

# MYTH AND BELIEF IN NORSE PAGANISM

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A large amount of information survives on the pagan religion of the Norsemen. Firstly, there is a large number of mythological allusions in the court poetry of Norway and Iceland: skaldic poetry. This poetry is usually attributed to named poets of roughly known date, and so can be attributed to a period beginning rather less than two centuries before the Conversion, which occurred around the millennium. The pagan mythological allusions in such poetry continue, after a partial lapse of roughly three-quarters of a century, in poetry composed during the Christian period, and do not cease until the poetic genre itself ceased to be productive, in about the fourteenth century. These allusions are usually indirect, almost always very brief, always elliptical, but frequently give or imply information which is unavailable independently elsewhere.

Secondly, there survives a small group of mythological lays in the older and looser metres and conventions of so-called Eddaic poetry. Most of these (i.e. ten poems) are preserved only or primarily in a single manuscript, the Codex Regius of the Elder, or Poetic, Edda (GKS 2365 4to), dating from the third quarter of the thirteenth century; a few others (some six poems) appear in other manuscripts, some of which are much later. The poems themselves are anonymous and undatable. Some of them may have been composed in roughly their present form in pagan antiquity; further, some of them are fairly certainly compiled of ancient material, even though the compilations as such may be late. Others of these poems are certainly late imitations of earlier texts, composed by antiquarian scholars between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries, though they may conceivably re-use genuine early information. Some of the mythological Eddaic poems are of very high literary quality, so much so as necessarily to affect the judgement of those who must use them as documentary source material.

The antiquarian impulse which led to the compilation of collections such as that in the Elder Edda, and to the compilation of pastiche pagan poetry, also led in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to the application of true scholarly activity to the study of Norse paganism. The starting-point was the older poetry, skaldic and Eddaic. Skaldic poetry is inherently and intentionally difficult, and has always required explication. But it was frequently the only contemporary source for information about historical events of the Viking Age and later, and therefore the twelfth and thirteenth-century historians used it as primary source material. Also its composition had become a social accomplishment for the nobility, and had high

social status. Texts of pedagogic intent appear in the twelfth century, together, apparently, with the antiquarian collection of poetic material. This process reached its culmination in the first half of the thirteenth century, with the works attributed to Snorri Sturluson (d. 1241). He was himself an Icelandic aristocrat of noble birth, excellent education, and great wealth. He was a skaldic poet of considerable technical accomplishment, though his own surviving poetry seems dull and mechanical beside that of many of his predecessors and some of his contemporaries. He acted as court poet to Duke (earlier Earl) Skúli of Norway, and was unfortunately implicated in Skúli's rebellion against his own nephew, King Hákon Hákonarson [the Old] of Norway; this was eventually to lead to Snorri's murder about a decade later. To Snorri is attributed the composition of the large cycle of sagas of the Kings of Norway known as *Heimskringla*; the attribution is generally accepted, and is certainly very plausible, though it is based only on very late and indirect evidence. *Heimskringla* makes much use of skaldic poetry as historical source material, and this use is discussed and justified at length in a Preface. In many cases these verses only survive because they are quoted here. But Snorri was also aware of the need to explicate skaldic poetry, and a further major work, known as *Snorra Edda* or The Prose Edda is attributed to him. The attribution is in the Uppsala manuscript, DG 11, which represents a version normally considered considerably more 'primitive' than the versions normally printed and translated: primarily those in the Codex Regius, GKS 2367 4to, and Codex Wormianus, AM 242 fol. It is by no means certain that these latter represent Snorri's work directly, and the Prose Edda continued to be re-worked, extended and elaborated up to the seventeenth century. The Prose Edda is a work of great scholarship, intended at least in part to be a handbook for young poets. It falls into three major parts. The last of these was probably the first to be composed: it is a long poem (*Háttatal*, 'Reckoning of Metres') composed by Snorri in praise of Earl Skúli and King Hákon, probably about 1219, employing all the metres and rhetorical devices available to its poet. This is accompanied by a very detailed technical commentary, not necessarily by Snorri, on each verse. It is exceedingly dull, but that does not diminish its usefulness. The second part of the work was probably composed next. It is *Skáldskaparmál* ('The Language (or perhaps 'The Sayings') of Poetry'), in which Snorri discusses poetic diction, and in so doing gives a very large number of examples from older poetry. In most cases these verses only survive because they are quoted here. But in order to explain the diction of these verses, Snorri is obliged to recount the stories to which they allude. This obligation becomes delight, and *Skáldskaparmál* is a treasury of legendary and mythical narrative, always brief, but frequently giving information not found elsewhere. The first major section of the Prose Edda was probably composed last: it is *Gylfaginning* ('The Deluding of Gylfi'). This gives the cosmogonical and cosmological setting for all the other narratives: it recounts the origins, nature, and end of the pagan mythic universe, and contains many quotations from Eddaic poetry, in most cases from poems which also survive in the Elder Edda. But Snorri sometimes knew these poems in different versions, and also seems sometimes to have had access to poetry which no longer survives elsewhere. He also gives material for which there is no known poetic or other source.

