination’. As was illustrated by the Hail & Horn Rune Ritual, these practices often involved the ‘pulling’ and ‘reading’ of runes, as well as a European shamanistic practice popularly known as ‘seiðr’ (see Blain 2002), which allowed them to ‘enter’ and navigate these worlds in person. Katherine related such an instance:

With the music, I start to drift off, a feeling like I am further and further away from what’s physically happening around me. Then I am in a pine forest at dusk. It’s crazy – I can feel the cold and smell the pine. I walk until I find a fire in a clearing with people around it. More often than not, there are men sitting around the fire but there have been women as well. They don’t all wear clothing from the same period. I have a strong feeling that they are my ancestors. As I stand or sit next to the fire – it’s so cold! – I notice an old man with white hair and a white beard. I recognize him; he is the god Heimdall and he welcomes me, asking me why I am there. When I travel the Nine Worlds I just appear [...] I end up in whichever world I need to or am drawn to visit. Sometimes I can recognize which world I’m in. Often I’m in Vanaheimr, sometimes Ásgarðr, Níflheimr and Jötunheimr. Those are the worlds I’ve been to.

Not everyone I spoke with reported engaging in these divination practices, however, least of all seiðr. Even those who did often preferred not to speak about them and their experiences of them around other Heathens. The reason, one explained, was that ‘some see what I do as a load of crap [because it] and what I experience doesn’t always correspond with what has been written [in the sources ...] I don’t care, I think it just adds greater depth to my understanding’ (Anonymous). I will return to these practices and this tendency later in my discussion.

This anonymous comment highlights an important characteristic of these worlds, the cosmos they helped define and my informants’ experiences of them. Specifically, despite sharing knowledge of these worlds through their ongoing participation in study and discussion practices, many of my informants voiced

drastically different understandings of those worlds and that cosmos due in part to their different experiences of them.²⁰ For example, at a workshop I attended at Midgard 2012, a number of ‘new Heathens’ asked Erik if he took the Nine Worlds cosmology literally. Erik replied by saying, ‘It can’t be taken as a literal construction [...]’. That said, something can be learned from a study of the worlds, namely about how the peoples whose worldview it developed from divided themselves up.’ While this opinion was shared by a number of those I spoke with, others believed the opposite and suggested that the worlds could in fact be approached literally. Katherine continued, ‘The part of me that has been there knows that these places exist. I have spoken to gods, I have felt the cold!’ These differences notwithstanding, they did all report actively striving to construct and articulate a shared knowledge of these worlds with and around others. I posit that it was this shared (if generalized) knowledge of the Heathen cosmological context, and their regular articulation of it in practices with others, that allowed my informants to subsequently engage with those others within that cosmos in formative ways.

Inhabiting the Nine

In addition to developing and articulating a knowledge of the Nine Worlds of the Heathen cosmos as part of their Heathen development, my informants also developed both a shared knowledge and highly personalized understandings of the many beings thought to inhabit those worlds. Unfortunately, a complete overview of these beings exceeds my current aim. That said, there are four types that I would suggest need to be considered at some length. This is in part because my interlocutors actively and regularly engaged with these beings both publicly at events such as blóts and in their manifold private practices. The aim of this ongoing engagement, it seemed, was the establishment of the formative ‘connectedness’ introduced earlier. As such, I would like to pause and consider these beings and a number of their defining characteristics in an attempt to better understand the possible impact my informants’ engagement with them had upon their projects.

²⁰ According to Auz, ‘you can’t say for sure what exactly [the Heathen cosmos] is and where it exists in relation to us [...] there is no dogma and a lot of it depends on personal experience.’ It is because of the contested nature of this context that I have decided not to capitalize ‘cosmos’ when referring to the Heathen cosmological realm. I believe that doing so would lend a formalization and coherence to this realm that is not representative of my informants’ reported understandings of it.

'Holy Powers'

During a discussion I had with him and Auz at Midgard 2011, Erik suggested that 'Heathenry is a truly polytheistic tradition [...] it recognizes many Holy Powers and [we] engage with most of them if we need to or when it is appropriate.' Most of my informants seemed to agree with Erik, with some even suggesting that this 'firm' polytheism, while not unique to Heathenry, helped differentiate it somewhat from many other contemporary Pagan traditions. Indeed, some juxtaposed the 'polytheistic worldview of historical Heathens and many Heathens today [...] many gods for many occasions' (Erik) with the polytheism they believed practiced by members of other traditions such as Wicca and Druidry. Specifically:

Wicca has always stressed bitheism, the wonder of all things as being manifest in the God and Goddess. The Alexandrian and Gardnerian ['witchcraft'] traditions both see the One in Many. In Druidry, the emphasis has always been on the polarity of the masculine and the feminine and in the past Druids have talked about this polarity appearing in humans, plants, animals and perhaps in deity, though they talked about the One and would have been less willing to talk about the many deities of the Celtic world. (Hardman 1996: xii)

Due to Heathenry's polytheistic emphasis, the first type of Heathen cosmological being I would like to consider are the Heathen 'gods' or 'Holy Powers'.

My informants suggested that the 'gods', which include beings like Odin, Donar, Loki, Freya and Nerthus (each of whom are associated with one or more pre-Christian European cultural traditions), that inhabit the Heathen cosmos are defined first and foremost by their 'human' nature. Specifically, as was mentioned earlier when I was discussing the formation and eventual destruction of the Heathen Nine Worlds, these deities were not seen as being omniscient or 'transcendent'. Rather, as Angus once noted, 'They eat, drink, they have sex, they fight, they have to travel around to get where they are going and they will die, just like us.' Coco from Montréal agreed: 'The gods are more human than anything else and that is why so many people connect to [Heathenry]. They don't condemn you for your actions because they do them too!' While recognizing their humanity, however, most of my interlocutors were quick to note that the Heathen gods were 'more than us' (Jonathan). Shane explained: 'I guess you could almost look at them like super-

humans – they are a lot like us, just a lot more powerful. If you don't respect them, they can really get you!

In addition to their human qualities, my informants also often emphasized their multiplicitous nature. For example, I once asked Auz and Erik which god was the principal deity of which realm or activity – e.g. sailing, warfare, fertility, etc. After thinking for some time, Auz replied, 'Each god is defined by a variety of characteristics and is thus associated with any number of different realms. [...] they are defined by a certain multiplicity!' Furthermore, and reflecting upon Heathenry's 'firm' polytheism, this multiplicity seemed to inform the types of relationships my informants developed with these beings. For instance, some explained how they had developed very 'close ties' with certain deities that they 'hold above all others' (Brynn). Despite this affinity, however, they still regularly engaged with other gods depending upon the context and purpose of that engagement. For example, Shane once reported regularly engaging with both Odin and Loki as he was 'very fond of both'. When I asked if his engagement with both detracted from his relationship with either, he replied, 'Nope! They do different things and I call upon them for different reasons. I guess you could look at it as a sort of "working relationship".' This contextually informed engagement was illustrated at the Midsommer Blót discussed earlier. Specifically, though no one present at the blót 'favored' Sunna, and each attendee reported having a specific god that they preferred to engage with in their private practices, they all honored Sunna in that context because it was Midsommer and thus 'appropriate' (i.e. 'frithful') to recognize the deity, her gifts and their relationship with her at that time.

Lastly, the gods were not seen by my informants as being omnipresent or 'unconditional' in their favor, but rather only present when they were 'called upon by worthy people' (Jade). For example, the gods, like my informants, were not the creators of the cosmos, but rather inhabitants of that realm. As inhabitants, they were seen as being only 'potentially present' at any particular time and place, with that presence being dependent in part upon the perceived quality of the context of potential engagement and the other beings present within it. My interlocutors' interactions with Heathen idols illustrate this point very clearly. For example, referring to the Rúnatýr Kindred Freya and Freyr idols (fig. 9) she and Erik had

constructed, Katherine once explained that ‘the gods aren’t always present but sometimes they are. You have to make the idols a place they want to visit and which is nice enough they will want to stay for a bit. It is only then that you can encounter them [in the idols]!’ Discussing her Nerthus idol, Brynn continued, ‘Making the [Nerthus idol] fit for her also required making me fit for her. I need to be the type of person [Nerthus] wants to visit!’ In both instances, the deity was not, by default, perceived as being present within the idol. Rather, they had to be actively ‘drawn’ into them by my informants. In other words, they had to ‘convince’ the gods to ‘take notice of [them]’ (Jonathan) by articulating certain qualities (e.g. frith and ‘worth’) in practices actively undertaken towards those cosmological beings through their idols – qualities that reflected and informed not only their own selves, but also the spaces within which that engagement might occur.



Figure 9: Rúnatýr Kindred Freya and Freyr idols and altar

Though all of my informants ‘knew’ of these beings and agreed that they displayed these characteristics, many maintained drastically different understandings as to their exact nature, as well as what role they should play within their lives. For example, the ‘Holy Power’ category was itself contested. Indeed, some believed that ‘every being [in the cosmos] can be considered a Holy Power including the gods’ (Erik), while others, the majority in fact, used the term to denote the Heathen ‘gods’

alone.²¹ I also spoke to a number of Heathens in both research contexts who were self-identified Atheists. As such, they did not believe the gods to be literal beings. Despite this, however, they still reported engaging with them ‘as an exercise in respect and self-development [...] even as metaphors they have so much to teach us’ (Anonymous). Conversely, I spoke with others who believed that the gods were literal agents that existed within and traveled throughout the Nine Worlds. A variety of opinions also existed concerning how individual practitioners might go about ‘appropriately’ engaging with these beings. For example, Erik once explained, ‘When I’m at home, I don’t interact with gods. That is not their place. Their place is amongst the kindred. In the Germanic worldview, there were no personal gods. [...] They were only interacted with at the level of the community.’ Others I spoke with, however, reported maintaining a very intimate and informal relationship with certain gods. For example, some reported regularly interacting with them as part of their ‘trance’ or ‘rune work’, while others explained that they often ‘shar[ed] a friendly drink with them at home or while out with friends’ (Viktor). Shane continued, ‘I’ll be sitting and watching NASCAR on tv and suddenly I’ll feel like giving an offering to Odin. So, I’ll get up, go outside on the back deck, Hail Odin and pour him a drink!’

Despite these differences, however, all of my informants stressed that these beings (however understood) could and should be engaged with in practice. This was in part because doing so provided them a means to directly affect their lives and developing Heathen selves. Specifically, by engaging in ‘honoring’ practices such as making offerings to these beings at shared events or on their own, my informants maintained they could establish and intensify relationships with them. That is, by acting in certain ways towards them, they were attempting to actively form relationships with the gods. These relationships, they maintained, would then allow them to directly affect their own developing self and the world within which that self was becoming. Even those who believed these beings to be metaphorical still maintained that their actions towards them had the power to effect an altered formation of self, as that willing engagement provided them an opportunity to

²¹ It is due to the popularity of the second usage that I have decided to adopt it to denote these beings throughout my discussion.

develop and articulate a ‘type of “me” that is good to be around and that I want to be’ (Angus).

Wights

A careful walk around Raven’s Knoll (the camping space where Hail & Horn was held) will quickly uncover a number of tiny gnome statues, little trees and small earthen mounds decorated with faded ribbons, small piles of coins, plates of rotten food and empty bottles of beer and mead. Auz once explained that these places and objects represent the ‘ever-present wights of Raven’s Knoll’. These beings were widely recognized by visitors to the Knoll, and at every gathering and festival I attended there, special attention was paid to them by event organizers and participants, Heathen and non-Heathen alike. As illustrated by the Midsommer Blót discussed earlier, my informants’ engagement with these beings extended beyond the Knoll, often being a part of kindred events and even those private practices individuals undertook outside of community contexts.

Observing that these beings were rarely defined yet widely and actively engaged with by my informants, I once asked them if they could explain to me what exactly wights were. Erik was the first to reply, ‘Wights are beings with power [...] The most powerful wight in the country is the Prime Minister! Hell, Bugs are wights too!’ He even suggested that human beings are wights: ‘You’re a wight, I’m a wight, we are all wights because we impact our world.’ During a Rúnatýr Kindred discussion group I attended on ‘magic and power’, Joshua agreed: ‘Any being that has the power to impact others through action is a wight.’ Others provided a slightly more specific definition that depicted these beings as being somewhat similar to the Icelandic Huldafólk (see Strmiska 2000), namely ‘small invisible beings that have special powers and live in special places in the landscape like big rocks’ (Viktor). Jonathan, whose Heathenry in part revolved around his engagement with his ‘land wights’, provided a definition that seemed to combine all of these views:

A wight can be a bunch of things. Some can even be shape-changers so you don’t really know what they are! All that really matters is that they have power. I know that a wight is in a spot because I feel that something in that spot is different. It might be the way it looks or I might feel dread. It is because something is there. In fact, the longer I [live here], I keep

finding more and more. I think they are coming from other people's land because I spend so much time out here and I respect them [...] I respect them because they have power and I don't want anything to happen. Sometimes I make offerings because things go missing!

However they were conceptualized, all of those I spoke with agreed that wights have 'power', or the ability to actively effect transformations within and upon the environments they inhabit, as well as within the lives of those who encounter them. As such, like with the gods, my informants maintained that it was important to engage with these beings through practices that would allow them to gain their favor. Reflecting upon his house wight 'Bobo', Erik explained, 'It's almost a matter of utility; when I am home and I lose something or want something, I offer to Bobo and things always clear up. Sometimes [wights] do things to get your attention or because they want something, just like I do to [Bobo]!' As with the Heathen gods, then, my informants actively undertook practices around and towards these beings in an attempt to affect the influence potentially exerted upon them by the wights. In other words, by engaging with these beings through 'frithful' practices such as the offering of coppers and butter, they were attempting to foster connections with them; a relationality whose aim was to bring them under (and help direct) the wights' formative influence.

Ancestors

As I mentioned when discussing my interlocutors' journey narratives, one of the characteristics they found particularly appealing about Heathenry was its emphasis upon 'where you come from' (Katherine) and the celebration of that personal historical rootedness. One way in which they (and Heathenry more generally) seemed to manifest this emphasis was in their engagements with their 'ancestors'. Indeed, whereas some other contemporary fields like the New Age Movement might be seen as emphasizing the 'Self itself [as] sacred' (Heelas 1996: 2), and Wicca and Druidry focus upon the celebration of nature and 'holism', my informants suggested that one thing that 'makes Heathenry unique is a focus on ancestors' (Brynn). Interestingly, however, this ancestral emphasis and the specific ways in which individual informants understood the ancestors differed somewhat. For instance, some believed these beings 'reside in our body – in our bones and blood' (Brynn),

while others maintained ‘they are in the ground [...] but] they live in our memories’ (Erik). There was also a third group who suggested that their ancestors continued existing after death as literal agents ‘either in Hel or Valhalla, where the worthy dead go’ (Katherine) with other departed beings and the gods.

Whether they were conceptualized as literal, volitional agents who still existed somewhere in the cosmos, an essence to be found within the bodies of their descendants, or as powerful memories, all of my informants regularly engaged with their ancestors in similar ways. One of the most observed forms taken by this engagement was genealogical research. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter One, all of my informants reported either wanting to learn or having learnt more about their ancestors since becoming involved with Heathenry. As Brynn put it, ‘my [genealogical] research helps me explore my roots; where I come from. A big part of my Heathenry is discovering where I come from and who I am.’ An important part of this process was their regular sharing of information about their ancestors with others, both online and at communal events. For example, one evening at Midgard Gathering 2012, Erik stood and proudly announced that he had recently undergone a genetic test that had definitively shown his ancestors ‘would have been Frankish Heathens with a Frankish Heathen worldview.’ Auz stood shortly thereafter and announced that a similar test had ‘illustrated’ his Scandinavian ancestry.

In addition to actively familiarizing themselves with their ancestors through acts of genealogical research, they also regularly engaged in ‘remembering practices’ that allowed them to celebrate those ancestors and their connections with them. This often took the form of their ‘speaking about them and their deeds [...] over a horn with others [so that] they will always be present’ (Auz) at events like the above blót. In other instances they would make an ‘ancestor plate’, both at communal feasts and in private; after being left untouched on the table during a meal, the plate was taken outside and left as an offering to the ancestors and local wights. Martin of Nine Mountains Kindred in Montréal explained that he keeps photographs of his recent ancestors so that he can ‘look at them to never forget them and their role in making me [...] sometimes I’ll have a beer or something and raise it to them.’ Brynn even explained how she ‘remembers and honors’ her ancestors simply by ‘living well,

being virtuous and continuing [her] family line. Your ancestors will live on in your worthy blood and bones!’

Everyone I spoke with engaged in similar acts of ancestral recognition and remembering, so I asked them why they did so. The reason, they explained, was that while their ancestors may ‘be dead, you are still connected to them through your deeds and in your body. You are connected to them through your luck’ (Jade). Specifically, they maintained that, though deceased, their ancestors still had the ‘power’, or formative influence, to bestow certain desirable qualities upon them in the present. However, in order to fall under their formative influence, my informants first had to identify, engage with and maintain relationships with their ancestors. In other words, by learning of and then celebrating the life and accomplishments of ‘worthy ancestors’ (ancestors who were seen in life as displaying certain Heathen qualities such as ‘strength’ or ‘honor’), they believed they could embody, affirm and re-create those qualities within themselves in the present, as those ancestors were ‘still a part of [them]’ (Martin). Likewise, they also suggested that, by remembering those ancestors and their quality, the memory of both could and would be strengthened and propagated within the present and even projected into the future. As with the gods and wights then, by actively searching out and engaging with these beings in ways that displayed desirable Heathen qualities such as an interest in one’s ‘roots’, my informants were able to establish and foster formative and seemingly reciprocal relationships with them.

Concerning Heathens and Elephants

With Heathenry’s emphasis upon ancestors considered at greater length, I think it may be time to deal with a proverbial ‘elephant in the room’. As I discussed in Chapter One, Heathenry, as a contemporary Pagan tradition, found its beginnings not in the mid twentieth century, but rather in nineteenth-century European Romanticism. Specifically, in response to the expansionism of Napoleon, and inspired by the works of individuals like Johann Gottfried von Herder, many nineteenth-century European scholars and artists began gathering regional folk stories and historic forms in an attempt to generate a sense of shared national identity. In Germany, the application of these forms in the generation and articulation of a ‘rooted’ cultural identity did not

end with the nineteenth century, but rather intensified. The early twentieth century saw the establishment of a variety of German ‘antiquity’ groups (e.g. the ‘Thule Society’) whose aim was to gain insight into ‘Germanic mysticism’ and the origin of the ‘Aryan race’ (see Phelps 1963). The period also saw the publication of a number of texts that delved in great detail into the history and ‘culture’ of Northern Europe, including the popular Heathen source *The Culture of the Teutons* (Grönbech 1931[1909]). In the second and third decades of the twentieth century, many of the historical Northern European forms that have since become widely associated with Heathenry (e.g. the sun-wheel discussed at the beginning of this chapter and the swastika) were appropriated and popularized by groups throughout Germany and Scandinavia, such as the National Socialist German Workers' Party. Some of these groups (e.g. the Nazis) then politicized and employed those and other forms in the establishment of an exclusionist sense of ‘cultural heritage’ and ‘biological’ nationalism (see Goodrick-Clarke 2002).

My informants were always quick to note that a connection continues to exist today between certain historic European forms and ‘racialist and other destructive exclusionist ideologies’ (Jade). They also noted that a similar connection has come to exist within ‘popular culture’ between Heathenry and such ideologies due to the tradition’s emphasis upon biological and cultural ‘roots’, as well as the centrality of those historic European forms to Heathenry and Heathen practice. While all of those I spoke with said that they were ‘ardently against racism and the use of Heathenry as an excuse for racist actions’ (Auz), they suggested that this popular association was not utterly unfounded, and that there are members of the world-wide Heathen community that maintain a connection does and *should* exist between Heathenry and the culture, landscape and ‘people’ of Northern Europe. While many reported having met such Heathens over the course of their quest, they stressed that they ‘are by far the minority [... but] sadly they also tend to be the loudest’ (Auz).

While, to my knowledge, I never spoke with Heathens that were members of ‘Neo-Nazi’ or ‘White Supremacist’ Heathen communities, I did have the opportunity to speak to individuals who self-identified as ‘folkish Heathens’. While ‘keen to stress that they are not racists (Harvey 1996: 56), these individuals did suggest that a connection exists between those who have Northern European ancestry and the forms

and ‘lifestyle’ they believed to define Heathenry and the Heathen cosmos. They suggested this link was manifold, being both ‘physical’, or rooted within and through their ‘blood and bones’, and ‘spiritual’, or being rooted in their ‘Northern folk soul’ (Anonymous). That said, the majority of those I spoke with explicitly stated that they were not folkish, but rather ‘universalist’ Heathens. Departing somewhat from the folkish perspective, members of this group maintained that ‘the deities of North-West Europe can call anyone to their worship, regardless of ethnic background’ (Strmiska & Sigurvinsson 2005: 136). My informants regularly expressed this perspective in their discussions with others, both online and at community events, by voicing the popular refrain, ‘Let the gods call who they will’.

Whichever perspective they adopted, all of my interlocutors regularly voiced their awareness of the connection that exists between ‘[Heathenry] and racist ideologies today within popular culture’ (Auz). In fact, many reported that this stereotype was one of the reasons it had taken them a long time to ‘give Heathenry a try [...] I didn’t want people to think I was a racist because I’m not’ (Erin). Others explained how their friends and family had been concerned that they ‘would become racists’ (NaTasha) once they began practicing Heathenry. Brynn continued, ‘I even had a friend who was concerned for my children’s safety! It was so frustrating.’ As a result, they all reported becoming ‘very aware’ of what they said and did as Heathens in an attempt to ‘change peoples’ minds’ (Jade). As part of their ongoing attempts to ‘change minds through [their] actions’ (Brynn), they and their communities actively and reflexively began associating Heathenry and their own developing Heathenness with a blatant inclusiveness. For example, the 2011 Rúnatýr Kindred Constitution, which can be accessed by anyone on the kindred website, states:

No one at any time shall be discriminated on any physical, emotional or spiritual premises’. Regardless of sex, gender identity, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or any other as stated in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms section 15 and the Ontario Human Rights Code. [...] All who feel a kinship to Heathen culture and RK culture in particular shall be treated as equal and without prejudice. The only concern in regard to RK is a person’s worth based upon their deeds and words. All Rúnafolk are their deeds. (Article 3)

My informants also tended to perform this Heathen inclusiveness at the shared events they held, both within their own communities and at the pan-community gatherings

they attended. For example, Erik once stressed that, so long as interested parties ‘maintain frith [...] anyone is welcome at Rúnatýr communal events, no matter what’. Likewise, at the 2011 Kaleidoscope Gathering at Raven’s Knoll, a small Toronto kindred known as the ‘Vikings of the Metal Age’ held a large event at which ‘anyone of any ethnicity, sexuality and belief [could] take part so long as [they] behave respectfully to one another and the gods’ (Derek).

Interestingly, while reflexively and actively emphasizing their awareness of Heathenry’s past and their contemporary Heathen inclusiveness in practice, they still maintained that having ‘pride’ in where they ‘came from’ and ‘who they are’ (‘PO’) was fundamental to the tradition and the development of their Heathen selves. Further, they believed that having and expressing that pride did not make them racist. This was in part because their pride in their ‘own roots [...] in no way takes away from the pride felt by others in their roots or denies them the right to pursue and express that pride’ (Jade). In other words, so long as their celebration of their cultural and biological heritage was reflexively undertaken and did not encroach upon the pride of others, they did not feel that Heathenry’s emphasis upon ‘heritage’ and ‘ancestry’ was troublesome. In fact, some of my Canadian informants even suggested that this cultural pride was justified and celebrated by the multi-cultural discourse they believed ‘makes Canada unique’ (Erik).²² Specifically, as one informant who requested anonymity suggested, ‘How is what we do any different from what the First Nations people do? We are simply celebrating who we are and where we come from in order to maintain our cultural heritage [...] where you come from makes you!’ Thus, I would suggest that the connection my informants recognized as existing between certain exclusionist ideologies and contemporary Heathenry’s emphasis upon/active celebration of ‘roots’ was not an ‘elephant in the room’. Rather, it was the focus of intense examination and discussion; a proverbial ‘fire in the corner’, the presence of which they were aware before they even entered the room.

²² According to Section 3 of the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*: ‘It is hereby declared to be the policy of the Government of Canada to [...] recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage.’

Human Agents

In addition to the potentially ‘present’ gods and wights and ‘remembered’ ancestors already discussed, there was a fourth category of ‘present’ being that all of my informants actively engaged with as part of their Heathenry. Including Heathens and non-Heathens alike, this category was composed of those human agents with whom they interacted at Heathen events and throughout the course of their daily lives. As with the other beings discussed, these human agents were seen as both possessing and exerting a formative influence upon my interlocutors (and vice versa). As human agents constantly influenced by and influencing human others, my informants stressed that ‘you have to constantly be aware because everything you do reflects on you and impacts others’ (Erik). Specifically, they maintained that it was important for human agents to not only be cognizant of the fact that they influenced others, but also of the quality of that influence. Similarly, they were often very selective as to the ‘types’ of human others they surrounded themselves with. They tended to gravitate towards those human agents who ‘choose to live and act’ (Brynn) in ways they believed displayed, and thus might infuse their own lives with, desirable Heathen qualities such as the ‘virtue’ that I shall shortly consider at length.

Even though the majority of the human agents they interacted with were not Heathen, my informants said they still tended to engage with these beings in ‘Heathen ways’ – that is, in ways that both displayed and were thought to generate Heathen qualities. Indeed, while the practices they employed in their interactions with these non-Heathens may not have been as explicitly ‘Heathen’ as those undertaken around other Heathen beings (e.g. the sharing and offering of mead or beer in a drinking horn), they still acted in ways *they* recognized as displaying and generating desirable Heathen qualities like hospitality, frith, honor and respect. For example, Katherine once noted, ‘I always treat everyone that comes to my home hospitably and I expect the same in return [...] they may not be Heathen but I am!’ I would suggest that, by attempting to identify and articulate certain Heathen qualities in practices undertaken with human others, my informants were attempting to establish (or avoid) relationships with those others, as the quality of those human others came to potentially affect their own perceived quality (and vice versa). Thus, as with the other beings discussed, by actively and reflexively engaging with these others in certain

ways, my informants were attempting to access and influence the formative influence they believed existed between them in order to effect a certain formation of self.

Heathen Practice

Throughout the above discussion my informants were depicted as engaging with these multiple categories of cosmological beings through their willing, reflexive and ongoing participation in Heathen practices. One reason these ‘recognizably Heathen’ forms of formative action were seen as being important was that they provided my informants with the means to, and a space within which, to engage with and within the Heathen cosmos and the beings potentially present therein. I suggest this engagement was fundamental to their projects, as it established the ‘powerful’ bonds of connectedness between these beings that their Heathen becoming was in part dependent upon. As such, I would like to pause and consider some examples of the communal events and private practices undertaken by them while attempting to generate this formative connectedness. I will primarily focus upon Rúnatýr Kindred’s events and its members’ practices, as they had the most extensive practical structure at the time this research was conducted. That said, the events and practices of others will also be mentioned where relevant.

Blót

One of the largest and most formalized shared forms of kindred practice I observed was the ‘blót’, one example of which was the 2011 Rúnatýr Kindred Midsommer Blót related earlier. At the time my research was being conducted, attendance at the Rúnatýr blóts averaged between eighteen and twenty-five and included not only Innangard members (‘IG’ – those who composed the kindred’s administrative body) and Utangard members (‘UG’ – paying members with no administrative duties), but also ‘friends of the kindred’ and invited visitors. These daylong events were organized by members of the kindred IG and were generally hosted at the home of the lead organizer, with additional support and input being provided by a co-organizer. The primary purpose of these events was to serve as a ‘method for aligning the community with the God-Powers and the Ancestors’ (Linzie 2000). This ‘alignment’ was primarily achieved through attendees’ participation in a central ritual that

consisted of honoring practices such as verbal ‘hailing’ and the making of some offering to an appropriate (i.e. seasonal) god, the ancestors, and, occasionally, the wights. These practices were then followed by drinking, singing, games and a ‘potluck’ feast where attendees would share foodstuffs they had brought to the event.

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, these events always featured recognizably Heathen forms as outlined within and identified through shared source materials, as well as through additional historical, cultural and genealogical research conducted by the organizers prior to the event. While, as I noted earlier, hosts were given the freedom to ‘really do it however they want’ (Jade), Erik stressed that the forms present at these events ‘must remain Germanic [... hosts] won’t be blóting to a non-Germanic god or whatever. [Also, they] keep with the [seasonal] theme – fertility in the spring, the harvest in the fall.’ These ‘recognizable Heathen forms’ were often manifested in interesting ways, such as in the type of foodstuffs served at the feast (e.g. wild boar, horse meat, wassail), in the stories told around the fire after the feast (e.g. they were often excerpts from or inspired by the ‘Heathen lore’) and even in the clothes worn by some present. For example, members of the Vikings of the Metal Age reported always wearing special attire at their blóts. According to Mike, ‘We want to honor the gods! So we wear our helmets and our mail!’ Derek continued, ‘We dress this way because we are calling the gods. We want to present ourselves to them as we are – we are a warrior culture so we dress as Viking warriors!’

As with the Canadian blóts observed, the Ásatrúarfélagið 2010 Landvættir Blót I attended in Iceland also featured a main ritual during which non-human cosmological beings were engaged with by participants through the recitation of ‘the lore’ and the consumption of ‘ceremonial’ drink (in that case beer rather than the mead generally used in Canada). As was also the case in Canada, the ‘main ritual’ was followed by discussion and the sharing of food. Discussing his own experiences at an Ásatrúarfélagið blót, Strmiska continues, ‘The consecration, recital of poetry, toasting of sacred beings, and festive eating and drinking are standard features of Blots. [...] The Blot which I attended impressed me on the most basic level as a [...] a group of sympathetic people enjoying a pleasantly inebriated descent into past tradition’ (Strmiska 2000: 123). Lastly, as with the Vikings of the Metal Age, many at the Ásatrúarfélagið blót also wore hand-made period clothing, as well as the chunky

Icelandic woolen jumpers that Teresa once joked ‘are the national clothing of Iceland!’ This, however, may have been in part due to the -50C wind-chill we faced during the event.

Symbel

Every two to three months Rúnatýr Kindred held a symbel. Like blóts, attendance at these events tended to be quite high – generally seven to twenty – and featured a combination of IG, UG, ‘friends of the kindred’ and visitors (it seemed as if far more friends and visitors attended these events than the kindred blóts). These events were also generally held in some kindred space, such as the home of a member or the kindred ‘enclave’ (demarcated camping space) when held at a pan-community festival or gathering. The symbels I observed were also based upon shared source materials (e.g. see McNallen 1993) and often featured many of the same pre-Christian Germanic and Scandinavian forms present at the blóts. In all but one instance, which I will discuss at the beginning of Chapter Three, these events featured a very similar practical structure. For example, they began with participants arranging themselves into an inward facing circle (either sitting or standing). A drinking horn of mead or beer was then passed around the circle a minimum of three ‘rounds’ in a clockwise direction. During the first round, participants ‘raised’ the horn to (‘honor’) a god. During the second, they did the same to ancestors or heroes, usually while telling a story about the individual being honored. The third round provided those participating the opportunity to ‘toast’ someone they held in high regard, or ‘boast’ about their own accomplishments. Once the three initial rounds were finished, participants were given the freedom to continue toasting, boasting and performing artistic compositions for as long as the mead or beer lasted. These events tended to conclude with the final drops of the ‘ceremonial liquid’ used in the horn being offered to the gods, ancestors and wights as a sign of respect and honor.

These events also gave participants a space within which to make oaths, though the decision to do so was the host community’s or that of the individual host-organizer. In each instance, the decision whether or not to allow for the making of these ‘sacred promises’ seemed to be dependent upon the level of familiarity between the potential oath-takers and the others present. When they were made, these oaths

were witnessed by all of the beings present and potentially present and, in the case of Rúnatýr, recorded in an ‘oath book’ along with the oather’s ‘scyld’, or penitence. These scylds were seen as being highly important as they were the only way that oath-breakers could immediately begin rebuilding their ‘worth and renown [...] the things that matter most to Heathens’ (Erik) within the community if they had broken their promise to community members.²³ Symbels, particularly those held at festivals, also provided participants with the opportunity to exchange gifts, not only with members of their own community, but also members of different groups. As Erik once explained, ‘[symbel] is primarily an event that focuses upon men and their relationships. That is why we gift and oath at symbel.’ Thus, if the blót allowed my informants to engage and establish formative relations with the gods, ancestors and possibly even wights, ‘the symbel or “sumble” served to relate man to man through the ritualized sharing of drink, oath-making, and gift-giving’ (Linzie 2000).

Discussion Groups

Another popular event I attended was the ‘discussion group’. Unlike blóts and symbels, these events did not feature ceremonial feasting or drinking, the ‘calling upon’ or ‘remembering’ of the Holy Powers, wights and ancestors, the making of oaths or the giving of gifts. Rather, these events were fairly unstructured, held at a variety of locations, open to any interested party and, according to both Erik and William, meant to provide those in attendance with the opportunity to present and discuss topics of ‘Heathen significance with other Heathens’ (Erik). Specifically, these events provided participants with the opportunity to discuss the myriad of Heathen sources mentioned earlier, the worlds, beings and events depicted within them and their interpretations of and engagement with them amongst knowledgeable others. A variation of the discussion group known as the ‘Lore Reading Group’ was also becoming quite popular in Ontario near the end of my research and seemed to be leading to the formation of a number of new kindreds. Indeed, Nine Mountains Kindred in Montréal and the Toronto-area Cliffside Kindred had reportedly begun as such a group. Notably, similar events known as ‘Open Houses’ were a weekly

²³ The scyld was usually an object (e.g. a book) or act of service that the oath-taker would provide the community within a predetermined period of time.

occurrence in Iceland, and, from what I saw, formed the backbone of Ásatrúarfélagið's community calendar. Much like their Canadian counterparts, these events generally saw members of the community and interested outside parties coming together at the Ásatrúarfélagið 'meeting house' to discuss matters of 'community importance' (Viktor) over coffee and cake.

As has already been mentioned, my interlocutors also often discussed these and other topics online. Indeed, a number of my informants regularly engaged with others electronically, and there was a substantial Heathen online presence in Canada. In fact, many I spoke with related how they had first come to know of Heathenry, their kindred community and other local Heathens from learning about and even meeting them online. These online discussions often occurred on the public forums many kindreds established, as well as on public and private social networking sites like *Ásatrú Lore*, the *Ontario Heathens* Facebook page and on individuals' own Facebook pages. It is interesting to note that, while many of the same topics were discussed both online and in person, some of the online discussions more closely resembled heated debates than the friendly discussions I witnessed in person. For example, in both cases participants would pose a question or a topic of discussion. Others present would then 'quote sources' relevant to the question or theme. Once these had been presented, participants would then share their understanding of the topic by applying those sources in interpreting and articulating their own personal experiences to those present. Unlike the discussion and lore groups I attended, however, those involved in the online conversations would often then critique or question these personal interpretations and experiences. This tendency was noted by Erik in Chapter One when he said that he and others would often 'challenge' visitors to the *Ásatrú Lore* site to 'defend' their practices and experiences.

Moots

Once a year Rúnatýr held 'Rúnamoot', or the 'Annual General Meeting'. Unlike symbols and blóts, only individuals active in the kindred IG and UG were allowed to attend this meeting, as it was during this gathering that the kindred's laws were

created or changed and the community constitution underwent its annual revision.²⁴ During this event individuals could also apply for entrance into the kindred, state their interest in the IG ‘offices’ (administrative positions) and, when appropriate, defend the positions they already held. The standing of those individuals ‘outlawed’ by the kindred for ‘breaking frith’ was also reviewed at this event, as was their possible reintegration into the community. Rúnatýr also held a smaller, less formalized style of moot gathering called an ‘IG Meeting’ at which the status of the kindred, as well as upcoming kindred events, were discussed. While, like the AGM, these were ‘open’ events (events that any kindred member could attend), they were not widely advertised and thus generally attended only by IG members. In addition to Rúnatýr’s moots, I also had the pleasure of attending a number of moots held by other groups as well, including a ‘pub moot’ held by Nine Mountains Kindred in Montréal. When asked about the purpose of the event, Martin of Nine Mountains explained that it was an opportunity to ‘get together, plan ahead and just enjoy frith.’ In every instance, these events featured discussions about the cosmological experiences of those present, their possible relevance to and effect upon the community and general acts of frith-making.

‘Private Practices’

While the events described above were not the only shared events attended by my informants, they were amongst the most often observed. A full list of these events might also include the many Heathen and pan-Pagan festivals and gatherings they attended, as well as the many smaller events that composed them, like the Rune Ritual discussed at the beginning of Chapter One. Despite being an incomplete list, however, I believe the above examples illustrate the regular, broad and interactive nature of my informants’ shared engagement with the Heathen cosmos. That said, their engagement with and resulting experiences of that realm were not solely defined by their participation in shared events undertaken with Heathen and non-

²⁴ My Rúnatýr informants stressed that the constitution was an ‘evolving document’ (Jade), the aim of which was to ‘establish and maintain frith within the community’ (Erik) by providing members with a shared yet highly personalized standard according to which they might engage with one another, members of other communities and even their own developing selves.

Heathen human others. Rather, many chose to engage with the cosmos through a myriad of ‘private practices’ undertaken in the absence of other Heathens. Even those who did regularly engage with human others at events like *symbel* and *blót* reported often undertaking a variety of personal practices ‘on [their] own’ (Brynn). Despite being undertaken ‘in private’, however, these practices were not undertaken ‘alone’, and were still seen as being potentially formative, or assisting in their development of a Heathen self. This was because they were often engaged in, with, around or towards the other categories of beings discussed above, including non-Heathen human agents.

Many of their private practices featured the same identifiably ‘Heathen’ forms present at their shared events, including offering, honoring and remembering acts. However, when undertaking them as part of their private observances, my interlocutors often personalized these Heathen practices so that they more fully reflected and allowed them to articulate their personal understandings of the Heathen cosmos. Specifically, their private practices tended to incorporate and reflect aspects of their own historical and cultural backgrounds to a far greater extent than did those practices they participated in at shared events. For instance, Jade explained how she regularly made tobacco offerings to her First Nations ancestors in private, while Erik’s private engagements with the wights and his ancestors often incorporated forms drawn from the body of ‘folk-knowledge’ he had developed through his research into the history and ‘worldview’ of his native Ottawa Valley ‘kin’. Likewise, Jonathan once told me, ‘Though I still read the [Heathen] stories, when I am on my own I mostly read up on stuff like historic armor and how they made it. I then use that knowledge to forge my own armor, which I think is a way to honor my ancestors and the gods [...] I focus on what is powerful for me when I am on my own.’ Thus, it appeared that, as part of their private Heathen practices, my informants obtained, developed and applied a field of knowledge that was both ‘Heathen’ (in that it was historically and culturally ‘relevant’) and highly personalized. They then employed that knowledge when conceptualizing of and engaging with potentially present cosmological others such as gods, wights and ancestors in private, formative acts of offering, honoring and remembering.

As well as placing less emphasis upon shared sources in their private practices, many of those practices also saw my informants engaging with potentially present cosmological beings and other human agents in far less formalized ways than was often the case at shared events. For instance, while I often observed my informants privately engage with cosmological others through acts of offering and hailing, they rarely felt the need to create a vé space within which to do so. Indeed, many said they would engage with the Holy Powers, ancestors or wights on a ‘whim’ or ‘as friends’ wherever and whenever they felt appropriate. According to Joshua, ‘Oh, I never have sacred space at home. You have to be careful because that limits you! I just have a rock where, if I feel the need as I am going about my day, I’ll just go out, pour a bit of beer or something and it’s done.’ Jonathan continued, ‘Sometimes when I am working, a fly will be buzzing my face or something so I would say, “Ok, ok, I hear you”! I will then pour some beer to the wights. That’s all I need to do.’ Others stressed that their private practices often centered on providing visitors to their home – Heathen or otherwise – with hospitality. Indeed, they explained that they would offer visitors ‘a bed to sleep in’ (Angus) or ‘food and drink to fill them no matter who they are’ (Auz) because, ‘though they might not be Heathen and recognize what I am doing, I can recognize it, it is important to me [...] it is the right thing so I do it’ (Katherine).

In addition to incorporating their personal backgrounds, interests and Heathen cosmological understandings into their private Heathen practices, some of my informants also undertook private ‘divination’ practices. Often taking the form of the pulling and reading of runes or the entering of trance, those who engaged in this practice related doing so ‘for direction and understanding – I don’t necessarily want a “yes” or “no” answer, just a way forward’ (Brynn). Additionally, some reported engaging in bloodletting practices, including making personal ‘blood sacrifices’ to a god or ancestor or ‘sacrificing [themselves – i.e. bleeding]’ upon an object to ‘bestow [their] power upon it’ (Anonymous). In each instance, they reported engaging in these practices in order to ‘make changes in the world because my power is in my blood’ (Anonymous). As noted earlier, those who engaged in these practices, particularly the latter, were often quite reticent to discuss them with or around other Heathens. When I asked why, they replied, ‘It’s just something you don’t see or hear

a lot about in the Heathen community.’ The reason, I was told, was that ‘while there are instances of it in the sources, there isn’t much [...] as Heathens some look down on doing stuff that can’t be “substantiated” with the sources so you don’t talk about it [so] people won’t think you’re “less Heathen”’ (Anonymous). Furthermore, they feared that they might be seen as ‘being a bit extreme. You don’t see that sort of thing a lot today and I think it scares people so I keep it to myself’ (Anonymous). Despite this, however, they maintained that these practices were central to their personal Heathenry. This was because the divination practices provided them a way to engage in highly personalized and intimate ways with the Heathen cosmos and the gods, while the bloodletting practices allowed them to manifest their and their ancestors’ power within their everyday world.

