

Spirits Through Respiratory Passages

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The topic of this paper is a whole complex of intertwined notions of soul, spirits, forerunners / premonitions and other types of long-distance influence from a person's mind. I will try to lead you into this 'jungle' by looking at some terms from the Shetlandic dialect of English. The noun *gander*, inherited from Old Norse *gandr*, has some interesting meanings that have never before been discussed by scholars:

- 'a high, roaring wind; strong gust of wind.'
- 'a sudden feeling of powerlessness, nausea, sickness at heart' (Jakobsen 1928: 210).

Jakobsen understands these meanings as completely different words (*ibid*), obviously because it is difficult to see a connection between them. However, separating these words becomes problematic if we take the Shetlandic noun *gandigo* into account:

- '(Strong) squall of wind with rain.'
- 'violent spewing; a sudden fit of vomiting' (*ibid*).

Here the double meaning 'wind' and 'sickness' reappears (and in this case Jakobsen does not list the meanings as separate words). Because we find similar pairs of meaning in both *gander* and *gandigo*, I will try to explain the mentioned meanings of these words as branches of one notion.

In my dissertation on Old Norse and Modern Scandinavian *gandr* / *gand(ur)* (Heide 2006b) I argued that the essential meaning of *gandr* in Old Norse sources is 'soul or spirit sent forth (in shape)'. This essential meaning may be connected to the Shetlandic *gander* meaning 'gust of wind', because the notion of soul or spirit is derived from breath, which is moving air, a form of wind. In languages from the Atlantic to Siberia the word for breath and soul / spirit is the same. Examples of this are Old Norse *ond* and *andi*, Saami *heagga* / *hægke* etc., Finnic *henki* / *hing* etc., Latin *anima* / *animus* and *spiritus*, Classic Greek *psyché*, and Hebrew *ruah* (Heide 2006b: 163-64, cf. Holmberg [Harva] 1927: 7).¹ Originally our soul was the air flowing in and out through our respiratory passages, and in recent folklore we still find the belief that the soul may leave the body in the shape of air or vapour. In some languages the word for soul or spirit also means 'vapour', probably because the vapour of the breath is visible in cold weather (Heide 2006b: 162-63). Therefore I believe that the magic fog that serves as a tool for magicians's will in *Hrólfs saga kraka* (: 6), *Njáls saga* (: 37-38) and *Borleifs þátr jarlsskálds* (: 222-23) should also be understood as the magicians' soul sent forth (Heide 2006b: 163, 271 ff., 301). The reason why the idea of soul or spirit is derived from breath is of course that we breathe as long as we live and stop when we die, cf. the double meaning of the verb *expire* and cognates in many languages.

¹ For reasons of simplicity I generally refer to my dissertation only. Further references are found there.

It is also very common to conceive this 'soul breath' as 'soul wind'. It is a widespread belief that when someone dies, the spirit leaving the body may blow out candles, or make a gale, if the departed had a strong mind (ibid: 196 ff., cf. Liestøl 1937: 96). Equally widespread is the belief that people skilled in sorcery are able to send forth their soul as wind even in person. Skaldic poetry has many examples of this idea (Meissner 1921: 138 ff.), and Snorri Sturluson says: 'The mind should be periphrased by calling it the ogress's wind' (*Huginn skal svá kenna, at kalla vind trollkvenna. Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*: 191.). The connection between breath, spirit and wind also emerges from ancient terminology. For instance, Old Norse *vindr* means both 'wind' and 'breath', and Old Norse *andi*, Finnish *henki* and Latin *spiritus* mean both 'spirit' and 'wind'.