Although *Gylfaginning* quotes poetry, it does so as do the historical works, as source-citation to corroborate the prose account of the narratives; in contrast with all other parts of the work, the poetry cited here is Eddaic. Some of the poetry here cited as source-material only survives in this text. However, where the poetry cited by Snorri also survives independently elsewhere, it usually seems evident that Snorri has not re-composed it. Where Snorri's sources are given, or are known from elsewhere, it is manifest that he indulges in very significant re-interpretation of the material, but in general he seems not to invent new material. This may give some qualified confidence in the reliability of his mythological narratives for which we have no known source.

The works attributed to Snorri Sturluson, who may at the very least be used as a convenient name for their author or authors, are of very high literary quality. They also show a very far-reaching attempt to understand and interpret their material. Because of their literary merits, it is frequently, indeed normally, difficult or impossible to discard their understanding of their material. Snorri's interpretation may well often be individual to himself. But he was a highly educated and sophisticated Icelander of the thirteenth century, evidently aware of the intellectual debates of his own time in French and English universities and monastic schools. However, he was also an Icelandic chieftain, and so heir of the poetic and intellectual tradition which had, at some remove, produced the poetry which he presents. His understanding of that poetry and its content, reflects on him, and on contemporary European culture, but it may nonetheless also provide an indirect reflection of the earlier individuals and society from which their poetry sprang, their attitudes and beliefs. Snorri is at once a fellow-scholar in the study of this material, an important secondary source for the intellectual and emotional attitudes of the thirteenth century, and an essential primary source.

Snorri Sturluson is the most important known figure in the twelfth and thirteenth century academic study of poetry, and of the mythology recorded in the poetry. But he is by no means alone. The works attributed to him certainly subsume much earlier scholarship. But other writers, who may sometimes be associated with Snorri and his school, took considerable antiquarian interest in the old religion. *Eyrbyggja saga*, for instance, shows a delight in folklore or quasi-folklore about the supernatural in general, and pagan cult in particular. Other texts represent collections of ancient legend, such as those which lie behind *Völsunga saga* or *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, in which the gods may play a part. Literary composition affected the presentation of this material, and the sceptical modern scholar suspects ever-increasing invention where genuine tradition was wanting. Texts such as *Gautreks saga* or *Norna-Gests þáttur* or *Sörla þáttur* can hardly be taken as reliable accounts of pagan mythology, and yet they contribute material which may well be ancient, and which can hardly be disregarded. Each text has to be evaluated on its own terms, and handled with source-criticism of the utmost delicacy.

These are the most important vernacular documentary sources for our knowledge of Norse paganism. Other documentary evidence has been used: for instance the accounts given by Arabic travellers of a people who may or may not have been Norse somewhere in the Ukraine, or the account given by Adam of Bremen of the heathen

temple at Uppsala. Equally, place-names have been used in attempts to demonstrate the geographical, and less convincingly the chronological distribution of cults. Personal names have been used less; they are certainly relevant if intractable. Such scanty evidence as exists for other Germanic religions, those of for instance the early English, has been brought into the discussion. But since this has often already been interpreted in terms of the much fuller Norse material, there is a strong risk of circularity here. Similar circularity of argument has frequently appeared in attempts to interpret archaeological evidence; such interpretation is not infrequently based on naive readings of the documentary sources, if not upon the vain imaginings of anthropologists. Archaeological evidence cannot, by definition, tell us what people of the past thought and felt, and only infrequently can it tell us in any non-trivial way what they did.