While I was in Canada a number of my interlocutors expressed an increasing interest in establishing private ‘coming of age’ practices that would, according to Brynn, ‘mark our progression through life as Heathens’. Despite this increased interest, however, few of them had developed and adopted such practices as part of their personal Heathenry. That said, I did have the good fortune of encountering two such practices. For example, I was given the opportunity to review the transcript of Erik and Chantal’s first child’s private Heathen ‘naming’ ceremony. This event, which was held at Raven’s Knoll and attended primarily by members of their family, saw the child receiving her name and being assigned her ‘Gods parents’. I also attended Brynn and Shane’s private ‘handfasting’, which was a wedding ceremony based upon recorded pre-Christian Germanic and Anglo-Saxon ‘binding rituals’. While many members of Rúnatýr Kindred and the wider pan-Pagan community had been invited to the event, Brynn stressed that it ‘was not a community event – it was for [Shane and I] and our family to mark our coming together. It was about what we find powerful!’ Though the majority of those present at this event were not Heathen, it is interesting to note that the hall where it was held had been decorated with identifiably Heathen forms. For example, the centerpiece at the ‘high table’ featured drinking horns, the cakes served to guests had been decorated with runic chocolates, many present were dressed in ‘ceremonial’ clothing like that discussed earlier and the tables where the guests were seated had been decorated with chocolates shaped

like the god Thor's trademark hammer (Mjölfnir) and copies of Heathen source materials.

As with the shared events discussed earlier, the above examples represent only a small sample of the many private practices undertaken by my informants as part of their Heathen development. However, I would suggest that they, like the aforementioned communal events, illustrate an interesting tendency in Heathenry as I observed it. Specifically, whether they were engaging with Heathen or non-Heathen human others, possibly present others or the Heathen cosmos more generally, all of my informants tended to actively employ and articulate certain Heathen forms (e.g. objects, forms of knowledge and types of practices) in their engagements with and within that realm. Indeed, while the naming and handfasting ceremonies were 'private' in that neither had been organized by or executed specifically for other Heathens or their associated communities, they both featured recognizably Heathen objects (e.g. Mjölfnirs) and forms of speech (e.g. 'gods') actively employed by participants with and towards others at shared Heathen events. Furthermore, whether they poured out beer or mead to honor another, spilled their blood to affect the world or 'remember' an ancestor, or simply offered a door-to-door sales person a cool glass of water on a hot summer day, they actively and reflexively undertook 'powerful' or potentially formative practices towards others that they believed displayed desirable Heathen qualities like 'frith', 'honor' and 'hospitality'.

Returning briefly to their proposed projects, I would suggest that, when my informants actively and reflexively employed and engaged with these forms as part of their Heathen striving and becoming, they came to function as 'technologies' that helped them connect with powerful cosmological others in identifiably Heathen ways. In so doing, they became means through which my informants began actively affecting the quality of their own developing Heathen selves, by 'subjecting' those selves to not only their own formative influence, but also that of others. The key, I would argue, to understanding this shared process of active and reflexive 'subjectivation' lies within the cosmological web of powerful relationality that these practices, forms and qualities helped develop.

Navigating the Web

As my interlocutors described it, the Heathen cosmos was potentially populated by present and possibly present beings that possessed a type of ‘powerful’ formative influence that allowed them to affect that cosmos, others and themselves. By establishing and maintaining potentially reciprocal relations with those beings through their participation in both shared and personalized forms of Heathen practice, my informants maintained they could enter into the matrix of formative relationality or ‘connectedness’ they believed permeated throughout and helped animate that cosmic realm. Their entrance into and development within this relational matrix (and the cosmos more generally) was dependent upon their ability to identify and display certain desirable Heathen qualities and characteristics to themselves and cosmological others in these practices. This was in part because many of my informants maintained these cosmological others were volitional agents who would react – favorably or negatively – to them and their actions depending upon the quality of self they displayed to those others within and through those practices. This was hinted at by Brynn earlier when she suggested that, by engaging with the Nerthus idol in specific ways, she was able to ‘make’ and display a certain kind of self to Nerthus that the god found favorable. The result of her ongoing performance of this desirable self in her interactions with the idol, she maintained, was that the volitional deity potentially present within it might find her ‘worthy’ and thus decide to begin engaging with her in increasingly intimate and powerful ways. Erik and Jonathan suggested something similar when discussing their wights. Specifically, by acting in hospitably ways towards those beings (i.e. by honoring them with offerings), they maintained they were able to display their desirable quality to them, thus ‘drawing’ them into their land, homes and lives. Of course, something similar might also be said about the human agents (Heathen and non-Heathen alike) they encountered, as well as their ancestors. In each case, they generated and displayed a type of self in the practices they undertook towards these beings that they believed would help them enter into potentially formative relationships with them.

Interestingly, even when conceptualized of as ‘metaphors’ or embodied remembrances, my informants still actively engaged with these beings in Heathen

practices and maintained that these engagements had formative implications that would allow them to influence how they perceived of their developing Heathen selves. I would suggest that this was because these ‘metaphorical’ gods and ‘non-living’ ancestors became ‘exemplars’ or ‘precedents’ (Humphrey 1997: 25) that had ‘no single meaning, but [were] given meaning in the context of the specific aspirations of the subject in his or her predicament’ (1997: 41). Specifically, by being recognizably ‘Heathen’ beings whose active engagement was desirable in that it displayed Heathen qualities like ‘honor’ and ‘frith’, these beings became ‘mirrors’ of sorts within and through which my interlocutors were able to develop and insatiate their own desirable Heathenness. However, the connectedness that resulted did not place them under the influence of those others, but rather their own reflexive striving. Thus, in this instance, I would posit that, rather than becoming subjects to the power of those others, they instead became subjects to their own becoming selves and the Heathenness manifested within and encountered through those practices, metaphors and memories.

According to my informants, the establishment of a formative connectedness between Heathen cosmological beings was dependent upon those involved developing and exercising ‘virtue’. In fact, many maintained that ‘virtue’ was the foundational Heathen quality upon which their realization of all other desirable cosmological qualities was dependent. Gus explained: ‘What makes a person “more Heathen” is following the Heathen virtues. You stay as true as you can to these. They outline how you are supposed to live well with other people. [...] They just ask [you] to be a good person.’ Expressing a similar opinion, Brynn continued, ‘These virtues are essentially “codes of conduct”, moral standards, norms that have been taken from or based upon historic codes like that found in old works like the *Hávamál*.’ My interlocutors regularly discussed a number of such ‘codes’, one of the most popular being the ‘Nine Noble Virtues’. Codified by the Odinic Rite in the 1970s and drawn from the Icelandic *Edda*, this code emphasizes the Heathen virtues of ‘courage, truth, honor, fidelity, discipline, hospitality, industriousness, self-reliance, and perseverance’ (see Thorsson 2003: 71). Often in addition to this Scandinavian code, some of my informants also studied the Anglo-Saxon ‘Twelve Atheling Thews’. This code outlines the closely related Heathen virtues of ‘boldness, steadfastness, troth,

givefullness, guestliness, sooth (honesty), wrake (vengeance), evenhead (equality), friendship, freedom, wisdom, and workhardiness’ (see Wodening 1994: 1–7). As well as regularly discussing and even simultaneously implementing these two widely observable codes, Rúnatýr Kindred had compiled its own list of virtues that community members also adopted. Inspired by the ‘pre-Christian Germanic worldview and sources’ and arrived at by community consensus, these virtues were ‘meant to help [them] act well towards one another and others’ (Erik). This code consisted of the:

‘Virtues of the Self’: Discipline, Fidelity, Honesty, Honor, Knowledge, Patience, Perseverance, Responsibility and Self-Expression; ‘Virtues of the Spirit’: Awareness, Balance, Courage, Creativity, Hope, Love, Lust, Truth and Wisdom; and, ‘Virtues of the Tribe’: Community, Compassion, Diversity, Frith, Hospitality, Humor, Interdependence, Support, and Vision. (2011 Constitution, Article 7)

Despite the wide variation observable between these ‘codes’, it is important to note that they all shared a number of interesting characteristics. First, they had all been either drawn directly from historic sources or generated from knowledge compiled from those sources. Secondly, all of my interlocutors agreed that, regardless of the code adopted, the virtues ‘must be lived’ (Jonathan), or incorporated into one’s everyday interactions with and around others. Lastly, they all stressed that the virtues were not ‘dogma [...] you have to choose to study them and apply them because you want to’ (Erik). In other words, as with their Heathen quests more generally, no one ‘imposed’ these virtues upon them from without. Rather, they had willingly researched, adopted and applied those virtues as part of their striving and Heathen becoming, because they ‘wanted to be a better person for me [and for] others to be around’ (Gus).

Thus, regardless of the specific code (or codes) they employed, these virtues seemed to exist and operate as a field of knowledge that, once adopted and applied in practice, helped my informants identify and express desirable Heathen qualities in engagements with and towards others. One such quality was the ‘frith’ briefly mentioned earlier. Erik explained, ‘In the historical usage, [frith] is little more than a mutual state of non-aggression – agreeing to disagree for the common good. [...] Frith has to be built; it has to be worked at.’ Grönbech elaborates upon this concept

in his oft-quoted *The Culture of the Teutons*: '[Frith indicates] a power for peace which keeps men amicably inclined [...] The fundamental idea is not that of disturbing elements and letting things settle down, but that of introducing a peace-power among disputants' (1931[1909]: 59). So defined, Heathen frith might be approached as a state of intentional, positive association generated between cosmological beings through their active and ongoing engagement in virtuous, frithful practices. In other words, frith establishes and maintains a state of potential relationality between beings through their co-participation in, and recognition and reciprocation of frithful acts, or practices that are outlined within, infused with and indicative of 'virtue'.

For example, at the blót discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Jonathan asked us all to bring coins, butter and flowers to offer to the gods and wights. We all did as he asked because doing so 'respected' his wishes as our host, an act that reflected our appreciation of his hospitality. By acting virtuously and thus frithfully towards Jonathan by actively abiding by his 'hall rules', those present were not only given the opportunity to potentially form relations with him and one another, but also with the wights and Sunna to whom the offerings were eventually given. Thus, by engaging in frithful practices that were framed by and displayed Heathen virtue, the many cosmological beings present or potentially present at the event were provided with an opportunity to establish or increase their connectedness with one another. Briefly, I would suggest that the centrality of the virtues and this frith to their establishment of this potentially formative connectedness might explain why my informants did not often 'challenge' one another's personal Heathen understandings at discussion groups, while they did during online discussions. Specifically, as the former generally included members of the same kindred or festival community (i.e. individuals who regularly engaged with one another in potentially formative ways), more 'respect' and 'honor' was shown to participants in an attempt to maintain frith between them. The online discussions, however, often occurred between individuals who had never or had rarely encountered one another. As such, they had not established potentially formative bonds and were less concerned with maintaining 'powerful', frithful connections.

By providing virtuous cosmological beings the space and means to engage with and potentially form connections with one another, these acts of frith and ‘frith-building’ also provided them with opportunities to display and increase their ‘luck’. Differing somewhat from the ‘common’ Western usage, Heathen ‘luck’ might be defined as a powerful ‘essence’ intrinsic to all cosmological beings ‘that inspires a man and emanates from his person, filling his words and his deeds’ (Grönbech 1931[1909]: 155). My informants suggested that this luck is both illustrated and influenced by an agent’s exercise of a personal power or ‘megin’. Specifically, every act undertaken by a powerful cosmological being has the potential to influence their luck, either positively or negatively. As a result, and in many ways similar to virtue and frith, they maintained that their luck was always ‘in process’. Samuel explained, ‘[Megin/Luck] is like a burning flame that everyone has within them but that is not equal in everyone because not everyone works to develop it!’ This luck was seen as taking two forms: ‘hamingja’, the personal luck just described and ‘orlog’, which was often referred to as the ‘luck of one’s ancestors, family and kin [...] the group’ (Erik). In other words, while also a personal quality, this power was seen as extending beyond individual agents. Specifically, they suggested it permeates into and outwards from other cosmological beings. Thus, by actively engaging in frithful practices with virtuous cosmological others such as honoring, offering and remembering, my informants maintained that they were able to manifest and increase their own ‘good luck’. However, when these practices were undertaken with and towards virtuous others, they also became able to intertwine that personal power with those others (and vice versa). This, I would suggest, is why they were so ‘picky’ (Erik) about the ‘quality’ of the others with whom they associated.

Described thus, luck is fundamental to a cosmological being’s ability to affect themselves and others through instances of action; the more ‘good’ luck one has, the better able one is to affect the world and their and others’ experiences of it in desirable ways. Further, by intertwining and extending this luck with and through others, beings become able to extend the range of this formative influence. My informants stressed that the ‘web’ of influence generated in part by this intertwining and ‘projection’ of luck to and through others was ‘a serious thing and shouldn’t be

taken lightly' (Erik). This was because it affected the 'wyrd' of all of those embedded within that powerful matrix. According to Thorsson:

Two words that indicate 'fate' really to the Germanic mind are 'wyrd' and 'ordeal'. [...] 'fate' is the result of actions which the person performed at some previous time [...] wyrd is really that which has become (those 'deals' already dealt out) which affect the present and that which is to come. (2003: 63)

Wyrd, then, might be likened to 'fate' in that it is a present and future state generated within the past and present by the actions undertaken by agents. Of course, such a definition depicts a type of fate that is somewhat unique. Indeed, unlike the popular Western definition which seems to equate 'fate' with a 'destiny' that cannot be changed by agents, the fate pursued by my interlocutors was something that was not only affectible by them, but a state they actively produced in practice. In other words their "'fate" [was ...] striven against more than it was meekly accepted' (Harvey 1996: 51). Indeed, my informants all maintained that the quality of the actions they undertook within the past and present had the power to fundamentally shape their wyrd in the present and long into future. As a result, they stressed that it was very important to 'always consider what you say and do because it will come back and get you in the future' (Katherine). Further, they suggested that the more powerful and 'lucky' the agent, the more their actions allowed them to shape their wyrd. Specifically, by increasing and exercising their 'good luck' through undertaking actions that displayed qualities like the above virtues, the more they could 'make the world and [themselves] what [they] want them to be' (Jonathan).

As with their luck, my interlocutors maintained that their wyrd could also be intertwined with and thus become influenced by the wyrd of those with whom they 'mixed themselves through acts like sharing a horn, sharing myself or honoring the gods' (Brynn). While this process could be dangerous in that 'who you chose to associate with [...] will change your life in one way or another' (Martin), they saw this potential intertwining of wyrd as important. The reason was that the more lucky beings with 'good' wyrd they connected themselves with, the more formative potential they both developed and had exerted upon them. In order to attract and then 'intertwine' their wyrd with such beings, they often engaged in practices that allowed them to display and identify the quality of their own luck and wyrd (and thus those

daily practices that had generated them both) and that of others. For example, my informants' entrance into this web was dependent in part upon their active study, reflexive adoption and ongoing expression of virtuous Heathen qualities within practices undertaken with and towards others. Specifically, by engaging in 'toasting', 'hailing' and 'remembering' practices towards human and non-human others, they became able to display their virtue and establish 'good frith' with and between themselves and those others (frith they then had to maintain through subsequent practices). This frith provided them with ongoing opportunities to display, increase and then connect their 'luck' with those with whom they had formed that connectedness. By intertwining their luck with those others, all involved became embedded within a powerful matrix of relational influence wherein the virtuous acts of one being potentially increased the positive cosmological quality of another. Katherine explained this process well:

As a Heathen, you boast a lot at [Heathen events] to show how good your wyrd is so that others will want to attach their wyrd to yours by doing things with you like sharing a horn. I guess you could look at it as a spider-web of power that develops between people, the gods, the ancestors and everything else! [...] When one person does something good it makes you feel good too because you know that it impacts all of you.

Thus, through engaging in practices that allowed them to display their own wyrd and observe the wyrd of others, my informants entered into a powerful matrix of formative potential that extended throughout the Heathen cosmos to and through other powerful, 'striving' cosmological beings. I would argue that it was the transformative potential of the Heathen cosmos, and the web of connectedness through which my informants encountered it, that informed and 'quickened' their projects and the selves being fashioned through them.

Populating the Heathen Cosmos

While my interlocutors appeared to share a knowledge of the Heathen cosmos and the beings and forces that defined it, as they described it, that cosmos did not seem to exist as a singular, structured ontological construct. Rather, while everyone I spoke with reported studying the Nine Worlds, knew the many names of the gods, actively celebrated their ancestors and spoke of their engagements with the wights, they often

attributed different qualities to each and engaged with them in different ways within their private Heathen practices. In so doing, it appeared that the knowledge they developed of that cosmos through their ongoing (and often shared) study and discussion practices provided them not with a unified vision of that realm, but rather a cosmological ‘primer’ or sorts. Specifically, it acted as a general field of knowledge with reference to which they began and continued engaging with cosmological others in ‘identifiably Heathen’ ways, while still exercising the flexibility of interpretation and understanding often associated with contemporary fields of practice (see Cusack 2010; see also Luhrmann 1989, 2012). In an attempt to better understand how this paradoxical duality impacted their potentially formative engagements with and within that realm, I would like to, somewhat oddly perhaps, pause and briefly consider ‘flags’.

Eriksen has suggested that ‘In the modern era of the nation-state [...] flags signify [...] some of the same things that totems and heraldic symbols have done in the past’ (2007: 3). Specifically, they ‘compress a broad range of meanings’ (*ibid.*) into a single, recognizable and shared form. In so doing, they function as ‘key symbols’ (Ortner 1973: 1342) that draw together many possible meanings into a mutually identifiable and unifying representation of ‘we-hood’ (Eriksen 2007: 3). The ability of flags to act as unifying representations stems in part from their being ‘empty’ vessels that can be ‘fill[ed ...] with many things’ (Eriksen 2007: 5). In other words, the signifying efficacy and unifying capacity of flags stem partly from their ability to communicate a shared sense of ‘we-ness’ to those who compose the ‘we’ they represent (and the ‘they’ they do not), while also being representational of the personal understandings those individuals have of what that flag symbolizes. I would suggest that something similar might be said about the Heathen cosmos.²⁵

As has already been discussed, my interlocutors came to know of the Heathen Nine Worlds (and the beings believed to inhabit them) through study acts that referenced a varied yet shared body of key Heathen source materials. Through these materials and practices, they developed a generalized knowledge of these worlds and beings. As I illustrated above, this knowledge allowed them to then engage with

²⁵ As I will discuss in Chapter Three, however, unlike Ortner’s flags, this cosmos did not exist as an ‘all or nothing’ (Ortner 1973: 1340) package my informants engaged with as an unreflected whole.

these beings in ways that helped generate the Heathen ‘connectedness’ I suggested was fundamental to their Heathen projects and developing Heathen selves. However, due to the freedom of interpretation and lack of dogma they suggested helped define Heathenry, each act of cosmological engagement undertaken produced diverging understandings of these beings and this cosmos that ultimately affected how my informants encountered both in their private practices. In other words, as it was increasingly encountered by my informants, this realm existed less as a singular ontological framework, and more as a loose yet identifiable field of possibilities and potentiality discovered through and outlined within study. This field was then personalized and populated by them in practice with ‘figures’ (worlds, gods, etc.) that, while ‘identifiably Heathen’, were ‘filled-out’ with informants’ personalized cosmological understandings. Thus, somewhat similar to flags, while my informants and other Heathens were able to recognize these beings and worlds as ‘Heathen’ with reference to their shared knowledge, due to the ‘looseness’ of Heathenry as a contemporary field of practice, each was also somewhat ‘empty’ and therefore infusible with ‘meanings’ (i.e. personal understandings and relevance) generated by individual striving Heathens in practice.

Importantly, I would argue that the flexibility and multivocality of the Heathen cosmos did not necessarily hinder my informants’ shared development into and as Heathen beings. This is because their becoming, and the interpersonal engagements that helped fuel it, were not dependent upon their sharing a singular, unified view of that cosmic realm with others. For example, though some of those who took part in the Hail & Horn Rune Ritual did not engage in divination practices, ‘Odin worship’, maintain a ‘belief’ in Odin as a literal being, or believe in the ‘power’ of the runes, they all still engaged in the event in very similar ways. That is, they all acted in ways that were ‘Heathen’ – in this case, ways that displayed and imparted frith, virtue, etc. Specifically, they all chose to take and abide by their oaths, they all engaged in the divination practice itself and they all ‘honored’ Odin for his ‘gifts’ with hails and offerings before and afterwards. Thus, despite their different understandings of the figures and forces involved, all of those present at that (and indeed every) event actively and reflexively adopted practices around and towards the others present that were understood by all as being ‘virtuous’, ‘frithful’

and 'Heathen'. In so doing, they became increasingly able to establish powerful, potentially formative relations with the others present, however they conceptualized of them. With this in mind, I would suggest that the specifics of individual participants' cosmological understandings were of less importance to their establishment of formative connections with others than their willing, reflexive and ongoing participation in practices that allowed them to identify and display shared, highly desirable Heathen qualities to/in others. In other words, what appeared to matter most to my informants' projects was not how they understood the cosmos, but rather the means, quality and ends of their engagements with others within it.

Conclusion

However they conceptualized of the Heathen cosmos then, my interlocutors agreed that, by engaging with and within that realm in ways that displayed certain Heathen qualities, they could establish relationships with others that were 'powerful'. Specifically, by embodying and articulating qualities such as virtue and frith within and through their striving Heathen practices (qualities they had come to associate with Heathenry and the Heathen cosmos through acts such as study), they were attempting to engage with and root themselves within a 'web' of connectedness, or causal relationality, with other influential cosmological beings. Once within this 'web of subjectivation', they not only became more able to actively and reflexively fashion themselves as becoming Heathen subjects through striving practices like study, discussion and 'honoring', they also became subjects to the formative practices of those they had become connected with. Thus, their Heathen becoming became dependent upon their ability to identify, manifest, embody and articulate a shared field of desirable Heathen cosmological forms and qualities (and the formative potential they represented) within their contemporary world, selves and relations in practice. It is this 'Heatheness', and the process of everyday aesthetic reorientation I suggest my informants underwent as part of their quest for it, that I will explore in Chapter Three.

Chapter III: ‘Aestheticizing’ the Everyday

Hail & Horn 2012 High Symbol

Unlike the previous evening, which had seen the raising of the Odin god pole and the Rune Ritual, the atmosphere at Raven’s Knoll on the third evening of Hail & Horn 2012 seemed a bit subdued. I would suggest this was at least in part due to the stunning amounts of food all of us had consumed earlier that evening at the ‘Húsel feast’, which had featured an astounding *eight* courses.



Figure 10: Hail & Horn Odin Blót offerings and Húsel ingredients

The first course had consisted of homebrewed bog myrtle ale that had been mixed with soured milk, while the second consisted of a thick leek and neep broth. We had then been served rye and wheaten rolls with an ‘apple-flesh’ spread (a thick mixture of salt, butter, crushed apples and bacon), which was followed shortly thereafter by a portion of ‘seethed ox’ (beef braised in ale). Kale and pottage had then been offered, and a thick, seasoned porridge known as ‘Caithness frumenty’. The seventh course had featured a chilled soup made from crushed apples and berries and the final course had consisted of hard, spiced biscuits called ‘Miklagårð cakes’. As each course had been brought into the dining space by the Húsel volunteers, Auz had enthusiastically explained the ‘importance’ and ‘relevance’ of each, stating that every dish offered that evening, as well as the ingredients used in their preparation, had

been chosen and prepared according to information that he and others had drawn from ‘a bunch of sources.’²⁶ As we ‘feasted’, Auz also reminded us that portions of the ingredients that had been used in preparing the meal had been offered to Odin the day before at the Odin Blót (fig. 10). He explained: ‘We removed and incorporated some of each offering as an ingredient in making the food [to allow for the] interaction between men and gods. Know that Odin dines with us!’

Once we had all been given some time to digest, Erik of Rúnatýr slowly and deliberately made his way from the fire pit into the central event space, where he loudly announced, ‘It is time to symbol!’ As the call spread across the Knoll, those who had decided to take part in that evening’s event began making their way from their enclaves to the hearth fire. Once there, and without being prompted, they quietly began arranging themselves into an inward-facing circle. Noticing this, Erik, as the event’s co-organizer, approached the group and directed everyone to ‘go to the Mead Hall’. Somewhat confused, someone asked, ‘why can’t we have it here at the fire? That would be nice!’ After pausing for a moment Erik thoughtfully replied, ‘No, we need to do it at the table in the hall. That is how they used to do it!’ Realizing that the matter was non-negotiable, and fearing that failing to do as Erik had directed would break frith even before the event began, those at the fire gathered their things and made their way into the hall.

The space within which the symbol was to occur (and within which the Húsel had been held earlier that evening) was demarcated by two aluminum-framed structures with open sides and a tarp roof that had been aligned into one long ‘hall’. The structure contained a series of wooden picnic tables placed end-to-end, creating one long seating and dining surface. For both the feast and the symbol, the hall and the tables it housed had been finely decorated with a number of recognizably ‘Heathen’ objects. For example, brightly decorated cardboard shields depicting Heathen Holy Powers and other popular Heathen forms had been carefully crafted and suspended in the spaces between the hall’s wall supports (fig. 11).

²⁶ The servers also set aside a portion of each course on a plate at an empty sitting near the end of the table for the ancestors and wights.



Figure 11: Hail & Horn Mead Hall

The interior of the structure had then been lit with a series of flaming candelabras that had been placed in intervals along the length of the dining surface. The flickering light they produced was brilliantly reflected by the many curved, glossy drinking horns that also decorated the tables. Though the beer that Shane had brewed for the feast and blót was to be used in the symbol horn as ‘depicted in many of the stories’ (Auz), numerous bottles of mead, some store-bought and others homebrewed, had also been placed upon the long tabletop. A variety of other objects including Auz’s ‘ceremonial hammer’, a set of deer antlers, faux animal pelts and a small decorative Viking longboat further lent to the ambience of the space (fig. 12). The atmosphere generated in part by these objects was one defined by a sense of ‘pastness’ and ‘tribal formality’, a fact many noted as they approached the structure.



Figure 12: Hail & Horn Mead Hall table decorations

Once we had all arrived at the Mead Hall, Erik directed us to re-take the seats we had been assigned at the earlier feast. Indeed, unlike the other feasts and symbols I attended, those observed that evening featured a linear seating arrangement wherein one's position at the table was dependent upon their 'worth' (Erik), or perceived value as a Heathen cosmological being. Specifically, our position had been assigned according to, and was thus representative of, our perceived level of 'standing' in the community. This status, according to Erik, had been determined based upon our level of Heathen knowledge, activism and 'renown' within the community as illustrated by our 'worthy deeds', 'virtuous' actions and resulting 'word fame'. Those who had been 'voted' by their own community as being the 'most worthy' according to these criteria (to my knowledge, a vote had not been taken in some instances) had been seated at the 'High Table', or the most finely decorated table located in the center of the hall. Likewise, those of 'less worth and renown' had been placed at the far ends of the structure. In addition to being seated according to our 'standing', I noticed that members of the same community had been placed next to one another, with members of different communities of a similar standing seated across from one another. In an interview I conducted with Erik following Hail & Horn, he explained that this

seating arrangement had been adopted both historically and at Hail & Horn for a specific reason, namely so:

[T]he most worthy can talk and the rest have to really pay attention to hear what they are saying. It is about giving people the chance to gain knowledge and renown if they really want to [it also allows individuals to] display solidarity with kin while potentially forging relations with members of other communities.

Interestingly, prior to the feast Auz had suggested that, while ‘a bit odd to our modern sensibilities’, the seating arrangement adopted that evening ‘in many ways reflect[ed] the structure of the [Heathen] cosmos’ (Auz). For example, those who had undertaken the most ‘worthy deeds’ were ‘rewarded’ by being placed in positions that both displayed, increased and extended their ‘power’ over and beyond themselves and the others present. Likewise, those who were seen as having less luck and power as indicated by their lack of ‘word fame’ were separated from those worthy others and their luck and wyrd. Further, the event space displayed the same ‘inner/outer’ quality that Erik and Jade both suggested was a defining characteristic of the Heathen cosmos (however imagined). Specifically, the space was ‘closed’ – just as non-Hail & Horn attendees were forbidden to attend the event, once the symbol began, no one within the hall was allowed to leave. Lastly, attendees were informed that, if they acted in ‘unvirtuous’, inhospitable ways towards others in the event space, they would break frith and, in so doing, destroy the cosmological (i.e. formative) connectedness being actively striven for by those beings within it.

After we had all been seated, Katherine retrieved Jade’s drinking horn (which Jade had named ‘Knowledge Bringer’) and filled it with Shane’s bog myrtle beer. With the horn full, she left the hall and made her way into the nearby woods where she poured an offering to Odin to ‘bless those at the symbol’ (Katherine). Upon returning, she approached Auz and Erik at the High Table and loudly offered the horn ‘to the hosts!’ Taking the horn, Erik stood and welcomed everyone to that evening’s ‘very special High Symbol’. As part of his welcome, he reminded us that the event would not feature the same three-round configuration that defined ‘most Heathen symbols’. Rather, as was ‘historical’, Katherine the ‘Cup Bearer’ (or ‘Horn Maiden’) would walk clockwise around the perimeter of the hall until the horn was actively requested by one of the participants. Upon being given the vessel, the

speaker would stand, hold the horn before them and loudly honor either themselves or some other worthy person. Once they had finished, the other attendees would then loudly ‘hail’ the speaker and the individual honored (if different) while the individual who had spoken would drink from the vessel before handing it back to Katherine.

As the event progressed in this fashion and participants became more comfortable with its unique form, I noticed that the focus began shifting away from ‘boasting’ and ‘toasting’ honoring practices towards ‘gifting’ practices. Steve of Mapleheim Kindred was the first to gift, presenting Brynn and Shane with a wooden plaque he had decorated with runes and Anglo-Saxon designs ‘for [their] recent handfasting’. Frank of Clearwater Kindred then gifted Rúnatýr Kindred a stunning handmade ‘sounding horn’ on behalf of his community. Holding the fine instrument before him, Frank loudly continued, ‘This is the matching horn to the one we have at Clearwater – they are from the same animal and now they will always bind [Clearwater and Rúnatýr] together! When you blow your horn we shall hear you!’ Auz then gave Erik the golden sun pendant he ‘always wears when [he] heads rituals for the Pagan community’. With a tear in his eye, Auz explained that the gift was meant to be a ‘sign of respect and appreciation’ for Erik’s help ‘making this event a reality and for working so hard in the community’. Accepting the gift, Erik stood, turned, and drew everyone’s attention to the tear that had appeared on his cheek. Handing Jade one of his ornamental golden arm rings, Auz continued by saying that he hoped it would help in her ‘continued spiritual development in Toronto’, to where she would soon be moving in order to continue her education. Accepting the ring, she wept openly. He then gave a newer member of the Raven’s Knoll Heathen festival community a book on Norse mythology to help her ‘develop in the tradition’. These gifting acts continued for the remainder of the event, with many present giving and receiving a variety of objects that had been inscribed with runes and other popular Heathen forms. Similarly, many gave and received books that covered a variety of Heathen-relevant topics such as Norse mythology, Germanic history and crafting practices like brewing. Interestingly, I noticed that the majority of these gifts were exchanged between those sitting at or near the High Table, with those sitting further away receiving fewer. Additionally, more gifts were given between

individuals than between communities, with Clearwater's horn and Nine Mountains' kindred banner being the two most notable examples of the latter.

With the gifts all given, the virtue and worth of all present displayed, observed and increased (and Raven's Knoll's ravenous mosquitoes out in droves), Auz stood, drained the horn and announced that the event, which had lasted just over an hour, had concluded. After he had returned the horn to Katherine, the rest of us stood, 'hailed' one another and the event and exited the hall. Once outside, many participants located and embraced those who had gifted or toasted them during the symbol. As they did so, I overheard a number remark on how 'very powerful' they had found the event and the objects and words presented and shared during it. These exchanges continued until, with their appreciation shown, individuals began returning to their enclaves to rest. Those who decided to remain near the hall, however, gathered their camping chairs and horns of mead and made their way to the nearby hearth fire for that evening's 'skaldic' or bardic performances.

Introduction

Compared to many of the communal Heathen events I attended in Canada, I would suggest the Hail & Horn High Symbol (or 'Sumble') displayed a number of unique characteristics. For instance, nearly all of the events I observed featured what Shane once laughingly referred to as the 'stereotypically Heathen' circular seating style; the very seating configuration, you will recall, some High Symbol participants tried to adopt around the hearth fire before Erik directed them to the Mead Hall. As I illustrated in Chapter Two while discussing the other Heathen symbols I attended, these events were also often quite inclusive, and generally featured a clearly defined and mutually identifiable practical structure. In so doing, they seemed to provide participants with a structured space within which to express themselves and engage with cosmological others in 'Heathen' ways. The High Symbol just discussed, however, was hierarchically structured, the event itself was open only to those who had paid the hefty sum to attend Hail & Horn, and any engagement that occurred between participants during the event was dependent upon their active initiation and navigation of those interactions. Further, unlike many of the events I attended and private practices I observed, no non-human cosmological beings were called upon

during the High Symbol aside from Odin (the patron god of the event). Thus, unlike ‘standard symbols’ for instance, where all participants are afforded at least three pre-determined opportunities (i.e. rounds) to engage with cosmological others, only those High Symbol participants who actively engaged in these self and other honoring practices were afforded the chance to potentially form relationships with the worthy others present at that event. At a workshop he held to ‘prepare’ attendees for the High Symbol, Erik discussed these many differences at length:

The circle shape of the ‘standard’ symbol and the passing of the horn from person to person is a manifestation of the ‘egalitarian’ American ideal, thus it is an ‘American-style symbol’ – no one is placed above another and everyone is urged to participate. Historically that wasn’t the case! According to the Germanic worldview, there were people seen as being more worthy and this symbol reflects that. [... Also] historically symbol wasn’t a time to commune with the gods [it was] when people came together to *be* together and make decisions.²⁷ [...] non-symbolers would be left on the outside; the gates would be closed. This is what you will see tonight. It is more accurate to the [Heathen] worldview.

While these characteristics differentiated this event somewhat from many of the others I attended, however, I would suggest that they also hinted at a fundamental characteristic arguably shared by every communal event, private practice and thus Heathen project I observed. For example, the High Symbol, and my informants’ experiences of and at it, were informed by the presence of certain recognizably ‘Heathen’ objects (e.g. drinking horns), bodies of knowledge and practices like ‘hailing’. Indeed, the Mead Hall where the feast and High Symbol was held had been purposely decorated with a number of these historical ‘Heathen forms’ (examples of which included runic inscriptions, drinking horns and various representations of Heathen Holy Powers) specifically to ‘add to the authenticity of the experience’ (Erik). In each case, these Heathen forms had either been taken directly from or based upon similar forms outlined within shared Heathen source materials. In fact, the High Symbol as a form of shared Heathen practice had itself been based upon a pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon practice ‘reconstructed’ by Stephen Pollington in his *The Meadhall* (2003). Interestingly, all of my informants had identified and incorporated

²⁷ That said, Auz did stress that ‘though this symbol isn’t necessarily about the gods or ancestors, by standing and speaking into the horn, they will hear you and what you say!’

similar historic Heathen forms into their own Heathenry. For example, all of them regularly engaged with and through certain objects, practices and bodies of knowledge when interacting with cosmological others, some had incorporated combinations of them into their home decorating and yet others had even adorned their own bodies with them. When I asked them why, they explained it was because those forms ‘remind [them] of Heathenry and allow [them] to display [their] pride in it and [their] own self as a Heathen’ (Katherine).

Reflecting upon the seeming centrality of these forms to my informants’ Heathenry, I would like to suggest that, through their ongoing engagement with them, they developed and began articulating a knowledge of the ‘Heatheness’ associated with those forms, as well as the cosmological implications of that quality. Specifically, by embodying and manifesting the Heatheness of Heathen forms like honoring and gifting practices, as well as the drinking horns, mead and the forms of ‘virtuous’ Heathen knowledge employed during those practices, I would argue my interlocutors developed the quality and skill needed to enter into and navigate the Heathen cosmos and ‘wyrd’ web of subjectivation introduced in Chapter Two. For example, by making offerings or giving and receiving ‘gifts’ with and towards cosmological others in ‘appropriate’ ways, those involved in those practices embodied and instantiated the desirable ‘Heatheness’ of those objects and acts. One possible result of this was their establishment of potentially formative relations with others.²⁸ Such a process was hinted at by my informants when they explained how they had taken part in the High Symbol in order to ‘experience something uniquely Heathen’ (Martin) and ‘be with other Heathens, hopefully form powerful relationships with them [and] increase my own renown within that community’ (Erik). Thus, the High Symbol – and indeed every other event, practice and context where my informants reflexively encountered these forms while questing for a

²⁸ According to Erik, ‘you always gift around others [...] if no one saw it, it didn’t happen. You also make sure the gift you give is better than the one you received and you do it as soon as you are able!’ Considering the emphasis placed upon the quality and timely reciprocation of these ‘gifts’, both material and verbal, and the potentially negative repercussions suffered if they fail to meet expectation (e.g. a loss of personal ‘worth’ and the destruction of frithful relationships), I would suggest that these gifting and honoring practices were not altruistic acts. Rather, like the Kula participants described by Malinowski (see 1932[1922]), the ‘gift giving’ undertaken by my interlocutors seemed to often operate as a form of non-altruistic reciprocal exchange purposefully undertaken to establish strategic relationships with others in order to increase their cosmological quality and standing.

Heathen self – potentially represented opportunities for them to realize the desirable Heathen quality and formative connectedness I suggested in Chapter Two as being fundamental to their Heathen projects.

Chapter Aim and Outline

With this in mind, in this chapter I would like to consider these Heathen forms, the nature of my informants' engagements with and through them and the potential repercussions of that engagement. Specifically, I will suggest that these forms were highlighted within and encountered by my informants through their engagement with a field of transformative perceptual and reactive desirability I will refer to as the 'Heathen aesthetic'. I will illustrate how, by actively and reflexively embodying and articulating these forms in practice, this aesthetic came to affect how my interlocutors perceived of and engaged with the selves, contexts and others in and through which those forms were encountered.

I shall begin my discussion of this proposed process by considering 'Aesthetics' as a broad category of sensibility and assessment. During my brief introduction to this extensive field of philosophical inquiry, I will focus specifically upon the recent shift within Aesthetics away from an 'art' and 'beauty-centered' approach towards an 'everyday aesthetics' that maintains subjects' everyday actions and contexts have aesthetic qualities and implications. I will then explore a number of the 'powerful' Heathen forms within this proposed Heathen aesthetic, as well as some of the possible repercussions of my informants' ongoing engagements with them. I will conclude by suggesting that my interlocutors' Heathen development was dependent upon a process of 'aesthetic reorientation' through which they began reflexively identifying and infusing Heathen forms, qualities and possibilities into their everyday contexts, actions and selves.

Aesthetics

While I would suggest my interlocutors' developing Heathen selves and questing experiences were aesthetically informed, and that their Heathen projects were both reliant upon and functioned in part as mechanisms of 'aestheticization', this thesis is not about 'Aesthetics', at least not the kind that has historically been the focus of

philosophical examination in the West. This is because, rather than being concerned with conceptions of ‘beauty’ and acts of artistic production and evaluation, I am interested in how my informants’ ongoing reflexive encounters with certain ‘desirable’ forms effected changes within their everyday understandings and experiences of self, other and world. As such, I do not believe an in-depth exploration of Aesthetics is relevant to my discussion. However, to better contextualize my argument and the aesthetic perspective I have adopted, I would like to pause and briefly consider a few of the key characteristics that have come, at least in part, to define this field of investigation.

Aesthetics, Art and the Experience of ‘Beauty’

Howard Morphy has noted that “‘Aesthetics’ is a rubric term with no simple, universally acceptable definition. It is easier to state the kind of things it is about than it is to simply provide a neat definition of what it is’ (1994: 181). Even this, however, is easier said than done, as the focus and scope of Aesthetics, particularly within the West, has varied greatly over the course of its long history. For example, though the roots of contemporary Western aesthetic thought are arguably observable in Aristotle’s *Poetics* (trans. Lucas 1968), ‘[A]esthetics, in the modern sense of the term, emerged during the 18th century’ (Wiseman 2007: 66). This is because it was during this period, one defined in part by the spread of Enlightenment philosophies that emphasized the universality and transformative potential of human reason, that ‘[t]he “science” of aesthetics’ developed as a “‘science of sensuous cognition’” (*ibid.*). The aim of this proposed science of ‘experience’ was to ‘theorize a specifically sensuous form of knowledge that [was] distinct from yet equal to its rational “other”’ (Wiseman 2007: 67).

While attempting to formulate this theory of human sensation, increasing attention was placed upon those acts of ‘aesthetic evaluation’ through which rational agents identified the sensible qualities of objects or phenomena. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant suggested that such acts of aesthetic judgment were a universal characteristic of human aesthetic experience. He went on to suggest that these acts of evaluation were unique in that they allowed individuals to identify ‘beauty’. Further, though these judgments were subjective (in that they were based

upon the individual's 'taste'), in so far as they dealt specifically with beauty, they also claimed a 'universal validity' within individuals' experiences. Kant continues:

[W]hen [a man] puts a thing on a pedestal and calls it beautiful, he demands the same delight from others. He judges not merely for himself, but for all men, and then speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things. Thus he says that the thing is beautiful; and it is not as if he counts on others agreeing with him in his judgment of liking owing to his having found them in such agreement on a number of occasions, but he demands this agreement of them. (2001[1790]: 32)

In addition to their 'claim to validity for all men' (*ibid.*), these aesthetic judgments were set apart from other forms of reflective action in that they involved the 'disinterested' contemplation of those beautiful qualities. Specifically, if an act of evaluation was undertaken 'apart from any practical interests' (Gell 1995: 22) solely to experience the 'delight' that results from an encounter with beauty, they and the experiences that resulted from them were 'aesthetic' in nature. Described in this way, Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment reflected a wider aesthetic perspective that was concerned primarily with the supposed universal human identification and experience of 'beauty' as defined by actions and experiences undertaken for their own sake. Of course, Kant was not the only thinker to associate 'beauty' and its identification with aesthetic judgments and experiences. Indeed, though their approaches to and understandings of beauty, taste and 'the aesthetic' differed, many Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophers including Schiller and Hegel increasingly associated aesthetic experiences and evaluations with 'beauty' and its identification.