As we have seen, the old connection between soul or spirit and wind can explain why one meaning of Shetlandic *gander* is 'gust of wind'. The connection between Old Norse *gandr* and wind can also be seen or reconstructed from a number of other sources. In Old Norse there is a word *gandrekr* meaning 'wind' (Finnur Jónsson 1912-15 B I: 674, A I: 683), and in skaldic kennings *gandr* sometimes means 'gale' (Heide 2006b: 218 ff.). Modern Norwegian *gand* may be a magic projectile in the shape of a whirlwind or a gust of wind, or a whirlwind is the vehicle of the magic projectile (ibid: 198-99). Northern Norwegian *gandferd* is equivalent to The Wild Hunt, which is a gale of damned spirits. Shetlandic-Orkneyic *ganfer*, probably < **gandferð*, meaning 'an atmospheric phenomenon portending bad weather' is similar to this, and so is *gandreið* in *Njáls saga* (: 320-21. Cf. Heide 2006b: 200 ff., 206 ff.). The background for all this seems to be that the soul / spirit of a living or dead person originally is breath, moving air, wind.

So much for the connection between *gander* and wind. Now I turn to the meaning 'nausea' of Shetlandic *gander*. The connection between this meaning of *gander* and the meaning 'gust of wind' seems to be that nausea can be caused by an attack from 'spiritual wind'. I will try to explain this in several steps. First I will return to the notion that the soul can leave the body in the shape of breath / vapour / wind. The belief is that if the soul leaves a living person while he is sleeping, the soul will return the same way, down the respiratory passages – logically enough. Given that the starting-point of the idea of soul or spirit is breath, souls and spirits can be breathed in as well as out. In my opinion this is what we see in many motifs in the Old Norse sources as well as in later folklore:

In a more common version of the soul leaving a sleeping person, the soul leaves the mouth or nose in the shape of some small animal – insect, butterfly,² small bird, mouse, stoat etc., or it leaves as air or vapour and then turns into such a creature. It returns in the same shape and the same way. Based on the oldest written account of this motif, it is called the Guntram legend, and it is known across Eurasia. In my dissertation I interpret the Icelandic and Norwegian magic flies – called *gandflug* or *galdraflug* – in the light of this notion of the soul. A number of motifs in popular belief about magic flies indicate that they should be understood as incarnations of the soul of their owner or his helping spirits. In Icelandic folklore, when a fly like this attacks a person to kill him, it will try to enter the victim through the mouth or nose. I know about one example of the same in

² The previously mentioned Greek *psyché* also means 'butterfly'.

Norwegian folklore, and there is reason to believe that this was more common in Norway in earlier times (Heide 2006b: 158 ff., 184, cf. 2002). The normal Norwegian *gandfluge* is a variant of a magic projectile that may have many forms – insects, small arrows, small balls of hair, etc. Such projectiles are known under many names, one of them being *gand*. Usually they attack the victim at any point of the body in a bullet-like way. But some of them take the form of wind, including some called *gand* (ibid: 198-99). It seems that such magic ‘wind shots’ may enter the victim through the throat. In Scandinavian folklore the bodies of people killed by ghosts sent forth or magical wind-projectiles are in many cases inflated. From one account it clearly emerges that the victim gets inflated because air forces its way into his respiratory passages (Broman 1911-49 [early eighteenth century]: 809, Heide 2006b: 166-67). A reasonable interpretation is that the alien, hostile spirit in the shape of wind enters the victim down his respiratory passages.

In some Old Norse sources friendly spirits seem to enter a person in the same way. In *Hrólfs saga kraka* (: 11-12) a *seiðkona* is asked for hidden information and therefore starts performing *seiðr*. After a while she yawns heavily, and immediately afterwards she can give some information. Then somebody tries to stop the sorceress, but unsuccessfully. She yawns again, and can give more information. The order of this indicates that it is the yawning which gives the *seiðkona* the information. This makes good sense if we take into account that the starting-point of the idea of spirit is breath and that yawning is a form of heavy breathing. The *seiðkona* probably yawns in the spirits that give her the information. Clive Tolley (1995: 58, 71) has been close to suggesting this, referring to the fact that Siberian shamans breathe in spirits. Icelandic folklore also supports this interpretation. In order to know the future, one may catch a ‘telling spirit’, a *sagnarandi*. To do this, one has to summon it by *seiðr*, and then trap it in a certain way when it enters one’s mouth (Jón Árnason 1958-61 [1862-64] I: 309, Heide 2006b: 184-85). This is in principle parallel to what I suggest in the *seiðr* séance in *Hrólfs saga kraka*: A spirit summoned by *seiðr* in order to give supernatural information enters the summoner through the mouth.