Such is the basis for any understanding of Norse paganism. It is immediately apparent from this description of the sources that we have much information about mythology. Some of it may have relevance to cult, and again there is a little material which purports to inform us directly about cult activity. Very little of the surviving material is relevant to actual belief. There is no real equivalent of any creed, mentioned or implied. The myths, as recorded in the poetry of the Elder Edda or as recounted in the Prose Edda, seem not to be 'that which it is needful to believe'. Unlike the central narratives of Judaism, Christianity or Islam, belief in the 'historical' truth of the myths of Norse paganism seems to be irrelevant. Indeed, the myths virtually never involve any interaction between the gods and the world of the historical activities of men, other than for a very brief and relatively trivial myth of the creation of men (told only in the Eddaic poem *Völuspá*), and the myth of the general cataclysm which is to overtake the entire cosmos at Ragnarøk (told most powerfully in *Völuspá*, but even there only trivially involving humanity). Divine intervention in heroic legend is also rare. Thus the myths cannot be historically verifiable: the events which they narrate do not take place in human time or space. Indeed, the myth of Ragnarøk by definition is non-historical, for Ragnarøk has not yet happened. If the myths of Norse paganism are 'true', their truth is not historical in any sense that we can recognise. Nor does this seem to matter. The contrast with, for instance, the central narratives of Christianity could hardly be stronger, since these narratives must be believed to be actually, literally and historically true; otherwise the basis of the entire religion is invalidated.

But the myths do not seem to fulfil a second function of narrative with which we are familiar: that of ethical exemplum. The parables of Christ are not presented as literally true, but as allegorical vehicles for truths, generally ethical. They set up paradigms of behaviour, meritorious or otherwise, for humanity. But the narratives of Norse mythology seem to have little or no direct ethical content, and, because they do not involve humanity, do not demonstrate models of human behaviour, whether or not these should be admired or avoided. In this they contrast very strongly with heroic legend, which certainly fulfilled this function though not by allegorical means. Indeed, it is difficult to find an ethical element in Norse paganism, as opposed to the

insistent ethical concern of heroic legend, though the personal ethics of the pre-Christian period are well enough documented across several of the Germanic peoples. The code of behaviour was, of course, not one of any absolute good and evil, the terms for which may have lacked any metaphysical overtones, but of public esteem: honour and shame. This is fully represented in skaldic praise poetry. But it seems hardly to relate to the myths or the mythological poetry. The gods are frequently accused of behaviour which is grossly shameful in human beings, and sometimes even seem to boast of it. Certainly some of the poetry exploits this tension with satiric glee. Only *Völuspá* seems to condemn it. The only instance in which ethically meritorious human behaviour seems to be acknowledged in the mythology is in the case of the Einherjar, Óðinn's chosen heroes: these die a noble and heroic death in order to be assumed into the company of the Chosen Warriors, being gathered by Óðinn against the day of Ragnarök. This one feature provides an explicit link between myth and heroic legend. Perhaps unfortunately, by far the best and fullest accounts of this mythic assumption into Valhöll are in two poems, *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*, memorial lays in praise of two Norwegian kings, sons of Haraldr inn hárfagri, who both fell in battle at or soon after the middle of the tenth century. Despite the literary power of both texts, and their resolutely pagan content, both kings were to some degree Christian, and so both poems must be seen at least in part as deliberate 'paganisations' of Christian monarchs, and hence of the Christian ascent of the meritorious soul to God. Otherwise human ethics seem to be irrelevant to pagan mythology.

Thirdly, the mythological texts give virtually no indication of any pagan theology: they show little sign of any systematised understanding of paganism, or any attempt to produce such an understanding. The exception, as often, is *Völuspá*, and consequently *Gylfaginning*, which takes its literary structure and hence to some extent its cosmology from *Völuspá*. Mythological information in the poetic texts is certainly structured, but not by any principles which we could accept: thus, for instance, versified lists of names of verbally related items are frequent in the Eddaic mythological sources. They seem to be obsessed with names and naming, as a primary aspect of religious wisdom, and they generally expound this knowledge of names within the literary framework of the (mostly) Óðinic wisdom-game, e.g. *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál*, *Alvíssmál*, the Riddles of King Heiðrekr, and finally the wisdom-game framework of *Gylfaginning*; *Völuspá* to some extent also employs this convention, and it may be implied in parts of *Hávamál*. The wisdom-game involves two characters, one of which is almost always Óðinn (other, curiously, than *Alvíssmál*, where Þórr questions a dwarf), who ask for divine knowledge; the game ends when one participant, usually Óðinn, asks the other an unanswerable question, and the loser also loses his life.