Although many, including Kant himself, stressed that beauty could be identified in a variety of objects and contexts, this quality, and the acts of aesthetic evaluation employed in its identification, became increasingly associated with 'theories about the fundamental nature and value of art' (Anderson 2004: 4). Indeed, Western Aesthetics became gradually and then predominantly concerned with the identification and evaluation of art objects and artistic acts of production. Weitz summarizes this shift in focus well: 'The primary task of aesthetics [became ...] to elucidate the concept of art [... and] to describe the conditions under which we employ the concept correctly' (1956: 33). This 'art-centered' and 'beauty-focused'

aesthetic discourse became so dominant that some have suggested that, until quite recently, it became ‘senseless [within the West] to find “aesthetic” thought anywhere other than the creation and reception of art works’ (Gell 1992: 27; see also Firth 1994). Of course, art, beauty and aesthetic inquiry have not always been so closely associated within the Western philosophical tradition. For example, while Aristotle found beauty to be a highly desirable quality identifiable through acts of sensation and reflective consideration, he did not necessarily associate beauty and those aesthetics judgments with art. Rather, he maintained that beauty existed as a ‘golden mean’ of sensible qualities within any object, ‘art’ or otherwise (see trans. McMahon 2008). Thus, beauty was perceived as a quality that could potentially be realized by and within any sensible, well-proportioned object or phenomenon. As such, aesthetic experiences and acts of aesthetic evaluation were also seen as existing independently from the ‘artistic realm’.

Towards an ‘Everyday Aesthetics’

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen a drastic shift in the focus, form and aim of Western Aesthetics and aesthetic inquiry. As studies of non-Western objects and phenomena increasingly illustrated that traditional Western notions of beauty were inapplicable in many non-Western contexts, the aesthetic means and standards through and according to which it had historically been identified were also increasingly called into question. Specifically, the inter- and cross-cultural engagements that did and continue to define the contemporary world illustrated that beauty and ‘[a]esthetic judgments are predicated on a system of values, fixed, situated, and manipulated by rules which are, for the most part, culturally specific and determined’ (Shelton 1994: 209); they are not universally applicable standards based upon proportion or identifiable through acts of reasoned analysis. This engagement also made it apparent that ‘the concept of “art” as such is alien to the practice and presumably the thought of many of the peoples studied by anthropologists’ (Firth 1994: 26). As a result, the universality of the Western category of ‘art’ was also called into question. Indeed, the implications of the Western artistic category were particularly scrutinized in the early and mid twentieth century by individuals like Dewey, who suggested that, by identifying, exalting as

‘beautiful’ and then separating ‘art objects’ from non-art objects, this category (and the ‘art-centered’ aesthetic approach that informed and reinforced it) functioned as a mechanism of division. Specifically, it placed ‘beautiful’ art objects into ‘a separate realm, where [they became] cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing and achievement’ (Dewey 2005: 2). This scrutiny was in part a result of the recognition that, ‘For most of us—or, perhaps more accurately, all of us most of the time—our aesthetic notions have more to do with home decorating, gardening, sport, advertising, and other areas of so-called “popular” culture’ (Coote 1994: 246) than with ‘art’ and art objects as traditionally defined. As a result, attention was and continues to be increasingly paid to the aesthetic quality and implications of ‘everyday’ objects, phenomena and experiences (see Yi-Fu Tuan 1974). Within this expanding field of ‘everyday aesthetics’, Yuriko Saito’s work is of particular interest.

Saito suggests that it is not just ‘beautiful’ art objects that have aesthetic qualities, but rather any ‘object, phenomenon or activity’ that elicits an embodied reaction through its ‘sensuous and/or “design” qualities’ (2007: 9). Further, she argues that our ‘everyday aesthetic sensibilities’, rather than being ‘disinterested’, ‘more often than not [lead] to some specific action’ (2007: 2). Indeed, she maintains that even the most ‘inconsequential aesthetic response that we make on a daily basis [does] often lead to serious moral, social, political and environmental consequences’ (2007: 6). The ability, she suggests, of these everyday objects and phenomena to affect how we experience and react to our world stems in part from the unreflective nature of our aesthetic sensibilities. Specifically, they function as ‘almost automatic, responses we form in our everyday life’ (2007: 10) that inform how and what we experience without us generally being aware of their influence. Despite being ‘often unreflected [...] often almost knee-jerk reactions’ (2007: 4), however, she stresses that our aesthetic sensibilities and reactions are not fixed. Rather, Saito’s everyday aesthetic exists as a ‘diverse and dynamic’ (2007: 2) field of embodied sensibility, evaluation and action, one that is informed by and propagated in part through agents’ own past experiences and ongoing engagement with fluctuating fields of shared, aesthetically informed and formative forms (e.g. ‘popular culture’ – 2007: 59).

So described, two primary differences might be seen as existing between the art-centered aesthetic perspective discussed earlier and this ‘everyday’ approach. First, while, like Kant, Saito maintains that aesthetic experiences and evaluations are fundamental to human experience, she does not suggest that they are necessarily concerned with ‘beauty’. Rather, she stresses that ‘our aesthetic life includes not only pleasant [i.e. ‘beautiful’] but also unpleasant experiences characterized as depressing, disgusting, or dreary’ (2007: 10), both of which influence what objects and phenomena individuals perceive of and how they react to those experiences. Secondly, unlike the art-centered perspective, Saito’s everyday aesthetic approach emphasizes the aesthetic quality of those ‘forms’ (i.e. objects, phenomena, etc.) encountered by agents within their lived world, as well as the potentially formative implications of those encounters. In other words, while the first perspective tended to remove aesthetic qualities and concerns from agents’ everyday actions and contexts, the second approach suggests that they are deeply embedded within and can dramatically inform individuals’ understandings of and reactions to each. Thus, according to the everyday aesthetic perspective, ‘All human activity has an aesthetic aspect’ (Coote 1994: 246), which has the potential to ‘affect [...] our lives and the state of society and the world’ (Saito 2007: 6). Adopting a perspective similar in some ways to that proposed by Saito, I would like to suggest that my informants’ fashioning into ‘desirable’ Heathen beings was dependent upon their development and application of just such an embedded, ‘lived’ aesthetic. Towards this end, I would like to begin by considering those widely observable ‘Heathen forms’ that appeared to inform their daily experiences as becoming Heathens.

The ‘Heathen Aesthetic’

As I noted in Chapter One, none of my informants self-identified (or were identified by others) as being Heathen early in their lives. Rather, they actively adopted the field after having separated themselves from some prior field of practice in their mid-teens or twenties. When I asked them why, they replied that they had felt Heathenry both represented and made possible a more desirable type of self and way of living. As was illustrated by their journey narratives and my description of their personal understandings of the Heathen cosmos, despite displaying a number of early

similarities, their individual Heathen quests came to display a great deal of diversity. Indeed, my interlocutors were themselves quick to note that their Heathenry and Heathen experiences (and, I would suggest, Heathen projects) displayed a ‘freedom’ that they suggested stemmed in part from the fact that ‘Heathenry has no dogma like Christianity or any of the large monotheistic religions’ (Jade). As a result, some of them came to emphasize Germanic, Frankish, Scandinavian or Anglo-Saxon cultural characteristics in their private Heathenry, or an interesting combination of all four. In so doing, some began referring to certain cosmological beings by different names (i.e. ‘Odin’ as Oðinn, Wōdan or Wōdan) and began engaging with them in slightly different ways, such as using beer instead of mead when honoring them or engaging with them only at specific times. This flexibility aside, however, it is very important to note that my informants’ Heathenry also shared many fundamental similarities. For example, whatever they called him, they all ‘knew’ Odin and his characteristics; they each knew what a ‘blót’ was, the ‘proper’ ways of taking part in one (i.e. through honoring practices that maintained frith) and the importance of regularly engaging with cosmological others. Further, they all reflexively and continuously identified themselves and certain others, acts and objects as being ‘Heathen’ based upon the observed presence of a certain ‘Heathen quality’. At Hail & Horn 2012, Erik hinted at the existence of this shared Heathen quality while relating an event that had occurred around the gathering hearth fire:

Heathens tend to keep to themselves at festivals because their sensibility is distinct from the other [groups present]. One night a few [non-Heathen] folk from ‘Pagans Unplugged’ came over to the hearth fire. A lot of the Heathens actually got up and left because the flamboyant ‘pagan-ness’ of the visitors made them so uncomfortable. Heathens just think and act in a unique way.

Keeping Erik’s comments in mind, I would argue that, as part of their questing projects (and despite the diversity observable in their private practices and experiences), my interlocutors had and were continuing to develop and apply the ability to recognize and articulate an identifiable ‘Heatheness’ in themselves, others, their actions and their world. I would suggest this occurred through their active and reflexive identification, embodiment and instantiation of certain shared, recognizably Heathen forms within their daily practices and experiences. I believe

this process, and the ‘Heathen’ forms and quality it helped them realize, was made possible by their internalization and ongoing application of a shared ‘Heathen aesthetic’. It is this aesthetic, or rather many of the forms highlighted by it (and which, in turn, helped generate that aesthetic) that I would now like to explore.

Heathen Representational Forms

As my research progressed, I began noticing that there always seemed to be certain ‘Heathen objects’ or representational forms present at every event attended, every private practice observed, within all of my informants’ homes and even on their own persons. While these representations took a variety of forms, some were seen so often as to be nearly ‘universal’. Amongst these forms ‘Mjölnirs’ (fig. 13), or representations of the Heathen god Thor’s hammer, were particularly popular.



Figure 13: Wooden wall Mjölnir (by Jonathan D.)

Indeed, this form was so widely identified with Heathenry by my informants that on more than one occasion, some actually associated their initial adoption of the field

with their adoption of the form itself.²⁹ While they often voiced this association at the large pan-community and pan-Pagan festivals I attended, they also discussed this connection on numerous popular Heathen websites. For example, during a discussion I observed on the *Ontario Heathens* Facebook page, a number of Heathens from eastern and central Canada actively referred to their initial adoption of Heathenry as ‘taking up’, ‘putting on’ and ‘wearing a hammer’. As Auz put it, ‘I am Austin [...] but most Heathens and Pagans call me Auz. I have worn a hammer continuously for the last 15 years.’



Figure 14: Drinking horns at Brynn and Shane H.’s handfasting

The ‘drinking horn’ (a drinking vessel made from the hollowed horn of a bovid) was another form that many of my informants actively associated with Heathenry (fig. 14). Indeed, the majority of those I spoke with in both Canada and Iceland either had and regularly used a horn, were in the process of procuring or making one or had some paraphernalia (e.g. an article of clothing or a piece of jewelry) that depicted the form. These objects were so widely observable that, as with the Mjölfnir, my informants saw them as being ‘just one of those things you always associate with Heathens [...] You always know who is Heathen at [a festival]

²⁹ This often took the form of a piece of jewellery, most often a necklace that featured a Mjölfnir pendant.

because they are always carrying their drinking horn' (Shane). When not being used, my informants tended to display these vessels in their homes, often with other recognizably 'Heathen objects'. For example, Brynn and Shane had decorated their hearth mantel with a number of horns, some nearly as long as my arms, while Katherine had hung hers on the banister in her townhouse near her large wooden Mjölfnir. Likewise, Jonathan kept his horn, along with his 'Germanic helmet' and axe, atop a display case he had placed near his front door. However they were stored and displayed, these objects were inevitably produced by my informants, filled with mead or beer and then 'shared' with 'worthy' others as a sign of 'frith and respect' (Jade) at pan/community events, as well as during their private practices.

Runes were another representational form often identified as 'Heathen' by my informants, which they actively incorporated into both their Heathen practices (shared and private) and everyday contexts. This incorporation generally took two forms. First, a number of my informants had purchased, been gifted or had 'crafted' (skillfully made) 'rune sets', which they used privately in divining practices. While these sets came in a variety of forms (e.g. made of wood, stone or bone), they all consisted of a bag of small objects that had been inscribed, or 'cut', with characters taken from one of the pre-Christian European runic alphabets. Often, but not always, in addition to engaging with these sets, many of my informants had also cut runic characters into 'everyday' and otherwise 'non-Heathen' objects. When I asked them why they had done so, I was often told it was because the runes made the objects 'powerful'. For example, once when I was talking with Jonathan near his armor forge, he proudly showed me his 'favorite hammer'. Handing it to me, he described how he had burnt runic script into the tool's handle to 'make it powerful'. He continued, 'This is the first hammer I ever got. It is not the biggest or most expensive but it is powerful to me!' He maintained that, by inscribing the 'everyday' tool with runic script, characters that he and others stressed had formative cosmological potential (i.e. they 'make things happen' [Katherine]), the tool itself, the armor-fashioning he used it for, his participation in those acts and the products that resulted from them were infused with a cosmological quality otherwise lacking (fig. 15). In other words, the forms seemingly became conduits through which he was able to actively manifest his own cosmological influence upon and through the inscribed

object; an influence that was itself fundamentally intertwined with, and helped to manifest, the formative potential of the Heathen cosmos itself.



Figure 15: Runic script on Viking shield (by Jonathan D.)



Figure 16: Wooden plaque with valknut and runes (by Jonathan D.)

On a related note, many of my informants had also received (and often displayed) tattoos that featured one or more of the above representations, particularly Mjölknirs and runic characters. Finding this tendency interesting, I once asked Brynn, Erik and Shane, all three of whom had a number of these tattoos, why they had decided to have them done. After pausing for a moment to think, each replied in their own way that ‘Each tattoo means something to me. It marks an important point in my life, including my development as a Heathen. I guess they help me to remember that development and who I have become as a result of it’ (Brynn). Interestingly, some reported repeatedly carving runes into their body with a blade to imbue themselves with ‘power’ before an important event, such as before taking exams for ‘insight and clarity’. In addition to these permanent forms, some reported inscribing temporary runic inscriptions on their own bodies and the bodies of others with pens, markers or their fingers. For example, Katherine once explained that she writes runes on her hand for ‘protection’ when she flies. Thus, like the runes Jonathan had inscribed on his favorite hammer, I would suggest these temporary and (semi)permanent bodily forms provided my informants with a way to realize the Heathen cosmos and forms of cosmological ‘power’ within their everyday experiences. Specifically, they acted

as a means of manifestation through which they were able to actively encounter that cosmological power, either towards a specific end (e.g. ‘safety’ and ‘success’) or in reflexively considering the role that cosmos had and was continuing to play in their development as Heathens.

Often in addition to these popular Heathen forms, my informants also decorated themselves and their daily contexts with forms that, while recognizably Heathen, reflected their personal Heathen focus. For example, while widely associated within Heathenry with the god Odin, the ‘volknot’ (also völknot or valknut), which is composed of three interlocking triangles, was only regularly displayed (as a pendant or tattoo) by four of my informants (fig. 16). Erin explained:

[I]t is the only symbol I know of that is primarily for Odin and not for anything else. All of my friends wore a Hammer of Thor, they wear the Mjölnir and I’m like, “that is fine but this is more powerful for me, you know?” [T]he idea [behind the form] is that warriors would have this tattooed on their body in a place where they wouldn’t mind being speared by a Valkyrie to be brought up to Valhalla to be with Odin once they die.

Others regularly wore amber jewelry, which is associated in Heathenry with the goddess Freya. Katherine explained, ‘I wear my amber [necklace] because it is the symbol of Freya and I follow Freya. I also wear it because it is less widely seen than the Hammer and therefore it means more to me. [But] I also own and wear a hammer.’ Additionally, many owned articles of clothing or tooled objects such as edged weapons, shields, armor, etc. featured a combination of these forms. As with their horns, these objects were often displayed in my informants’ homes and on their person, as well as employed by them in practices with cosmological others.

Furthermore, some of my informants decorated themselves and their daily contexts with Heathen forms that were unique to their communities. For example, the members of the Rúnatýr Kindred Innangard wore small wooden pendants that had the ‘R’ and ‘K’ runes burnt into their surface. Unlike the other forms discussed, which were often worn in a variety of contexts, these pendants were only donned by IG members at community and pan-community events (often in combination with one or more of the other forms mentioned). In fact, all of the kindreds I engaged with reported developing and incorporating similar community-specific, yet recognizably Heathen forms into their community practices. For example, in addition to IG

pendants, Rúnatýr had also crafted and regularly displayed a kindred banner (fig. 17) and shield that featured the community's runic initials and representations of Thor's hammer and Odin's spear. The Toronto-based Vikings of the Metal Age kindred had developed and regularly displayed a similar banner, as had Nine Mountains Kindred from Montréal.



Figure 17: Rúnatýr Kindred banner and enclave at the 2012 Midgard Gathering, Raven's Knoll

Despite being widely observed within and associated with the Heathen community and Heathenry more generally, my informants stressed that these representational forms were not, in themselves, intrinsically 'Heathen', nor did they alone indicate and generate 'Heatheness'. Martin of Nine Mountains continued, 'Just because you dress up like a Viking doesn't make you a Heathen. It's about so much more than that!' In fact, all of my interlocutors recognized that 'there is a wider audience (not only among Pagans) for those things which are of central significance to Heathens. Books on runes and Norse mythology abound and appear to be gaining extra space in the relevant sections [...] of many bookshops' (Harvey 1996: 49). Indeed, the Mjölner, the sun-wheel present at the Rúnatýr Midsommer Blót, runes, drinking horns, etc. have all been adopted by and have come to be associated with a variety of 'non-Heathen' fields of practice, including some Neo-Nazi groups, 'Death' and 'Viking Metal' music and numerous aspects of 'popular' culture. Shane highlighted this fact in an interesting way:

It's funny. When I think of Heathenry I think of Thor and his hammer, but Thor and his hammer aren't just Heathen. I actually first heard of Thor and saw his hammer in the comic books I used to read and that was long before I even heard of Heathenry! So are the comics Heathen?'

Thus, while they actively associated these forms with Heathenry and the Heathenness they were attempting to realize through their projects, it is clear those forms and the individuals, contexts and practices associated with them were not, by default, 'Heathen'. In other words, 'the clothes' (or in this case the Mjölnir) did not necessarily 'make the Heathen', at least not on their own. Rather, I would argue that they needed to be contextualized by and engaged with through additional Heathen forms.

Heathen Knowledge

Regardless of the specific focus of their personal Heathenry, all of my informants, albeit it to varying extents, maintained that contemporary Heathenry was the product not of 'stories and an over-active imagination [... but rather] study and reconstruction from historical sources' (Erik). Indeed, the 'concrete and historical' (Jonathan) nature and focus of Heathenry was one of the qualities about the field many of my informants reported admiring most. Thus, as has already been discussed, as part of their ongoing engagement with Heathenry and development as Heathens, they began increasingly engaging with bodies of 'Heathen' knowledge in an attempt to better understand Heathenry and what it was to 'live as a Heathen' (Brynn). Specifically, they began actively identifying and engaging with source materials that depicted pre-Christian European 'Heathen' populations in an attempt to 'develop and apply the historical Heathen worldview' (Erik) within their contemporary, lived world. While the sources from which this knowledge was obtained (and, I would suggest, that helped identify it as 'Heathen') took a variety of forms, nearly all of my informants owned, had engaged with or knew of certain shared 'primary sources'. For example, many of them reported engaging with texts composed by Heathen scholars like Bil Linzie, Freya Aswynn and Hilda Ellis Davidson, whose aim was to help 'new Heathens develop in the tradition' (Katherine). They also often quoted historic works like those listed in Chapter Two, which they maintained depicted, at least to a certain extent, the lifestyle and 'culture of historic Heathens' (Jonathan). In

addition to these widely shared source materials, they also regularly engaged with a variety of secondary sources, including anthropological works on ‘magic’ and shamanistic practices (see Blain 2002 and Luhrmann 1989). Many also reported engaging with archaeological documents relevant to pre-Christian Northern Europe, as well as historic documents (some of which they had translated themselves) that depicted historical peoples, practices and contexts relevant to their personal Heathenry. Though they recognized this study was ‘always developing; always incomplete’ (Auz), they stressed it was important because it helped them develop a ‘better idea of the types of things [historic Heathens] did as part of their lives [...] how they experienced the world around them’ (Brynn).

While developing this body of historical and ‘cultural’ Heathen-relevant knowledge, my informants also often engaged with sources that simultaneously allowed them to develop a form of historic Heathen ‘self knowledge’. As already discussed, this ongoing genealogical research was seen as desirable, as it allowed them to further develop their knowledge of their ‘roots’. Interestingly, while all of my informants found this genealogical knowledge desirable in itself, they found any information that explicitly connected them with historic Heathen populations and contexts particularly desirable. For example, Brynn once proudly announced, first on her Facebook page and then at the pan-community Heathen Midgard Gathering at Raven’s Knoll, that she had recently discovered she was ‘related by blood to Heathen Anglo-Saxon kings of old’. Discussing his Germanic ancestry, Jonathan once made a similar comment: ‘It is important that I live my Heathenry right because I know that it is how my forefathers lived!’

In addition to these forms of historical Heathen knowledge, my informants stressed that it was also important to develop and embody knowledge of the Heathen virtues. In fact, most of my interlocutors maintained that, to ‘be a real Heathen’, one needed to ‘develop a true understating of the virtues through research, contemplation and application’ (Brynn). In other words, they believed that their ability to embody the desirable Heathen quality of this ‘virtuous’ knowledge was dependent upon not only its acquisition, but also their reflexive application of it in their daily interactions with other cosmological beings. Indeed, as I explained in Chapter Two, it was seen as being supremely desirable within Heathenry, and by my interlocutors, that

Heathen cosmological beings develop a working knowledge of these virtuous Heathen qualities. This was primarily because these virtues, and their knowledgeable identification and application, was seen as helping individuals to establish, maintain and expand the frithful and formative connectedness that animated the Heathen cosmos (however conceptualized). Interestingly, some of my interlocutors suggested that their engagement with and development of the other forms of Heathen knowledge already discussed was in itself reflective and generative of this virtuous knowledge. For example, a number of my informants explained that they engaged in genealogical research in part because it allowed them to show ‘pride’ in themselves, their backgrounds and their deeds. Likewise, others maintained that the ability of developing Heathens to share and defend their Heathen knowledge around and to ‘well read’ others was virtuous in itself, as it illustrated their ‘effort and willingness to stick it out, defend themselves and grow’ (Erik).

Erik once stressed that these bodies of Heathen knowledge ‘are always growing and changing [...] each new discovery and experience can potentially change what we know and do as Heathens.’ Nevertheless, I would suggest they helped generate a flexible discursive field that helped my interlocutors identify and embody the potentially formative ‘Heatheness’ of certain objects, agents, experiences and contexts. Indeed, I would suggest that it was this knowledge that in large part defined the desirable Heathen cosmological quality of the representational forms discussed earlier. To understand how, I would like to briefly turn once again to the work of Yuriko Saito, particularly her work on the ‘Japanese aesthetic’. Concerning this aesthetic, she has noted that:

The Japanese aesthetic tradition is noted for its sensitivity to, respect for, and appreciation of the quintessential character of an object. This attitude gives rise to a guiding principle of design that articulates the essence of an object, material, or subject matter [...]. (2007b: 85–6)

In other words, when encountering, reacting to and affecting objects with reference to this aesthetic, the aim is not to alter the perceived character of the object or workable material, but rather reflect or release it. Stressing again the ‘everyday’ nature and implications of aesthetic sensibilities and reactions, she goes on to suggest that, while this approach is fundamental to Japanese acts of artistic production, this

‘principle [of] respecting a natural object also applies to producing objects of everyday life’ (Saito 2007b: 86). Indeed, she discusses at length how this aesthetically informed respect for the innate quality of everyday objects and materials might be seen as being reflected in a variety of daily Japanese activities including gardening, cooking and packaging. For example, she explains how ‘Japanese gardeners meticulously shape and maintain trees and shrubs by extensive manipulation. Unlike topiary in European formal gardens, however, [...] a tree or a shrub in a Japanese garden is shaped according to its individual form’ (*ibid.*). Likewise, she explains how, when packaging gifts or food, the ‘various packaging materials [used] are designed not only for protecting the content, but also for emphasizing their innate characteristics’ (Saito 2007b: 87). In other words, the materials used in the act of packaging, as well as how they are employed in the act itself, are meant to reflect not only the innate characteristics of the packaging material itself, but also that which it encloses. Lastly, she explains how the extensive effort put into the act of food preparation, regardless of whether that food is destined for an individual’s daily bento lunchbox or a shared feast, is meant to ensure ‘each ingredient retains and expresses its own characteristics, while also serving as a complement to the others’ (Saito 2007b: 87). Thus, according to Saito, as with other aesthetically informed ‘everyday Japanese activities’ like garden maintenance and gift wrapping, Japanese cooking attempts to identify, emphasize and articulate the perceived innate characteristics of the materials utilized in and acted upon as part of the cooking practice.

Keeping this aesthetic approach in mind, I would suggest that the Heathen knowledge described above ‘contextualized’ or ‘rooted’ certain representational forms within the Heathen field by attributing a perceived ‘natural’ Heathenness to them, as well as providing my informants with the ‘informed’ sensibility required to recognize the Heathen quality of those forms. Furthermore, I would posit that this knowledge was itself deemed ‘desirably Heathen’ in many of the very sources it had been developed from, as well as in the discursive field that knowledge helped generate. Specifically, through actively referencing forms of Heathen knowledge in their ongoing daily interactions with certain forms, my interlocutors became aware of their potential historical, cultural, cosmological and thus ‘Heathen’ character. In

other words, by helping my informants to perceive of the Heathen quality of these forms, this knowledge infused them with that desirable Heathenness. In so doing, I would suggest it transformed ‘non-Heathen’ forms like lumps of dried tree sap, hollow cow horns and characters taken from an archaic alphabet into cosmological representations through which my informants became potentially able to manifest the Heathen cosmos and desirable Heathen qualities like frith wherever they were encountered.

Heathen Practice

One possible implication of the contextualizing influence of this Heathen knowledge was that any form my informants identified with reference to it might have become identifiable as a Heathen representation. That, however, was not always the case. For example, an early Christian object or form associated with a Heathen context (e.g. Saxon England) that was identified within a Heathen source was not necessarily thought by my informants to display or impart Heathenness. Rather, it was approached as a historical Christian form. I would suggest the reason was that, while the cosmological quality of the forms discussed thus far contextualized and informed one another, for them to become fully ‘rooted’ within the Heathen field (i.e. become ‘Heathen’ and thus means of manifesting Heathenness), they needed to be actively and reflexively articulated within and through a final category of Heathen form. I would argue it was how my interlocutors functionalized their knowledge and applied/reacted to certain representations in forms of Heathen practice that ultimately defined the desirable Heathen cosmological quality of each. As I illustrated in Chapter Two, there are a number of Heathen practices, both personal and communal, that could potentially be given as examples of this proposed process. However, I would like to focus my attention upon two in particular, as I believe they not only illustrate the mutually formative relationship I would suggest exists between aesthetically desirable forms of Heathen knowledge, certain representations and these practices, but also, through their very form and focus, illustrate what transforms some actions into ‘Heathen practices’.

Consider first my informants’ crafting practices. As I have noted, all of my informants engaged in some sort of skilled, productive ‘making’. While these crafts

and crafted objects sometimes reflected or produced ‘Heathen’ forms (e.g. knowledge of historic mead-brewing practices applied in the production of mead), those acts and objects were not seen by my informants as being intrinsically Heathen, nor were the crafters. Indeed, I spoke to a number of independent and commercial mead brewers and makers of historic ‘Viking era’ tooled objects like swords and armor who did not self-identify as ‘Heathen’, nor were they identified as such by my informants. What appeared to determine the Heathenness of these crafting acts and crafted products (and the craftsperson) was the reflexive intentionality of the crafting agent behind the acts and objects. Specifically, if the crafting act was intentionally undertaken and the resulting products were then actively and reflexively employed by the craftsperson in an attempt to generate and instantiate Heathen cosmological qualities, they were seen as displaying and potentially imparting Heathenness. For example, Jade, Katherine and a number of others had crafted both their drinking horns and the mead they regularly used in them. When asked why they had gone to the trouble, they explained that they had ‘finished’ their horns and brewed mead so that they could ‘share’ both the objects and a part of themselves with others, both in their private practices and at communal events like the High Symbol discussed at the beginning of this chapter. I would suggest that their reflexive application of their Heathen knowledge in the production of these representations, whose explicit purpose was to be ‘shared’ or employed in frithful interactions with other cosmological beings, infused these craft products, the actions and agents that made them, and the interactions within which they were used, with Heathenness.

I would argue that this process was also reflected in my informants’ divination practices, particularly those undertaken with runes. Like the crafting practices just described, my informants’ participation in these divination acts first required that they have knowledge of relevant historical, cultural and cosmological forms. By then functionalizing their knowledge of the runes and the structure and nature of the Heathen cosmos (as they understood it), and how they might encounter and engage with and through it in the divination act, my informants became able to generate potential encounters with that cosmos and cosmological others. As they often described it, the purpose of this reflexive engagement was their establishment of a formative relationship with those cosmological beings and their ‘power’ in the

hope they might provide my informants with insight they could then use to affect their own cosmological quality, and thus that of the others with whom they had become connected through these practices.

In both cases, the actions undertaken by my informants, and the forms represented and utilized in them, came to function as means through which they actively attempted to manifest and encounter the Heathen cosmos, cosmological others and the potential represented by that engagement within their experiences. This, I would suggest, was the defining characteristic of their ‘Heathen practices’. Specifically, I would argue that a Heathen practice might be approached as any willing, active and reflexive action undertaken by ‘informed’ Heathen agents in an attempt to infuse their world, self, relationships and others with a desirable Heathenness, as well as the formative cosmological implications and possibilities associated with it (fig. 18).



Figure 18: Katherine L. mead offering in front garden

Defined thus, the Heathenness and ‘practical’ quality of the Rune Ritual, Rúnatýr’s Midsommer Blóts, the High Symbol and even instances of private study become apparent. Specifically, each are composed of and are themselves practical forms defined by the presence and application of certain representational forms perceived of as being ‘Heathen’ according to participants’ embodied Heathen knowledge. In each case, those involved actively employed that knowledge and engaged with and through those forms (e.g. sharing a drinking horn, reading runes and gifting crafts, books and ‘honoring words’) in actions-as-practices whose aim was eliciting an

engagement with the cosmos, cosmological others and the formative potential they represented.

Defining the Heathen Aesthetic

Described in this way, my interlocutors' development as Heathens appeared to be greatly influenced by their active, reflexive and ongoing engagement with and application of certain Heathen representational forms and forms of Heathen knowledge and practice. Specifically, these forms seemed to serve as the means through which they came to encounter and then root the Heathen cosmos – and the Heathenness and possibilities for development realizable within that realm – in their contemporary world, selves and experiences. How then did they come to identify and prioritize those forms within their experiences initially, as well as perceive of their Heathenness as being 'desirable'? Indeed, as discussed earlier, my informants were not born with these forms, their qualities and implications programmed into their consciousness. Likewise, unlike many of my Icelandic interlocutors, my Canadian informants had not 'grown up' engaging with potentially Heathen texts. I would suggest this issue of lack of exposure was only compounded by their eventual adoption of Heathenry, as the tradition's 'looseness' meant that they were not actively coerced to embody specific forms by an external authority, nor was their subsequent engagement with and application of those forms overtly enforced. Despite this, however, my informants were still able to recognize, and then actively chose to engage with and through, these shared forms in ways that allowed them to identify Heathenness, and then embody and instantiate that cosmological quality.

I would suggest that the key to unraveling this process lies in how these forms 'became' both Heathen and desirable in the first place; a process that, while informed by their Heathen knowledge and practices, was not solely a product of them. Indeed, most of my informants had not engaged with this knowledge or in these practices to any real extent prior to adopting the tradition, yet they 'knew of' Heathenry and had found it and the possibilities it represented 'desirable' nonetheless.³⁰ One possible explanation, and the one I shall adopt throughout my

³⁰ A notable exception, of course, is the genealogical research many of my informants reported undertaking prior to adopting Heathenry. That said, as my informants themselves noted, doing genealogical research does not 'make' one Heathen, nor is it Heathen in itself.

following discussion, was that their Heathen development (and knowledge of Heathenry more generally) was shaped by their exposure to, embodiment of and ongoing instantiation of a flexible and personalizable yet discursive field that ‘defined’ Heathenry and Heathenness. Specifically, I would argue this field existed as a flexible collection of ‘*a priori* forms’ encountered and then embodied by my interlocutors, which came to influence ‘what presents itself to experience [...] what is seen and what can be said about it’ (Rancière 2004: 13). So defined, this field of ‘sensibility’ made Heathenry and the desirable potentiality it represented ‘perceptible’ and thus realizable within my informants’ experiences and world.

I believe this ‘everyday Heathen aesthetic’, or rather the desirable world and self it made perceptible and realizable, is what attracted my informants to Heathenry initially. They then embodied and instantiated that aesthetic every time they actively and reflexively applied it when identifying and engaging with the potential Heathenness of a certain form within the increasingly ‘aestheticized’ world that engagement generated. Specifically, by consciously applying this field of ‘desirable’ (and thus ‘directed’ in the loosest sense) sensibility and action within their daily lives, they began ‘making’ the forms, others, actions and contexts that defined their contemporary, everyday world ‘Heathen’, a desirable and potentially formative Heathenness they then actively identified and embodied. I would suggest that, by generating and then facilitating their identification of and engagement with these desirable formative forms and qualities, this aesthetic increasingly focused and informed their perceptions, actions and experiences, thus ‘affect[ing] and sometimes determin[ing their] worldviews, actions [...] and quite literally the course of [their] history’ (Saito 2007: 12).

It must be noted that the ‘everyday’ Heathen aesthetic sensibility I am proposing does differ somewhat from that outlined earlier by Saito. Unlike Saito’s aesthetic, which she suggested was defined primarily by and operated through sensory experience as an almost ‘knee-jerk reaction’, my interlocutors’ proposed aesthetic functioned primarily through their active and reflexive application of the field in their daily encounters with, interpretations of and reactions to everyday forms, contexts, etc. In other words, their aesthetic was not only highly reflexive and intentional, it was also sensual (experiential), cognitive (interpretational) and

practical (active). Their proposed aesthetic also departs from the ‘art’ and ‘beauty-centered’ approaches discussed in that it is thoroughly ‘embedded’ (or undergoing a process of ‘embedding’) within their daily lives and experiences. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter One, one of Heathenry’s defining qualities as identified by my informants was that it was ‘lived’, or actively informed their day-to-day actions and experiences in some way. If, as has been suggested, this aesthetic helped determine the Heathen quality of their actions and experiences, then it, like Heathenry more generally, would have also become a ‘factor in all aspects of their social and cultural activities [including] being used to mediate social relationships’ (Coote 1994: 249).

I have intentionally avoided equating the ‘Heatheness’ I believe to be the focus of this aesthetic with ‘beauty’ and ‘the beautiful’. This is primarily because I do not recall an instance when my informants referred to the cosmological quality of Heathen forms, or the quality they were themselves attempting to realize through them, as being ‘beautiful’. As such, in an attempt to accurately depict this aesthetic as manifested within my informants’ sensibilities, I have decided to move beyond even the ‘non-essentialist ethno-aesthetic’ conception of beauty outlined by Wiseman (2007). Rather, I have forgone the concept altogether and adopted instead ‘desirability’ to denote the aesthetically ‘prioritized’ cosmological quality my informants were attempting to manifest through their engagement with aesthetically desirable forms. Such an approach, I believe, focuses more upon ‘aesthetic “principles” rather than standards of beauty, [... that reflect] wider social principles’ (Coote and Shelton 1994: 7). In so doing, it more realistically depicts how agents identify, pursue and apply their aesthetic sensibilities upon and through their everyday actions, experiences and contexts.

Of course, my informants’ proposed ‘preferential perception’ of, engagement with and embodiment of certain forms and qualities in practice might be explained by non-aesthetic means as well. For example, their identification of and participation in some forms over others could have also been informed by a ‘Heathen *habitus*’ – that is, an embodied system:

[O]f durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at

ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (Bourdieu 1990: 53)

In other words, their actions and experiences could have been structured by a shared and embodied way of ‘being’ and ‘doing’ that was learned, but operated within, upon and through them without their awareness (see Mauss 1973[1934]). Their embodiment and self-reinforcing enactment of such a structure might explain why they identified and engaged with certain forms in certain, shared ways over others. It would also explain why they recognized certain forms and qualities as being ‘Heathen’ and then pursued them in an attempt to embody that ‘desirable’ Heathenness. Importantly, however, as a structure that is unreflective and difficult (if not impossible) to reflect upon, such a *habitus* could not readily account for the active and intentional quality of my informants’ engagements with and through these forms. Nor could it account for the highly reflexive quality of the practices employed by them in their active attempts to manifest the Heathen cosmos and its desirable, formative qualities within their world. Further, considering the ‘looseness’ of Heathenry and the emphasis within the tradition upon individuals developing and ‘living’ their Heathenry in personalized ways, the Heathen field itself seemed to emphasize the volitional, reflexive striving of individual Heathen agents. Thus, one reason I have adopted this everyday aesthetic approach in an attempt to ‘unpack’ my informants’ development is that, unlike concepts such as *habitus*, it does not ‘go without saying’, at least in the way I have formulated the concept. Rather, it – and the desirable Heathenness it helped my informants infuse into and identify within their contemporary world – was a product of their active, reflexive and willing encounters with and through the forms that field of sensibility helped them identify.

Before I continue, I would like to note that this proposed aesthetic appeared to be present in some form in both research contexts. For example, like my Canadian informants, my Icelandic interlocutors regularly donned Mjöllnirs and actively developed the same forms of historical, ‘cultural’, ‘virtuous’ and self-knowledge discussed above. As already noted, some of the primary sources referenced by my Canadian informants were Icelandic in origin, and were texts many of my Icelandic informants ‘grew up reading’ (Teresa). Further, my Icelandic informants also regularly engaged with and in many of the same practical forms as my Canadian

interlocutors, including study practices, blóts and offering practices. That said, some differences in aesthetic sensibility were observable between these two contexts. For example, as was desirable, my Icelandic informants' 'Heathen' knowledge was predominantly based upon historic Icelandic sources alone. However, perhaps reflecting the multiculturalism of Canada and their own mixed backgrounds, my Canadian informants believed it was desirable to reference a wider variety of sources that depicted multiple historical Heathen cultural contexts. Despite such differences (differences that were themselves aesthetically desirable), I maintain a similar field of desirable sensibility and action came to inform what my Canadian and Icelandic informants perceived of, how they interpreted those experiences and how they reacted to them in practice. In fact, I would suggest that the cross-contextual quality of this aesthetic was illustrated by Viktor (in Iceland) and Jade (in Canada) in Chapter One. Specifically, referencing similar bodies of desirable Heathen knowledge, both actively identified and reflexively interpreted the presence of ravens ('Heathen' representations) encountered within potentially Heathen contexts as being illustrative of the possible presence and formative favor of the Heathen god Odin.

The Heathen Project as Aesthetic Reorientation

If the desirable cosmological quality, or Heathenness, my interlocutors were pursuing through their adoption of Heathenry was defined by and made realizable through their engagement with the Heathen aesthetic, it would follow that the selves they were actively attempting to fashion in their engagements with the tradition were also dependent upon their adoption of that aesthetic. Specifically, as discussed in Chapter Two, the 'Heathen selves' that appeared to be the aim of their proposed projects were dependent upon their entrance into the Heathen cosmos. This was because those becoming selves were subjects to and a product of not only their own formative influence and fashioning efforts, but also those of other cosmological beings. In order to enter into, act upon and be acted upon within that formative web of cosmological connectedness, however, my informants needed to first be able to identify, develop and display certain desirable Heathen qualities like 'frith' and 'virtue' in their engagements with other cosmological beings. Their development and articulation of those qualities, and thus their establishment of relations with

influential cosmological others, was largely a product of their engagement with and through the desirable Heathen representations, forms of knowledge and practices discussed earlier. For example, by referencing these forms they were able to recognize the potentially frithful quality of a gift given or a ‘toast’ made at a symbel over a horn of mead, while their active participation in the practice itself helped them to embody, instantiate and display the desirable Heathen ‘virtuousness’ of those forms. Before they could begin engaging with those forms, embodying those qualities and establishing those formative cosmological relations, they needed to first become aware of them and perceive of their cosmological ‘relevance’ and importance to their projects. In other words, their fashioning into Heathen beings depended upon a reorientation in their sensibility that altered what they experienced and how they interpreted and reacted to those experiences.

In her *Everyday Aesthetics* (2007), Yuriko Saito discusses just such a process of ‘aesthetic reorientation’. Specifically, she argues that everyday aesthetic sensibilities, and the actions they inform, can be reoriented by actively exposing subjects to ‘those mechanisms which are [the alternative aesthetic’s] major players’ (2007: 98) within their everyday experiences. She suggests that, by actively ‘incorporat[ing] something new and different’ (2007: 87) into those experiences, a ‘discrepancy between the seemingly beautiful appearance’ (2007: 85) of the incorporated forms and the original aesthetic’s standard of desirability (or vice versa) is generated. By maintaining this discrepancy, she continues, the aesthetic sensibilities of those involved become de-centered and alterable. I would suggest that a similar process of introduction, de-centering and reorientation was hinted at in my informants’ journeys and questing narratives. For example, in addition to openly displaying their horns and other Heathen representational forms within their homes, as my interlocutors’ Heathen development progressed, they also began regularly wearing their Mjöltnirs, amber and volknots to work, when visiting their non-Heathen friends and while shopping. They also reported actively searching out and engaging increasingly with forms of Heathen knowledge (e.g. genealogical) at home, at the library, at bookstores and, somewhat cheekily, on their ‘computers at work’. Lastly, they explained how they began increasingly undertaking forms of Heathen practice within a variety of everyday contexts. For example, Erik and Jonathan reported

making impromptu offerings to their local wights, while others reported making small drink or food offerings to gods and ancestors ‘if I am moved to, wherever I am and whatever I may be doing’ (Katherine).