However, I shall return to hostile spirits and the way they may be seen as entering the body through the throat. A quite common motif in the sagas is that forerunners / premonitions (*hugir / fylgjur*) from attackers make the victims yawn or fall asleep (cf. *Þorsteins þátr uxafóts*: 361, *Sturlunga saga* II: 46, *Þórðar saga hreðu*: 195, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*: 258, *Finnboga saga*: 332-33 og *Njáls saga*: 156. Similar in recent folklore, cf. Heide 2006b: 169-70). I suggest that the victims breathe the forerunner spirits in. This fits with the fact that forerunners can be felt as an itching in the nose – in *Orkneyinga saga* (: 247) and often in later folklore (Heide 2006b: 168) – as if the forerunners want to enter through the nose.

In Scandinavian folklore, the modern forms of *hugr*, which is one of the terms for forerunner in the Old Norse sources, seem to enter the victims through the throat. This is not explicit in the sources, but it is hard to understand their effect otherwise. (The following refers to Heide 2006b: 167 ff.) Forerunners / premonitions can cause nausea and vomiting or diarrhoea, which might seem strange, but is easily understandable if their nature is to attack through the throat. If they end up in the belly of the victim, it is logical that what was there before is forced out. There are many examples of *hug* having this

effect. In Dalarna (Dalecarlia) in Sweden, the verb *hugsa*, meaning 'to think about', also means 'through one's thoughts make someone ill or sick'. Etymologically, the verb *hugsa* means 'to send one's mind or thoughts (*hug*) to the object one is thinking of', so the idea behind the sickness effect is probably that the mind (*hug*) of the thinker goes to the object being thought about and causes a physical effect there. In Norwegian, *å ha hug på noko* means 'to want something', literally 'to have mind on something'. One's mind goes to the object of desire. In popular belief, if somebody gets sick, the reason may be that someone wants his property, expressed as 'someone *har hug på*' the property. Probably the idea was originally that the *hug* of the envier went to the envied person and had physical influence on him that way. Faroese folklore has evidence of the same thing. The Faroese say that if a person gets sick from food, he is *fyrí hugboði* 'is hit by a *hugboð*', 'hit by a "mind message"', and the reason for this is that somebody is envying the victim his food. The underlying notion must be that the envy is the 'mind message' that hits the person being envied. The sickness indicates that the 'mind message' enters through the throat of the victim, and so does the mentioned passage from *Orkneyinga saga*, where the word mentioned from Faroese folklore, *hugboð*, is the word that refers to the itching in the nose caused by the forerunners from the attacker, as if they want to enter the victim through the throat. – In Modern Norwegian the noun *hugbit* both means 'forerunner / premonition' and 'nausea', and in Swedish dialect, this word (*hogbit*) means 'diarrhoea' (Lid 1935: 11). Literally, *hugbit* means '*hug* bite', 'biting by a *hug*', which indicates that the influence causing sickness was conceived as an attack. This fits with an Icelandic saying. If someone chokes on something, it is said that something *sækir í hálsinn á honum* 'something attacks him in his throat' (Jón Árnason 1958-61 [1862-64] II: 534). The idea of attack we also find in the term *atsókn* / *aðsókn*, which in Old Norse as well as in Modern Icelandic is the term for yawning and sleepiness caused by forerunners. Scholars have not comprehended this term literally, but I believe we should. If we take the term seriously, the yawning itself is called an 'attack', and this makes good sense if we understand the yawning as breathing in of the spirits running ahead of an attacker. This kind of forerunner is exactly what *atsókn* refers to in the sagas when it refers to forerunners, and when such forerunners are described, they are described as wolves running towards the victim (visible only in dreams or to persons with second sight). In some cases, these wolves are called *hugir* (Strömbäck 1935: 153 ff.), which, as we have seen, normally refers to a person's mind, and which in other sources seem to attack through the throat. In some sagas, forerunners from attackers cause itching in areas near the mouth of the victim (Heide 2006b: 169), and in one of them, we get to know what the attacking forerunner looks like, and it looks like a wolf. – At this point one might object that in most situations of life forerunners do not come from attackers but from peaceful people. I am aware of that, but if we again turn to later folklore, terms for forerunners point towards an attack, and evil or envious thoughts (willingly or unwillingly) function in the same way as attacking forerunners in the sagas. We have seen that a premonition in Modern Norwegian may be referred to as *hugbit*, indicating that it bites. In Modern Icelandic, *aðsókn*, still meaning 'attack', is a common term for forerunner even from a friend, and it may also refer to a long-distance influence from envious or otherwise hostile