The indication from the documentary sources, then, are that Norse paganism appears to lack belief in its own narratives, appears to lack any serious ethical directives for human conduct, and appears to lack any systematised understanding of itself and its relationship with humanity, a theology. It is of course possible that these lacks in paganism are apparent, not real. The nature of its composition and transmission

has certainly skewed the documentary evidence. In particular, transmission through poetry, and in particular aristocratic court poetry, has certainly eliminated most evidence, for instance, of domestic cult-practice, which we know only from a few anecdotal references. But poetic or other transmission seems unlikely to have eliminated any implication of belief, or evidence for ethics, or expression of theological understanding. This is so far removed from the understanding within our own cultures of 'religion' that the word seems hardly applicable to Norse heathendom. The only apparent points of contact with our own experience seem to be in terms of cult activity, and for that the actual evidence is slight and not wholly reliable.

This summary discussion raises, therefore, fairly fundamental questions about the nature and function of Norse paganism for its adherents. Why did they tell the mythological stories which give us most direct access to Norse paganism? What function did these stories have and how could or should we relate them to anything which we could consider as 'religion'?

I have elsewhere (Bibire 1986, 27-9) made assertions on some of these problems, which there usefully served as an axiomatic basis for discussion of a particular myth, that of Freyr and Gerðr. But these assertions, although useful and (I think) quite likely to be valid, do not constitute rational discussion of these problems. Thus I alleged that a myth 'must have been believed . . . to have been . . . objectively "true"'. Although I hedged this allegation with qualifications, it requires much further discussion, and this may well substantially change its meaning. So for instance, it will be observed that I conflated the terms 'mythological narrative' and 'myth', as convenient shorthand. But a myth is not necessarily merely any one particular telling of that myth, although it may be re-created in its re-tellings (as that discussion went on to demonstrate). The term 'believe' and its cognates are heavily loaded with notions of Christian faith, especially for a modern readership which inherits the burden of the Protestant doctrine of salvation by faith alone, and its unhappy offspring in Marxist 'political correctness' or the proselytising zeal of, say, certain schools of linguistics. And any notion of 'objective truth' has for us intellectual ramifications in, say, a logical positivist view of experimental proof. We carry our own intellectual baggage with us in the terms we use, and as soon as we examine these, they merely inform us of our own attitudes.

Since in the discussion above I have deduced no requirement for belief in the myths, belief is a suitable point of entry to this question. We must set aside our own terminology, with its baggage of implication. The Norse noun is *trú*, and the cognate verb is *trúa*. Rather like Greek *pisteuein* or Latin *credere*, the semantic range of the Norse verb seems to cover 'belief that' (i.e. the acceptance that X is 'true'), 'belief in' (involving a degree of personal commitment to X), and 'trust' (i.e. reliance). There seems no semantic distinction made in Norse between intellectual acceptance and emotional trust. Of course, this semantic analysis is made on the basis of thirteenth-century and later texts, mostly prose, of a variety of different genres. But since similar semantic ranges can be demonstrated for the cognate words in the languages cognate with Norse, it is at least plausible that this semantic range is ancient, though

it could of course simply reflect a shared culture and shared exposure to external cultural influences, especially from Latin Christianity.

The Norse terminology must function differently when applied to different aspects of Norse paganism. Thus, when applied for instance to a god, the few actual references suggest probable implications of reliance. This will trivially also involve factual belief: in order to trust a god, it is necessary to accept the existence of that god. But factual belief does not seem to be significant: it is never discussed, never questioned, never stipulated as a requirement. Even in overtly Christian texts, the actual existence of the pagan gods is virtually unquestioned, and only their status is changed, whether they are condemned as devils, or are reduced by euhemerisation to refugees from fallen Troy. Their effect may be illusory, diabolical error or conjuring trick, but they themselves are not delusion. The implication of the Norse vocabulary for 'belief' as applied to the gods of Norse paganism are likely, therefore, to be those of personal trust as in a social relationship. On the few occasions when Norse pagans discuss, or are depicted in later texts as discussing their relationship with their god or gods, the metaphorical framework is that of friendship and patronage, even neighbourliness. Social models of human relationship are used, and they are not those of the human family, fatherhood and sonship, as employed in Christianity.