In each of these instances, I would suggest that my informants began introducing Heathen aesthetic forms and qualities into their everyday ‘non-Heathen’ contexts and experiences. By actively identifying, displaying and embodying these aesthetically desirable forms and qualities within contexts, actions and even selves that, prior to their adoption of Heathenry, had been informed by a different aesthetic (e.g. ‘Christian’, ‘Atheist’, ‘modern’, etc.), I would suggest they were attempting to alter their own aesthetic sensibilities. In other words, by reflexively choosing to increasingly applying the Heathen aesthetic and its standards and mechanisms of desirability in non-Heathen contexts, they actively increased their awareness of those means, that desirability, the aesthetic that informed them and, most importantly, the cosmos each helped to manifest. Thus, just as ‘an art which ever increasingly contains reference to its own history [...] asks to be referred not to an external referent, the represented or designated “reality”, but to the universe of past and present art works’ (Bourdieu 2010 [1984]: xxvii), my informants’ aesthetically informed actions and experiences came to increasingly reference the aesthetic that informed them, their own aesthetic sensibility and the Heathenness of each. In so doing, this process of aesthetic introduction, de-centering and reorientation allowed them to increasingly ‘aestheticize’ or suffuse Heathen aesthetic qualities, the Heathen cosmos they reflected and the formative potential they represented into and throughout their experiencing selves and sensible world with each act of identification and instantiation. In other words, like when Jonathan decorated his favorite hammer with runes to make it more ‘powerful’, my informants actively infused their contemporary selves and world with cosmological qualities and implications by employing their aesthetic sensibility in this way.

While, as will be discussed in Chapter Four, my informants’ aestheticization intensified when it was undertaken around human Heathen others, their presence was not, I would suggest, a necessary condition of this reorientation. For example, while they reported that their Heathen development accelerated once they found other ‘present’ Heathen agents to engage with, most of my informants’ initial aesthetic

reorientation occurred in the absence of human Heathen others. I would argue this ‘solitary’ reorientation was possible because, in addition to their active engagements with potentially present cosmological others, the process itself allowed them to ‘populate’ the Heathen cosmos they began increasingly manifesting in practice with ‘non-Heathen human others’. By reflexively identifying the perceived ‘Heatheness’ of others’ actions (and their own reactions to them), I would suggest my informants aestheticized those others, thus transforming them from ‘contemporary everyday others’ into ‘potential cosmological others’. In other words, when they were identified by my informants as acting in ‘Heathen ways’, or, as was more often the case, their formative cosmological influence over my informants was observed, they were transformed, in my informants’ experiences at least, into ‘non-Heathen human others’. Thus, by repeating this process throughout their contemporary world, my informants became embedded within the Heathen cosmos-as-manifested, and in the process, with the cosmic potential they were attempting to manifest through their aesthetic reorientation. I would suggest this process was hinted at by Erik when he noted, ‘One of the biggest things about becoming Heathen is that you become more aware [...] It doesn’t matter who they are, the wyrd of those you associate with comes to affect yours and you become a lot more aware of that [and what] they do!’

In addition to potentially helping my informants transform their selves, world and others into sites where the Heatheness and formative potential of the Heathen cosmos could be manifested and embodied, this reorientation had another possible repercussion. By establishing, emphasizing and then helping my informants to perceive of, pursue and realize desirable Heathen qualities like ‘pastness’ and frith, the Heathen aesthetic, like every aesthetic field, came to have ‘ethical’ implications.³¹ Indeed, Anthony Shelton has observed that ‘Huichol ethics and aesthetics may be compounded to constitute a single field of knowledge’ (1994: 240); so much so, in fact, that ‘Huichol aesthetics is concerned not so much with notions of beauty as with ethical ideals’ (1994: 8). Michael O’Hanlon has made a similar observation, suggesting that, amongst the Wahgi, the ‘quality of appearance

³¹ While the difference between ‘the moral’ and ‘the ethical’ will be discussed at length in Chapter Four, for the time being (and for the sake of clarity) I will use both terms to denote the quality attributed to and realized by those individuals, objects, practices, etc. that strive to embody or are believed to reflect the discursive standards of ‘excellence’ present within a particular context.

in [performative] displays is communicative in that it is read as a commentary on the moral status of those displaying' (1989: 124). Saito (2007b) has also discussed the 'moral' quality and implications of everyday aesthetic sensibilities and behaviors at length, particularly with regard to the Japanese context. She has suggested that within Japan (both historically and contemporarily), an individual's 'aesthetic sensibility, whether in providing or receiving an aesthetic experience, can be an important measure of his or her moral capacity' (2007b: 93). She goes on to stress the embedded nature of this moral dimension, suggesting that, like the aesthetic with which it is associated, it is 'deeply entrenched in people's daily, mundane activities and thoroughly integrated with everyday life, rendering it rather invisible' (2007b: 85). While I do not believe the ethical component of my informants' Heathen aesthetic was 'invisible', I would agree that, within/according to that aesthetic, 'What is morally good is expected to display valued aesthetic qualities, and what displays valued aesthetic qualities is expected to be morally good' (Coote 1994: 266).

In a very general sense then, aesthetic fields, and the sensibilities and behaviors they inform, might be seen as having ethical and moral implications in that they help determine what 'beautiful', 'prioritized', etc. qualities individuals perceive of, as well as provide them with 'desirable' means to pursue and realize those qualities in daily practice. With this in mind, I would suggest that acts of aesthetic reorientation might be approached similarly, as their aim is to align individuals with new standards of desirability; standards they then must strive to adopt, fail to achieve or dismiss outright.³² I would suggest this was particularly the case with my informants' reorientation, as it was a highly reflexive process. Their aesthetic reorientation both required and was dependent upon their active identification and willing, ongoing adoption of an alternative 'moral[-aesthetic] discourse [that was] open-ended and unfinished' (Humphrey 1997: 34); a quality reflected, I would suggest, in the 'looseness' of the formative field of practice that aesthetic helped define. Further, the forms, beings, and acting self my informants were actively and reflexively attempting to infuse with Heathenness were similarly infused with ethical

³² I would suggest that the ethical implications of these fields and this reorientation are compounded by the fact that agents are embedded within (and are in turn embedded with) multiple fields simultaneously. As such, they are potentially subjects to multiple moral-aesthetic standards – not all of which are necessarily compatible – that they must navigate across multiple contexts.

qualities and implications. Thus, as well as helping my informants to align themselves with and manifest the Heathen cosmos and its possibilities within their actions and experiences, the Heathen aesthetic also represented an alternative field of ‘ethical living’ through and according to which they were potentially striving to identify and display certain ‘moral’ qualities and forms. In so doing, the process of aesthetic reorientation and active aestheticization upon which their Heathen projects seemed to depend also became a process of ethical reorientation that, I would argue, was just as fundamental to their Heathen quests as the aesthetic itself.

Conclusion

As Erik once noted, ‘In Heathenry we are trying to take the customs and ways of thinking that we find in the [historical] sources, pull the important bits out and then apply them the best we can today [...] They become a “Heathen lens” that we use when looking at our modern world’ (Erik). I would argue that, by informing how my informants perceived of and reacted to their contemporary world, others and their own striving selves, the Heathen aesthetic proposed in this chapter served as just such a lens. Indeed, I have suggested that their active and reflexive embodiment and application of an ‘everyday’ Heathen aesthetic was fundamental to my interlocutors’ Heathen development. By actively applying this field of sensibility, they began undergoing a process of aesthetic reorientation that affected how they perceived of and reacted to their world, others and even themselves. Specifically, the aesthetic sensibility, aestheticized experiences and aestheticizing potential they developed as part of this reorientation allowed them to begin manifesting and engaging with the Heathen cosmos, its desirable qualities and its formative potential within their everyday world. By establishing and providing my informants with the opportunity and means to realize desirable Heathen qualities like virtue and frith, I concluded that this aesthetic, their aestheticization and thus their Heathen projects were fundamentally ‘ethical’. It is towards this ethical quality, the way my informants developed and articulated that quality in their engagements with others (and their own becoming Heathen selves) and the possible implications of this ‘Heathen ethics’ to their Heathen projects that I would now like to turn.

Chapter IV: An ‘Ethics of the Ordinary’

Rúnatýr Kindred November 2011 Symbel

It was a cool, wet November evening in Ottawa when the ‘folk’ of Rúnatýr Kindred gathered at Erikheim (‘Erik’s home’) for their November ‘Remembrance Symbel’. As with most other kindred events held in members’ homes, I observed that the kindred ‘core’ members and their families were present that evening. These included holders of Innangard positions (administrative roles), Utangard members, or paying members who held and attended kindred events but did not have official titles, and an assortment of spouses and partners. Also present that evening were a number of whom Erik had once called ‘friends of the kindred’. Generally defined by their non-paying status, not holding Innangard or Utangard positions and their self-identification as ‘non-Heathen’ or ‘Heathen curious’, the attendance of individuals from this group often fluctuated from event to event. While we were all excitedly ‘catching up’ with one another, Erik and Chantal began producing an eclectic collection of chairs, which they then, with Jade and Katherine’s help, arrayed into a large inward facing circle in the center of their sitting room. Recognizing that the event was about to start, we all slowly began taking seats in the circle, often next to a close friend or family member. Shortly after I had been seated and produced my tattered notebook, Jade slyly leaned towards me and explained that it was not going to be ‘a normal symbel’. Soon I realized why – ‘Chris’ appeared in the circle and sat down next to Erik.³³

Up until a year before I had arrived in Ottawa, Chris had been fairly active in Rúnatýr Kindred, regularly attending kindred events and generally enjoying ‘good’, frithful relations with many of those present that evening, particularly Jade. However, as a result of a ‘personal matter’ (a matter about which I was never able to learn much), Chris and Jade’s relationship had suffered, so much so that Jade had brought both the matter and Chris before the kindred Innangard for ‘arbitration’, a recourse generally reserved for instances of oath breaking. After hearing both parties speak,

³³ In an attempt to maintain their anonymity within the wider Heathen community, I have decided to withhold this informant’s name. Throughout what follows, they will be simply referred to by the gender-neutral name ‘Chris’. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to them with a feminine pronoun as is currently popular academic parlance.

the Innangard had decided that Chris was at fault and, due to her being labeled a ‘frith breaker’, her relationship with the community had suffered.³⁴ Indeed, from then on, Chris had not been welcome at any kindred events, neither those held at community members’ homes nor those held at large pan-community gatherings like Hail & Horn. Noting my confused expression, Jade quietly continued, ‘[She is] here to ask for forgiveness.’



Figure 19: Katherine L. mead with framed copy of the Rúnatýr Kindred virtues

As we all sat exchanging uncomfortable glances across the circle, Katherine quickly produced her drinking horn. Pulling it from its braided leather strap (she had once boasted that she had ‘finished the horn and made the strap on [her] own’), she began filling the vessel with a bottle of her homebrewed mead (fig. 19). Once full, she handed the horn to Erik who, clearing his throat, proceeded to outline his ‘house rules [...] no one can get up during the first three rounds [...] to break this rule is to break frith!’ Interestingly, on this particular occasion he did not also prohibit the

³⁴ While it was not clear to me if Chris was a dedicated Heathen, she had been very active within the kindred, often engaging with and through the aesthetic forms discussed above. As part of this engagement, I would suggest she had been held, by herself and the community, to a certain standard of desirable ‘Heathennes’. That is, by reflexively instantiating those forms and their possibilities with and around others, she had become rooted within a shared web of ‘ethical’ striving, regardless of the extent to which she identified with Heathenry. I shall return to this idea later in my discussion.

honoring of certain Holy Powers in his home, namely Loki. I found this odd, as, at most other events held in his ‘hall’, Erik had declared that ‘certain powers, specifically “he who shall not be named” [Loki], will not be mentioned in my home [...] it is about respecting the rules of hospitality! I do not want chaos brought into my hall.’ I found this seeming oversight surprising, as Shane, who often honored Loki, was present that evening. During a chat I had with Shane later, I asked him if he had wanted to honor Loki that evening even though Erik had not forbidden him to do so. Laughing he replied, ‘Nah, I know [Erik] doesn’t like it so I won’t do it in his home, whether he specifies it or not. It is about being respectful.’

Once finished, Erik gave the horn to Chris who made her way into the center of the circle. There, she produced a sheet of paper and, while lifting the glossy, curved horn before her, began reading a statement. Loudly, she first outlined, albeit in rather abstract terms, her ‘misdeed’. She then stated that she wanted to make a public apology as a sign of reconciliation so that she could once again enjoy ‘ties with the kindred’. Looking at each of us in turn, Chris concluded by saying, ‘I ask for your forgiveness.’ After a moment of silence, Erik stood and made his way towards Chris. Standing side by side, he and Chris then drank from the horn and shook hands. With the ‘deed’ done, Erik, as the kindred ‘Lawspeaker’, or ‘protector and guardian of RK’s wyrd’, then took the horn and loudly declared that Chris’s transgression had ‘been forgiven.’³⁵ With the matter settled, both re-took their seats and the first round of that evening’s symbol began.

As with most of the symbols I attended in Canada, the first round that evening provided participants with an opportunity to ‘hail’ (verbally recognize and honor) a Holy Power, or god, they felt an affinity for, indebted to or ‘moved to call upon because of recent events’ (Brynn). Specifically, upon being passed the horn, each attendee first called out the name of the god they wished to honor. They then, in some cases emotionally and at great length, explained why they were honoring that particular deity on that occasion. Once their relationship with (and experiences of) the being had been shared, they then drank from the horn while the others present ‘hailed’ the honored Power. That evening Rya, a ‘friend of the kindred’ and Jade’s partner, wonderfully illustrated this tendency. Smiling, she raised the horn before her

³⁵ 2011 Rúnatýr Kindred Constitution - Article 2, Section B

and explained: ‘The other day it was raining hard as I was preparing to leave for work. I didn’t want to get wet, but I couldn’t be late! I was so upset. I begged Thor to stop the rain until I got [to work] and he did! It stopped when I left the house and started again just as I walked in the door! So, I want to thank him. Hail Thor!’ Finished, she drank from the horn while the rest of us loudly hailed Thor in kind.

As was also generally the case at sýmbel, the second round that evening provided participants with the opportunity to honor ancestors and heroes – that is, a ‘worthy’ person or group of people that had ‘inspired’ them or ‘made [them] who they are today’ (Jonathan). As Canadian ‘Remembrance Day’ is in November, Erik and Angus honored Canadian military personnel, both living and dead, for their ‘valiant sacrifices’ (Angus). Jade, a self-identifying transgendered woman and LGBT activist, chose to honor the many gay youths who had recently committed suicide due to bullying. Recalling first their names and then the events that had resulted in their deaths, she concluded by calling them her ‘heroes [...] By hailing them, they and their trials will never be forgotten!’ Shane then honored the unions (of which he was a member) that had recently marched on Parliament Hill for ‘trying to make things better for all of us!’ Janica, another friend of the kindred, concluded the round by describing a trip she had recently taken to Alcatraz Island. She explained how ‘The whole place is being reclaimed spiritually [...] it is so powerful and hopeful! Hail those who have made it possible!’ As she spoke of the island’s transformation, she began to weep, as did Brynn, Katherine and Rya.

The third round, which my informants referred to as the ‘toasts, boasts and oaths’ round, provided attendees with an opportunity to share their recent accomplishments, recognize the accomplishments of others (both present and absent) and, if deemed appropriate by the host, make oaths. In so doing, this round seemed to provide those present with a space within which they could talk about themselves, others and their formative actions and experiences in very constructive, supportive ways. Jade once agreed with this observation, and explained how she:

[W]as going to counseling before I started attending [sýmbels], but after a while I didn’t need it anymore because the people here were providing me with the support and understanding I needed [... it] provides us all the chance to come in and talk about how badass we are no matter how bad things have been because we *are* [original emphasis] and we deserve it!

Interestingly, the majority of those present that evening chose to ‘boast’ by presenting some sort of ‘crafted’ form. For example, Brynn shared two scrapbooks that she suggested ‘reflected [her] strength’. As they made their way around the circle (and while each attendee praised her for her effort, skill and style), she explained how the objects, and her crafting more generally, were ‘extremely important’ to her. The reason, she explained, was that they allowed her to ‘record and express where I have been [and] how I have become a better, stronger person. [It] represents my personal journey as a Heathen, a woman, a mother and someone who is terminally ill with lupus.’ Jonathan then boasted that he had recently composed a poem entitled *The Smithy*, which, at the urging of those present, he recited. As he finished, Angus proclaimed, ‘That was amazing! I really want that!’ Jonathan smiled, thanked him and said he would ‘be honored to share it’. Angus then both boasted about and performed a song that, while ‘Christian’, he had ‘re-written to honor the Thunder God. He is the god of strength!’ Erik concluded the round by boasting and then toasting the kindred by reading a poem he had recently written entitled ‘That Which the [Rúnatýr] Folk Know’, which outlined the ‘kindred virtues of self, spirit and tribe.’ Upon finishing, he reiterated the importance of these ‘virtues in growing the renown and worth of ourselves and the kindred.’

With the first three rounds concluded, Erik’s house rules obeyed, and frith maintained, people began slowly leaving the event. Those who remained, however, continued both sharing crafted forms and honoring one another for nearly an hour. As it began getting late, Erik left the circle, only to return a few moments later with the kindred ‘Oath Book’. After he had retaken his seat and had opened the book to a blank page, Jade requested the horn. Once it was in her hand, she stood and announced, ‘I wish to make an oath! I will complete, to the best of [my] ability my three Masters in Social Work applications that are due in early December [...] I have been putting them off.’ She then explained how, if she failed to fulfill her oath, she would ‘give [her] Heathen book collection which [she] love[s] to the kindred and buy the kindred three books of their choice [...] that is my scyld!’ In his official capacity as the Lawspeaker, Erik approved of the oath and scyld, wrote both in the book and then he and Jade signed their names. With this, Jade was ‘hailed’, the remaining mead was poured as an offering to Erik’s house wight ‘Bobo’ and the symbol ended.

Introduction

Formulated and popularized in part through the work of one of contemporary Heathenry's earliest and most prolific contributors, Stephen McNallen, 'standard' or 'American style' Heathen symbols like the Rúnatýr Remembrance Symbol just depicted were one of the most widely participated-in events I observed while in Canada.³⁶ In addition to being one of the most popular shared practices engaged in by my interlocutors (and often one of the first), I would suggest that symbols, including the 'High' or 'Saxon' Symbol related at the beginning of Chapter Three, were also amongst the most interesting. This is because they, perhaps more clearly than any other shared or private practice I witnessed, illustrated the active and reflexive process of aesthetic instantiation, reorientation and cosmological manifestation that I suggested in my previous chapter was at the core of my informants' questing Heathen projects. Specifically, these events provided attendees with space to recount their prior engagements with and 'through' desirable Heathen forms around cosmological others, as well as opportunities to engage directly with those others and those forms in ways that illustrated their own desirable Heathen quality. For example, symbols provided participants with the opportunity to engage with Heathen representational forms like drinking horns, mead, Mjölknirs (which most wore to these events) and even the symbol circle itself. They also provided them with opportunities to illustrate and increase their Heathen knowledge through their skillful application of that knowledge while participating in the many desirable Heathen practices that composed these events.

Consider the acts of honoring and remembering Shane and Jade participated in during the above Remembrance Symbol. As was deemed 'desirability Heathen', during the ancestors and heroes round they actively honored individuals and actions that they believed displayed desirable Heathen qualities like 'bravery', 'perseverance' and 'justice'. By illustrating their ability to identify these Heathen qualities within everyday contexts and non-Heathen human others, their honoring narratives also illustrated their embodied Heathen knowledge and ability to skillfully apply that knowledge in potentially formative and 'cosmologically Heathen' ways. Importantly,

³⁶ See *Rituals of Asatru* (McNallen 1992) and *Living Asatru: A Handbook of Simple Celebrations* (McNallen 1993).

by allowing my interlocutors to illustrate their Heathenness around similarly aestheticized others, these events also acted as mechanisms through which they formed formative cosmological relations with those others. Indeed, as Brynn noted following the above event, ‘Symbel allows me to share my pride in my accomplishments with those I care about [and] share in their pride’ (Brynn). In so doing, Jonathan continued, they ‘strengthen [our] relationships with each other [by] seeing that we are here for one another’.

These events also helped my informants illustrate and observe the highly personalized nature of their aestheticization by providing them with opportunities to share narratives that recounted their ongoing participation in formative ‘everyday’ Heathen practices. Consider as an example the ‘boasting’ forms shared by Brynn, Angus and Jonathan. Each of them presented some narrative form (e.g. a poem, song or material crafted object) that both reflected and allowed them and others to reflect upon the individualized ways in which they had and were continuing to realize desirable Heathen qualities in their daily practices. For instance, Brynn’s crafts illustrated her recognition of and pride in her own daily strength, while Jonathan’s poem emphasized and celebrated the centrality of his armor-smithing both to his daily life (he owns and operates an armor-smithing business) and his Heathenry. Likewise, the song Angus re-wrote not only illustrated the centrality of both Donor (Thor) and ‘strength’ to his everyday life and Heathenry, as it recounted his steady movement away from Christianity towards Heathenry, it also actively depicted his aesthetic reorientation. In each instance, their boasting forms illustrated their active and reflexive engagements with and incorporation of Heathen cosmological forms, qualities and possibilities within their contemporary, everyday world; a quality that each of my informants stressed was fundamentally and desirably ‘Heathen’ in itself.

Chapter Aim and Outline

In presenting my informants with opportunities to both recount and observe their development into beings that displayed desirable Heathen qualities, as well as chances to engage in desirable ways with similarly defined others, I would suggest that these symbel events also highlighted the ‘ethical’ dimension of their Heathen projects. Specifically, the narrational honoring practices that composed these events

allowed them to illustrate their ongoing, willing and reflexive abidance to the criteria that defined the ‘Heatheness’ deemed desirably and uniquely Heathen by the Heathen aesthetic. It is this active abidance – or rather the acts of ‘ethical striving’ that defined it, its relationship with the Heathen aesthetic and its formative implications for my interlocutors’ projects – that I will consider in this chapter. Specifically, I will explore the ‘everyday ethical’ means employed by my informants in their development of the selves I would suggest the aim of their projects, as well as the ethical quality of those ‘fashioned’ Heathen selves. I will begin by briefly considering the recent shift within the social sciences away from approaches to the human pursuit of ‘goods’ that emphasize external ‘moral’ frameworks towards perspectives that favor contextualized ‘virtues’ realized through everyday ‘ethical’ practices. I will then suggest that Heathenry and my informants’ Heathen development might be seen as both employing a particular kind of ‘ethics’ and reflecting a very specific kind of ‘everyday’ ethical project. I will conclude by suggesting that, through developing and applying a Heathen ‘ethics of the ordinary’ and undertaking ethical practices with and through others, my interlocutors actively transformed their everyday contexts and experiences into fields within which they became able to realize a self that displayed desirable, formative Heathen qualities.

Morality, Virtue and an Ordinary Ethics

Over a century ago Durkheim suggested that society is ‘a moral being qualitatively different from the individuals it comprises and from the aggregation from which it derives’ (1953: 51), that, when reproduced by members of that society within their social actions, becomes ‘the best part of the individual’ (1976[1915]: 388). Specifically, he maintained that society is an externalized structure that prioritizes certain ‘positive’, socially constructive qualities and then combines those qualities into a shared ‘moral’ framework. This framework is then propagated and embodied by the individuals who both exist within and reproduce that structure through ‘abstract issues of justice and the rights and obligations adhering to it within the context of the impersonal relations of the public domain’ (Overing and Passes 2000: 4). Described in this way, society becomes ‘intrinsically moral, while the individual is only so in virtue of its incorporation into the former’ (Laidlaw 2014: 16-17). In other

words, as imagined by Durkheim, the moral quality of the individual becomes dependent upon their perceived adherence to and instantiation of the positive qualities and values of the social structure of which they are a part. While once quite popular, Durkheim's 'Enlightenment' approach to morality has fallen increasingly out of fashion within the social sciences. This has been in part because an increasing stress has been placed upon alternative approaches that are more accommodating of the contextual particularities of human 'living' and the varied ways individuals strive to realize 'good' qualities through their daily practices.

Virtue Ethics

Alasdair MacIntyre outlined a possible alternative to this positivist morality in his widely read *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1981). Briefly, in this work he suggests that, as with 'society' more generally, post-traditional experiences of morality have become fragmented and disassociated from their historical roots. In an attempt to escape this 'calamitous severing of fact and value effected by the Enlightenment [...] and nihilistic relativism' (Laidlaw 2014: 61), he suggests that the traditional rights-centered moral theories proposed by individuals like Durkheim might be replaced with a moral perspective that focuses instead upon 'virtues'. The key, he suggests, to developing and implementing such a morality is the 'cultivating [of] virtues' that would allow individuals and communities to actively and 'substantively engage in defining and pursuing the good' (Dunn 2013: 27–8) in contextually relevant ways. Specifically, MacIntyre's proposed moral approach emphasizes those 'internal goods' (1981: 187–8) that help define (and are defined in part through) the social practices that compose the 'traditions', or 'historically extended, socially embodied argument[s ...] in part about the goods which constitute that tradition' (1981: 222), that in turn help agents within a particular context experience their life as a moral whole. Such a virtue-centered morality, he argues, would overcome the ahistorical and impersonal nature of Enlightenment morality by being determined and applied at the level of social practice, community 'tradition' and human living.

Overing and Passes have proposed and developed a similar 'virtue-oriented' approach to social action and human living in the 'Introduction' to the edited volume

The Anthropology of Love and Anger: The Aesthetics of Conviviality in Native Amazonia (2000). They begin by outlining how, within the traditional ‘rationalist, formalist and judicial model of a “rights-centred” [...] society’, the moral or ‘good’ is determined and manifested within the public or ‘formal realm’, while the private realm of the ‘domestic’ is seen as being defined by an inferior ‘virtue-centered morality’ (2000: 5). They go on to suggest, however, that such a public–private moral division does not exist within the native Amazonian context. Rather, the personal and interpersonal qualities being pursued by native Amazonian agents are determined by and realized through their ‘ethical’ engagement within a ‘sociality’ that aims to produce and maintain an intimate ‘conviviality’ across all interpersonal contexts. As such, when attempting to explore and describe the convivial striving undertaken by those individuals within the ‘relational matrix which constitutes [their] life’ (Strathern in Gross 1990: 18), an alternative ‘virtue-centered ethics’ approach should be employed. Specifically, rather than focusing upon the externalized and ‘overly coercive’ moral frames that define most ‘rights-centered’ moral approaches, their proposed ‘virtue ethical’ approach focuses instead upon how the observance of ‘moral virtues and the aesthetics of interpersonal relations’ (Overing and Passes 2000: 6) by the volitional agents embedded within these webs helps them achieve a “good life”, which is engendered through the artful practices and skills of those who personally and intimately interact in everyday life’ (2000: 4). Thus, similar to MacIntyre’s virtue-centered morality, Overing and Passes’ ‘virtue ethics’ not only considers the shared standards of ‘goodness’ striven for and propagated within a particular context, it also appears to stress the ‘process of character formation’ (Laidlaw 2014: 50) through which individuals actively and reflexively strive to realize those ‘virtuous’ qualities in practices undertaken with and towards others.³⁷

Ordinary Ethics

Building upon and attempting to answer similar questions as the virtue ethicists above, Michael Lambek has proposed an ethical perspective he calls ‘ordinary ethics’. Quoting the work of authors like Aristotle and Arendt (1998), he suggests that

³⁷ Of course, such an approach is not novel. A similar perspective was proposed and discussed at length by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (trans. Bartlett and Collins 2011; see also Hursthouse 1999).

it is primarily through the seemingly mundane practices that agents engage in daily that they '[strive] much of the time to do what is right and with respect to standards of excellence' (2008b: 151). He goes on to stress that the criteria that define a particular 'standard of excellence', as well as the practical means through which individuals identify and pursue those qualities, are highly contextualized, as they are 'established and acknowledged in [the] performative acts' (2010b: 39) undertaken by those individuals within their everyday contexts. Specifically, the potentially 'ethical' quality of an individual's actions is determined through the judgments both they and others make as to how closely their observed and ongoing performances reflect those shared, striven-for standards. Despite being dependent upon and realized through these performative actions and critical judgments, Lambek maintains that 'the ethical' is 'relatively tacit, grounded in agreement rather than rule, in practice rather than knowledge or belief, and happening without calling undue attention to itself' (2010: 2). Furthermore, he maintains that the 'ethical' (and individuals' ethical striving) is not fixed, but exists in a state of constant transformation. This is because, while their actions establish and propagate the criteria according to which they, their practices and others are judged, those judgments can, in turn, 'generate new performances [...] that recalibrate the criteria and shift the ethical context' (2010: 56).

Thus, as defined by Lambek, 'ethics' and 'the ethical' become defined by and realized through individuals' shared participation in an ongoing process of performance and evaluation informed by identifiable yet flexible standards of desirability and excellence. They also become 'ordinary', or an intrinsic aspect and quality of every human interaction, practice, context and experience. Enacted by and between practicing agents, the ethical field generated by and generative of these ethical practices and judgments has the potential to inform not only the perceived quality of those beings, but also the quality of the field of relations within which their striving occurs. Lastly, Lambek's 'ordinary ethics' is implicit, operating within and through agents without them realizing it, similar in many ways to language. Indeed, Lambek suggests that there are only a few instances when the ethical becomes explicit, namely '(1) in respect to its breaches; (2) with regards to ethical problems [... when] the right thing to do is unknown or hotly contested; (3) in prophetic movements of social and ethical renewal; and, (4) among priestly classes attempting

to rationalize and educate' (2010: 2). Thus, 'the ethical', and the contextual 'ordinary ethics' employed by agents in their ongoing pursuit of it, exists not as an overarching, fixed 'moral framework' or 'code', but a flexible, evolving and 'lived' field of 'excellence' generated from and generative of its contexts and means of operation. In so being, as with the virtue-centered approaches discussed earlier, I would argue that Lambek's ordinary ethics is primarily concerned not with individuals 'following rules', but rather their ongoing development and implementation of an evolving ethical disposition that allows them to identify and realize desirable qualities through their daily practices.

Lambek's 'ordinary' ethical perspective (and the virtue-ethical perspective more generally) appears in many ways to reflect the process of ethical reorientation and striving that I would suggest fundamental to Heathenry and my informants' questing projects. For example, the engagement with formative cosmological others upon which my informants' Heathen development in part depended required them to embody and instantiate certain shared Heathen qualities seen by them and those others as being 'desirable'. In other words, their 'fashioning' into Heathen beings was dependent upon their identification and demonstration of qualities deemed desirable or 'excellent' according to certain Heathen cosmological criteria. Further, these criteria and qualities were defined, manifested and realized by my interlocutors through their participation in aestheticized practices, not through their passive encounters with 'abstract' social concepts. In addition, as was illustrated by the narratives many shared during the symposium discussed earlier, their 'ethical' recognition of and abidance by these Heathen criteria occurred in and through seemingly 'mundane', everyday contexts and actions, and always in relation to some present or potentially present being. As a result, the excellent (or not) Heathen quality of their practices and practicing selves were seen as influencing not only those selves, but also the cosmological others and context within which those practices were undertaken. Described in this way, by establishing and making potentially realizable a shared field of 'desirable Heathenness', the Heathen aesthetic appeared to function as a criterion according to which my interlocutors began actively striving to recognize and realize their own desirable Heathenness and that of others. In so being, this

aesthetic helped generate an ‘ordinary’ ethical field within and with reference to which their everyday Heathen striving and becoming began occurring.

Despite these apparent similarities, I would argue that the ethical dimension of my informants’ Heathenry and Heathen development was also potentially different from the ethics formulated by Lambek in a significant way. Specifically, unlike Lambek’s ordinary ethics, the ethical quality of my interlocutors’ Heathen aesthetic and associated ethical striving was explicit and highly reflexive, being at all times and in all places reflected upon, discussed and applied. In other words, their ‘Heathen ethics’, like the aesthetic from which it developed, was not a ‘kind of habitus or an unreflective and unreflexive disposition of everyday social life’ (Zigon 2008: 17), but actively, reflexively and volitionally developed through and applied by them to their own everyday practices and those of others. For example, after actively relating the ‘kindred virtues’ at the Remembrance Symbol in a poem he had composed before the event, Erik stressed the importance of those present applying those virtues in their daily lives. As illustrated in Chapter Two, all of my interlocutors not only voiced a similar opinion concerning the Heathen virtues more generally, but also regularly related instances when they had applied and actively reflected upon those virtues in their everyday contexts and actions. Importantly, though their explicit engagement with and ‘through’ these and other Heathen forms may seem incommensurable with the ethics proposed by Lambek, I would posit it did not detract from the ‘ethical’ or ‘ordinary’ quality of my informants’ Heathen aesthetic or ethically-informed Heathen becoming. In fact, Lambek himself provided an example that potentially reconciles the fundamentally reflexive, yet noticeably ‘ordinary’ character of my informants’ aesthetically informed ethical striving.

Earlier Lambek suggested that one instance when an implicit ordinary ethic becomes potentially explicit is in ‘prophetic movements’, or ‘deliberate, organized, conscious effort[s] by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture’ (Wallace 1956: 265) with reference to certain historical forms highlighted within the present by ‘prophetic beings’. The success of these movements is dependent in part upon members identifying and instantiating certain ‘desirable’ (i.e. ‘ethical’) historical qualities through their active engagement in actions believed to display and impart those qualities. In other words, members of prophetic movements must

actively consider and attempt to alter the quality of their own actions and those of others before they can realize the desirable qualities and reoriented world outlined by the prophetic being. I would suggest that something similar might also be said about Heathenry. As discussed in Chapter Three, through incorporating certain historical forms into their everyday actions, contexts and selves, my informants were attempting to affect and reorient the perceived quality and potentiality of each. Thus, similar in some ways to the movements described by Lambek, my informants' Heathen projects saw their intentional engagement with and reflexive 'in-acting' of decontextualized historical forms in an attempt to make themselves and their contemporary world more 'desirable'. To understand how my informants compiled and applied these decontextualized forms in their pursuit of desirable cosmological qualities, an important feature of Heathenry, their 'ethical' Heathen projects and the contemporary context within which they operated should be considered.

Pastiche

Fredric Jameson has suggested that experiences within the 'postmodern world' are defined in large part by an increasing 'historical deafness' (1991: xi); a historical disconnection, he continues, that has resulted in the 'fragmentation of the subject' (Jameson 1984: 63). He maintains that this 'waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way' (1991: 21) has both resulted in and from the recent transformation of history, and the forms through which we engage with it, into what he calls a 'pastiche'. Citing a number of contemporary cultural products including 'nostalgia films' (e.g. see Lucas's 'American Graffiti', 1973) and 'postmodern historical novels' (e.g. see Doctorow's 'Ragtime', 1975) as examples, he suggests that these historical pastiches are produced through individuals' 'cannibalization of all the styles of the past' (1991: 18) and subsequent incorporation of those fragmented forms into the present. He concludes that, through their decontextualization, generalization and contemporary recombination, these pastiche forms have come to 'no longer [...] represent the historical past, [...] only our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which at once becomes "pop history")' (1991: 25). The result, he maintains, is that a 'history of aesthetic styles [has

replaced] ‘real’ history’ (1991: 20), which has led individuals and their experiences to become further disassociated from any sense of a shared, concrete past.

As outlined by Jameson then, ‘pastiche’ might be seen as being defined by three key features. First, pastiche ‘necessarily involves a turn towards the past’ (Mark 1991: 195), one possible aim of which is the ‘re’-construction of a historically informed sense of self, other and context. Second, as was just suggested, this engagement with the past necessarily involves the active decontextualization and subsequent integration of historical forms within new contexts. Lastly, by actively integrating these pastiches into new contexts, individuals, the pastiche field (i.e. ‘history’) they represent and the contexts of their integration begin exhibiting intertextuality. In other words, and concerning Jameson’s pastiche ‘history’ specifically, by integrating these ‘playful mixtures of previous styles’ (Strauss 1997: 363) into their current contexts, individuals’ everyday fields begin exhibiting the desirable ‘historicity’ of those pastiches. In turn, the forms themselves are imbued with the immediacy, ‘lived’ and potentially fragmented quality of the contemporary world into which they have been integrated. Thus, these pastiches not only take on the characteristics of the contexts into which they are introduced, they also have the potential to infuse those contexts with the perceived quality and possibilities of the fields from which the forms that compose the pastiche were derived.

Of course, while Jameson associates this process, and the pastiches that result, with Post Modernity specifically, a similar process might also be seen as occurring within ‘Late’ or ‘Liquid Modernity’ as depicted by Giddens and Bauman. As was noted in my first chapter, each of these epochs, however related theoretically, are generally seen as being both representative of and products of a similar process of historical, discursive and narrative fragmentation. As I have suggested that these same qualities also in part define the contemporary world within which my informants’ Heathenry and Heathen projects developed, I would posit that a similar process of historical and cultural decontextualization and subsequent integration characterizes ‘the contemporary’ as well. Specifically, due to the perceived absence of coherent narratives of self, other and world, contemporary agents and institutions (like their post, late and liquid modern counterparts) creatively and reflexively construct and articulate alternative fields of forms as part of their ongoing quest for

stable, ‘relevant’ narratives. Described thus, I would like to suggest that, as products of this contemporary world and nineteenth-century European Romanticism, Heathenry, the aesthetic that appeared to define it and the beings produced from both might themselves be approached as pastiches.

Heathenry as Pastiche

As I have indicated, my interlocutors began engaging with Heathenry and developing as Heathens by connecting with and ultimately ‘through’ a flexible field of aesthetically identified forms. While the vast majority of them regularly identified and displayed many of these popular, shared ‘Heathen’ forms (e.g. Mjöllnirs, certain bodies of knowledge, and practices like the symbol related above), they also engaged with forms that, while still ‘Heathen’ (as determined by their historical, cultural and cosmologically formative quality), were also highly individualized.



Figure 20: Rúnatýr Kindred Winterfinding altar with leechcraft supplies

Examples of these forms included Brynn’s ‘leechcraft’ knowledge and supplies (Anglo-Saxon ‘herb lore’ – fig. 20), Erik’s study and use of Old High Franconian linguistic forms and Jonathan’s engagement with historical sources that outlined the techniques used historically in Europe in the production of armor. In each case, they engaged with these forms because they felt that, due to their association with the

Heathen cosmos and historical 'Heathen' peoples and contexts, they both displayed and might potentially impart a desirable 'Heatheness' upon them.

As it was reportedly 'lived' by my informants then, Heathenry appeared to exist as a manifold, aesthetically informed field of decontextualized historical, cultural and cosmological forms they 'in-acted' within the present in order to affect the perceived quality of their contemporary selves. In so being, I would suggest the tradition existed and operated as an interrelated field of pastiches. Specifically, as a field of shared practice, Heathenry was composed of and defined by decontextualized forms carefully identified by individuals with reference to a pastiche aesthetic, which they then intentionally articulated within the present in the pursuit of desirable Heathen qualities. Furthermore, as was 'aesthetically desirable', as part of their development my interlocutors also identified, decontextualized and creatively incorporated additional Heathen forms into their projects that were personally relevant. Thus, in some ways reflecting the 'historical' decontextualization, contemporary incorporation and intertextual contextual transformation outlined by Jameson, by engaging with these manifold Heathen pastiches my informants became able (and were in fact attempting) to identify and manifest Heathen qualities and a formative cosmological potential within their contemporary selves and world.

Importantly, it should be noted that Jameson maintained that our contemporary production of and subsequent engagement with pastiches, particularly a pastiche history, both led to and was helping to exacerbate the 'fragmentation' he suggested fundamental to postmodern experiences of self and world. Before I continue, I would like to suggest that the opposite was in fact true of my interlocutors' construction, adoption and application of these Heathen pastiches. Consider Heathenry's emphasis upon 'roots'. Fundamental to my interlocutors' engagements with and development through these pastiche fields was a newly developed or recently intensified interest in their family and 'cultural' genealogy. Indeed, as has been noted, many of them were initially drawn to the tradition precisely because of the historical connections they believed existed between themselves and the 'historic Heathen' peoples and contexts identified with and through these fields. I would argue that, as a result of this perceived connection, their

construction of and engagement with and through these historical, cultural and cosmological pastiches did not fragment their sense of ‘history’ and self, but rather helped them construct a historically rooted self that was undergoing a process ‘unification’. In other words, by facilitating their engagement with certain historical cultural forms and their own history through ‘desirable’ genealogical practices, these pastiches actually helped them construct a sense of ‘historical self’ unified through its own active instantiation of a history that (while itself a pastiche) was perceived of as increasingly cohesive with every ancestor discovered and honored.

‘Heathen Ethics’ as Pastiche

When asked, nearly all of my informants stated that they believed Heathenry was ‘important’ because, amongst other things, it helped individuals to ‘be good persons’ (Jonathan). Indeed, most suggested that Heathenry had either helped them to become a ‘good’ or ‘better person’, or that central to ‘being Heathen [was] trying to be a good person in whatever you do’ (Katherine). The majority maintained that this quality was not primary a product of and reflected in those practices they undertook in Heathen ‘ceremonial contexts’ such as symbols, but rather those ‘everyday actions’ (Brynn) undertaken as part of their daily living. In other words, their pursuit of the ‘goodness’ they believed realizable through their engagements with and embodiment of their pastiche Heathenry was ‘something you are always doing! It is in every word you say and thing you do [... it’s] not just a hat you put on or take off’ (Erik).