thoughts of a person not approaching. In Scandinavian folklore, insects can also be incarnated evil thoughts and forerunners (Heide 2006b: 159-60), cf. the *gandflugger* that I have mentioned.

To sum up what I have been sketching out so far, I would like to return to the problem that I started out with: how the Shetlandic words *gander* and *gandigo* can mean 'strong gust of wind' and 'nausea', 'sudden vomiting', when the essential meaning of *gandr* in Old Norse sources is 'soul or spirit sent forth'. My suggestion is based upon the fact that the starting-point of soul and spirit is breath. This implies firstly that souls and spirits are moving air, which may explain that a soul or spirit called *gand(e)r* may be a gust of wind. Secondly, the starting-point of the notion of souls or sprits implies that their nature is to pass through respiratory passages. Therefore, the explanation of the mentioned meanings of *gander* may be that hostile spirits referred to as *gand(e)r* may enter the victim down his throat in the shape of gusts of wind, forcing out what was there before, leading to sudden nausea and vomiting. Such *ganders* in the shape of gusts of wind would be related to the wind *gandar* of Norwegian folklore.

I would like to continue with another meaning of Shetlandic *gander* referred to in my introduction: 'a sudden feeling of powerlessness', which I believe belongs to the same complex of meaning. (The following refers to Heide 2006b: 178, 180 ff.) So far, I have taken sleepiness caused by aggressive forerunners in the sagas to be a variation of yawning. But there is reason to believe that there is more to it than that. The fact that the influence caused by forerunners is referred to as *atsókn* 'attack' implies that it is harmful to the victim. However, when I examine the passages in question, I find no physical injury. But when the real attackers come, they find the victims powerless, passive and void of initiative, unable to defend themselves or flee. *This* seems to be the harm caused by the forerunners, and the meaning 'sudden feeling of powerlessness' of Shetlandic *gander* should probably be interpreted in the light of this. The sudden powerlessness is originally a result of an attack from a *gandr* = *hugr* 'forerunner' / 'mind sent forth'. The mechanism behind this may be reflected in the term *hugstolinn* (Modern Icelandic [and Old Norse, see below]) / *hugstolen* (Modern Norwegian). Literally the terms mean 'with a stolen *hug*', 'deprived of mind', and the actual meaning is 'absent-minded, disheartened, diffident'. This meaning would also describe the condition of people influenced by forerunners from attackers, and the literal meaning of *hugstolinn* / *hugstolen* suggests that the victims of such forerunners could have been referred to with this term. If so, I can see two ways to explain it. Possibly the alien *hugr* (the forerunner) could enter the body of the victim and force out the original *hug*, or possibly the *hug* of the victim lost a fight with the attacking *hug* outside the body. *Hávarðar saga Ísfríðings* (: 349 ff.) points to the latter solution (cf. Strömbäck 1975: 7). But the mentioned vomiting and diarrhoea caused by long-distance influence from alien minds points to the former solution. So does the saga motif of hit men referred to as *flugumenn* 'fly men'. The traditional explanation of this term is that the employer of the hit man 'fishes' the hit man with a fly like a fly-fisher when he wants to hire him. But there are serious problems with this explanation. Instead I have suggested that the 'fly man' becomes a tool of the employer's will when he symbolically swallows a fly which is an incarnation of the employer's mind. As already