As discussed in Chapter Two, the Heathen virtues were fundamental to my informants’ everyday pursuit of this Heathen ‘excellence’, as were the practices seen as reflecting and infusing those virtues within them, others and their lives. Indeed, Auz once suggested that the Heathen virtues were one of the ‘features of the tradition that many people find appealing [... because they represent] a framework that can direct and inform their behavior while not limiting it.’ As with Heathenry more generally, these virtues were themselves pastiches, being concepts and qualities drawn from a number of historical cultural traditions and contexts and then creatively combined and applied within the present by Heathen authors, kindred communities and individuals in personalized ways. That said, as was the case with the myriad of other forms that appeared to define Heathenry in my informants’ experiences, these

virtues were also aesthetically informed, or ‘shared’. For example, all of my interlocutors had a knowledge of and had engaged with certain Heathen virtue ‘codes’ (i.e. specific collections of virtues associated with particular cultural contexts) such as the ‘Nine Noble Virtues’, and they all maintained they should be ‘incorporated into [your] daily actions’ (Jade) through an active and reflexive process of Heathen study, discussion and ‘doing’.

According to my informants, the definitive cosmological quality being pursued by all Heathens through their ongoing engagement in ‘virtuous’ everyday actions was ‘worth’. This cosmological quality was seen as being so important that ‘as a Heathen all that matters is one’s worth and renown [...] If you don’t have worth no one wants to be around you [...] you basically don’t exist’ (Erik). The reason such an emphasis was placed upon this quality was that it was primarily by building one’s worth, and the ‘renown and word fame that precedes it’ (Erik), that they and other Heathen beings could increase, display and potentially intertwine their luck and *wyrd* with ‘worthy’ others. Most also agreed that this desirable quality was primarily generated by and through those ‘good deeds’ regularly undertaken by them and others that allowed them to display and thus increase their virtue and worth. These included shared practices like *symbol*, the remembering, honoring and oathing practices that often occurred at those events and any action undertaken in a ‘Heathen way’, or a way that displayed Heathen virtue. Interestingly, these were often the very same ‘everyday actions’, Heathen practices and qualities they related at *symbol*s in their ‘boasts’, or self-hails, and in the posts they made on Heathen social networking sites and forums. Indeed, concerning these actions specifically, my interlocutors stressed that one’s deeds, their quality and the personal quality reflected by and instantiated through them, needed to be ‘shared’ with others. This was because ‘if no one sees them, they didn’t happen’ (Erik). Thus, my informants often went into great detail when describing these actions, and the quality they reflected and generated, within these and other similar contexts.

My interlocutors’ own potential Heathen virtuousness and worth, as well as that of those others with whom they interacted, was reportedly identified by them through their ongoing participation in reflexive judgment acts. During a group discussion I held following the Remembrance *Symbol*, Erik explained: ‘As Heathens,

we are very judgmental – we are always judging our own actions and the actions of others [...] Put simply, how you act determines if I will associate with you! You must be a worthy person.’ Though I found Erik’s comment somewhat surprising, his reflexively acknowledged criticality towards himself and others was not unique to him. In fact, upon hearing this observation, the rest of those present that evening, including Jade, Jonathan, Chantal and Katherine, all loudly ‘hailed’ their agreement. Gus once made a similar remark: ‘I don’t think Heathenry is for everyone [...] some people can’t handle how hard we can be on ourselves and each other [...] we can be a little judgmental.’ Auz even reported relying upon these judgments when deciding which individuals to invite to speak at the gatherings he hosts at Raven’s Knoll: ‘When I am considering someone to organize Heathen or Heathen-themed rituals and workshops and I don’t know them, I can always ask others in the community about them [...] everyone is always talking about what everyone else is doing!’

Just as my informants strove to display and increase their virtue and worth through and within a variety of ‘everyday’ contexts and actions-as-practice, they also reported making these judgments in a variety of contexts and with regard to a stunning variety of actions. For example, during a chat I had with Angus about his weight training, he related how he had become ‘increasing critical’ about not only his own training practices and performance at lifting competitions, but the performances of others as well. He continued, ‘I’m really hard on myself and I’m hard on other people too. It is about giving it everything you have! [...] What you do reflects the person you are inside and if you don’t give it everything, you are not being as good as you could be.’ Likewise, while discussing his armor crafting, Jonathan declared, ‘I do the best work I can which sometimes takes a bit longer because I know that other people will judge me by my work, just as I judge them by the quality of their work. I want each piece to reflect who I am [...] and] increase my worth!’ So described, in addition to actively evaluating the potentially virtuous and worthy quality of their own actions and selves, as well as those reported and displayed by the Heathen others (human and non-human alike) with whom they interacted, they also regularly evaluated the quality of those non-Heathen human others they encountered. These judgments then influenced how they perceived of, interacted with and acted towards those others and, I would suggest, their own developing selves. Thus, as part of their

aesthetic and, I would argue, ‘ethical’ reorientation as and into Heathen beings, they began judging the ‘quality of a man by the quality of his actions’ (Jonathan) with reference to certain Heathen cosmological criteria. This perceived quality then determined if and how they engaged with those potentially formative others.

With this in mind, I would like to suggest that, as part of their Heathen development, my informants began reflexively engaging in an active and ongoing process of ethical striving and evaluation. The aim of this process was their identification and alteration of their personal quality (as reflected in their ‘deeds’) towards the realization of an increasingly ‘worthy’, or ‘excellent’ Heathen self. As was aesthetically desirable, in the majority of cases it appeared that the Heathen virtues came to serve as the criteria with reference to which their striving for this worth was undertaken. That said, and like the aesthetic field through and with reference to which they encountered and adopted these criteria, I would argue that the field of virtuous ‘doing’, ‘considering’ and ‘becoming’ that came to define their quest for this worth existed not as a strict framework, but a flexible pastiche. For example, their developing worth was dependent upon their perceived instantiation of Heathen ‘virtuousness’ as defined by the Heathen virtues. However, while all of my informants had knowledge of these virtues and stressed their daily application, they did not exist as a unified ‘moral framework’. Rather, they existed as collections of desirable Heathen forms and qualities defined by and made sensible through the Heathen aesthetic, which my informants then actively combined, referenced and ‘in-acted’ in individualized ways while ‘living’ their pastiche Heathenry. As a result, the ‘field’ of Heathen virtuousness they developed and employed while attempting to realize worth was similarly personalized; a pastiche ‘Heathen ethics’ that, while operating with reference to/through aesthetic criteria and forms, they individualized in personally relevant ways in and through their ‘everyday’ actions and contexts.³⁸

Consider, for example, Jonathan and his ‘armor-smithing’ business (fig. 21). Once while discussing his work, Jonathan suggested that every piece he fashions has to be the ‘best it can be’ because the perceived quality of his craftsmanship directly reflected and affected his quality as a Heathen being. I would argue that, due to the

³⁸ Their ethics were not only a pastiche of historical and cultural Heathen forms, but also those criteria that helped define ‘excellence’ in the wider social context within which those ethics operated. Indeed, as Erik and Auz both stressed, ‘Heathenry has to operate within the world, not outside of it’ (Erik).

emphasis he had come to place upon his crafting in both his daily living and personal Heathenry, those crafting acts and crafted objects had become infused with ethical qualities and implications. In other words, his personal ‘ethical’ striving for and recognition of Heathen excellence had become tied to and in part realized through these acts and objects, due to them being fundamental to his pastiche Heathenry and Heathen project. Thus, for him these ‘crafting practices’ and crafted objects became both ‘ethical’ means and ends that influenced and reflected his striving for and realization of Heathen cosmological ‘excellence’.³⁹ In so doing, his becoming as and into an aestheticized, ‘worthy’ cosmological being became connected with and in part dependent upon his ability to manifest, judge and alter his Heathen virtue and worth through his everyday smithing practices and products.



Figure 21: Jonathan D. armorsmithing and woodworking space

I would argue that Angus’s weight training might be approached similarly. Over the course of my research, Angus was training as a ‘strong man’; training, he explained, that was ‘hard on the body and hard on the mind. You have to really want it and you have to be tough.’ Interestingly, aside from occasionally ‘taking part in stuff with Rúnatýr’ and ‘always being hospitable to everyone all the time’, he told me that his personal Heathenry and daily striving for and realization of a personal Heathen virtue and worth had come to revolve almost exclusively around this training. In other words, his Heathenry and questing project had become first and

³⁹ By becoming ‘ethical’ I believe these daily actions were transformed into Heathen ‘practices’, as they began potentially influencing Jonathan’s entrance into the Heathen web of wyrd and, in so doing, his ‘becoming’ as a Heathen being.

foremost about ‘being strong and doing and being the best I can [...] that is what I aim to do when I am lifting.’ Towards this end, he developed and began employing a pastiche ethical field that allowed him to identify, judge, react to and affect the qualities he believed were reflected in and attainable through those practices. For example, if, with reference to his Heathen ethics, he decided that his and others’ training/lifting practices displayed virtuous qualities like ‘strength’, ‘effort’ and ‘dedication’, the virtue and worth of those practices and individuals were affirmed and increased. Thus, similar to Jonathan and his smithing, Angus’s pursuit of physical strength, and the practices that allowed him to increase and display that strength, became infused with and generative of ethical qualities and cosmologically formative implications.

So described, the active and reflexive construction and application, in practice, of highly personalized yet aesthetically informed pastiche ethics was seemingly fundamental to my interlocutors’ fashioning into desirable Heathen beings. Specifically, in order to become beings with desirable Heathen qualities and formative cosmological potential, my informants began increasingly undertaking and evaluating their own and others’ deeds, qualities and selves with reference to an ‘everyday’, personally relevant field of Heathen ‘excellence’. In so doing, their ‘aesthetic Heathen projects’ simultaneously became ‘ethical Heathen projects’ through which they began ‘making’ themselves into and as beings whose daily practices, contexts and selves became means employable in the development and identification of their and others’ virtuousness and worth. Thus, through their everyday ethical striving as and becoming into worthy Heathen beings, my interlocutors actively and reflexively transformed themselves into ‘human beings under a set of descriptions, criteria, and commitments put into place by means of successive performative acts [...] that] render them in the first instance as ethical subjects’ (Lambek 2013: 845). However, they did not become subjects to some externalized moral framework, but rather an aestheticized ethics primarily developed and employed in and through their own daily practices and acts of critical reflection.

A Heathen 'Ethics of the Ordinary'

Now that the pastiche quality of my informants' Heathenry and proposed Heathen ethics has been explored, I would like to briefly return to the virtue-centered ethical perspectives I introduced earlier in the chapter. This is because I believe my informants' ethics shared a number of important characteristics with those ethics, particularly Lambek's 'ordinary ethics'. For example, my interlocutors' pastiche ethical fields were 'ordinary' in that they were primarily developed and employed by them within everyday contexts through ongoing practices and evaluations. Likewise, they were 'ethical' in that they saw my informants' adoption of and daily striving with reference to certain criteria in the pursuit of contextualized, desirable qualities. Thus, similar in some ways to Lambek's ethics, my informants' were developed, employed and instantiated by them within their everyday contexts and actions-as-practices towards the realization of personal 'excellence'. That said, I would argue that their ethics manifested these key characteristics differently from Lambek's. For example, one of the defining qualities of his ordinary ethics was that it operated implicitly within and through individuals' everyday performative practices and judgments. As described by my informants, however, their pastiche ethics had been actively and reflexively developed and applied by them in an ongoing attempt to identify and affect their cosmological quality. As such, their pastiche ethics were not implicit, but rather operated as an *explicit* ethical disposition that functioned similarly to Aristotle's 'phronesis'. In other words, they became fields of reasoned practice through which my informants increasingly identified, pursued and attained a 'virtuous' Heathen worth in personally and contextually relevant/dependent ways. I would argue that this reflexive, explicit and active quality transformed their ethics from an 'ordinary ethics' into an 'ethics of the ordinary' through which they began fashioning their contemporary world into a site infused with formative ethical potential where their ethical Heathen projects might successfully occur.

For example, as was highlighted above, one defining feature of my informants' pastiche Heathen fields (including their ethics) was their 'lived' quality. Specifically, as part of their Heathen projects, they actively and creatively developed and began engaging with, within and 'through' a matrix of personalized, yet identifiably Heathen fields in an attempt to realize certain qualities within and

through their everyday contexts and practices. Erik stressed that this perpetual process of ethical ‘doing’ and ‘becoming’ was extremely important, as ‘everything you do changes your worth’. In other words, as with the ‘frith’ discussed in Chapter Two, their Heathen virtue and worth were not seen as static, achieved states, but rather qualities that were being (and had to be) perpetually achieved. As such, every action undertaken, being encountered and context acted within necessarily became, within their experiences, sites where they would either increase or decrease their worth depending upon the reflexively perceived presence of virtuous qualities. Described in this way, their Heathen ethics seemingly became the primary means they employed in an attempt to direct their realization of the unstable cosmological qualities necessary to their Heathen development. Thus, while their aesthetic reorientation helped them perceive of and manifest the Heathen cosmos within their contemporary experiences, their Heathen ethics potentially effected an ‘ethical reorientation’ that helped them perceive of and make perpetually realizable a Heathen cosmological excellence within and through their world, actions and selves.

Consider once again Angus’s weight training. As you will recall, as part of his Heathenry Angus had begun increasingly employing his strength training practices to realize, illustrate and increase his virtue and worth. In so doing, I would suggest that any context, being and action he began associating with that strength training became similarity infused with the ethical and cosmological potential of those ethically prioritized practices. In other words, by highlighting and emphasizing the ethical potential of his everyday ‘lifting’ practices, Angus’s ethical disposition allowed him to also reflexively identify and realize the ethical qualities of the contexts and ‘self’ within and through which those practices, that strength and his worth was illustrated and increased. Angus himself hinted at this process once when he explained how his strength training had begun changing how he viewed it, himself and the world:

Now if I see something big and heavy while I’m walking around Ottawa I’ll ask myself “Can I lift it? Am I strong enough?” Sometimes I try! Once I tried to lift a concrete bollard in an abandoned parking lot. It tore my arms up, but I tried my hardest and that is what matters. I’ve come to look at things according to their weight. I relate to the world by how much it weighs and if I can lift it. [... The world] has become my gym.

Thus, through his continued, active and reflexive participation in these ‘ethicized’ strength practices, he began infusing the everyday actions, qualities and contexts he associated with them with the ethical and cosmological qualities and implications of the practices themselves. In other words, I would suggest that any space that featured objects that Angus believed he could potentially use to instantiate his own virtuous, worthy strength came to exhibit the same cosmological and ethical potentiality as his strength and strength practices, as well as the ‘Angus’ he was actively striving to construct through them.

I would suggest that Katherine’s work might be approached similarly. In addition to owning and operating an independent massage therapy business in Ottawa, Katherine also taught the subject at a local college. Describing her career, she suggested that the knowledge and skills she had developed and regularly employed within these work contexts allowed her to illustrate and increase her Heathen worth, as she believed it was ‘virtuous’ to have and display ‘pride’ in her abilities, as well as ‘make others feel better’. Reflecting Jonathan’s approach to his own armor crafting business, she explained how every massage she gave and every technique she taught was the ‘best it can be because [they] can and probably will be used to heal someone’. As described by her then, her healing practices, as well as the knowledge, skills and contexts she associated with them, had become embedded with ethical significance and implications, and as such, fundamental to her Heathenry and Heathen development. Interestingly, in order to keep those healing skills ‘sharp’, she explained how she had ‘[come] to approach all the people I meet as a mass of muscles and bones [... that] I may be able to help function better by doing what I do for a living’. In other words, she actively employed her ‘virtuous’ knowledge within not only ‘work’ contexts, but throughout her daily world as well. Reflecting again on the ‘ordinary’ quality of her ethics, I would suggest that every context within which she applied or became potentially able to apply her healing knowledge and skills became infused with the same ethical, cosmological Heathen qualities and potential as the healing practices themselves. As with Angus and Jonathan then, through her ongoing participation in explicit and reflexive acts of ethical striving and evaluation, Katherine infused her daily practices, contexts and virtuous, ‘healing’ self with cosmological and ethical potential.

Thus, by developing and applying an ‘ordinary’ pastiche Heathen ethics when evaluating the quality of their ‘lived’ contexts, selves and actions, my informants’ contemporary world and experiences were ‘made’ *potentially* ethical ‘in a Heathen way’.⁴⁰ Specifically, their reflexively identified and actively undertaken virtuous actions-as-practices began generating an expanding matrix of ethical, cosmological sites where they could realize and influence their unstable Heathen quality within their contemporary world. In so doing, their ethics came to function as technologies through which my informants, their world and their actions became both the subjects and the objects of their ethical striving.

Private Actions, Public Practices and Shared Projects

Considering the highly personalized and reflexive quality of my informants’ ethics and ethical projects, it is conceivable that, unlike Durkheim’s morality and even Lambek’s ordinary ethics, theirs could potentially exist and operate independently from the ethical fields of others. Specifically, as their ethics were based upon and employed through personalized acts of virtuous ‘doing’ and ‘considering’, it is feasible that they could further their (and their world’s) development into and as ‘ethical’ sites of cosmological manifestation and instantiation solely through their own reflexive, ethical striving. In fact, as has already been noted, most of my informants’ initial development as Heathens had occurred in precisely this way. In so doing, they illustrated that ‘Heathens don’t need to be a member of a community or necessarily do “social things” to develop spiritually’ (Auz). Rather, it appears that they need only to construct and employ an aesthetically informed Heathen ethics that allows them to identify and realize desirable and formative cosmological qualities within and through their everyday world. Why is it then that my informants strove to regularly engage in practices that allowed them to perform, directly or indirectly, their cosmological quality around ethical Heathen others? For example, if Angus’s worth was realized through his strength training, and, through that training, he had transformed the world into an expanding site where his worthy development could occur, why did he attend Rúnatýr events? Further, why did the ‘unaffiliated’ or

⁴⁰ I would stress the precariousness of these qualities. As with frith and their own worth, the ethical, cosmological and aesthetic potentiality of these selves, contexts and actions were not fixed or ‘achieved’, but rather only ever ‘being striven for’ and ‘being achieved.’

‘solitary’ Heathens I spoke with who had ‘no interest in being in a community’ (Anonymous) attend Heathen and pan-Pagan festivals where they took part in symbols and blóts, as well as regularly engage with Heathen others online? In other words, if, as was also the case with the Heathen aesthetic, their ethics allowed them to ‘ethicize’ their self, world and the others that inhabited it, why did my informants recount and perform their ethics and ethical qualities in contexts with present Heathen human others?

First, I would suggest that the aesthetically desirable process of individualized ethical construction, application and ‘projection’ fundamental to their projects actually put those projects at risk. In developing and applying their pastiche ethics, they were in constant risk of either creatively incorporating forms and qualities into those fields that were not ‘Heathen’, or of articulating their ethics in actions, judgments and contexts that were not ethical in a ‘Heathen way’.⁴¹ For example, was Angus’s ethical emphasis upon ‘strength’ and regular instantiation of that strength in ‘everyday strength practices’ like weight training virtuous and worthy in a ‘Heathen way’? Likewise, was Katherine’s and Jonathan’s work, the sites where that work occurred and the results of those work practices adequately ‘ethical’ and Heathen? While they were according to those individuals’ pastiche Heathenry and ethics, it must not be forgotten that those fields had been creatively constructed from a wider, aesthetically distinct field of forms all of my informants could identify and wanted to be identified with. Further, their identification of and with that field was fundamental to their Heathen projects, as the selves seemingly the aim of those projects were dependent upon their active and reflexive manifestation and instantiation of that field and its potentiality within their contemporary world. As such, I would argue that, by actively engaging in or recounting instances that illustrated their ongoing ethical Heathen striving and becoming at shared events like symbols, my informants could not only identify and instantiate their own ‘Heathen’ quality, they also presented that quality (and the practices, judgments, fields, contexts and selves that informed them) to ethical others for evaluation. In other words, these

⁴¹ I did observe instances of this ‘aesthetic drift’ during my research. For example, I knew a number of Heathens who, despite the ‘freedom’ afforded by Heathenry, had either been labelled as or had labelled other Heathens as ‘Wicca-trú’ or ‘Heathens in Name Only’ due to the perceived ‘un-Heatheness’ of their actions and qualities.

shared practices represented opportunities for them to have the aesthetic and ethical quality of their everyday selves, practices and world ‘witnessed’, questioned and affirmed by aestheticized and ethicized Heathen others.

I would argue that their participation in these events also helped them further infuse their everyday world and practices with ethical, formative potential and cosmological potentiality. Specifically, through sharing narratives or objects that depicted their everyday ethical striving, and then having the qualities that resulted observed, affirmed and reinforced, the ethical cosmological potentiality infused into those contexts by those practices were similarly reinforced. These sharing and affirmation practices then exposed the witnessing agents to the ‘opened up’ potentiality of those everyday practices and contexts. For example, at the Remembrance Symbol Shane honored the unions because of the perceived virtue of their recent protest at Ottawa’s Parliament Hill. In the process, he presented a narrative that depicted individuals he identified (with reference to his pastiche ethics) as being ‘worthy’ engaging in an act he believed ‘virtuous’ within the everyday space of downtown Ottawa. In other words, his narrative illustrated to the others present how being an active member of a union might be seen as being illustrative and generative of desirable Heathen cosmological qualities, as well as how, through engaging in ‘ethical’ union practices, Shane had (and others might) transformed protest actions and spaces into sites and mechanisms of ethical and cosmological manifestation and formation. Thus, while those present at the symbol may not have immediately recognized the ‘Heathen’ potential of Ottawa, union actions and union members prior to the event, upon hearing Shane’s narrative they were exposed to the ethical and cosmological potentiality of those contexts, practices and beings. So described, these shared practices represented opportunities when my interlocutors could manifest, observe, have reinforced and possibly combine their ‘unfolding’ ethical Heathen cosmological fields with others by experiencing the ‘lived’ ethical and cosmological quality of those ethical, aestheticized others’ everyday worlds.

In addition, I would suggest that their participation in the honoring acts that generally composed these events provided my informants with opportunities to actively observe and thus increase their ethical quality. As mentioned earlier, the ‘self’ in Heathenry was seen as being defined by the quality of its deeds – that is, the

more ‘virtuous’ the deeds, the more worthy the ‘doer’. However, as Erik and Jade both often noted, those deeds did not occur ‘unless they [were] witnessed.’ Thus, as the majority of these ‘worthy’ deeds occurred in everyday contexts away from witnessing human Heathen others, my informants often composed ‘boasting’ narratives that allowed them to depict their virtuous deeds and striving selves to themselves and ethical Heathen others at these events. For example, at the Remembrance Symbol Brynn presented craft objects to those present that allowed her to display her daily ‘strength of character’. Likewise, Erik shared a poem that showcased not only his ‘skaldic’ (poetic) skills, but also his knowledge of and engagement with the kindred virtues, which he himself helped compose and ‘continues to uphold’ as the kindred Lawspeaker. These boasting objects and narratives allowed my informants to display, to themselves and others, key aspects of their Heathenry, their Heathen ethics, the means employed by them in articulating those ethics and the qualities they believed realized through them. When the witnessing agents present then ‘hailed’, or verbally ‘rais[ed] them up by respecting them’ (Jade), the quality of the narratives (material or verbal), narrated being and their pastiche fields were affirmed. Of course, the ‘toasts’ and ‘hails’ made at these events allowed those present to highlight the previously observed virtue and worth of another as well. For example, at one symbol I attended I witnessed participants toast Shane for ‘supporting Brynn’ (Katherine) in her illness, Katherine ‘for helping Rya move [...] it was so kind!’ (Jade) and various gods and ancestors for the ‘virtuous’ actions they had undertaken in their lives – e.g. Rya’s toast to Thor at symbol.

Thus, it appeared that my informants’ willing, reflexive and regular participation in practices with and around ethical Heathen others allowed them to monitor and affect the quality and focus of their own ethical projects, practices and dispositions. That said, I would suggest that there was another dimension to these ethical ‘performances’ as well. As has been discussed, my informants believed that ‘everything you do has a very real impact upon you and the world around you’ (Jonathan). As such, they stressed it was important to ‘always be aware and responsible for what you say and do’ (Erik). This concern was in part the result of the perceived interconnectivity of the Heathen cosmos within which they were all attempting to reside, as well as the formative power they believed Heathen

cosmological beings like themselves exerted over both their own selves and others. Specifically, the Heathen cosmos was seen as being animated by a ‘web of wyrd’ within which the ‘fates’, or cosmological potential, of all associated, ‘connected’ beings were intertwined through shared practices. Within this associative web, it was important that all beings act virtuously and worthily, as the quality of a single being’s actions could bring either ‘doom’ (Jade) or ‘renown’ (Erik) to those with whom they were connected. As depicted by my interlocutors, within this cosmos individuals’ ethical development not only effected an ethical, worthy self, but also affected the ethical development of those others with whom they had been connected in practice (and vice versa). In so doing, like the ethical, aesthetic fields they employed as part of this development, their ethical Heathen projects came to exist as pastiches actively fashioned through their own everyday practices and those of ethical others.

With this key characteristic of their projects in mind, I would suggest that their participation in these performative, shared practices allowed my informants to illustrate, and have illustrated to them, that they and others were ‘cosmologically good to be with’. By providing them and others with a space within which they could recount everyday instances when they had acted virtuously, while also actively engaging in ethically desirable practices such as honoring, these events allowed individuals to illustrate that they were consistently striving, in some identifiable way, to realize desirable cosmological qualities and an ‘excellent’ Heathen self. Further, by facilitating individuals’ sharing of ‘striving narratives’, these performative spaces also helped them, ‘check for’ and, if required, ‘correct’ the potential un-virtuousness of those others with whom they were connected. In so doing, their engagement with and within these spaces provided attendees the chance to directly affect their worth and ‘fate’ through either questioning or affirming the quality of other participants. Importantly, by willingly and reflexively engaging in these acts of evaluation, reinforcement and ‘correction’, my interlocutors also became able to observe and affect the quality of the Heathen cosmos itself as it was manifested by and reflected in the quality of those present. Thus, these events and event spaces allowed my informants to perform and increase their virtuousness and worth, while also entering into the Heathen cosmos and subsequently acting upon the formative influence of the ethical Heathen others with whom they were connected within it.

So described, as part of their ethical fashioning into and as worthy Heathen beings, my informants engaged in practices that not only allowed them to observe, judge and act upon their own developing selves, but also submit those selves to others for ethical evaluation. In so doing, I would posit that those practices, which included toasting, boasting and online posting, served as instances of what Foucault referred to as ‘parrhesia’ – that is, verbal and nonverbal practices through which my interlocutors expressed their ‘personal relationship to truth [...] because [they recognized] truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as [themselves])’ (Foucault 2001: 19–20). Specifically, my interlocutors willingly and reflexively presented their deeds, aesthetically informed ethics, striving selves and transforming world to those with whom they were connected in order to show those others that they were virtuous and worthy, as was their formative influence. In the process, they also actively made themselves subjects to the ethical evaluations and formative influence of those others. Importantly, this practice of actively placing oneself under the ethical ‘authority’ and influence of others is, while not ‘unique’, certainly not a widely observed practice within many contemporary traditions. For example, referring to the ‘New Age’ specifically, Heelas explains:

[The New Age] denies any value to *all* those authoritative voices which speak from beyond the in-dwelling spiritual substance [...] Ethical decision-making becomes a matter of heading one’s ‘intuition’ (to use a favored word), thereby ‘getting in touch with’ the sole source of truth and wisdom, in-dwelling spirituality. (1994: 105[original emphasis])

My informants’ ethical quality and development, on the other hand, seemed at least in part to be a product of the favorable evaluations and resulting influence of others. That said, it should be noted that unlike other ‘shared’ moralities, including those proposed by Durkheim and Foucault, their presenting themselves to these ‘powerful’ (in both a Heathen and Foucaultian sense) evaluating others was undertaken willingly and reflexively. Further, the evaluations themselves were not made according to an overarching ‘truth’ or framework of ‘rightness’, but rather manifold and highly personalized fields of desirable, aestheticized striving willingly conflated by volitional beings in a shared attempt at ‘becoming’.

One possible example of this process of shared ethical striving and becoming was the incident that resulted in Chris’s apology at the Remembrance Symbol.

Having once been closely associated with Rúnatýr, the personal cosmological quality realized by Chris through her everyday application of her ethics had at one time necessarily affected not only her own quality and development, but also that of other kindred members. As such, when Chris was deemed by those others as having actively misapplied her ethic, the ‘negative worth’ that resulted was seen by them as harmfully affecting their wyrd, the ‘fate’ of those non-kindred others with whom they associated and so on, until the very fabric of the Heathen cosmos was altered. In order to prevent Chris and her misdeed from causing any additional ‘damage’, she was forbidden to associate with Rúnatýr and those with whom Rúnatýr associated: her connectedness with those influential others had been severed. After taking time to re-evaluate and affect her ethically striving self, her practices and their quality, Chris reappeared at the Remembrance Symbel and presented her reformulated ethics for evaluation. Specifically, she related how she recognized her fault and had taken steps to actively alter the quality of her multiple Heathen pastiches, the striving actions prioritized within them and, by proxy, herself. Once these changes and changed self had been observed, affirmed and reinforced by those present, Chris was once again allowed to connect her ethical, influential self with theirs.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have suggested that, as part of their development as and into Heathen beings, my informants came to construct and apply a pastiche Heathen ‘ethics of the ordinary’. Specifically, by embedding themselves in an ongoing process of ‘ethical’ everyday practice and reflexive self judgment, they began increasingly identifying, pursuing and realizing ‘excellent’ Heathen qualities. In so doing, their reorienting aesthetic Heathen projects simultaneously became transformative ethical Heathen projects. Through these, they began instantiating and increasing their personal Heathen worth within and through an expanding field of contemporary, daily contexts and practices infused with formative cosmological potential. By then depicting their ethical striving, and the ‘ethicized’ worlds within which it occurred, around similarly becoming others, my interlocutors ‘opened’ their ethical projects, selves and worlds to the influence of those others. In this way, their realization of selves they perceived of as aesthetically, ethically and cosmological

desirable 'in a Heathen way' became products of their own everyday ethical striving and the perceived and reported striving of others. In my next chapter, entitled 'Playfulness and Performance', I shall discuss the process of cosmological 'opening up', playful 'conflation' and performative instantiation that I would argue made this formative cosmological connectedness, everyday ethical striving and Heathen becoming possible.

Chapter V: Playfulness and Performance

The Procession of Nerthus 2012

Since the establishment of Nerthus's vé earlier that morning, there had been a noticeable tension in the air at Raven's Knoll. That tension, however, suddenly and palpably transformed into a dreadful excitement when, without warning and in no more than a whisper, Brynn approached Rúnatýr Kindred's Midgard Gathering enclave and announced 'Nerthus is coming'. Less than an hour later, nearly twenty of us had gathered in a loose group under the searing May sun, in sight of the small pond known at the Knoll as the 'Sacred Well' (fig. 22).



Figure 22: The Sacred Well of Raven's Knoll

It was from that seemingly innocuous-looking body of water that Nerthus, the primal Germanic Earth goddess, would soon emerge. Once everyone had arrived, Brynn, who had donned an ornate 'ceremonial gown' for the event, silently left our company along with Annick and disappeared into the tall reeds that obscured the Well's shores from our view. Moments later, Annick reappeared carrying a ceramic pitcher that had been filled with oily, black water drawn from the Well. As she approached us, head down and eyes fixed upon the pitcher's contents, Brynn suddenly yelled 'Hail Holy Mother Nerthus!' from the water's edge. A short time later, she emerged from the reeds carrying a small, covered wooden box under her arm. It was within that box

that Nerthus's freshly washed idol, and thus, it was hoped, Nerthus herself, would reside for the duration of her three-day visit to Raven's Knoll.

Walking past our group, Brynn carefully placed the covered idol atop the low, wide, brightly decorated cart that would soon form the focus of our company. Once the idol had been secured atop the cart, Brynn then asked us to form a somber line. With the procession assembled, she took the pitcher from Annick and began slowly and deliberately washing the hands and faces of those present, in each instance quietly repeating 'clean of body, clean of mind' as she worked. As part of our 'purification', we were also asked to remove all 'forbidden articles' from our person, including anything that might be considered 'iron' (e.g. weapons or other 'technology' including mobile phones) and, most importantly, any forms representative of any cosmological being other than Nerthus. Once we were all properly 'prepared', Brynn gave the pitcher back to Annick and then took her place in front of Nerthus's cart. With the procession at last complete, Jade, herself dressed in an ornate gown, moved to the head of our company and began loudly calling: 'Hail, Hail, Hail! Holy Mother Nerthus comes through the countryside!' The Procession of Nerthus had begun (fig. 23).



Figure 23: The Nerthus Procession with anthropologist (photo by and reproduced with permission from Shane H.)

As we made our way along the winding track that connected the Sacred Well to Nerthus's vé, most walked with their heads and eyes lowered, particularly Erik and Jonathan who, as Nerthus's 'sacrificial oxen', strained under the weight of her cart.



Figure 24: Raven's Knoll gnome home

Soon we left the main track and turned towards the largest of the Raven's Knoll 'gnome homes', or wight offering areas. As we passed the small mound (fig. 24), which had been decorated with colorful, grinning gnome statues and offerings of food, drink and money, Jade yelled, 'Hail the Landvættir! Servants of Holy Mother Nerthus!' Then, turning towards the nearby 'Rainbow Tree' (a small tree that has grown in a low arch parallel to the path), she continued, 'Hail the Rainbow Tree that brings others into this world!'⁴² Turning again, this time towards the monolithic Raven's Knoll 'standing stone' (fig. 25), Jade shouted, 'Hail the standing stone which was erected by the folk to show our hands and blood!'⁴³

⁴² Jade was referring to the 'Bifröst' or 'Rainbow Bridge' that connects Miðgarðr and Ásgarðr within the Heathen Nine Worlds cosmology.

⁴³ The stone, erected by the 'Ár nDraíocht Féin: A Druid Fellowship, Inc.', is decorated with the handprints of those who helped 'raise it'. The prints were made with red ochre, which has the appearance of blood on the stone's face.



Figure 25: Raven's Knoll standing stone

Rejoining the main track, we soon came upon the tent of Jeff and Mandy, whose child, according to the local scuttlebutt, had been conceived at the Midgard Gathering two years before. Passing their enclave, Jade remarked, 'Behold! A child conceived under the gaze of Holy Mother Nerthus!' Soon our procession entered and momentarily halted within the central Raven's Knoll camping space, where a number of Midgard Gathering attendees approached, 'hailed' Nerthus and placed offerings of drink, flowers and money near her idol.

Following another short trek, our procession soon arrived at its terminus – the mouth of the large, oval vé that had been established in Nerthus's honor earlier that morning. Removing the box from the cart and carrying it between the two wooden posts that marked the space's entrance, Brynn carefully placed the covered idol upon a stump that had been stationed at the base of the tall, 'Great Tree' that stood opposite the vé opening. Katherine (who, like Jade and Brynn, had donned special dress for the event) and Jade then gathered the assorted offerings from atop the cart and gave them to Brynn, who then took them into the space and placed them around the base of Nerthus's 'altar' (fig. 26). With Nerthus and her offerings at last in place, Brynn exited the space and quietly welcomed the sizable crowd (thirty-one in total, including seven children) that had gathered near the vé.



Figure 26: The Nerthus idol and altar



Figure 27: Nerthus Procession cart with banners

Katherine then called out the names of the communities whose banners and shields had accompanied Nerthus during her Procession (fig. 27), as well as provided those present with a brief history of Nerthus and her ‘many processions through the land’, both historically in Europe and contemporarily at Raven’s Knoll. Once Katherine had finished, Brynn stepped forward and began outlining the ‘rules’ participants would need to follow while in ‘Nerthus’s Hall’. She continued, ‘Your hands and face must be washed with water from the Sacred Well [...] you must also purify your

convictions; you must rid yourself of iron; you may not bring any other gods into her vé and no one may cast their eyes upon or touch the idol.’ Scanning the crowd, she concluded gravely, ‘To go against these conditions is to break frith and [Nerthus] will leave!’

Those who had gathered were then asked to approach the mouth of the vé where Katherine, using water poured from the ceramic pitcher, washed their hands and foreheads. Brynn then asked each to ‘promise’ to observe the rules of the space and ‘maintain frith while in Nerthus’s Hall’. Once they had agreed, each participant was then given a flower or an apple slice to offer Nerthus as a gift and was then given entrance into the space. After everyone had taken a seat along the inner boundary of the vé (demarcated by a rope that had been strung between the nine wooden posts that formed the space’s ovoid shape), Brynn invited all present to ‘unload [their] hearts to Mother Nerthus’. One by one, participants began approaching the altar and the small, covered box that sat atop it. Some took a seat on the ground in front of the altar and quietly spoke with Nerthus, while others, including Auz, executed a full prostration, lying outstretched and face down upon the ground in the idol’s shadow. Erik, upon making his offering, fell to the ground and began yelling in Old High Franconian, while Katherine, approaching the idol crying, fell to her knees and let out a piercing scream. However they approached and addressed the god, each participant was or soon became visibly emotional, with most weeping as they returned to their seat. After everyone had engaged with Nerthus, and a moment of silence had been observed, Brynn slowly stood and reminded us all that the space would remain ‘sacred’ until Nerthus ‘tir[ed] of men’ on Monday and departed. With that, Brynn left the vé and we all shortly followed after her.

As I sat chatting with my friends early Monday morning, it appeared that the dread that had marked Nerthus’s arrival two days prior had returned to see her back to the Well. Indeed, in addition to many of my interlocutors relating how they had experienced ‘powerful, dreadful dreams’ (Brynn) and had ‘heard voices and saw faces in the trees’ (Erik) the night before, others reported feeling something powerful and ‘potentially dangerous’ in the air that morning. In fact, Katherine and Brynn approached me late in the morning and cautioned me to ‘stay away from the Well today and be careful during the Procession’. When I asked why, Brynn continued, ‘I

have a bad feeling that something might happen to you this morning during the Procession.’ With these admittedly disconcerting warnings and experiences still ringing in my ears, two hours later I joined the rest of those who had taken part in the ‘Arrival Procession’ at the mouth of the vé to bid Nerthus farewell. A short time later, the ‘Departure Procession’ began when, following a moment of silence, Brynn loudly thanked Nerthus for her ‘visit and many blessings’. She then entered the vé and placed the idol, and the manifold offerings that had been made to it over the weekend, into the fold of her dress. Exiting the space, she placed each upon the cart. With this, we reformed the processional line and, with Jade resuming her ‘heralding’ duties and Erik and Jonathan once again becoming Nerthus’s oxen, our company began the long walk back to the Sacred Well.

As we once again traversed the sun-scorched ribbon of gravel and sand that connected the vé and Sacred Well, the procession was quiet – eerily so. After what seemed like an eternity, Jade halted our exhausted group on a bit of track that ran parallel to the Well. While we all stood there in utter silence, Brynn lifted the idol before her and, departing from our company, disappeared into the wall of foliage that surrounded the pond. Moments later, Jade and Katherine carefully collected the assorted offerings from atop the cart, most notably ‘Bob the Breadman’, and followed Brynn out of sight.⁴⁴ In an interview I conducted shortly after the event with Brynn, she explained what had happened once all three had disappeared into the reeds: Leaving Jade and Katherine on the path to ‘guard the entrance to the Well’, Brynn carried the idol and offerings to the water’s edge. Kneeling, she then asked and thanked Nerthus for her blessings as she ‘destroyed and submerged Bob’ and the other offerings into the pond’s murky depths. With the gifts given, Brynn then uncovered the Nerthus idol and washed it once again in the Well before placing her back into the covered box. Back on the road, the sound of screaming and weeping was suddenly audible through the dense reeds – ‘Bob’ was dead and Nerthus had departed. Shortly afterwards, Brynn, Jade and Katherine all emerged back into view, each visibly distressed. Annick, Erik and Rya rushed towards them and, holding them, helped them rejoin our group. With the Procession concluded, we all slowly

⁴⁴ I shall discuss ‘Bob’ – a half-meter long human analogue made of bread who represented a ‘human sacrifice’ (Brynn) – at length below.

and quietly made our way back to the vé, where Brynn thanked Nerthus once again as Katherine uprooted and then tossed the nine vé posts to the ground.

Introduction

The above excerpt depicts the second of two ‘Procession of Nerthus’ I had the pleasure of participating in while in Canada. Now in its fifth year, the Procession is the focus of the Heathen-themed ‘Midgard Gathering’ (fig. 28) festival held at Raven’s Knoll over the Victoria Day weekend in May.



Figure 28: Midgard Gathering 2011 welcome sign with runes

Of the many practices I observed over the course of my fieldwork, this event was one of my favorites. This was because, while defined by a number of singular characteristics, it also shared a number of important similarities with the many other practices I observed. In so doing, I believe it was particularly illustrative of a process and quality I would argue undergirded all of my interlocutors’ ethical striving practices and formative experiences, as well as their quests to become ‘Heathen’.

For example, while I observed a number of practices that involved idols, including those Hail & Horn events that revolved around the Odin god pole and the many Rúnatýr practices (shared and private) that involved the kindred’s Freya and Freyr idols, the Procession was the only event that featured an idol that could not be directly engaged with by participants. The one exception was Brynn, who, as the Procession gyðja (‘priestess’) and guardian of the idol, was tasked with its ongoing care and protection. According to Brynn, this was because ‘that is how it was

historically, plus [Nerthus] is not the kind of god you just interact with. She is powerful and very dangerous.’ Further, though my informants often became emotional at shared events (e.g. the symbol related at the beginning of my previous chapter) and generally reported ‘feeling power’ during their private interactions with Heathen beings, most agreed that their experiences of and at the Procession were by far the most intense. Erik continued, ‘It is so intense that sometimes it is scary and overwhelming [... Raven’s Knoll] is a powerful place and Nerthus is a force of nature.’ Lastly, as a weekend-long event, the celebration of Nerthus’s visitation lasted longer than any other practice I witnessed aside from Hail & Horn, which was designed to be ‘one long, three-day ritual’ (Erik).

These characteristics aside, however, the Procession was also fundamentally similar to all of my informants’ practices in that it was aesthetically informed, being ‘reconstructed’ from a widely quoted Heathen source. Indeed, at a workshop he chaired at Midgard 2012, Erik discussed the event, its aim and its background at length, as well as the historical Roman source and Germanic practice upon which it had been actively and intentionally based:

According to Tacitus [in the *Germania*], Nerthus was thought to reside in a lake or on an island and was only interacted with by a head priest and slaves. An idol representing her would be processed through the lands – always covered so no one could see it except the head priest [...] After blessing the land and its peoples, Nerthus would eventually tire of men, at which point she would be taken back to her island or lake. Once there, the slaves employed by the priest and the oxen used to pull the cart would be sacrificed to her. [...] Rúnatýr Kindred] wanted a weekend-long ritual to Nerthus [...] It was just providence that it was held [during Midgard]. She wanted to be worshipped here!⁴⁵

Thus, in an attempt to mirror this historical practice, the contemporary Procession had also come to see the parading of a covered Nerthus idol ‘through the land so any who wish may encounter her, honor her and enjoy her blessings for the following year’ (Erik). In addition to the Procession’s historical Heathen form and focus, it, and the space within which it was held, was defined by the presence of a number of shared Heathen forms. These included the runic forms that decorated the kindred banners and shields carried during the Procession, the vé space itself, the Nerthus

⁴⁵ See Tacitus, translated by Rives 1999

idol and even the ‘processional’ and honoring practices that formed the focus of the event. Furthermore, like my interlocutors’ other practices, their participation in the Procession was dependent upon their active and reflexive engagement with cosmological others (and their own striving selves) in ‘ethical’ Heathen ways. Specifically, in order to encounter and ‘be with’ the Heathen cosmological beings made present and potentially present through the above forms, particularly Nerthus, Procession participants needed to act virtuously – that is, ‘frithfully’. Towards this end, they spent the weekend engaging in honoring practices with and towards those others according to the standards of excellence established by Brynn at the vé, as well as those that defined Midgard as a pan-community Heathen gathering more generally. In so doing, they illustrated their own personal virtue and worth to those others, became able to observe the desirable quality of those others as manifested in their reactions and subsequently began establishing and strengthening potentially formative cosmological relations with and as cosmological powerful beings.

Described in this way, and similar to their engagements with the Rúnatýr Freya and Freyr idols, the Odin god pole and those personalized representations they surrounded themselves with daily (e.g. Mjöltnirs, runes horns, etc.), by acting in virtuous Heathen ways towards and ‘through’ the Nerthus idol, it, and the context of that engagement, became sites where my interlocutors began manifesting and encountering the cosmos they represented.⁴⁶ In so doing, those involved were afforded an opportunity to encounter that deity and the formative cosmological possibilities she represented. As discussed in my previous two chapters, the cosmologically informed experiences that resulted from this engagement potentially allowed my informants to then ‘project’ the qualities and possibilities represented by and realized through those ethical practices and encounters into and throughout their everyday world. Thus, like their other practices, the Procession became a means of ‘being, doing, showing doing and explaining doing’ (Schechner 2002: 22) that allowed my informants to ‘project [certain] images of themselves and the world’ (Palmer and Jankowiak 1996: 226) to those selves and into that world – they were

⁴⁶ This might explain why Procession participants were asked to remove representational forms from their person before encountering Nerthus. Specifically, as with their ‘everyday’ contexts, those forms would have manifested the deities, ‘power’ and connectedness realized through them within Nerthus’s Hall.

actions, that is, that helped them manifest and integrate the Heathen cosmos and Heathen cosmological possibilities within their contemporary experiences. It is this process of ‘opening up’ and ‘bringing together’ that I will consider in this chapter.

Chapter Aim and Outline

Though I introduced this process of cosmological manifestation, everyday integration, ‘projection’, experiential reorientation and personal development in my previous two chapters, in what follows I will attempt to outline the ‘transgressive’, transformative disposition I would argue made this process not only possible, but also fundamental to my interlocutors’ ethical, aesthetic Heathen projects. I will begin my discussion of this process by considering the concept of ‘play’, as well as my informants’ possible development of a ‘playful disposition’ that allowed them to exist within and as multiple fields simultaneously. Specifically, I will argue that, through their active and reflexive encounters with and ‘through’ Heathen forms, they began developing a reorienting disposition that helped them to ‘open up’ to and then ‘root’ themselves and their world within the Heathen cosmos (and vice versa). I will then consider the role played by their manifold ‘Heathen performances’ in helping them ‘make present’ and ‘in-act’ the potentiality of that Heathen realm within their everyday world and self. I will conclude by suggesting that their realization of the ‘desirable’ Heathen selves that appeared to be the aim of their projects was dependent upon their manifestation and aggregation of multiple fields through their active and reflexive participation in these playfully informed Heathen performances – that is, their striving as and becoming into beings who were ‘cosmological’ in their ‘everydayness’ and ‘Heathen’ in their potential ‘un-Heatheness’.

Play and Playfulness

In Chapter One I suggested that my informants’ Heathenry and Heathen projects should be approached as manifestations of ‘the contemporary’. The reason, I argued, was that, while Heathenry and the experiences that reportedly informed my interlocutors’ adoption of it reflected the ‘fragmentation’, post-traditionalism and ‘agency’ of Late/Post Modernity, their projects did not appear to be defined by those qualities alone. For example, their ‘journey’ narratives did not solely depict

experiences of post-traditional fragmentation, but rather a more generalized desire for ‘more’ or ‘something different’ for and from themselves, their ‘liquid’ world and their shifting experiences of it. Indeed, even if their journey and subsequent ‘questing’ narratives had focused upon experiences of personal, social and historical fragmentation, the formative experiences obtained by my informants through their engagements with the Heathen cosmos would have only increased that fragmentation. This was in part because that cosmos and Heathenry more generally represented a new and highly flexible field of additional possibilities that challenged their prior assumptions and understandings. In addition, while, like other late/post modern projects, my informants’ Heathen becoming was often highly personalized and reflexive, their projects (and the reformulated selves that appeared to be their aim) were not a product of their agency alone. Instead, they were pastiche fields informed by and developed in part through their formative engagements with and ‘through’ ethical, aesthetic others. As such, their developing Heathen selves were neither simply subject-objects born from the formative ‘power’ of others, nor products of their own unrestrained volition. Rather, they existed as and within an expanding dialogue between their own striving selves and cosmological others, just as their projects appeared to exist in and operate through a dialogue between structure and creativity, imagination and ‘script’, practice and experience, and past, present and future. In an attempt to better understand the unique quality of these striving Heathen projects and becoming Heathen selves, as well as the process of experiential reorientation I have suggested at their core, I would like to consider the concept of ‘play’.

Play

In his 1983 paper ‘Body, Brain and Culture’, Victor Turner noted that ‘play does not fit anywhere particular; it is transient and is recalcitrant to localization, to placement, to fixation’ (1983: 233). In addition to highlighting the ambiguity of ‘play’, both as a theoretical concept and as a subjective category of practice and experience, Turner also illustrated the interesting tendency, particularly within Western scholarship, to define play in opposition to other ‘concrete’ categories of practice and experience, particularly ‘work’. He continues, ‘Most definitions of play involve notions of

disengagement, of free-wheeling, or being out of mesh with the serious “bread-and-butter” let alone “life and death” processes of production, social control, “getting and spending” (*ibid.*). In his highly influential early work on play, *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga appeared to adopt just such an approach when he suggested that play is:

[A] free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. (1955: 13)

Due to this longstanding tendency within the social sciences to associate play with the ‘unreal’, as well as acts of ‘imagining’ and ‘gaming’, Richard Schechner has suggested that play has become a ‘rotten category’ (1993: 27) within the contemporary, Western world – that is, an activity ‘defined by its lack of productivity [...] by its status as non-work’ (Malaby 2009: 206).

As a ‘rotten’ category, I was reticent at first to utilize the concept of play when discussing my informants’ Heathen development. I was afraid its use might insinuate that my interlocutors’ practices and associated experiences in some way lacked ‘real-life’ implications or reflected some ‘non-reality’, which I did not believe to be the case. Despite this, however, I maintained that the concept might help illuminate the underlying process through which my informants’ projects actually came to effect altered formations of self, world and other in practice. As such, I was relieved to find that an alternative reading of play also exists, one that locates play and play practices not in the realm of ‘pretend’, but at the very center of individual and interpersonal acts of development. For example, George Herbert Mead (see 1934) argued that human beings begin developing an understanding of the social world and themselves as social beings primarily through their ongoing play acts. Specifically, he suggested that during play, children enter a secure space within which they are able to adopt and explore the various social roles they have observed being performed within ‘adult’ society. Within this space, they actively objectify those roles, engaging with and in them, gaining subjective experiences of them and subsequently developing a sense of self informed by those formative play experiences. Donald Winnicott has described a similar process in his *Playing and Reality* (1971). Specifically, he maintained that

humans live and develop in a tripartite world – one which features an ‘inner reality’, an ‘external life’ and a kind of ‘experiencing to which inner reality and external life both contribute’ (1971: 2–3). Within this manifold field, the individual’s inner reality, and the self it informs, develops in part within the third ‘potential space’ of ‘experiencing’. He concluded that it is within this space that formative ‘cultural experiences[s] begin with creative living first manifest in play’ (1971: 100).

As described by individuals like Mead and Winnicott then, play and play acts are not instances of unproductive action, but rather represent and generate creative, experiential spaces within which agents can engage in (and undergo) a formative process of objectification, subjectification and embodiment that fundamentally informs their development. Hopefully an example will illustrate. In his ‘Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight’ (1973b), Geertz suggested that Balinese men engage in unpredictable and ‘unproductive’ cockfighting acts because, within and through those acts, they become able to experience their own quality as social beings. Specifically, during these acts the birds and their aggressive encounters become manifestations of their handlers, their handlers’ qualities as Balinese males and their experiences of and with other Balinese men. In other words, during cockfights the Balinese social world and the males who populate it are simultaneously represented, articulated, experienced and reinforced within the ‘play’ space and acts that, according to Geertz at least, defines cockfighting as a form of social practice.

Despite the fundamental differences that appear to exist between these two approaches to play, I would posit that both depict most play acts as sharing two important characteristics. First, aside from what Schechner refers to as ‘dark play’ (see 1993; 2002), play acts tend to be book-ended or ‘framed’ by sequences of ‘actions performed in specified places for known durations of time’, which serve as ‘metacommunicative messages that say “we are playing”’ (Schechner 2002: 109). In other words, playing individuals are generally aware that they are acting and experiencing within a play space. As such, play might be approached as an intentional and reflexive form of action. Secondly, playing tends to be ‘narrational’, and often involves the ‘arousal and display of emotion’ (Schechner 1993: 39). Specifically, playing helps individuals or groups of individuals to generate, reflect upon and embody alternative fields of possibility. Thus, whether approached as a

non-productive activity divorced from reality or a formative activity fundamental to individuals' development, most instances of 'play' involve the active construction of a reflexive space within which those who are playing can engage in activities that generate affective and, I would suggest, 'effective' experiences.

It is interesting to note that Richard Schechner has proposed a third approach to play that, while differing somewhat from the second perspective discussed above, develops it further. Specifically, he has proposed that play acts are not only activities reflexively undertaken by 'playing' individuals, but also an implicit and fundamental quality of our everyday world. In so being, he suggests that play operates within that world similarly to the Hindu 'Maya-lila'. He continues, 'Maya-lila is fundamentally a performative-creative act of continuous playing where ultimate positivist distinctions between "true" and "false", "real" and "unreal" cannot be made [...] Maya is the multiplicity which the world is: creative, slippery, and ongoing' (1993: 30–1). Described in this way, play acts cease being solely reflexive and punctuated and become instead constant, formative and deeply embedded within individuals' daily actions, contexts and experiences – that is, 'ordinary life [becomes] netted out of playing but playing [...] squeezes through the smallest holes of the worknet' (1993: 42). In so being, the work/play, real/unreal dichotomies present (to varying extents) within the other play perspectives are neutralized and play becomes 'the' human productive activity. Despite these differences, however, both the Maya-lila approach to play and the second play perspective presented earlier appear to agree that play acts should be approached as mechanisms through which beings entertain, realize and embody formative experiences. Both maintain that play is not simply 'fantasy generated either by children or by adults' (Leach 1984: 363), but a means of 'fashioning' that produces spaces where unknown or seemingly incommensurable forms, selves and 'realities' can be encountered and experienced in formative ways by developing beings.

Playfulness as 'Opening up' and Conflation

While I believe play's ability to potentially affect individuals' development through facilitating their production of formative experiences is certainly relevant to my interlocutors' Heathen becoming, in considering the quality of their projects I would

like to adopt a term that avoids the conceptual baggage that has turned play ‘rotten’. Towards this end, I initially considered ‘playful’. Indeed, T.M. Luhrmann has recently suggested that many ‘contemporary spiritualities’ including Wicca and ‘Contemporary Shamanism’ (interestingly, Heathenry was not mentioned) are fundamentally ‘playful’, in that they are seemingly defined by:

[A] ‘just try’ or ‘let’s pretend’ quality that presents the practice as epistemologically ambivalent. [...] And yet the playful lets-pretend of these spiritualities – let’s imagine that the magic is real, let’s imagine that Jesus told me which shampoo to buy – is also a serious claim about the nature of the world [...] It demands that the practitioner create a third epistemic space, not materially real like tables and chairs, but not false like fiction. (2012: 139)

Thus, as used by Luhrmann, ‘playful’ seems to denote a quality of certain actions and experiences that situate each somewhere between the two basic formulations of play outlined earlier. Specifically, like the second formulation of play, these ‘playful spiritualities’ provide individuals with the means to create an ‘in-between’ realm of potential experience within which they might actively obtain novel and potentially formative experiences.⁴⁷ That said, however, the ‘let’s pretend’ nature of this proposed space (and, it would seem, the resulting experiences) also carries with it hints of the first approach towards play.

Defined in this way, I would suggest that ‘playful’ is unhelpful when considering my informants’ observed practices and reported experiences. In addition to wanting to avoid the ‘real’/‘unreal’ differentiation seemingly insinuated by Luhrmann, I disagree that Heathenry produced or required my interlocutors to create a ‘third epistemological space’ within which their potentially formative encounters with the Heathen cosmos occurred. Indeed, as Jade, Erik and many others regularly pointed out, ‘You live your life like a Heathen everyday in everything you do’ (Jade); ‘it is about applying the [Heathen] worldview in the world today [...] we don’t live in some past world, we live as Heathens in this world, right now’ (Erik). In other words, for my informants at least, the ‘here and now’ of the lived, contemporary world was the primary space within which they manifested, actively

⁴⁷ Carole Cusack, who has written extensively on a number of contemporary traditions (particularly Invented Traditions), has also noted this ‘playful’ quality (see Cusack 2010, 2013).

and reflexively encountered and began generating formative experiences of and within the Heathen cosmos. In fact, as was illustrated during my discussions of their shared Heathen aesthetic and pastiche Heathen ethics, their striving for and realization of the desirable Heathen qualities upon which their projects were dependent only became formatively ‘Heathen’ when seen by them and others as being undertaken through their ‘everyday’ actions and within their ‘lived’ worlds.

In an attempt to account for and emphasize the ‘lived’ quality of my informants’ development, as well as the everyday spaces and actions through which they strove to encounter the Heathen cosmos and its formative potential, I would like to forgo both play and playful as they have been used thus far. In their place, I would like to adopt ‘playfulness’ – that is, ‘[An] attitude that is totalizing [... a] disposition of play [that] is marked by a readiness to improvise [... and] a disposition that makes the actor an agent within social processes’ (Malaby 2009: 25–7). Specifically, I shall use ‘playfulness’ to denote a disposition that potentially allows ‘playful’ beings to actively and reflexively open, engage within and then close play frames at will. So defined, this disposition exists somewhere between Schechner’s Maya-lila approach to play and those proposed by Mead and Winnicott. Like the Maya-lila, this disposition potentially allows individuals to utilize everyday actions, contexts and even their own ‘playing selves’ as means to transform their world into a possible site of highly creative and formative ‘doing’ and ‘experiencing’. Departing somewhat from the Maya-lila perspective, however, this disposition’s emphasis upon action and ‘agency’ hints towards the sort of reflexivity and intentionality Mead and Winnicott associated with play. Thus, like ‘play’ and ‘the playful’, I would argue that this disposition potentially provides individuals with reflexive opportunities to actively and creatively generate formative experiences. However, like the Maya-lila, these acts are ‘unframed’ in so far as they could potentially occur through and within any action and context. Returning to my informants’ projects, I would suggest that their ability to manifest and subsequently integrate the Heathen cosmos and its formative potential within and throughout their everyday world and selves was dependent upon their development and application of just such a disposition. Furthermore, I believe this development and application was actually reflected within their ‘journey narratives’.

As discussed in Chapter One, the majority of my interlocutors adopted Heathenry after disassociating themselves from some prior field of practice. In nearly every case, those past fields had either lacked or failed to emphasize many or any of the forms and qualities my informants maintained made Heathenry (and the cosmos and selves associated with it) ‘desirable’. Even when those qualities and forms had been present within those past fields, I would posit that my informants had perceived of, encountered and experienced them differently. This was in part because those encounters would have been informed by different ethical and aesthetic fields. For example, as has been discussed at length, one of the characteristics of Heathenry my interlocutors found most desirable were the Heathen virtues. However, many had come to Heathenry from fields that featured similar ‘codes’. Indeed, while ‘hospitality’ may be a fundamental Heathen virtue, it is also a popular Christian virtue. Despite this fact, however, many of those informants who had come to Heathenry from Christianity believed that the focus, form and implication of that virtue differed drastically between the two fields. As Erik put it, ‘For Christians it seems to be about catering to your guests, which we do as well, but for Heathens the focus is on the guest being respectful to the host [...] it is tied to respect and frith.’ Thus, before my interlocutors could begin fashioning upon their desirable Heathen selves through their engagements with ‘powerful’ Heathen others, they needed to first develop and employ a pastiche Heathen ethics that allowed them to display virtues like ‘hospitality’, ‘respect’ and ‘frith’ to those others in ‘Heathen ways’. This, in turn, was dependent upon their active reorientation of their aesthetic sensibilities. Before that was possible, however, they needed to first open their contemporary selves, world and experiences up to that Heathen aesthetic and the potentially formative implications of the cosmos, forms and qualities made sensible through it. Towards this end, I would suggest they began engaging with and through those forms ‘playfully’. Specifically, they actively and reflexively ‘opened up’ their world and selves to the existence and possible presence of the cosmic realm within which the potentiality of those forms might be realized (and which might, in turn, be manifested within their experiences through their engagements with those forms). The experiences that then resulted, I would argue, came to affect how they viewed

those forms, the contemporary contexts within which they were encountered and the selves displayed in and generated from those encounters.

Consider as a possible example of this process Erik and Jonathan's experiences at the Nerthus Procession. During the Procession, Erik and Jonathan played the honored role of Nerthus's 'sacrificial oxen' – those beasts of burden that historically carried Nerthus through the countryside before being sacrificed to her upon her departure (fig. 29).



Figure 29: Nerthus idol and offerings on cart (photo by and reproduced with permission from Shane H.)

Discussing their experiences at and of the event at length, both men recounted how, 'for that time I am the ox [...] I don't think, I just lift and pull and I carry myself as if I am a sacrifice for [Nerthus] as we return to the well' (Erik). I would suggest that their annual 'transformation' into sacrificial beasts of burden might be seen as reflecting the process of playful 'opening up' and experiential reorientation just proposed. For example, as part of their development as Heathens, both men had developed an aesthetically informed understanding of the Heathen cosmos. In so doing, both knew that Nerthus was historically processed through the land atop a cart pulled by two sacrificial oxen. Likewise, they also knew that within that cosmos, a small idol in a wooden box, when treated a certain way (frithfully – i.e. 'ethically') within a certain context (the Procession) by beings with certain qualities (virtue and worth), potentially became a site where a Germanic deity and her formative power might be encountered. I would suggest that by willingly, actively and reflexively

interpreting their experiences of and at the Procession with reference to this informed understanding, both men began opening themselves, and the contemporary world within which that event occurred, up to the cosmological potentiality of the event and the many forms and beings it represented. In other words, by referencing their aesthetically informed pastiche Heathenry when approaching, engaging in and then interpreting their experiences of the event, Erik and Jonathan became receptive to and aware of the possible presence of Nerthus during the Procession, as well as their own potential existence as sacrificial oxen. In so doing, they also became aware of and potentially influenced by the formative cosmological potential of that deity and their relationship with her. Thus, by playfully (i.e. actively and reflexively) opening themselves and their world up to the cosmological potential represented by and manifested at the event, the men were able to ‘become’, through their pulling, sacrificial oxen possibility in the presence of Nerthus, just as Nerthus herself, and the realm with which she is associated, potentially became present at Raven’s Knoll.

Consider also ‘Bob the Breadman’. Though, at the time, I did not know what or ‘who’ he was, I had the pleasure of meeting ‘Bob’ prior to the Procession as he was being assembled by Brynn and Shane in their canteen tent. As I stood quietly watching the six loaves being carefully sawed and combined, Brynn turned to me and explained, ‘It’s Bob! He has a big weekend in store!’ Indeed he did: Over the next three days he traveled with Nerthus from the Sacred Well, sat at the base of her altar in the vé, was stuffed with hair, blood and other intimate offerings made by those present, traveled back with Nerthus to the water’s edge and was then ‘killed’ in her honor. As with Erik and Jonathan’s experiences as oxen, I would suggest this figure’s transformation from ‘Bob, a man made of bread’ into ‘Bob, the Breadman – sacrifice to Holy Mother Nerthus’ within the experiences of those present was effected in part through their application of this playfulness. For example, through their participation in study practices, many of those present at the Procession knew that human sacrifices were historically made to Nerthus. Likewise, they also knew that ‘powerful’ (i.e. formative) bonds could be established between potentially volitional Heathen cosmological beings through ‘ethical’ practices like making offerings. Towards this end, many Midgard Gathering attendees spent the weekend engaging with ‘Bob’ through a variety of honoring and offering practices in an

attempt to become ‘connected’ to him cosmologically – a connection that meant they would also become connected to Nerthus upon his death. I would suggest that by actively opening themselves to ‘Bob’s’ potential power as a cosmological being, and then reflexively engaging with him in the same way they might a powerful human Heathen other, he was transformed within some of their experiences into a ‘living’ being whose sacrifice had tangible implications for and within their contemporary selves and world. Indeed, in an interview I held with Brynn following the Procession, she related how, over the course of the weekend, ‘Bob [became] more and more real until I am standing there over him at the Well. In that moment, he is a living, breathing person and I am killing him for [Nerthus]. When I do, I feel such power and loss! It makes me cry.’ Thus, before their developing selves could benefit from ‘Bob’s’ grisly death, Procession participants first had to become receptive to his potential existence as a volitional cosmological being, his possible connection to Nerthus as a powerful, ‘present’ being, and their own ability to connect with and through those others in potentially formative Heathen practices. This, I would suggest, was achieved in part through their application of a playful disposition that allowed them to actively and reflexively transform these cosmological possibilities into realizable, present ‘realities’; first at Raven’s Knoll, and then within and throughout the rest of their contemporary world.

In each instance, I would suggest that my interlocutors’ ability to have formative experiences with powerful cosmological others within the Heathen cosmos was dependent upon their ongoing development and application of a playfulness. Specifically, by helping them to reflexively ‘open’ themselves, their experiences and their contemporary world to the possibilities of the Heathen cosmos, this playfulness allowed them to then actively encounter and experience that cosmos and its potentiality within those contemporary sites of cosmological transgression. In each case, the experiences that then resulted from those engagements appeared to alter how my informants came to interpret those experiences and the contemporary contexts within which (and the selves to which) they occurred. Importantly, by illustrating the transgressive and formative capacity of this disposition, I believe these examples also hint towards the fundamental role played by this disposition in my informants’ striving as and becoming into Heathen beings. Specifically, the

actions and qualities that they believed defined them as contemporary striving beings only became formatively Heathen – i.e. illustrative and generative of Heathenness – if they and others undertook, displayed and observed those actions and qualities as part of their daily lives. They maintained that this ‘everyday Heathen living’ was important in part because it was only those individuals who were seen as ‘always’ acting ethically Heathen (i.e. in virtuous and worthy ways) who were provided access to the formative web of cosmological connectedness upon which their developing Heathen selves were dependent. Thus, in order to fashion desirable Heathen selves, they had to first open up those selves and their everyday world to the possible presence and formative potential of the Heathen cosmos, and then actively ‘draw together’ or conflate those selves and contexts.

Performing Playfulness

Described in this way, by applying this disposition when reflexively considering the quality of and the possibilities potentially realizable through certain forms, contexts and beings, my informants became able to ‘manifest’ the Heathen cosmos – that is, experience as ‘present’ and formatively influential – and the potentiality it represented within their contemporary world. In so doing, this transgressive disposition transformed certain forms, my informants’ everyday actions and contexts and even own selves into sites where Heathenness could be realized. Before I consider at greater length the fundamental role I would suggest this disposition played in my interlocutors’ Heathen development, I would like to briefly consider the actual means through which my informants seemed to open and then draw together the ‘everyday’ and the ‘cosmological’.

‘Doing’ as Performance

Exploring these proposed ‘Heathen performances’ is potentially easier said than done, as what qualifies as performance is generally contextually dependent – that is, determined in ‘specific cultural circumstances’ (Schechner 2002: 30). As such, I would like to begin not by defining these performances, but rather considering a few key characteristics that might be seen as determining the ‘performative’ quality of certain actions and contexts. Towards this end I will begin by considering

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's work on food as performance. In her 'Playing to the senses: Food as performance medium' (1999), Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has suggested that there are three characteristics that might be seen as helping to define instances of performance across multiple performative contexts. She continues, 'to perform is to do, to execute, to carry out to completion; [...] Second, to perform is to behave [appropriately]; [...] Third, to perform is to show' (1999: 1–2). Approached thus, she posits that the term 'performance' might conceivably be used to denote a wide variety of activities, both formal and informal, including those that define daily acts of food production and consumption. Richard Schechner has taken this 'daily action as potential performance' approach further by suggesting that all 'actions, interactions and relationships' (2002: 24) can potentially be approached as performance, so long as they are instances of 'doing, behaving, and showing' (2002: 32). Of course, approaching the everyday actions and interactions that tend to define individuals' daily experiences as potential instances of performance is not novel. Over half a century ago the Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman proposed a similar approach when he suggested that 'all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers' (1959: 22) is potentially performance. Thus, in addition to being highly contextualized behaviors, I would suggest that performances are also defined, at least in part, by their 'active' and 'acted out' quality – that is, they are 'not in people's heads [but rather] in their public acts' (Brissett and Edgley 1990: 36–37).

These forms of situated 'doing' also tend to be composed of and are 'restored behaviors'. Schechner defines these behaviors in the following way:

Restored behaviors [are] 'out there', separate from 'me'. To put it in personal terms, restored behavior is 'me behaving as if I were someone else', or 'as I am told to do', or 'as I have learned' [...] Its meaning needs to be decoded by those in the know. (2002: 28)

In other words, performances are often perceived of by performers and, it should be stressed, by those who observe those performances, as being 'de-centered' or external to the specific context or medium of their execution. In so doing, those actions, 'actors' and performative contexts become potentially imbued with a

‘rootedness’ or ‘transcendence’ that might otherwise be lacking. Goffman also noted the seemingly ‘transcendent’ quality of most performances when he suggested that the specific behaviors that tend to define instances of performance are often desirable actions identified by, within and drawn from performers’ social fields (see Goffman 1976). Likewise, Victor Turner suggested that the ability of social performances, or ‘social dramas’, to serve as mechanisms of social change was primarily a product of their manifesting pre-established ‘meaningful cultural frameworks’ within restored, or ‘symbolic’ actions (1974: 41). Importantly, while, like Goffman and Turner, Schechner emphasizes the seemingly ‘othered’ quality of performative behaviors, he also stresses that ‘as embodied practices each and every performance is specific and different from every other’ (2002: 29). In other words, while he agrees that performances are often made efficacious in part by their component actions or perceived results extending beyond a particular instance of doing, he stresses that the performers, observer-participants and contexts involved in those performances always differ. Thus, while performances may contain certain ‘scripts’ that inform and affect the practices, participants, experiences and contexts involved, they themselves are not necessarily ‘scripted’ by restored behaviors, nor are the experiences and individuals generated through them (see Ingold and Hallam 2007: 12).

Lastly, most instances of performance are highly ‘reflexive’. Specifically, through performative acts, the performing individual:

Reveals himself to himself [...] the actor may come to know himself better through acting or enactment; or one set of human beings may come to know themselves better through observing and/or participating in performances generated and presented by [others]. (Turner 1987: 13)

In other words, during performances ‘both performers and audiences experience, register, appreciate, analyze, and evaluate images that are projected in their own performances and the performances of others’ (Palmer and Jankowiak 1996: 242). Thus, in addition to helping the performing ‘self [...] be known as it is in-acted’ (Schechner 2002: 186), performative acts also allow observers to encounter that self as it is performed, as well as their own observing selves through their reactions to those performances. In so doing, through engaging in performative acts, both

performers and observers become able to actively create and project, as well as reflexively observe, embody and instantiate particular views of self, other and world.

Thus, at a general level at least, performances might be seen as being defined by four key characteristics; they are contextualized, active, restored and reflexive. Specifically, any contextualized instance of de-centered action that provides individuals means to ‘in-act’ or display-observe-embody some understanding of self, world and other (either alone or with others) is potentially performative. With these qualities in mind, in what follows I shall approach ‘performances’ as any contextualized instance of ‘doing-showing-experiencing’. Furthermore, as forms of action that provide individuals the opportunity to produce and externalize, and then objectify and internalize their understandings, I would argue that performative acts also provide them the space and means to generate and affect their experiences.

Performance as ‘Doing’; Performance as ‘Becoming’

Turner has suggested that ‘the social world is a world in becoming, not a world in being’ (1976: 98). Developing this idea further, Bruner has proposed that this world-in-process is both effected and populated by subject-agents that are similarly ‘in production, in process’ (1983: 2–3). According to Schechner, one mechanism potentially employed by these ‘becoming’ beings in their fashioning of both themselves and their world are the performances just discussed. Specifically, he has suggested that the contextual, reiterative, reflexive and formative nature of performances make them means through which individuals can, in effect, ‘make belief [in or] create the very social realities they enact’ (Schechner 2002: 35). In other words, social beings and the world (or worlds) within and with reference to which they develop might be seen as being products, at least in part, of their ongoing performances of those worlds and selves. I would argue that something similar might also be said concerning my informants’ development into Heathen beings, as well as the ongoing process of opening, conflation and instantive realization upon which it appeared to depend.

I have suggested that my interlocutors’ becoming into and as Heathen beings was dependent upon their active ‘opening up’ of their world, self and experiences to (and subsequent conflation with) the Heathen cosmos. I would posit that the actual

means employed by them when effecting this process of ‘opening’, ‘transgression’ and ‘rooting’ were Heathen performances – that is, those formative instances of active doing-showing-experiencing that either facilitated or featured their reflexive manifestation of, engagement with and embodiment/instantiation of Heathen cosmological possibilities. Interestingly, defined in this way, most or even all of my interlocutors’ Heathen practices became potential performances. As defined in Chapter Three and Four, their actions ‘became’ Heathen practices precisely because they were reflexively undertaken and allowed my informants to actively present (perform) their potentially ethical, aesthetic selves and worlds to both themselves and others for review, alteration and instantiation in an attempt to establish formative cosmological relations. Of course, these practices displayed other ‘performative’ qualities as well. For example, as products of their active and ongoing application of their pastiche Heathenry and ‘ordinary’ ethical dispositions, these practices were always contextually specific and dependent. Likewise, they were also ‘reiterative’ or restored, as, being ‘ethical’ and ‘Heathen’, they were also aesthetic – that is, historical, cultural and ‘cosmological’. The examples below will illustrate how my interlocutors’ manifold practices, both shared and private, potentially became transformative Heathen performances.

Earlier I outlined how, prior to, during and following the Procession of Nerthus, Erik and Jonathan had adopted a disposition that playfully opened them, their contemporary world and their experiences up to the formative cosmological possibilities represented by and potentially manifested through the event. I would now like to suggest that it was primarily through their active participation in the practices that composed the Procession that they actively ‘drew in’ and then rooted that cosmos and the formative potentiality it represented within that context and their performing selves. Consider specifically their role as oxen. Like the other honoring practices undertaken (e.g. offerings) and the Procession more generally, their role as oxen was an aesthetically informed and ethically reflective practice actively undertaken by them to ‘call upon and honor Nerthus so that she will [...] be present’ (Brynn). Specifically, the quality of their performance as oxen allowed them to illustrate, observe and then reincorporate into their performing selves their own aesthetically informed Heathen knowledge, the ethical quality of their application of

that knowledge during the performance and the interconnectedness with influential cosmological others that knowledge and personal quality made possible. This practice-as-performance also made the manifested and conflated contemporary-as-cosmic field within which those selves, qualities and formative relations had been realized observable, ‘judgeable’ and instantive, by both themselves and others. Thus, through their performative, playful participation in this event, Erik and Jonathan not only opened their selves and world to that cosmos, they actively manifested, observed, shared and embodied it through their own reflexive becoming.

‘Bob’s’ transformation into a worthy ‘human sacrifice’ might be approached similarly (fig. 30).



Figure 30: Nerthus idol with altar, offerings and ‘Bob’

To become an appropriate sacrifice to Nerthus within that context, ‘Bob’ needed to first ‘become’ a cosmological agent whose destruction had the same value as those worthy non-bread-based people who had historically been sacrificed to the god. His transformation into that being was effected primarily through the ‘ethicizing’ and ‘aestheticizing’ practices undertaken towards him by the influential cosmological others who took part in the Procession – that is, the ‘honoring’ (i.e. offering) practices undertaken towards him by Procession participants. By becoming the focus of striving others’ formative practices year after year, ‘Bob’ became a mirror within which they could reflexively observe and instantiate their Heathenness as manifested

in and realized in part through their own performative engagements with him, as well as the developing ‘worth’ and ‘power’ they believed their influence as Heathens imparted upon him. In other words, by acting as a medium through which those present could potentially establish formative relationship with Nerthus, ‘Bob’ allowed those present to actively externalize and then reflexively observe and internalize their own desirable Heathen quality, as well as the ‘immanence’, or ‘presence’, of the cosmological realm within which those practices became formative. Thus, as with Erik and Jonathan’s becoming into oxen, the performative honoring practices undertaken by my interlocutors towards ‘Bob’ helped them make the Heathen cosmos and its transformative potentiality present in the instant of their ‘doing’, and with it, their own striving, becoming Heathen quality.

I would suggest that additional examples of this process are as numerous as the performative Heathen practices through which it occurred. For example, for my informants to develop potentially formative relations with the ancestors and gods, they had to first open themselves and their world to both their existence and presence within their everyday lives. I would suggest this occurred primarily through their engagement with those beings in performative Heathen practices such as toasting or boasting. Specifically, through raising a horn of mead or beer or making an offering to those worthy Heathen others at symbol or on their own, my informants actively illustrated and reflexively identified their own opening to the possibilities represented by and manifested in those practices. I would posit that they also came to observe, experience and instantiate their own striving, becoming Heathen quality, as well as the formative potentiality of the conflated context within which such beings and cosmological interactions became possible. Indeed, the same could even be said about every instance in which they crafted, purchased, displayed or recognized the many Heathen forms discussed in Chapter Three. By actively wearing and reflexively identifying the Heathen quality and cosmological potential of Mjölnirs (fig. 31), runic forms, drinking horns, etc., they not only opened their self and the contexts within which those forms were identified to cosmological potentiality of those forms, they and others also became able to observe, experience and instantiate the conflated quality of those ‘aestheticized’ contexts, as well as the formative Heathenness associated with and potentially generated from those performative acts.



Figure 31: Mjölknir pendant

Thus, by ‘doing-showing-experiencing’ themselves and others as individuals who were striving to be ‘ethically and identifiably Heathen’, I believe my informants actively manifested and became able to reflexively in-act the Heathen qualities and cosmos represented by and encountered through those practices within their contemporary world. Furthermore, I would suggest this process of ‘doing’ and ‘experiencing’ was cyclical – that is, once they had actively opened and conflated these realms, my informants increasingly ‘rooted’ and ‘grew’ that potentiality within themselves and their world with every additional Heathen quality and possibility realized within their experiences. In other words, these playful performative practices and formative cosmological experiences formed a self-propagating loop through which they increasingly manifested and infused the Heathen cosmos and its formative possibilities into and throughout their contemporary world. Thus, these playful striving performances potentially helped effect an ‘experiential reorientation’ through which they increasingly experienced the Heathen cosmos as ‘possible’ and ‘present’ within their world; a process that, by infusing their everyday selves, contexts and actions with realizable cosmological potentiality, allowed them to more fully ‘live’ their Heathenry ‘every day’ and, in so doing, strive and ‘become’ as Heathens.

'Interpretive Drift'

It should be noted that this idea that my informants effected a reorientation that altered what they experienced (and how they interpreted those experiences) through their participation in these playful, performative practices is not novel. Indeed, in T.M. Luhrmann's 1989 publication *Persuasions of the Witches Craft*, she suggested that her English Pagan informants underwent a similar process through which they began 'believing' in magic despite the seeming irrationality of magical practices. Specifically, she suggested that, through their ongoing participation in 'magical rituals', her informants began experiencing an 'interpretive drift' that started altering how they experienced, interpreted and related to the world (Luhrmann 1989: 32). In other words, by actively and reflexively exposing themselves to a 'magical reality' through their ongoing participation in 'magical practices', her interlocutors' interpretation and understating of the events that helped define their everyday world were affected. This modification in understanding then led those individuals to actively pursue and embody additional experiences and forms of knowledge of the magical field that further reflected the qualities and possibilities they had come to associate with it. They then began developing intellectual strategies that increasingly supported and reflected their magically informed experiences; a reoriented understanding of their world and selves that was further reinforced through subsequent magical practices. In so doing, she suggested that the disjunction that initially existed within their world between 'magical' and 'scientific thought' was increasingly neutralized and their experiences increasingly reflected and reinforced the perceived magical quality of their world.⁴⁸ Luhrmann is not the only scholar to suggest that a process of experiential reorientation is a key characteristic of certain contemporary traditions. Indeed, in her *Witching Culture* (2004), Sabina Magliocco related how she experienced first-hand the reorienting power of certain practices while conducting fieldwork amongst North American 'Neo-Pagans'. Specifically, she recounts how, due to the reorienting power of a number of 'ecstatic' experiences she obtained while participating in 'some of the rituals [she] attended', her understanding of her own self and world 'changed in significant ways' (2004: 12).

⁴⁸ In her more recent work Luhrmann (see 2012) has replaced categories such as 'magic' and 'rationality' with concepts like 'magical realism' and 'secularism'.

While the processes of reorientation depicted by Luhrmann and Magliocco are certainly similar to what I observed during my fieldwork, I would suggest that my informants' proposed process of playful, performative reorientation differed in some important ways. For example, Magliocco's work emphasizes how the ecstatic experiences she and her interlocutors obtained during ritualistic practices generated 'altered states of consciousnesses' that served as the catalyst for their shifts in experiential interpretation and everyday understandings. While it is true that some of my informants engaged in 'ecstatic practices' such as 'trance work' and 'possession', even in instances where ecstatic experiences were obtained, they appeared to reinforce, not prompt, their opening to and rooting of the Heathen cosmos within and throughout their experiences.⁴⁹ Further, where these ecstatic practices were observed, they were almost always undertaken by informants as part of their private observances, and in many cases began decreasing in frequency and centrality as their participation in shared practices increased. In addition, Luhrmann's proposed 'interpretive drift' seemed to require, and in part result from, practitioners' differentiation between the reality encountered through their 'magical practices' and the 'secular' reality in relation to which their magical experiences were interpreted. For my informants, on the other hand, to 'become Heathen' was to 'make Heathen' their lived world. Specifically, their Heathen development was dependent upon their and others' active and reflexive recognition that they were pursuing and realizing Heathen cosmological possibilities throughout their everyday world – that is, through an 'integration into' not through a 'movement from'.

The 'Playful Heathen Project'

Reflecting what Schechner observed above, I would suggest that my informants' ongoing participation in playfully informed Heathen performances came to represent a process whereby they began increasingly 'making belief in' the Heathen cosmos, its presence within their everyday world and their own striving as and potential becoming into Heathen beings. Specifically, their manifold performative practices facilitated and then propagated a process whereby they opened their experiencing

⁴⁹ One possible exception might be those informants who adopted Heathenry after making contact with some potentially present cosmological being. Even these instances, however, tended to occur after those involved had engaged in prior interactions with that cosmos through practices like study.

selves and experienced world to the presence and possibilities of the Heathen cosmos. Then, through practices that allowed them to actively conflate – and reflexively observe their conflation of – those fields via their identification and instantiation of their and others’ developing Heathenness, they underwent a shift in how they perceived of their selves, their lived world and others, as well as the formative Heathen potential of each. So described, this process both made possible, and was in turn reinforced by, the processes of aesthetic reorientation and ethical projection at the core of my interlocutors’ questing projects and developing Heathen selves. In so being, I would argue that their ethical, aesthetic Heathen projects also became ‘playful’ Heathen projects.