mentioned, the *gandfluger* and other magic flies of Scandinavian folklore seem to have been conceived as such incarnations. They may enter through the mouth or nose, and if they contain another person's mind, it makes sense that the person they enter gets deprived of his own will and becomes a tool of the alien will (Heide 2006b: 133-34, 180 ff., 191-92, 301).

These interpretations are supported by other usages of the motif of getting deprived of one's own will. Nineteenth-century Icelandic tradition has a parallel to the famous Norwegian early fourteenth-century witchcraft case against Ragnhildr Tregagás, who sends *gonduls *andar*, 'gandr's spirits', against her newly married former lover in order to make the couple fight so that their intercourse will fail. In the Icelandic parallel the long-distance influence from the rival also makes the married couple fight. In other words, the will of the couple is to a certain degree replaced by the will of the rival, and the interesting thing is that immediately before this happens, they have been yawning (Jón Árnason 1958-61 [1862-64] I: 333-34) – breathing in the alien mind? (Heide 2006b: 172-73) Some Old Norse accounts of *seiðr* and one nineteenth-century account show a similar pattern. In *Ynglinga saga* (: 28 ff.) the *seiðkona* Hulðr applies *seiðr* to attract king Vanlandi to Finland, where she is, and as a result the king gets sleepy and wants to go to Finland. The Icelandic parallel is very close and includes the sleepiness, the weakening of the victim's will, and the attraction (Torhildur Þ. Holm 1962 [1878 and before]: 170 ff., Heide 2006b: 181). Also the *seiðr* employed against Kári in *Laxdæla saga* (: 106) makes the victim sleepy, weak-willed and attracted to the source of the *seiðr*, as Strömbäck points out (1935: 152-53). I believe the mind or the helping spirits of the *seiðr* practitioner enter the victim in fundamentally the same way as I have been outlining so far. To be sure, no source for this kind of *seiðr* gives clear information that this is the way it worked, but I find it reasonable in the light of the total evidence, particularly the previously-mentioned divination-type of *seiðr*. It seems very likely that the *seiðkona* of *Hrólfs saga kraka* breathes the summoned *seiðr* spirits in, and I can see no reason why the *seiðr* practitioner would not apply the same spirits for aggressive purposes, and then presumably they would enter other people in the same way. There is also a possibility that aggressive *seiðr* spirits entering the victim through the throat could make the victim insane. There is no explicit evidence of this, but there are some indications. When the *seiðr* in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (: 240) 'backfires' on the *seiðmenn* they turn insane. If the Icelandic *sagnarandi*, summoned by *seiðr* to tell the future, succeeds in entering the summoner through the mouth, he turns insane. And finally, the only meaning of *hugstolinn* attested in Old Norse is 'insane' (Fritzner 1883-96 II: 89, Heide 2006b: 191 ff.), cf. *hugstolinn* / *hugstolen* above.