For example, concerning the Heathen aesthetic specifically, I would posit that, through their application of this transgressive disposition, certain forms, the contexts within which they were encountered and the beings who encountered them were potentially transformed into fields that could exist as many things simultaneously. As a result, it became possible for certain styles of jewelry, drinking vessels, a murky pond in Ontario and the active remembrance of one’s own ‘excellent’ actions (or those of another) to *also* exist as Heathen cosmological forms where formative Heathen qualities, experiences and even the cosmos itself might be encountered and embodied. Through continuing to engage with these ‘opened’ aesthetic forms and aestheticized fields in performative practices like the Nerthus Procession, symbols, their reflexive identification of another’s hammer or even the donning of their own, I would suggest that my interlocutors increasingly rooted the Heathen cosmos represented by and manifested through those forms within and throughout the everyday world within which they were encountered and undertaken. In so doing, this process of active opening and reflexive ‘doing’ allowed them to identify and embody the aesthetic Heathen quality and formative cosmological potential of those forms more and more. This shift in sensibility, and the reorientation in understanding it required and facilitated, then helped them further aestheticize, identify and instantiate ‘Heathenness’ within their experienced world, as well as the cosmological beings potentially ‘becoming’ within it.

Consider also my informants’ ethical striving. As was aesthetically desirable, my informants constructed and began applying highly individualized pastiche

Heathen ethics that allowed them to pursue and realize desirable Heathen qualities within and throughout their everyday practices and world. They then shared narratives that recounted the virtuousness and worth generated through and illustrated by those daily ‘deeds’ at events like *symbel*, as doing so allowed them to display, to both themselves and others, that ethical Heathen striving. They stressed that these acts of sharing and ‘remembering’ were important to their Heathen development, as they allowed both others and themselves to see that they were cosmological ‘good’ to be connected with within the formative web of causal relationality they believed animated the Heathen cosmos. By helping them to establish this formative connectedness with worthy others, these ethical practices, in effect, intertwined and projected their individual ‘fates’ into and through those others, thus connecting the striving and becoming of all involved.

I would argue that this process was dependent, in the first place, upon their ongoing participation in playfully informed ethical performances. Specifically, before they could begin actively striving for and reflexively realizing Heathen virtue and worth within and throughout their everyday contexts and actions, they needed to first transform those contexts, actions and selves into sites where those qualities became ‘excellent’ and their realization and subsequent ‘projection’ was possible. Towards this end, I would suggest they began conflating, through performative practices like study, reflexive self-evaluation and personalized acts of virtue, those everyday fields, forms and selves with the Heathen cosmological realm where this ethical striving was not only possible, but a fundamental aspect of daily living. Once these realms had been conflated, they then, through additional performative practices like *symbel*, boasting, toasting, ‘witnessing’ and ‘judging’, recounted instances through which their striving had occurred and they had realized and displayed ethical Heathen qualities like virtue and worth. In so doing, both they and any worthy others around whom those performances occurred became able to reflexively observe, instantiate and potentially even increase those qualities and the formative potential they made possible through additional acts like ‘hailing’ and gifting. Thus, due to the shared, reflexive quality of these performances, my informants not only became able to ‘make belief in’ their own ethical quality and the growing ethical potentiality of their daily world, actions and selves, they also became able to observe, experience

and even become involved in the similar striving and development of the others whose performances they observed. In so doing, these playful performances potentially allowed their ethical striving selves and associated projects, like the Heathen cosmos and contemporary world, to be ‘opened’ and ‘conflated’ – that is, they became fields of practice and experience that began supporting and displaying multiple potentialities simultaneously.

Before I conclude, I would like to briefly suggest that these interrelated processes of playful ‘opening up’ and conflation, aesthetic reorientation and ethical striving (and with them, my informants’ playful projects) were never complete but rather in process. This was because the fields and beings within, through and upon which they appeared to act were ‘emergent’ – that is, undergoing a perpetual process of ‘becoming’. Specifically, my interlocutors’ projects required that every daily context, action and experience be actively engaged with in ways that were ethically and identifiably Heathen. For this to occur, however, every novel context, action and experience needed to first become sites where Heathenness might be manifested, observed and instantiated. This, as discussed above, occurred primarily through their performative acts of aestheticization and ethical striving and projection. Thus, their everyday world, novel actions and new experiences were never fully conflated with the Heathen cosmos and its potentiality. Rather, they were constantly undergoing a process of conflation undertaken, realized and propagated through their ongoing playful striving, instantive ‘doing-behaving-showing’ and reflexive becoming.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have proposed that, through actively developing a ‘playfulness’ that they then reflexively applied upon and through their everyday actions and selves, my interlocutors began opening their contemporary world and those selves to a new set of possibilities, namely those associated with the Heathen cosmos. In so doing, this transgressive disposition allowed them to conflate their contemporary world and becoming selves with the Heathen cosmos and those similarly becoming others who resided within it. By then actively manifesting and reflexively observing/instantiating Heathen cosmological qualities and possibilities through Heathen practices-as-performance undertaken within that world, I suggested that they increasingly ‘made

present', 'rooted' and then 'grew' that cosmos and its potentially within and throughout their experiences. I concluded by suggesting that, due to the shifting, emergent quality of their world, projects and selves, their striving and 'becoming' was potentially embedded in a perpetual process of active opening and reflexive 'doing-showing-experiencing' through which my informants were striving to manifest, identify and instantiate the potential Heathenness of every new action, context and self experienced. In my final chapter, entitled 'Crafting Ancestors', I will consider one key way in which my interlocutors appeared to overcome the 'emergent' or 'fragmented' quality of their contemporary selves and world, as well as the 'virtuous' Heathen self that appeared to be the aim of their Heathen projects.

Chapter VI: Crafting Ancestors

Rúnatýr Kindred August 2011 Symbel

Jade began the third and final round of the Rúnatýr August symbel by requesting that, as Erik the Lawspeaker was away that evening on business, no one ‘make any oaths [...] let’s just stick with toasts and boasts!’ Once we had all voiced our agreement, she thanked us and then lifted the horn before her. Smiling, she continued, ‘I would like to toast Rúnatýr! Things have been a little rocky within the kindred as of late but it fills me with hope and pride to see how we continue to come together [...] we are here for one another and that is the point of family. Hail Rúnatýr!’⁵⁰ Though many present that evening were not in fact kindred members, but rather ‘Heathen curious’ individuals from the Ottawa area and ‘friends of the kindred’, Jade’s toast was met with a deafening chorus of ‘HAILS!’ Having drunk deeply from the vessel, Jade passed the horn to NaTasha who was sitting immediately to her left. Quietly, and with the horn held tightly to her breast, NaTasha began, ‘I would like to boast. Things have been hard for my daughter and I recently [...] we have survived a horrible divorce. Despite what has happened, we made it through and we are ok. Hail us and our strength!’ As those present in the symbel circle were honoring NaTasha and her daughter with ‘hails’ and ‘good jobs’, I sat struck by the intimate nature of her confession, particularly considering the many new faces in attendance that evening. However, as no one else seemed surprised, I smiled and lent my voice to the celebration.

With a confidence that had been somewhat lacking during the first two rounds, ‘Sara’, one of the ‘Heathen curious’ attendees present that evening, turned and accepted the horn from NaTasha. With a smile slowly spreading across her face she announced, ‘I guess I have a toast and boast! I’m pregnant! To our growing family!’ As with NaTasha, I was surprised by both the intimate nature of her confession and the seeming sincerity of the response it elicited from those present,

⁵⁰ Some had recently begun distancing themselves from the community ‘for personal reasons [...] I don’t want to feel as if I can’t practice how I need to’ (Anonymous). As a result, tensions between them and others within the kindred had become strained; a tension that, though rarely acknowledged at community events, had become increasingly apparent in comments made online and at the pan-community events held at Raven’s Knoll.

particularly as that was the first time she and her husband had attended a community (or, to my knowledge, any Heathen) event. Taking the horn, Sara's husband then turned to her and continued, 'I want to toast my lovely wife. I want to thank her for the child she is carrying!' The next to speak was Jonas, who, as I mentioned in Chapter One, had been in the process of distancing himself from Heathenry and the Ottawa Heathen community. Following a thoughtful pause, he looked out from under the dark brim of his wide hat and quietly toasted 'all of those who are helping me on my current life journey to find who I am. It would be so much harder alone. Thank you all!' Taking hold of the curved vessel and placing a supportive hand on Jonas' shoulder, Ian, a 'friend of the kindred' (and a personal friend of Jonas) wished him luck and continued, 'As many of you know, I craft runes. Well, I recently set up an online business and started selling them on "Etsy". It means a lot to be doing what I love. [...] I just wanted to share my accomplishments!'

While a number present expressed their interest in seeing samples of Ian's craft, I glanced over to see Chantal looking at me from across the symbol circle. Then, with a grin on her face (and noting my obvious embarrassment) she raised the horn in my direction and continued, 'I want to hail Josh, our beloved "creeper"! At first we thought it was a little weird that he was always around, but now he is a pleasant fixture in our lives! Hail the creeper!' Finished, she passed the horn to Brynn who, with a smile on her face and tear in her eye, began, 'While I'm really sick, I'm also a real bad-ass. That said you can't be a bad-ass all the time.' Turning to Shane she concluded, 'Thank you for being strong for me when I'm not. Hail Shanel!' Having kissed Brynn and thanked everyone, Shane then boasted about his recent '[musical] performance with the "League of Rock". Though we only just met, at a recent performance we won the best of three! What can I say? I'm a rockstar!' Shane then handed the vessel to Jonathan, who boasted that he had recently completed a 'shrine to [his] land wights [...] I dug out the stones and carried them and placed them. I made it all by hand!' Following a moment of quiet reflection, he suddenly concluded, 'Well, I guess it isn't that much to boast about, really.' Audibly scoffing, Chantal quickly turned to Jonathan and chided, 'Hey! There are no small boasts! You've done something important to you and that is all that matters.'

Shrugging his shoulders, he agreed and lifted the horn to both himself and the wights; a hail we all loudly echoed.

‘Gwen’, a non-Heathen friend of the kindred, then boasted that she had recently found a ‘singing teacher who, after hearing me sing, believes she can help me to again reach the semi-professional level of singing I was at a few years ago. I’m really excited to begin developing my skill again!’ Angus then turned and accepted the horn. Clearing his throat and looking deeply into the vessel, he continued, ‘I wanna toast my upcoming competition and Paul, my trainer and second father. He would probably kick my ass if he heard me call him that! Anyway, I hope to honor them by being strong!’ Finished, he passed the vessel to Katherine who was reclining on a nearby futon. Somewhat groggily, she boasted that, mere hours before, she had completed an ‘eighty-five-kilometer charity bike tour for [Multiple Sclerosis].’ Drawing everyone’s attention to her ‘official participant t-shirt’, she explained ‘I take part every year to support my brother who has MS. This year I did it in even less time than last year!’ While we recognized her accomplishment (and many present recognized the donations they had given to support her) she stood and returned the horn to Jade. With the vessel again in hand, Jade stood and made her way into the back garden of her small townhouse. Once we had all gathered behind her, she lifted the horn high into the air before her and poured the remaining mead onto the grass as an offering to ‘honor the Æsir, Vanir [Heathen gods] and the Landvættir [land wights]’. With the event officially concluded, we then returned to the sitting room where we set to the frithful task of putting the space back in order. After the room had been sorted and our duty as guests had been fulfilled, Jade thanked us and loudly extended a ‘standing invitation’ for ‘any of [us] to return to [her] home at any time!’

Introduction

Organized and hosted by Jade, the 2011 Rúnatýr August symbel was another example of the popular ‘American style’ or ‘standard’ symbel discussed at length in Chapter Four. Like the other standard symbols observed, including the Remembrance Symbol, this event featured a three-round ‘gods/ancestors/toasts-boasts-oaths’ format, a circular seating style and an intimate, performative quality. That said, however, this event also displayed a number of interesting characteristics – differences that were in

part a result of the leeway afforded Jade as the event host to conduct the event in a way she felt appropriate and personally ‘powerful’. For example, unlike at the Remembrance Symbol where Jade herself had made an oath, as the host of this event, she had forbidden the making of oaths. This was in part because, as Erik the kindred Lawspeaker was away on business, there was no one to ‘record the oaths made’ (Jade). In other words, any oath made at the symbol would have been left open to interpretation and possible default, either of which, due to the ‘conflated’ or ‘connected’ nature of the luck and wyrd of those present, would have had ruinous implications for the ‘fates’, projects and developing selves of all event participants. Indeed, Jade told me after the event that she always forbids the making of oaths at events where ‘non-members are present [...] because you don’t know the type of person you are connecting yourself with [...] in other words] they haven’t proven themselves yet.’ Interestingly, aside from forbidding oaths, Jade established no other ‘hall rules’ during the above symbol. In so doing, she provided all present the space to honor whatever beings they wished in whatever way they wanted so long as they ‘were respectful to others and respected the horn [were quiet when the horn holder spoke]!’ This differed somewhat from other symbols I had attended, where Erik, as the event host, had specified that certain deities and actions were ‘unwelcome’ in his home. Another characteristic that differentiated this event from many of the other shared events I attended in members’ homes was that there were more non-kindred and non-Heathen attendees present than registered members. Indeed, aside from those kindred practices held at pan-community events like Hail & Horn, Midgard and the Kaleidoscope Gathering, the attendance at most shared community practices consisted primarily of kindred members, their family and their friends.

While this altered demographic affected what specific practices attendees were able to engage in at the event, it did not seem to affect how they engaged with one another at the event – that is, the information they shared with one another, how they went about sharing it or the possible implications of that sharing. Specifically, as with the other symbols I observed, attendees at the above event actively and willingly performed narratives that depicted their personal trials, daily experiences and the ways in which they had interpreted and dealt with them. Those who bore witness to these performances (the performer and the other present and potentially present

beings believed to be in attendance) then evaluated, recognized and reinforced the personal qualities of those narrating and narrated beings through ‘honoring’ practices like hailing, toasting and boasting. In other words, despite being executed according to a different host’s pastiche Heathenry, and informed by the personal practices and understandings of a number of new and non-kindred participants, the August symbol attendees still actively and willingly recounted and observed instances when they had ‘lived’ in a ‘Heathen way’ – that is, acted in aesthetically informed ways that helped them realize Heathen virtuousness and worth within everyday contexts. For example, by recounting the difficulties she and her daughter had recently faced and surmounted, NaTasha and the others present were able to observe and instantiate her and her daughter’s virtuous ‘everyday’ strength, an act that in turn increased their perceived worth. Thus, this event, like all of the shared practices I observed, became a site where my interlocutors could and did perform, observe and instantiate the ethical, cosmological potential of their everyday world, their own striving selves and the striving efforts and developing worth of the other cosmological beings present. In so being, these events also became sites where those individuals might actively open and reflexively conflate those ‘everyday’ striving selves and their reorienting daily contexts, as well as intertwine the formative potential and ethical, ‘becoming’ quality of each in their pursuit of a desirable Heathen self.

Chapter Aim and Outline

I would suggest that my interlocutors’ engagements with, within and through those opened, shifting fields were made possible by and then facilitated through their skilful application of their pastiche Heathen ethics as a form of ‘techne’ and crafting ‘technology’. It is this techne, the process of careful conflation and navigation it facilitated and the type of contemporary Heathen self I would argue they were attempting to craft through its application that I will consider in this final chapter. I will begin my discussion by considering the ‘crafting’ process through which I would suggest they were striving to realize and experience their developing Heathen selves. I will then examine some of the ways in which they brought together those developing selves, developing Heathen others, the Heathen cosmos and their contemporary world in and through a very particular kind of personhood.

Specifically, I will argue that they were attempting to fashion and articulate a type of personhood that conflated the past, present and future by allowing them to experience selves that were historically rooted, undergoing a shared process of refinement in the present and, in so doing, being potentially projected outwards from them into the future. I will then conclude my discussion of their ‘crafting Heathen projects’ by suggesting that this process of self-making both reflected and potentially helped my informants to affect their experiences of the ‘fragmented’ contemporary world within which they were, in part, occurring.

The Crafting Heathen Project

I have been arguing that my interlocutors’ engagement with Heathenry might be approached as a complex, multi-faceted ‘project’ – an effort on their part to ‘make of themselves a certain kind of person’ (Laidlaw 2002: 327). Their attempts at self-making appeared to be structured in part by and achieved in part through their engagement with and application of certain Heathen ‘technologies of the self’. In Chapter Four I suggested that my informants’ Heathen development was facilitated by and propagated through their highly individualized yet shared acts of everyday ethical striving, including those both recounted and undertaken at events like the symbol related earlier. Indeed, they maintained that their development into cosmological beings that were virtuous and worthy was dependent upon their ability to actively ‘make ethical’ their daily actions, selves and world. This ‘ethicization’ was seen as important by them as it was only through performing those ethics and ethical qualities around others, and then having those others approve of and reinforce them, that they could enter into the formative cosmological matrix through and within which their developing Heathen selves became realizable. Thus, the potential success of their formative Heathen projects came to depend upon their ongoing striving for and performative realization and instantiation of excellent Heathen qualities within and throughout their contemporary world, actions, others and own selves. As such, I would posit that their pastiche Heathen ethics and striving and often ‘shared’ ethical practices became themselves formative Heathen technologies. Considering the emphasis placed within these projects upon the ‘everyday’ quality of those ethical technologies (e.g. lifting weights, ‘ethical’ judgments, etc.), as well as

the ‘lived’ nature of the performative practical engagements through which they were applied and experienced, I would argue that their projects should also be approached ‘practically’. Specifically, I would suggest that my informants’ projects were skillfully and reflexively employed by them in an attempt to make themselves into everyday objects serving practical ends. In this way, I believe those projects might be approached as a form of ‘craft’, and their Heathen selves as crafted objects.

Techne and Craft

It is interesting to note that nearly all of my interlocutors reported engaging in some sort of crafting activity as part of their Heathenry. For example, Brynn engaged in ‘magical Heathen crafts’ such as leechcraft, or Anglo-Saxon herb craft. Others, including Katherine and Jonathan, reported applying their ‘craft magic’, or ‘practical power’ through everyday acts in order to elicit changes within their world. As Katherine put it, ‘I have used my craft before when I am [massaging] people who are in pain. Sometimes I will write runes on their backs as I am working on them. They don’t believe in it, but I do and I exert my will into them to help them heal.’ Thoughtfully, Jonathan continued, ‘When I drink coffee in the morning before I start working on my armor, I will speak into it and say, “You will wake me!” I know I have the power to change the world around me so I do!’ Others reported engaging in ‘Heathen’ material crafts, or those crafting activities that were believed to either display or produce aesthetically desirable historical and cultural forms (fig. 32).



Figure 32: Katherine L.'s mead brewing station

For example, Auz and Katherine regularly brewed mead and beer for both private use and consumption at community events, Ian produced hand-carved runes, Jeff (a ‘friend’ of Rúnatýr Kindred) was an accomplished bladesmith and Erik regularly engaged in skaldic crafts – that is, composed songs, stories and poems. In addition to engaging in one or more of the above, many of my informants also regularly undertook ‘non-Heathen’ crafting activities, such as needlepoint or scrapbooking.

Despite their highly variable form, each of these activities, as well as their products, were explicitly referred to by my informants as ‘crafts’. The reason, I was told, was because they shared a number of qualities. First, they were all manifestations of a specialized knowledge, whether ‘physical such as metal crafting and mead brewing, magical [...] like Seiðr and rune reading or intellectual like skaldery’ (Katherine). Secondly, each saw individuals applying that knowledge to alter some substance towards some practical, everyday end – that is, to get ‘things done in the world [...] the creation and changing of the world through [...] actions’ (Erik). In some instances this involved the skilled manipulation of materials in the production of objects such as blades or armor, while in others, their aim was the alteration of the very conflated world within which they lived. Regardless, the results were always seen as having ‘everyday’ consequences. Furthermore, my informants emphasized that these crafting activities, and the skill that produced them, were ‘in process’: ‘[craft] is not something you can just [*snap*] do. You may have an inclination to it but it still takes effort. You have to develop your skill’ (Katherine). Lastly, they maintained that each object or alteration realized through these crafting actions had ethical implications. Specifically, as was illustrated in Chapter Four with regard to Jonathan’s armor crafting, they believed that the songs, mead and scrapbooks they crafted and presented to others both reflected and affected their quality as cosmological beings. This was because they were judgeable manifestations of their personalized everyday application of their ‘virtuous’ Heathen knowledge.

Thus, it appeared they conceptualized of their ‘crafting’ as acts of ‘poiesis’ – that is, productive activities ‘aimed at an end different from the making itself’ (Nicolini 2012: 26), namely the production of an ‘object [or affect that] is useful’ (Becker 1978: 865). These acts of poietic creation were seen as being dependent upon and informed by the development and application of a ‘*techne*’, or a skilled

knowledge ‘concerned with contingent principles of production, with [...] know-how (practical, productive skills)’ (Smith 2003: 86) that was developed and transmitted by, to and through ‘accumulated experience based on “past making”’ (Nicolini 2012: 27). Second, due in part to the evolving nature of their *techne*, my informants’ crafting acts and the resulting crafted objects were seen as potentially undergoing a continual process of refinement. Specifically, they maintained that their *techne* was always ‘becoming’ through their own ‘critical judgment’ (Tiles 1984: 54–5) of the objects produced, the skills used, the selves reflected in them and how well those objects might fulfill their purposes, as well as the evaluations of those ‘skilled’ others who then engaged with those objects. In other words, their crafting became ‘productive work for a purpose [...] which involved] a dialogue with its “client” or community, whose interests the craft serves’ (Shanks and McGuire 1996: 78). Described in this way, my informants’ crafting came to be defined by their skilled, everyday application of a specialized ‘bod[y] of knowledge and skill [in the production of] useful objects [that] perform in a useful way’ (Becker 1978: 864); fine, practical objects that, in being manifestations of their crafter’s skill, also came to represent and affect their quality as craftspeople.

Narrative Objectification

As instances of *poiesis*, one defining characteristic of crafting acts like those engaged in by my informants is that they result in an end other than the creative act itself. To put it differently, unlike acts of *praxis*, which ‘find [their] immediate expression in [the] act’ (Agamben 1999: 68), crafted objects must exist separately from the craftspeople, *techne* and practice associated with their production. For example, a fine blade does not forge, hone and polish itself. Rather, it is brought into being by a craftspeople that produces the object with their skilled hands and keen eyes. As such, my suggestion that my interlocutors’ questing Heathen projects were acts of self-crafting carries with it the implication that the highly desirable ‘everyday’ Heathen selves that were the aim of that crafting needed to exist separately from the crafting agency and actions of their *poietic* selves. In other words, they needed, in effect, to become subjects to their own crafting actions – malleable objects upon which they (and others) could apply their Heathen *techne* in the ongoing production and

refinement of those selves. Such a process of ‘self-objectification’ is not as peculiar as it may perhaps at first sound. Indeed, as Csordas has noted, ‘we are capable of becoming objects to ourselves, [though] in daily life this seldom occurs’ (1990: 6), as, in our daily practices, we generally ‘collapse [...] the conventional distinction between [the self as] subject and object’ (1990: 40). Importantly, however, this is not always the case, and there are instances when we come to view ourselves ‘as objects to be looked at and evaluated’ (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 177). One way in which this objectification can occur is through the ‘narrativization’ of individuals and their experiences in remembering acts.

Jonathan Boyarin has suggested that ‘identity and memory are virtually the same’ (1991: 23), in that our ability to both depict and observe ourselves as a semi-coherent field of related experience both stems from and results in the objectification of that field in acts of remembering. In other words, memory ‘serves as both a phenomenological ground of identity [...] and the means for explicit identity construction [...] the self caught between its roles as subject and object of memory, the telling and the told’ (Lambek and Antze 1996: xvi, xix). One way this occurs is through the skilful objectification and construction of those remembered identities within self-narratives. Lambek and Antze continue, ‘People emerge from and as the products of their stories about themselves as much as their stories emerge from their lives. [...] This entails connecting the parts of a more or less unified narrative (1996: xviii). Importantly, these formative remembering acts and resulting self-narratives are neither static nor undertaken in a vacuum, but rather realized by individuals in their ongoing navigation of ‘social memory [and] internalized experiences of selfhood’ (1996: xx). For example, Bakhtin has suggested that how individuals understand their experiences and themselves is greatly informed by and constructed through those with whom they regularly interact. This is because, as experiencing beings, their ‘time is forever open and unfinished; [their] own space is always the center of perception, the point around which things arrange themselves [...] By contrast, the time in which we model others is perceived as closed and finished’ (Holquist 2002: 22). In other words, individuals only ever perceive of themselves as existing within singular moments of perception and action. As a result, they are unable to experience themselves as ‘unique, consummated whole[s]’ (Course 2007:

93). As such, they rely on others to construct coherent personal narratives for them, which connect their individual experiences, and the chronotopes within which they occurred, through time. Thus, according to Bakhtin at least, our own selves as they are objectified and then experienced by us within our narrativized biographies must be ‘bestowed as a gift’ (Bakhtin 1990[1923]: 166) by others.

Of course, Bakhtin is not the only thinker to suggest that the conceptions of others influence our narratives of self. Indeed, Ricoeur also suggested that our capacity to view ourselves as coherent beings was primarily the result of our ability to generate a ‘narrative identity’ – a sense of self formulated in and articulated through narratives that depict those selves as ‘unified, concordant, and finite’ (1991: 23). Like Bakhtin, Ricoeur suggested that this process was not undertaken by individuals in a void, but was instead informed by the objectifying narrational acts of others. That said, unlike Bakhtin, he stressed that this narrative identity was primarily generated through individuals’ own acts of self-narrativization. Specifically, he proposed that by drawing together the ‘heterogeneous elements’ (1991: 21) that populate our experiences into objectifying narratives that tell us and others about ourselves, we actively construct and experience a (semi-) coherent sense of self.

Importantly, in addition to providing remembered and remembering beings with an alternative field of memories from which to construct their narrativized selves, this dialogical process of construction and emergence also potentially provides them with ‘the kind of play or freedom that enables [them] to creatively refashion ourselves’ (Lambek and Antze 1996: xvi). In other words, through creatively combining and articulating their and others’ memories in stories they tell to themselves and others about themselves, individuals become able to generate and experience a self that, though seemingly coherent and concrete, is also flexible and affectible. Keeping this quality in mind, I would argue that, through their objectification in their own memories and those that others have of them, as well as the stories constructed from those memories, individuals become potentially ‘craftable’ objects. In other words, by depicting and being depicted within these objectifying narratives, reflexive agents come to exist as ‘remembered’ objects potentially modifiable by both themselves and others. This, I would suggest, is how my informants came to actively craft upon their own ‘craftable’ Heathen selves.

Crafting Heathens

It is interesting to note that my informants' pastiche Heathen fields, including their ethics, might in themselves be approached as skillfully fashioned craft objects. Specifically, as part of their Heathen development, they actively and reflexively began applying their shared Heathen aesthetic as a form of *techne* in their careful construction of an individualized pastiche Heathenry and ethics that still displayed a recognizable 'Heatheness'. These fields, and the crafting practices through which they were potentially constructed, shared a single practical aim, namely my informants' daily realization of the virtuousness and worth most of them agreed defined both Heathenry and truly 'Heathen' beings. Importantly, as discussed in Chapter Four, the quality of their ethical fields in particular was constantly being evaluated and affected by their own 'skilled', ethical selves and similarly knowledgeable others. This was because they believed those fields both reflected and potentially influenced the quality of their makers, as well as those others who came to encounter them through their practical application. Returning to my current discussion, I would suggest that the key to understanding how these crafted Heathen fields (and particularly their ethics) came to affect the cosmological selves being crafted through them lies in large part with the ethical evaluations and practices-as-performance that came to structure and refine those fields.

As discussed at length during my initial consideration of their Heathen ethics, my informants' ethical evaluations took two primary forms. First and foremost were those ongoing ethical self-judgments through which they gauged and then reacted to the perceived quality of their own daily acts and selves, those others around whom those actions occurred and the everyday cosmological contexts within which their selves lived. These judgments, and the qualities they helped identify, were then either affirmed and reinforced or refuted through the judgments made by ethical others at shared practices like the August symbol related earlier. Keeping in mind the process of narrative objectification introduced above, I would like to suggest that, through their ongoing participation in these ethical evaluations, my informants came to adopt 'a reflexive stance in which [they became] subjects for themselves' (Gershon 2011: 539). Specifically, through engaging in these acts of ethical self-evaluation, my interlocutors became embedded within an ongoing process of judgmental self-

remembering, or ethical ‘glancing back’; their becoming Heathen selves came to exist ‘never “in the moment” [but rather as individuals] faced with one’s self as a project that must be consciously steered’ (*ibid.*). As part of this ongoing reflexive process, I believe they objectified and then inspected the punctuated selves, acts and contexts depicted within those remembered, potentially ethical instances of doing-showing-experiencing. Then, as ‘being Heathen’ meant acting in ways that allowed them to observe and increase their worth as part of their daily lives, I would argue they retrospectively identified and connected instances of ethical striving and realization within their memories. In so doing, they underwent a ‘hardening process, a process of objectification’ (Csordas 1990: 38) through which they began reflexively crafting their objectified selves into and through ethical self-narratives that affirmed their crafting skill and the ‘desirable’ quality of those selves.

Importantly, I would suggest that these objectifying ethical self-narratives were themselves carefully crafted. For example, when discussing their Heathen development, my informants never willingly related instances in which they had undertaken some deed they had reflexively deemed ‘un-Heathen’ (i.e. ‘un-ethical’). Rather, when discussing their striving Heathen selves, they only ever emphasized those instances of ethical living they believed would increase their worth. That is not, of course, to say that they never engaged in unvirtuous acts, only that they actively chose not to incorporate those instances into their narratives. Thus, as part of their Heathen projects they skillfully produced and then performed narratives that, like the Heathen fields that shaped them, had been reflexively designed and employed for the practical purpose of transforming their selves into objects that were seen as being ethical every day in a ‘Heathen way’.

It was these narratives that I believe my interlocutors actively and willingly presented to skilled others for evaluation, whether online, at festivals like Hail & Horn or during shared practices like the August symbol. These contexts seemed to provide my interlocutors with both a space within which and the means through which they could performatively present these narratives (and the objectified, narrativized selves they represented) for review, to both their own crafting selves and others who they knew to be similarly ‘skilled’. For example, at the symbol related at the beginning of this chapter, NaTasha boasted about the strength she and her

daughter had shown during her recent divorce. By relating this crafted narrative, which emphasized her virtuous strength and persistence, she presented the worthy self depicted within it to the others present. That narrative, the quality of the objectified self it depicted and the memories from which that self had been composed were then affirmed and reinforced by and in the honoring practices subsequently undertaken by the others present. That self, freshly worked upon by NaTasha through her telling of it and by the others present through their support of it, was then instantiated – that is, re-incorporated – by NaTasha, first into her memories and then into her ethical self-narrative, just as it was by the others present. (The same might also be said about Katherine’s boast and Brynn’s ‘boastful toast.’) Once the quality of their Heathen fields and those selves were then confirmed and increased through the performative judgment acts of the others present, all involved then re-incorporated their performed ethical selves, and those of the other skilled agents present, into their memories, where they then reinforced and further refined their self-narratives and ethical Heathen selves they depicted.

Briefly, while these narratives did not feature the sort of formulaic ‘ritualistic speech’ that has been described by authors like Fox (1988) and Keane (1994), they did often display contextualized similarities in structure and performance. For example, the narratives shared at ‘standard’ symbols were always related while participants were holding the drinking horn, or ‘Well’. This was because the vessel was believed to connect them and their words to the others present and other potentially present cosmological beings like gods and ancestors. Furthermore, participants always explicitly stated the aim and focus of their narratives. In other words, when the narratives shared were meant as toasts or boasts, the boastful and/or ‘honoring’ quality of those narratives was made explicit, as were those involved in them and why. I would suggest that, by adopting this recognizable format, one that allowed them to consistently and explicitly display the identifiably Heathen quality of the narrator and narrated beings, those involved became able to further display and reinforce their ethical quality and ongoing development into and as Heathen beings. These qualities aside, however, I would suggest that these narratives also bore their ‘maker’s mark’. Specifically, while (like the private events at which they were often performed) these narratives displayed and imparted an identifiable

Heathenness, they also often differed slightly in their tone and form depending upon the individual performer. For example, at shared events Erik often spoke theatrically, sometimes infusing his narratives with French Canadian and reconstructed ‘High Franconian’ linguistic forms – the ‘languages of [his] ancestors’. Shane’s and Angus’s narratives, however, tended to have an informal tone and structure, both of which reflected, to a certain extent, the form and quality of their own pastiche Heathenry.

Returning to my current discussion, I would suggest that this dialogical crafting process had another dimension. Consider how Chantal responded at the above symbol when Jonathan retrospectively dismissed his worth while boasting about his wight shrine. When he doubted the ethical quality of the narrativized self he performed during that boast, Chantal actively intervened and altered the quality of that self. I would posit that something similar occurred during Jade’s toast to Rúnatýr, Brynn’s toast to Shane and Chantal’s toast to me. In each instance, those involved not only illustrated the quality of their own toasting self by engaging in a virtuous Heathen practice while also reinforcing the quality of those they were toasting, they also actively composed new objectifying and ethicizing narratives for those others. In so doing, I would argue that the beings my informants were crafting upon not only observed and instantiated the Heathenness of the narrativized selves that existed within their own memories, they also observed, embodied and incorporated into their memories the objectified selves that appeared to exist within the memories of the others present. I would suggest that, by willingly performing their narrativized selves for their own reflexive selves, as well as for and even ‘through’ ethical others, my informants reflexively embedded themselves in an ongoing process of formative self-making. During this process, every potentially shared instance of ethical reflection, articulation and instantiation represented crafting potential. When this potential was then realized through the sharing and recognition of their narratives, the practices and contexts employed became formative Heathen technologies through which they and others actively fashioned themselves into increasingly worthy Heathen agents.

Of course, this process might be seen as being dependent upon and reflecting the ‘playfulness’ discussed in Chapter Five. Specifically, as just described, I would

posit that this shared process of performative narrativization and ethical crafting both demanded and illustrated my interlocutors' application of this conflating disposition. For example, for their 'crafting Heathen projects' to be successful, my informants had to become both subjects and objects to their own selves. This was in part because many of the formative, ethical encounters through which their crafting occurred took the form of internalized acts of reflexive self-evaluation. Thus, for the formative potential of those judgments to be realized, they needed to exist and act as both contemporary selves who might and were being crafted into ethical Heathen beings *and also* ethical Heathen beings with the skill and formative power to successfully effect those craftable contemporary selves. The success of their projects was also dependent upon their narrated selves being observed by, acted upon and then instantiated by and through others. Towards this end, the beings who took part in the conflating, performative practices-as-technologies through which this shared crafting occurred came to exist as a collection of narratives produced and experienced by and through both them and others. Thus, through their participation in this playful crafting, my informants became fields composed of both their own craftable and crafting narrativized selves, as well as the crafting and crafted narrativized selves of those others with and through whom their fashioning had occurred.

Crafting Ancestral Selves

As my fieldwork progressed, I found 'the ancestors' increasingly interesting. This was in part because they were the only category of Heathen being (aside, of course, from 'human others') all of my interlocutors reported either directly engaging with or maintained were present (or potentially present) within and throughout their everyday worlds. For example, at every private and public symbol, blót and discussion group I observed, my interlocutors 'call[ed] upon' their ancestors (Erik), 'honored' them and recounted narratives that depicted both the desirable quality of those remembered beings and the role they had played in helping my informants develop their own desirable Heathen qualities. My informants also regularly engaged with these beings as part of their personal pastiche practices. For example, Erik and Chantal had erected a small altar in their home to Chantal's deceased father-in-law (fig. 33) and Erik often composed and performed stories and poems about his

ancestors, both distant (i.e. ‘Frankish’) and recent (e.g. his father). Likewise, Katherine once explained how she annually ‘buys a can of the cheap beer [her grandmother] always used to drink, sit on the front porch, choke it down and think about her’ on the anniversary of her death. In addition to actively engaging with their ancestors, many also maintained that these beings were a fundamental part of their everyday world. As they put it, their ancestors were always present within their ‘bones and blood’ (Brynn), their ‘memory and the stories we tell about them’ (Erik) and as part of their Heathen ‘wyrð’ in the form of ancestral luck, or ‘orlog’. Thus, while variability did exist in the ways individual informants conceptualized of their ancestors, they all reported actively and reflexively considering their relationship with them, as well as sharing in the worthy qualities of those ancestral beings.



Figure 33: Erik and Chantal's ancestor altar

I would like to suggest that these acts of ancestral engagement were additional means employed by my interlocutors in their self-fashioning. Specifically, by regularly recounting the ‘excellent quality’ and ‘good deeds’ of the worthy ancestors they believed had and were continuing to influence their own developing Heathen selves, my informants actively and reflexively incorporated the desirable quality of *those* beings into their own objectified, narrativized selves. I stress the specificity of this process because, as noted in Chapter Two, they only ever honored ancestors who they maintained affirmed their own quality as striving beings. For example, during the second round of the symbol related at the beginning of this chapter, Ian recognized and honored his grandfather who ‘was a master woodworker.

He inspired me to become active in crafting, especially with wood, and for that I thank him!’ Shortly afterward, Brynn honored her grandmother who, like her, ‘had some health issues that she outlived for twelve years! I will try to do the same. Her strength lives in me!’ In both instances, Brynn and Ian highlighted beings, qualities and characteristics that they believed either mirrored their own striving practices and experiences or had directly informed the quality of their developing Heathen selves. Thus, just as Ian chose to recognize his grandfather’s virtuous crafting skill and the role he had played in helping him develop his, Brynn honored the strength and worth she believed she shared with an ancestor who, like her, had battled a terminal illness. In this fashion, I would suggest that they actively and reflexively associated their own virtuous striving selves, actions and associated ethical quality in the present with those displayed by similarly ‘ethical’ ancestors in the past. By then objectifying those selves and their similarly perceived ancestors in these crafted remembering narratives, they and any others present became able to observe and conflate those related worthy selves across time. Once this connection was established, observed and affirmed, my interlocutors were able to incorporate those ancestors, their qualities and the formative connections they believed they shared with them into their self-narratives and craftable Heathen selves.

Of course, as mentioned in Chapter Two, the formative crafting potential of these remembering acts were not seen by my informants as being one-sided. Rather, they maintained that, by reflecting upon the deeds and associated quality of their ancestors in honoring and remembering practices in the present, those ancestors, their deeds and their worth came to ‘live on’ (Auz). For example, during the second round of the August symbel, Sara’s husband honored his grandfather because he ‘was a great man’. However, as it was his first symbel, he failed to give his grandfather’s full name. Just as he was preparing to pass on the horn, Shane suddenly stopped him and asked, ‘What was his whole name?’ Jade continued, ‘Yes, it is very important that we remember our heroes and ancestors by their full names at symbel so that they, their deeds and their worth will live on in all of our memories!’ In this instance, I would suggest that, without the full name of his grandfather being spoken, he could not be concretely connected with the ‘virtuous deeds’ and desirable quality depicted within that remembering narrative. However, by speaking his grandfather’s name when

performatively recounting that narrative, his grandfather was connected with those worthy deeds, and, as a result, became an ethical being who was opened to the evaluations and formative crafting influence of others (and vice versa). Thus, just as my informants' ancestors were drawn from the past to participate in their crafting Heathen projects within the present, so too did my informants actively and regularly craft upon those ancestors within the present, and in so doing, guarantee their continued 'worthy' existence and development into the future.

Keeping the ethical quality and crafting potential of these ancestral beings in mind, I would like to suggest that, by carefully crafting themselves within the present into ethical beings who were believed to display virtue and worth, my interlocutors were trying to fashion themselves into 'ancestral Heathen beings' – cosmological beings, that is, who would be remembered and honored 'in the future by others [... and] become larger than life because of their worth and word fame' (Erik). However, I would argue that my informants' ability to perceive of their potential future existence as ancestors was dependent upon their ability to monitor and control their 'openness' as connected Heathen beings within the present, as well as navigate the cosmological field within which those selves were developing.

'Making' Ancestors

At a workshop he chaired at Midgard 2011, Erik suggested that Heathenry:

Is defined by boundaries; the inner and the outer [... For example] the Nine Worlds are described as being distinct from one another. In fact, Ásgarðr is surrounded by a wall! You see it in kindreds too. You have various private cults and public cults that are created by individuals, their families and so on [... also] kindreds tend to keep to themselves.

While I certainly observed these and other such 'boundaries' during my fieldwork, I do not believe that Heathenry and the Canadian Heathen community, at least as I experienced them, were necessarily 'defined' by those boundaries alone. Rather, they seemed to be equally defined by individuals' transgression and navigation of them. For example, in the Heathen mythological corpus, Loki, Thor, Odin and others are regularly depicted as traveling between the Nine Worlds. Likewise, by affording hosts opportunities to articulate aspects of their personal Heathenry within contexts shared with human Heathen others, community practices like *symbel* provided

participants with a space to encounter other pastiche Heathen fields. Similarly, I often witnessed multiple communities, as well as individuals from those communities, engage with one another, both online and in person at pan-community events like those held at Raven's Knoll. Lastly, by employing these practices as crafting technologies around and through others, my informants opened themselves to the influence of those others, thus becoming 'connected' to them within the web of formative influence they referred to as the Web of Wyrð.

While my informants maintained that intertwining their wyrð with virtuous others was fundamental to their development into worthy Heathen beings, they also stressed that this process had to be tightly controlled. This was because opening themselves to the influence of an 'unworthy' other had potentially disastrous consequences for their development. As such, their crafting was not solely a product of their active opening to others, but also dependent upon their ability to carefully control that conflation and manipulate the boundaries that distinguished those interconnected selves from one another. Consider as an example of this process the incident discussed in Chapter Four. Some time before I arrived in Canada an incident occurred between two members of Rúnatýr. Specifically, Jade had felt that Chris had behaved in a way that lacked virtue, and, as a result, had brought her before the kindred for evaluation. Siding with Jade on the matter, the kindred had subsequently distanced themselves from Chris. This occurred, I suggested, because the perceived 'unworth' of that individual had been seen as having potentially destructive repercussions for the projects of the others present. This was because, as they had become cosmologically 'connected' through their shared participation in performative opening practices, their crafting projects had become intertwined. Thus, to ensure that Chris could not craft upon their selves with her undesirable, 'unethical' crafting influence – that is, 'poor' crafting skill – those at risk actively and reflexively limited the influence she exerted upon their development. In other words, those involved actively, with reference to their ethics, affected the extent to which Chris could 'enter' into and craft upon them until she exhibited an improved crafting skill by making amends.

Returning to the ancestral Heathen selves that I have suggested the aim of their crafting projects, I would argue that my interlocutors became able to objectively

observe and then subjectively experience their increasingly worthy crafted and crafting selves by observing how their ‘word fame’ or reported worth had and was continuing to be actively honored and remembered, in both their own ethical self-narratives and those of others. In so doing, much like the ancestors that they themselves honored, they became able to perceive of themselves as potentially ‘existing on’ within and through similarly opened others. Likewise, by recognizing and being recognized as beings whose developing ‘worth and renown will continue even after [they] have gone into the ground’ (Erik), I believe they were also able to perceive of the potential continuance of their formative Heathen quests for personal virtue and worth. Thus, by regulating the crafting influence of others and their own ethical striving in the present, my informants, and those who helped them ‘project’ that quality outwards, became able to experience the possible existence of their quests and questing selves as ancestral beings beyond their current crafting. In other words, as ‘open’ Heathen cosmological beings, I would posit that my interlocutors became reflexively regulated nodes of crafting potential that actively and skillfully projected their virtuous selves outwards from themselves, as well as incorporating the similarly externalized influence of virtuous cosmological others into themselves. In this fashion, they came to exist as and within a matrix of crafting relations that extended to and through other worthy beings within the present, into the past and, most importantly I would suggest, potentially into the future.

Of course, the playfully ‘opened’ quality that by necessity defined my informants’ proposed ancestral Heathen selves is not often associated with Western conceptions of personhood. Rather, the Western person has traditionally been characterized as a social ‘monad’ (see Dumont); a ‘bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe [...] set contrastively against other such wholes and against its social and natural background’ (Geertz 1984[1974]: 126). In so being, the Western social self has generally been depicted as existing and developing independently from others and the relations they establish with them. My informants’ crafting into Heathen ancestors, on the other hand, suggests a different kind of personhood. Indeed, to become ancestors and enjoy the projected, ‘unfolding’ quality of an ancestral being, they needed to become, act as and remain persons that were open to and developing in part through cosmological others (past,

present and future). In this fashion, they were developing into and striving as cosmological beings who displayed a permeable quality often associated with non-Western notions of personhood. Specifically, their ancestral quality was dependent upon their becoming a ‘plural and composite site of the relationships that produced [them]’ (Strathern 1988: 13). In other words, in some ways similar to Strathern’s Melanesian ‘dividuals’, their selves became a ‘living commemoration of the actions which produced [them]’ (Strathern 1988: 302), namely those ethical crafting actions through which they and others were making them into increasingly worthy beings. That said, they were also fundamentally different from Strathern’s dividuals in that, for their selves to become ‘ancestral’, they needed to reflexively control the formative influence exerted upon them by others. Thus, in a somewhat paradoxical way, they appeared to be cosmological *dividuals* whose ongoing dividuality had to be actively applied and reflexively regulated by their own crafting *individual* selves.

I would suggest that these ancestral Heathen persons displayed another quality often associated with non-Western conceptions of personhood. For example, Maurice Bloch (1982) has suggested that Western and non-Western approaches to death reflect the perceived permeability (or lack thereof) of the social beings involved. As such, in the West, death is generally seen as a punctuated event, as the monadic individual involved is composed not from without, but rather from within – that is, they are defined by the biological connections that compose their ‘bounded’ bodies. In so being, they cease being ‘alive’ the moment those internal connections dissolve. Thus, the Western individual dies when their bodies die, as that is the moment they cease being a complete social being. In many non-Western contexts, however, death is seen as a process that involves not just the dying, but also the other persons through whom they have been socially constructed. Specifically, as ‘dividuals’ composed in, as and through the relations they have with others, these ‘unbounded’ persons only cease ‘living’ once the social relationships that define them and their roles within the community have been dissolved through practices like funerary rituals (see Course 2007; Tsintjilonis 2007). In other words, they are not ‘dead’, at least not fully, until their connections to and within their community have been severed. I would posit that something similar might also be said concerning my informants’ development into ancestral Heathen beings.

By engaging in shared acts of ethical performance with and through ethical others, my interlocutors established, entered into and were striving to maintain formative relationships with those others. If the worthy Heathen selves subsequently and continually constructed in part through those relationships were perceived by them as displaying a high enough quality, they, like their ancestors, became able to potentially ‘continue on’ through those and subsequent worthy others. In other words, similar to Bloch’s ‘unbounded’ persons, so long as my informants remained worthy enough for others to actively establish and foster formative relationships with them in the present, they also became able to perceive of their own possible continuance through crafting others into the future – that is, they would not ‘die’ with their bodies, but would rather ‘live on’ through others so long as their worth was recognized. Of course, as they themselves noted, this potential ‘existing on’ would not occur solely within the crafting, remembering acts of others, but also within the bodies of their progeny. Indeed, as has been noted, many maintained that, like their own ancestors, once they died they would ‘live on’ and continue developing within their descendants’ ‘blood, bones and deeds’ (Brynn).

Crafting Collage Selves

Described in this way, my informants’ quest for virtuous Heathen selves was primarily a quest to construct and experience their own potential ancestral quality. That said, I would argue that the significance of my interlocutors’ crafting Heathen projects was not limited to their ongoing generation and incorporation of an ancestral quality and sense of future continuity into their present experiences of self. Rather, in more comparable terms, I would argue that their participation in this shared yet highly personalized crafting process also illustrated their simultaneous engagement in a related process of ‘contemporary’ self-development whose aim was the construction of a ‘collage’ self. Specifically, I believe that, while constructing their ancestral selves, my informants were also potentially fashioning themselves into a form of narrativized, authenticating ‘pastiche’ who was experienced by both themselves and others as holistic, ‘ethical unified’ beings.

The 'Authentic Self'

Charles Taylor has suggested that experiences of self-making within the Western world's current 'secular age' have become shaped by the belief that 'each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and [...] it is important to find and live out one's own' (2007: 475). Specifically, he suggests that our current epoch is defined in part by an 'expressive individualism' (2007: 299) according to which 'What I am as a self, my identity, is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me' (Taylor 1989: 34). As such, late/post modern agents have become embedded in an ongoing process through which they are continually attempting to identify, embody and instantiate qualities and experiences that 'matter for [them]' (*ibid.*) in the pursuit of selves that are 'authentic'. Taylor goes on to suggest that individuals' ability to construct, express and experience these authentic selves is largely dependent upon their ability to identify and then connect past and present instances when they believe they had displayed those desirable qualities. In other words, their construction and experience of an authentic self results, at least in part, both in and from their production and instantiation of personal narratives that depict them as developing and displaying those qualities through time. Though he maintains that this process of narrational objectification is highly personalized and reflexive, Taylor does stress that agents' production and instantiation of these 'authenticating' self-narratives is informed by others. This is because, while 'late modern' agents are ultimately the primary author of and authority on their own authentic selves, those selves and their authenticity are only realizable 'in dialogue with others [... because] we need to know where we stand in relation to others in order to know who we are, where we are at, and how to get where we want to go' (Smith 2012: 56). Specifically, their realization of authentic selves is in part dependent upon them generating a composite self-narrative that positions their developing selves and their qualities in relation to other agents, as well as those others' perceptions of them. In so doing, they become able to construct and embody a 'holistic' or unifying narrative whose composite, objective quality lends a 'coherence and consistency to the diversity of [their] lived experience' (Taylor 1989: 47), as well as the authentic selves depicted in and being developed from them.

Though I have decided to contextualize my informants' development within the Contemporary Era rather than Late/Post Modernity in an attempt to escape the conceptual baggage of the latter, in Chapter One I suggested that these epochs, as well as the beings 'becoming' within them, do share some fundamental similarities. Specifically, these eras might be approached as fluid, 'liquid' fields defined in part by a sense of 'narrative fragmentation' – that is, a disengagement from coherent, concrete experiences of self, history and other. I also suggested that the individuals who inhabit these fields might be seen as being similarly 'fragmented', and as such, perpetually attempting, through their generation and propagation of formative narratives, to construct and experience selves they find desirable, coherent and 'rooted'. With these similarities in mind, I would like to suggest that my interlocutors' crafting, contemporary Heathen projects and their becoming, ancestral Heathen selves might also be approached as examples of the process of late modern 'authentication' just described. Indeed, both 'projects' feature reflexive, volitional beings actively constructing and propagating narratives that depict them developing and displaying certain qualities through time. Likewise, the selves those qualities were believed to define appeared to only be realizable through their engagement in objectifying, narrational practices with and through others. Thus, I would posit that, like my informants' striving Heathen selves, Taylor's developing authentic selves could be approached as beings embedded within a shared crafting project whose aim is the realization of a coherent personal desirability. Similarly, as with Taylor's late modern authentic selves, I would suggest that my informants' striving for an ancestral Heathen self might also be approached as an attempt on their part to construct, experience and propagate 'unified', authentic selves. It is towards the potential 'authenticity' of these Heathen selves that I will now turn.

Crafting an Authentic 'Collage' Self

As depicted within their 'journey' narratives, my informants initially adopted Heathenry and began developing as Heathens because they felt the tradition 'made sense' and 'fitted' them and their hopes for the future. Indeed, whether they believed the tradition might allow them to celebrate their family, cultural history and accomplishments, provide them with practical and experiential freedom or simply let

them ‘live [their] life’ (Gus) in a way they found desirable and fulfilling, each maintained that Heathenry, and the qualities they believed it might impart, were representative of who they wanted to be and how they wanted to live. Put simply, they saw Heathenry as a means through which they might fashion and realize a type of self they found ‘authentic’.

In order to realize a self that was authentic in its ‘Heatheness’, my informants needed to live the tradition ‘all of the time’ (Erik). As I have indicated throughout the previous chapters, they maintained that this was no small task, as their identities were ‘fragmented rather than unitary and fixed’ (Peacock & Holland 1993: 368). Specifically, all of my informants stressed that they were not ‘just Heathen’, but rather a field of playfully conflated identifications that acted and developed in relation to one another across multiple fields of practice. In so being, their potential realization of a personal Heatheness, and the authenticity they seemed to believe that quality might impart upon them, was dependent upon their ability to illustrate – to themselves and others – that they applied their Heathen ethics upon and throughout the manifold identifications and fields that defined their everyday experiences. In other words, their realization of the authenticity they believed ‘being Heathen’ might provide them was dependent upon them being ‘ethically unified’ beings – that is, individuals who acted in a virtuous, worthy and ethical Heathen ways all the time, regardless of whether they were fathers picking up their kids from school or Heathens toasting others at symbel. The key to this process of ‘drawing together’ lies, I would suggest, in the Remembrance Symbol related at the beginning of Chapter Four.

During the third round of this event, Brynn shared two crafted scrapbooking objects as a form of boast. As we admired the fine quality of the objects, as well as the virtuous crafting skill reflected in them, she explained that the many forms she had utilized in their construction (personal photos, images taken from magazines, snippets of fabric, etc.) were ‘personally meaningful’. The reason, she continued, was that she associated each with an ‘important’, albeit disparate, formative experience from her past. Thinking back, I would now classify the objects shared that evening as ‘collages’ – that is, pastiche wholes composed of seemingly incongruent forms that Brynn had thoughtfully and skillfully combined to tell the story of her

journey as a mother, a Heathen, an activist and someone who is ill. I would like to suggest that, by objectifying disconnected past experiences and then combining the forms that represented those experiences into collages, Brynn was attempting to draw those disparate experiences, qualities and selves into a more coherent self-narrative. In other words, I believe those craft objects became collages of both material forms and the remembered qualities and selves they represented and, I would suggest, helped produce. In this way, Brynn's collages allowed her (and the others present that evening) to observe, consider, affirm and then instantiate the 'unified' self generated from and depicted within those composite, narrational forms. Returning to the 'Heathen authenticity' described above, I would posit that, by allowing Brynn to connect and then illustrate to all involved how she had displayed virtuous Heathen strength, perseverance, etc. when dealing with everyday 'trials', these unifying collages allowed her to observe and affirm her ongoing application of her ethics as part of her everyday living.

While Brynn's scrapbooks were potential material manifestations of this authenticating 'collaging' process, I would suggest that the majority of my informants constructed their authentic Heathen selves within and through the same ethical self-narratives as they did their ancestral Heathen selves. For example, as stressed earlier, my informants were very careful about what actions, experiences and even ancestors they associated themselves with in the ethical narratives they crafted and presented to others and themselves for evaluation. This was in part because one aim of these objectifying ethical narratives was to depict them as striving as and becoming into as worthy a Heathen being as possible. Towards this end, they crafted their ethical self-narratives so that they emphasized their 'total' Heathen quality; a Heathenness that was seemingly rooted in their ancestors in the past, was increasing in the present and which they believed might continue developing into the future. I would now suggest that, while helping them craft and experience potentially ancestral Heathen selves, these narratives also became ethical collages that helped them to construct and experience a sense of authenticity. Specifically, the ethical acts, contexts and beings they reflexively and skillfully combined and then integrated into these narratives came to function in many ways similar to those 'meaningful' photos and bits of fabric that Brynn had incorporated into her collages – that is, they

became objectified and objectifying ethical 'snapshots' that highlighted instances of 'everyday' ethical Heathen striving and becoming. By combining those disparate instances of ethical action into a single self-narrative, I believe any who came to witness those narratives being performed were able to experience, evaluate and then affirm the seemingly unified ethical quality of my informants' manifold selves and actions, as well as the 'total', lived quality of their Heathenness. Thus, in crafting the ethical narratives upon which their development into potentially ancestral beings depended, my interlocutors were also fashioning themselves into 'self collages' – contemporary agents who, despite their multiplicity, were also 'authentically Heathen' in their ethical unification.

One possible example of this collaging process was my interlocutors' tendency to retrospectively define themselves as Heathen. As I hinted at in Chapter One, many of my informants qualified their journey narratives by saying, 'Well, I was always Heathen.' For example, Erik once stated, 'I would have to say that I always partook in activities which I would define as being "Heathen" such as respecting others and being aware of how my actions impacted everything around me.' Katherine related a similar belief: 'After I had been reading and practicing for some time I realized that, looking back, I would do things that I now identify as Heathen when I was little [... like] leave out food offerings for the spirits and I was always focused on being a good hostess when I had people over.' In each of these instances, my interlocutors were retrospectively identifying potentially ethical Heathen qualities within their past experiences, which they then incorporated into their authenticating self-narratives within the present. In so doing, they were able to not only reinforce their unified ethical quality and Heathen authenticity within the present, but also project it backwards and root it within their past self. Something similar might also be said concerning their ancestors. As has been noted, my informants tended to emphasize only 'worthy', 'relevant' ancestors within their ethical self-narratives. I argued that this was because doing so helped them to highlight their own worthy quality, as those beings were seen as fundamentally influencing their quality as striving, becoming Heathens within the present. I would like to now suggest that, by highlighting the formative influence they believed those ancestral beings exerted upon them within the present they, like my interlocutors'

own ‘pre-Heathen’ and ‘everyday’ Heathen selves, were integrated into their contemporary collage self. In so doing, they became able to extend and then root their ethically unified, contemporary authentic self into and within the past.

In addition to becoming an increasingly ‘authentic’, ethical collage of their own selves and ancestors, my interlocutors also appeared to become collages of contemporary ethical others as well. Specifically, by performing their unified, narrativized Heathen self for others at events like the August symbol, they and the others present were able to observe and instantiate, as remembrances, the collage selves depicted within those narratives. If those selves were subsequently believed to display a worthy enough quality, they were often recognized later by those witnessing agents in novel honoring remembrance narratives such as ‘toasts’. As discussed earlier, these remembrance narratives (the very narratives that helped them to experience their own potential ancestral quality) not only affirmed, but also often increased the honored being’s perceived worth by providing them additional ethical narratives to incorporate into their own. Consider, as a possible example of this process, the 2011 Rúnatýr Kindred ‘Rúnamoot’. At the annual administrative meeting, Annick and Jonathan requested membership into the kindred Innangard. Despite already being long-standing members of the kindred Utangard, before they could be considered for ‘IG’ membership, they had to first explain why it was they wanted to be, and most importantly, were *worthy* of being in the IG. As part of this process, they needed a pre-existing IG member to ‘speak to their worth’ (Jade) – that is, affirm their exceptional, ‘total’ ethical quality as Heathens. Annick was the first to speak: ‘We are dedicated to the kindred. I want to bring something more to the kindred. I want to help you grow. I am an accountant, which gives you an idea what I could do!’ When she had finished, Erik stood and continued, ‘I will speak to her worth! [Annick] is a good hostess, a great mother [...] she has a supreme wisdom [...] she has all of the characteristics we need to carry us forward!’ After Erik had seated himself, Jonathan then took the floor: ‘I wish to be a member of the IG. I have looked at other kindreds but all they do is talk and talk is cheap. You act and that is important. I have been happy [with you]. You guys are a family! [...] I can help you enlarge with what I can do as an artist and I want to. That is all. I’m a man of few words.’ Once Jonathan had finished, Katherine stood, turned to him and

continued, ‘I will speak for you. I like how you are free with your opinions, you tell the truth and you speak your mind when few others do. Also, your crafting abilities are amazing [...] you don’t do things by halves. We would benefit from your skill.’

I would posit that the Innangard nomination process provided Jonathan and Annick with an opportunity to present their ethically unified, collage selves to skilled others for immediate review, affirmation (or rejection) and instantiation. In this instance, Erik and Katherine not only reinforced the quality of the selves presented, they also immediately worked upon those selves by presenting novel narratives that further highlighted the lived quality of their Heathenness. For Annick, the authentic collage self generated from these narratives was as ‘virtuous’ when she was being a mother, host and accountant as when she was engaging in Heathen practices. Likewise, Jonathan was depicted as displaying Heathen virtue and developing his worth not only when he was exercising his skill as an armorer, but every time he spoke plainly and honestly to and about others. Thus, I would suggest that at this and every shared practice my informants attended, they, like Taylor’s late modern agents, conflated their authenticating self-narratives with those presented by others. In so doing, they affirmed and increased the unified, authentic quality of the collage selves depicted within them.

Described in this way, it would appear that the same shared process of ethical narrativization employed by my interlocutors in their pursuit of ancestral Heathen selves also helped them to generate and embody narratives that allowed them to become ‘collages’ whose ethical Heathen quality was an observable aspect of their daily selves, actions and contexts. By then performing self-narratives around and through others that depicted their unified quality, narratives that were themselves composed in part of and by those others, my informants became a further collage – that is, collage selves composed from, of and through collaged others within the past, present and possibly even the future. Thus, like the worthy Heathen selves my interlocutors believed these ethical self-narratives would allow them to generate and project ‘outwards’, this simultaneous process of ethical collaging potentially allowed them to realize an authentic, contemporary self whose authenticity was similarly rooted within and realized through others in the past, observable in the present and, as becoming ancestral beings, might possibly extend into the future.

Returning briefly to what I said earlier concerning the multiplicity of my informants' identifications, I would like to stress that I am not suggesting that the perceived authenticity of their contemporary selves was defined by their perceived Heathenness alone. Indeed, it appeared that the qualities and experiences that came to inform and define their sense of personal authenticity stemmed as much from their ongoing striving as business owners, students and activists as from their striving and becoming as Heathens. Rather, in discussing this unifying, 'collaging' process, I have simply been attempting to show how, in order to recognize themselves as 'ethically' and thus 'authentically' Heathen, they needed to infuse those other identifications and fields with Heathen qualities – that is, they needed to playfully conflate those identifications in such a way that, while still not 'Heathen', would show they strove to behave in ways that were.⁵¹ Thus, through the ongoing crafting and refinement of their ethical narratives, my informants became beings who, while not only Heathen, became authentic in part through their perceived 'total' Heathen character. In so being, this ultimately shared process of playful, transgressive collaging allowed my interlocutors to become ethical beings whose 'fragmented', contemporary selves were skillfully refashioned, performatively objectified and then re-embodied as rooted, unified and authentic 'total' Heathen selves.

Importantly, because the way in which some fashioned, performed and instantiated their Heathenness and associated authenticity sometimes conflicted with the collaging efforts and authentic qualities of others, this shared process of collaging did not always go smoothly. While I was in Canada I spoke with a number of individuals who said they had left communities or had distanced themselves from others because they had felt that the collaging, crafting projects of those others had impeded their ability to pursue, experience and subsequently instantiate some quality they believed fundamental to who they were or wanted to be. For example, one informant related how they had felt that the personal Heathenry of another member of their community had hampered their ability to construct and recount personal Heathen narratives at shared practices. They had therefore left the community in an attempt to distance themselves from that individual and their influence. When I asked if they feared doing so would negatively affect their development as Heathens and

⁵¹ There is, of course, nothing to say that the same was not also true for their other identifications.

individuals more generally, they replied, ‘I don’t think so. There are always people online and others that I can talk to. So long as I can openly and freely share what I am doing, I don’t care who I do it around or where I do.’ Thus, just as my informants reflexively monitored and affected their cosmological ‘openness’ in an attempt to ensure that their selves might become potential ancestors, it seemed they also actively controlled who, when and to what extent others could influence their development into and as authentic, collaged selves. Specifically, if the others through whom these narratives and authentic selves were in part constructed began ‘fragmenting’ the unified Heathen selves represented within those self-narratives – by questioning them or presenting conflicting narratives – my interlocutors removed themselves from that invalidating influence. So described, while, like their ancestral selves, the authenticity of their contemporary collage selves may have been realized in part through others, they, like Taylor’s agents, were still the primary authors of, and authority on, their own authenticity, as well as the unified selves and pastiche Heathenry through which it was in part realized.

Before I conclude, I would like to briefly suggest that a similar process was also taking place as part of my Icelandic informants’ projects. As I indicated in Chapter One, many of my Icelandic interlocutors had actively sought out *Ásatrú* and had become active in *Ásatrúarfélagið* because they felt both were linked to and expressive of their Icelandic ‘culture’, ‘heritage’ and ‘identity’. Indeed, most of them maintained that *Ásatrú*, or Scandinavian Heathenry, was inseparable from the history and culture of Iceland, a connection they believed was legitimized by the fact that a number of key Heathen sources had been written in Iceland and in Icelandic. Teresa explained, ‘The language we speak now is very similar to the language they spoke in the time of the Sagas [...] that time lives on in our language and writing and I am proud of that!’ With this in mind, I would argue that, like my Canadian informants, many of my Icelandic interlocutors believed that Heathenry (*Ásatrú* specifically) and ‘being Heathen’ was fundamental to their construction of an authentic contemporary self. I believe that by regularly ‘reading the stories’ (Viktor) and ‘speaking the language *correctly*’ (Teresa [original emphasis]) that for them defined Icelandic history and Icelandic Heathenry, and connected them with and within contemporary Iceland, they were attempting to fashion themselves into selves who were expressive

of and unified through the authenticating Heathenness they perceived as permeating their everyday lives as Icelanders.⁵²

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that, much like Jonathan and the Odin god pole described in my Introduction, my interlocutors' projects saw them skillfully carving and being carved from the raw material of their own contemporary world, actions, experiences and memories into the worthiest of Heathen beings. Specifically, I have suggested that, through their development and application of an ethical Heathen techne, their Heathen projects helped them to carefully construct an objectified, narrativized self – a 'lived' ethical self that they performed, observed, augmented and instantiated around and through skilled cosmological others. I proposed that the 'ancestral' beings they and those others were attempting to fashion through this ongoing process of shared 'telling' and refinement were seen as displaying such a fine cosmological quality that, like the god pole, my informants became able to perceive of their potential existence across space and time. I continued by suggesting that their crafting Heathen projects, as well as the ethical techne-as-technology employed in them, might also be approached as mechanisms through which my interlocutors were attempting to construct, express and experience de-fragmented, 'authentic' contemporary selves. Specifically, through their skillful combination of their experiences of self and world into a 'collage' of aesthetically and ethically coherent narratives, my informants became able to experience their ethically unified selves, and the authenticity they associated with them, as both projecting outwards from and being 'drawn into' the present.

⁵² I recognize that this statement is a 'loaded' one. That said, for the time being I am simply trying to show that, though the context and details of my Icelandic informants' projects differed somewhat from those undertaken by my Canadian informants, both might be seen as having provided them with a means through which, and a space within which, they could construct, pursue and realize a self they found personally 'excellent' and contextually relevant, as well as a world and way of living they found satisfying.

Conclusion

Canadian Heathens and their Quest for a 'Virtuous' Self

In this thesis I have attempted to grasp my interlocutors' ongoing attempts at contemporary self- and world-making. I suggested that their engagement with Heathenry and everyday striving as Heathens represented a formative personal quest – that is, an active attempt on their part to realize a type of self and world that they found desirable. I argued that the self and world they were attempting to realize through their quest was one they perceived of as being 'virtuous', or at least spaces within which Heathen virtue might be realized and experienced. Focusing upon their highly reflexive and volitional quality, I went on to suggest that these quests for virtue might be approached as a type of formative 'project'.

These Heathen projects represented a means through which my interlocutors began effecting new formations of self and world through actively and reflexively affecting their everyday experiences and understandings. I argued that this process of self fashioning and experiential reorientation was fundamentally informed by an alternative field of embodied sensibility and practice I came to call the Heathen aesthetic. This pastiche of historical and cultural forms came to represent a highly personalizable yet shared 'truth' with reference to which my informants began reorienting what possibilities they understood as being present within their everyday experiences of self, world and other. By first playfully 'opening' their experiences to the Heathen cosmological potentiality represented by and manifested through those aesthetically desirable forms and then actively identifying, embodying and instantiating that potentiality in highly personalized ways as part of their everyday living, they underwent a shift in how they perceived of and reacted to those forms and the sites where they were encountered. Thus, this Heathen aesthetic, playfully applied, served as a mechanism through which they began manifesting the 'Heathen cosmos' within their everyday world; an altered field of potentiality that brought with it a desirable, formative Heathenness they began identifying within and projecting throughout their experiences of self, world and other. In so doing, their understandings of the 'contemporary' began to shift so as to reflect their experiences of the 'cosmic' they perceived as being present within it.

I suggested that this process of aesthetic instantiation and everyday experiential reorientation hinted at another characteristic of my informants' questing projects that was essential to the type of self and world they were attempting to realize. By providing them with an alternative field of significance according to which they began actively attempting to 'live' and 'become' daily, their Heathen aesthetic came to facilitate a process of ethical reorientation that affected the quality of self and world they were striving to realize. Specifically, as a shared (albeit 'loose') field of desirable forms, my informants' Heathen aesthetic generated a new standard of 'excellence' they began actively and, most importantly, *reflexively* pursuing as part of their everyday lives through an ongoing process of ethical action and evaluation. Towards this end, my interlocutors generated highly personalized pastiche ethics that they began employing in an attempt to identify, display and then embody the excellent Heathen quality (e.g. virtue and worth) of their everyday striving selves, actions and contexts, as well as the quality of those others with whom they shared in those contexts. I suggested that, through this reflexive, ongoing process of everyday ethical 'doing' 'being' and 'becoming', my interlocutors came to 'make' their lived world, actions and selves 'ethical in a Heathen way'.

This process of ethical reorientation, like the aesthetic reorientation that facilitated it, occurred primarily through my informants' ongoing, active and reflexive participation in Heathen 'practices-as-technologies'. I suggested that these practices were defined by their being aesthetically informed actions reflexively undertaken by my interlocutors in 'ethical ways' – that is, in ways that allowed them to performatively display, observe and embody a formative Heathenness as part of their everyday living. While these technologies – like the pastiche Heathenry, aesthetics and 'ethics of the ordinary' through which they had been developed – were reflexively personalized by my informants, they were also 'shared', or undertaken by them with and around other beings; human and non-human, present and potentially present alike. Indeed, while my interlocutors stressed that the Heathen pursuit of virtue and worth was dependent upon the ethical striving and 'virtuous deeds' of the individual, they stressed that those deeds, and the ethics and ethical beings associated with them, exerted an influence over the striving and becoming of others. This was in part because, through their ongoing application of a playful disposition when

engaging with and through Heathen aesthetic forms and ethical technologies, my informants had ‘opened up’ and then conflated their contemporary world with the Heathen cosmos, and in the process, transformed themselves and others. Specifically, through their playful Heathen projects they had ‘unbounded’ and transformed their everyday world into a site where the Heathen cosmos was experienced as ‘present’. Within that altered field of potentiality, my informants were similarly ‘opened up’, thus becoming ‘cosmological beings’ who were open to and contemporaneous with striving cosmological others. As unbounded cosmological beings, my informants were seen as exerting a formative ‘power’ – the very power, in fact, through which they were attempting to effect new selves and a transformed world. In addition to allowing them to affect their own perceived ethical quality and that of the world within which they existed, as unbounded beings surrounded by similarly opened others, my informants’ formative influence was also seen by them as affecting the development and perceived quality of those cosmological others and vice versa. Thus, as ethical Heathen beings existing within the Heathen cosmos, my informants’ were ‘powerful’, or formatively influential. As such, every ‘action-as-practice’ they undertook within that playfully opened and conflated contemporary cosmic context was seen as potentially affecting the quality and ‘fate’ of the others they shared that context with, just as the quality of those others’ actions impacted my informants’.

Described in this way, my informants began actively and reflexively controlling and utilizing this interpenetrating web of formative cosmological connectedness in an attempt to increase the perceived virtue of their own selves and world. Towards this end, they engaged in shared events like *symbol* and *blót* that allowed them to establish and monitor their formative relationships with ethical cosmological others. These shared practices became means through which my informants presented their ‘private’ Heathenry and ethical, everyday Heathen selves to others for review in the form of expertly crafted ethical self narratives. These narratives allowed them and others to observe the ethical – that is, virtuous and ‘worthy’ – quality of their striving, becoming selves and, if the selves presented were seen as being of an excellent enough quality, intertwine those selves and projects. Through this process of conflation and dialogical ‘crafting’, my interlocutors generated a matrix of shared development that not only allowed them to fashion their

own selves, but also work on them *through* others – that is, they became objects and subjects of both their own questing projects and those of others.

I concluded by suggesting that, by conflating their projects and becoming selves with others through their skillful crafting and sharing of an evolving ethical self-narrative, my informants became able to experience and understand their emerging selves and world as being holistically ‘Heathen’. In other words, with and through others they constructed a biography that was experienced by them as displaying a ‘total’ Heathenness – a self and world, that is, unified in its virtuous Heathen quality and cosmological potential. By then objectifying and projecting that biography through others and throughout their world during shared practices like symbol, that biography became a sort of personal Heathen history experienced as and through a seemingly coherent narrative rooted within the past, observed as a totality within the present and developing hopefully into the future. In this way, by observing their own virtue and worth in the present within their biography-as-history, my informants came to perceive of their own potential existence as a Heathen ancestor who, like their own ancestors, might continue developing into the future through the crafting acts of others.

By encountering their own potentially ‘ancestral’ selves, I argued that my interlocutors also came to experience those crafted Heathen selves as ‘authentic’. Indeed, reflecting Taylor’s ‘secular age’ (and the expressive individualism he suggested was a defining feature of that age), I posited that my informants’ Heathen projects reflected a more widespread search for personal authenticity. Specifically, they maintained that Heathenry represented a contemporary field of practice through which they might manifest, experience and propagate selves they found relevant and desirable. However, in order for their contemporary selves to fully realize this Heathen authenticity, they needed to be experienced as being Heathen ‘all the time’. In other words, their virtuous Heathen quality needed to be seen as permeating throughout their manifold fields of daily action, as well as the many interrelated selves that inhabited and were developing within those fields. Like their ancestral selves, this was achieved through their participation in a shared process of narrative objectification. By having their selves objectified and then experienced in and as ethical narratives that depicted their ongoing attempts at virtuous everyday living,

they skillfully crafted themselves around and through others into a collage whose perceived ethical totality attributed a coherence and authenticity to their experienced contemporary selves.

The Heathen Cosmic Imaginary as ‘Re-enchantment’

My interlocutors’ projects were dependent upon, reflective of and generative of a reorientation in understanding that affected how they experienced their selves, those around them and the world they shared. Specifically, while pursuing selves that were ‘authentic’ in their ethically unified, potentially ancestral Heathen quality, my informants playfully opened themselves to and began manifesting and embodying the Heathen cosmos, cosmological others and their possibilities. In so doing, they began increasingly identifying, encountering and instantiating the formative presence of that cosmos and those others within and throughout their everyday world and selves, which in turn generated an altered understanding that reflected, concretized and propagated the presence and potentiality of each within their experiences. Thus, by undertaking aesthetically informed practices-as-technologies daily that allowed them to conflate their contemporary world and selves with the Heathen cosmos and cosmological others, their proliferating experiences of and within the latter increasingly informed their understandings of the former, thus collapsing both into a single field that was simultaneously ‘contemporary’ and ‘cosmic’.

Through this process of reflexive conflation, my interlocutors’ Heathenry came to function as a unifying field of ‘experiencing’ within and according to which their projects and reorientation in experience and understanding took place. In this fashion, I would suggest their Heathenry came to represent, reflect and, in turn, generate a formative and transformative ‘cosmic imaginary’. Specifically, by becoming embedded within and throughout their contemporary experiences, this Heathen imaginary came to affect the way they ‘imagine[d] their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations’ (Taylor 2004: 23). Defined by, manifested within and projected throughout their experiences through their practical engagement with their highly personalized yet sharable Heathen aesthetic, this cosmic imaginary came

to represent an embodied field within and according to which my informants began ‘being’, ‘doing’ and ‘becoming’ in new ways. Specifically, it provided them with a loose standard of ‘excellence’ according to which they began engaging with, connecting themselves to and understanding others, the potential of their relationships with them and the nature of the emerging ‘everyday’ within which their formative, ethical engagements with those others occurred. It also provided them with the raw material from which to craft pastiche fields through which they, with reference to and through their interpersonal engagements within this imaginary, began fashioning contemporary Heathen selves that were biographically and ethically coherent and authentic in their unifying Heathenness.

Most importantly perhaps, this cosmic imaginary outlined and facilitated my interlocutors’ manifestation and experiences of, as well as living within, a world and as a self that existed without boundaries. Indeed, it was this unbounded, conflated quality that differentiated the experiences and understandings that defined this imaginary – and the virtuous, authentic selves and world realized through it – from those that reportedly defined my interlocutors’ ‘pre-Heathen’ contemporary experiences. Specifically, this aesthetically and ethically defined and instantiated imaginary became a space within which and a mechanism through which my informants were able to open up, draw together and ‘root’ the Heathen cosmos, other cosmological beings, their own past and even their potential future within their selves and world as they experienced them daily. In so doing, the Heathen cosmic imaginary as it was experienced and employed by my interlocutors became a means through which what was seen by them as ‘exceed[ing] the immediacy of space and time [and the] boundaries of what is taken for granted in everyday life’ (Knoblauch 2008: 142) – the ‘transcendent’ – was made experientially ‘present’ and encounterable, or ‘immanent’.

Heathenry as ‘Re-enchantment’; Heathenry as ‘Re-engagement’

Max Weber famously suggested that modernity was ‘characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the “disenchantment of the world”’ (Weber 1946: 155). He maintained that, through the development and prioritized application of detached reason, the unified ‘religious’ and ‘metaphysical’ understandings he

suggested defined pre-modern experiences of the world had dissolved, and ‘the natural world and all areas of human experience [had become] defined, at least in principle, as knowable, predictable and manipulable by humans’ (Jenkins 2000: 12). While discussing the shift in understanding he suggested helped generate the current Western ‘secular age’, Charles Taylor considered a similar process of disenchantment and ‘disengagement’. In a general sense, Taylor proposed that the coming of the secular era both generated and resulted in part from a fundamental shift in experience and sensibility that transformed the Western world from an ‘enchanted’ space where ‘meaning [existed] quite independently of us [...] It comes on us from outside’ (2007: 33–34), into a disenchanted space where experiences have become disengaged from external forces and understandings have become rooted within individual agents. Fundamental to this proposed shift has been the transformation of the individual from a ‘porous’ subject – a being open to the potential presence and influence of external, ‘transcendent’ powers – into ‘buffered’ individuals who have become ‘distinct from the “outer” world [and find] the idea of spirits, moral forces, causal powers with a purposive bent, close to incomprehensible’ (2007: 540). In other words, according to Taylor, the disenchantment of Western experience has seen both the world and the beings believed to inhabit it transform from porous subjects and spaces that displayed ‘a perplexing absence of certain boundaries which seem to us essential’ (2007: 33) into agents and places where ‘any form of interpenetration’ (2007: 16) between nature and the ‘cosmic’, the self and the other – the *transcendent* and the *immanent* – has become, if not impossible, then rare.

As depicted by Taylor and Weber, the coming of the ‘modern’ secular age brought with it a process of disenchantment and disengagement as a result of which:

[We] no longer understand (or experience) ourselves as inhabiting a world with spirits, daemons or other entities that can inhabit or possess us [...] and] we have come to see ourselves as significantly independent of others—i.e. as individuals in an atomistic or monadic sense who can ‘objectively analyse’ and dispassionately act in any given situation. (Smith 2012: 58)

Though, as I suggested early in my discussion of my interlocutors’ projects, I am not suggesting that the contemporary context within which those projects occurred was

the ‘modern’, ‘secular’ era specifically outlined by Weber and Taylor, I have discussed how ‘the contemporary’ – and my informants’ projects and experiences – might be seen as sharing a number of characteristics with it. Indeed, I have shown how the ‘contemporary’ Western world within which Heathenry in part developed and my informants’ projects were undertaken, like the late and post modern eras discussed by authors like Giddens and Bauman, featured increased levels of biographical and interpersonal ‘fragmentation’, as well as a more generalized process of narrative proliferation and de-centralization. Likewise, I have illustrated how Heathenry and my informants’ projects might be approached as a manifestation and reflection of the diversification of fields and highly individualized pursuit of personal ‘authenticity’ that Taylor suggested constitutes a defining characteristic of the modern secular age. Keeping these similarities in mind, I would like to conclude my discussion of my informants’ quest for virtuous selves by suggesting that the contemporary period within which their pre-Heathenry selves and world existed and their projects were undertaken displayed the same disenchantment and disengagement that Weber and Taylor associated with secular modernity. That said, I would also like to suggest that, by facilitating the process of opening up, conflation and connection that came to form the foundations of their projects, the Heathen cosmic imaginary became a mechanism through which and generated a space within which my informants ‘re-enchanting’ their experiences of self, world and other.

As you may recall, my informants’ becoming into ethical, authentic Heathen selves was dependent upon their crafting and propagation of coherent self narratives. In order for these biographical narratives to be embodied in formative ways, my informants and their experiences had to be first opened to and rooted within others throughout the Heathen cosmos. For example, while crafting these narratives my interlocutors began engaging with their own pasts through Heathen practices like study and genealogical research. Through these practices they generated and ‘re-connected’ to an ancestry and cultural heritage; a ‘pastness’ often manifested in the form of ancestors they drew into the present through honoring practices. In other words, within and through the Heathen cosmic imaginary they came to root themselves within their past, as well as rooting that past within their present. As part of their crafting of these authenticating and ‘ancestralizing’ self narratives, they also

came to connect the many selves they maintained defined their experiences of and development within the present into a holistic collage through acts of everyday ethical evaluation and narration. Specifically, these narratives allowed them to draw together their own disparate experiences, and the everyday selves and contexts they depicted, into beings whose unified quality was experienceable. As it was only by objectifying, infusing and then experiencing their increasing virtue through similarly opened others that the selves and world my informants were striving for could be realized, their crafting of these narratives also came to connect them with and through others. Of course, as was illustrated, the formative cosmological others who took part in this process were not just Heathen and non-Heathen human others (living and departed), but also a variety of non-human others who had been introduced into their contemporary world from the Heathen cosmos. Lastly, by engaging with and ‘becoming’ through these others, my informants became able to experience as present their own future, craftable future selves and, like their own ancestors before them, any who might continue their crafting within that future.

Described in this way, I would suggest that the Heathen cosmic imaginary came to represent a ‘countervailing force of dedifferentiation: that is, as a movement oriented towards reasserting unity in a world perceived to be artificially fragmented’ (Crook 2009: 26) that, rather than existing apart from their everyday world and self, came to be deeply embedded within it – so rooted in fact that it came to affect their experiences and understanding of that world and vice versa. Specifically, the Heathen cosmic imaginary provided my informants with an everyday space within which, and the practical means through which, to become ‘porous’ – that is, defragmenting subjects open to, effected in part by and existing throughout the conflated, re-enchanted world. In so doing it facilitated their re-engagement with their own experiences and developing selves, others and the manifold chronotopes within and throughout which each existed. Thus, as part of their questing towards and within this conflating imaginary and with, through and as porous, formative beings, my interlocutors and their world became sites of ‘immanent transcendence’ – sites of re-enchantment and re-engagement where ‘otherness’ was not only encountered, but, through their rooting within it and vice versa, fundamental to their contemporary striving as and becoming into virtuous, authentic beings.

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