One of the unsolved questions in Old Norse cultural history is why the practising of *seiðr* was unmanly and perverse. Margaret Clunies Ross (1994: 209) has suggested that the *seiðr* practitioner became possessed by summoned spirits and that this penetration by spirits gave him or her a feminine role. I am not sure if it is justifiable to talk of *possession*, but I agree on the penetration and the symbolism of it (Heide 2006b: 274). Possibly we find the same fundamental idea in the logic concerning forerunners from attackers in the sagas. We have seen that the yawning caused by the forerunner spirits

probably means that the victims breathe them in, and we have seen that this makes the victims powerless, passive and void of initiative, unable to defend themselves. This implies that they were *argir* 'unmanly' according to Old Norse norms, and this supports Clunies Ross' understanding of the penetration by spirits. There is also reason to believe that spirits sent forth in hostile *seiðr* could enter the victim's *backside*. This would only make the *victim* unmanly, not the *seiðr* practitioner (according to Old Norse norms), but could fit a more general idea of perversion. I am getting at Almqvist's (2000: 258, note 20) mentioning of saga passages where the effect of hostile *seiðr* is that the victims cannot sit still or stay calm (*Egils saga*: 176 ff. og *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*: 377-78; *aldri ró biða / mátti eigi um kyrrt sitja*). Almqvist's explanation of this fidgeting is that the *seiðr* attacks the victims' backsides. This is not obvious in those passages, but *Þorleifs þátr jarlsskálds* (: 222-23) seems to have a clear example of such an attack. In the passage Þorleifr jarlsskáld attacks the manliness of earl Hákon, not through *seiðr*, but through a *níð* poem. As a consequence, half the earl's beard, an important symbol of manhood, rots away, and he gets intense itching around his anus, and has to have two men pull a coarse cloth between his buttocks. The backside itching may be compared to a woman's wantonness being called *lendakláði* 'loin itching' in *Hrólf's saga Gautrekssonar* (: 95), and it is very likely that the readers or the audience of *Þorleifs þátr jarlsskálds* comprehended the 'massage' of the earl's backside as something that made the earl *argr* 'unmanly' in a most fundamental way. The most interesting thing in the passage is that it seems to be the skald's mind sent forth that attacks the earl's manliness. The itching parallels the itching caused by forerunners called *hugir* 'minds' and the like in the sagas, and in this story, the incidents seem to be caused by a magic fog of darkness filling the room. This fog is presumably the skald's mind, cf. the widespread belief that a person's soul can leave the body in the shape of air or vapour (see above). If so, it is the skald's mind that attacks the earl's backside. (Heide 2006b: 271 ff., cf. 2006a).³

In this paper I have tried to demonstrate how the seemingly incompatible meanings of Shetlandic *gander* and *gandigo* might not be so incompatible. The purpose of this has been to show that a lot of motifs in sagas and folklore, hitherto considered unrelated or unexplained, actually belong in the same complex, revolving around the double nature of the idea of spirit, namely 'breath' and 'spirit. This understanding of spirit is compatible with my theory that *seiðr* etymologically means 'thread' (cf. Old English *sāda* and Old High German *seito* 'a cord, halter, snare'), the practising of *seiðr* essentially being about spinning a thread (Heide 2006a, 2006b: 235 ff.). In attracting *seiðr*, which is the most common form of *seiðr*, the threads would be souls or spirits sent forth in the shape of threads in order to attract things – for which there is broad evidence. There is also some evidence that such a 'mind thread' could pass through respiratory passages (Heide 2006b: 243 ff.) and that it could have phallic symbolism (ibid: 274 ff.).

³ In the mentioned works I interpret even the coarse cloth (indirectly placed there by the skald) pulled between the earl's buttocks as a representation of the skald's manhood attacking the earl's backside. This is because there are three knots on the cloth, and this connects it with a probable and common incarnation of wind / mind sent forth. There is no contradiction between these interpretations; the same idea may be expressed in different ways.

The method behind the theories presented here are in principle highly problematic. Usually it is not considered justifiable to mix young and old sources and sources from different cultures to the degree that I have done. When I nevertheless find it justifiable it is because of the results that the approach has yielded. It has made so many pieces of evidence that would otherwise be inexplicable fit together in a meaningful pattern. I am convinced that if sources and folklore of other parts of Europe were examined, one would find much of the same pattern there, because the notions in question are so basic.

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