The discussion hitherto has been based upon generalised conclusions drawn from the range of sources already mentioned. But these generalisations hide the passion and complexities of the actual texts. To demonstrate how they actually seem to function, one must examine the sources themselves. I have chosen extracts from two well-known texts for closer discussion: their familiarity should not hide their complexity. The most important primary text which shows the social relationship between a Norse pagan and his god is probably *Sonatorrek*, the anguished and unusually personal lay in which Egill Skalla-Grímsson laments the death of his sons (Turville-Petre 1976, 24-41). The poem itself may date from the mid-tenth century, if the attribution is correct. It survives only in a very corrupt form, and much of it is unintelligible as it stands. This textual corruption seems at least to show that the poem was probably not composed or re-composed recently in its textual history. Unusually the poem is actually written out continuously in its (late and probably incomplete) surviving mss., and hence in its existing structure is not merely a modern reconstruction.

In *Sonatorrek* Egill discusses his tortuous and ambiguous relationship with his god, Óðinn. The earlier parts of the poem are littered with incidental references to this. Óðinn is already a thief in the first verse, in a kenning for poetry, *Viðris þýfi*, 'Óðinn's theft': this concern with the nature of poetry is central to Egill's religious concerns. He gives a second, ironic, poetry-kenning in the second verse,

fagnafundr  
Friggjar niðja  
ár borinn  
úr Jötunheimum.

This, the 'joyful meeting of the offspring of Frigg, borne early from the Giant-Worlds', presents the joyful meeting of the kinsmen of Frigg, Óðinn and his sons by his wife

Frigg, when he brought poetry, stolen from the alien realm of the giants. It is contrasted bitterly with his own loss of sons, borne away as plunder into death at a grievous parting. Óðinn is a warlike taker of warriors' lives in v. 11:

ef sá randviðr  
røskvask næði  
unz her-Gauts  
hendr of tæki

'if that warrior (lit. "shield-tree") had managed to grow up, until the hands of Óðinn (lit. "Army-Gautr") took him'. In v. 15 there is a difficult kenning, *alhjóð Elgjar galga*, which probably means 'entire nation of the gallows of Óðinn'. Óðinn's gallows is the World-Ash, which supports the entire human universe; here all men are associated with the god of the Hanged Man, himself the archetypal gallows-bird. Óðinn, *hrosta hilmir*, 'lord of fermentation', i.e. lord of poetry, seems to be Egill's opponent in v. 19; the kenning picks up those referring to the myth of the origin of poetry, mead produced by fermentation and stolen by Óðinn, at the beginning of the poem (vv. 1–2).

The section of *Sonatorrek* in which Egill discusses most explicitly and fully his relationship with his god occupies vv. 21–4.

In v. 21 Egill says:

Pat man'k enn  
er upp um hóf  
í goðheim  
Gauta spjalli,  
ættar ask,  
þann er óx af mér  
ok kynvið  
kvánar minnar.

'It I still remember, when the converser with the Gautar raised up into the world of the gods the ash-tree of [my] family, which grew from me, and the kin-timber of my wife.' Óðinn, *Gauta spjalli*, 'friendly converser with the Gautar', echoes the Óðinn-*heiti* *Her-Gautr*, v. 11. He raised up Egill's *ættar ask* 'family ash-tree', i.e. his son, which contextually echoes *randviðr*, 'shield-tree', v. 11. This has implications of creation, when according to *Völuspá*, a trinity of Óðinn, Hœnir and Lóðurr gave life to a piece of ash driftwood and so made the first man, Ask. But it is also reminiscent of the World-Ash that maintains all human life, but which is also Óðinn's gallows and is referred to as such in the Óðinn-kenning *Elgjar askr*, v. 15. Óðinn raised Egill's son into the world of the gods: presumably some sort of assumption into the company of the Einherjar in Valhøll.



In v. 22, Egill says:

Átta'k gott  
við geirs dróttin,  
gerðumk trygg  
at trúa hánúm,  
áðr vinátt  
vagna rúni,  
sigrhöfundr,  
um sleit við mik.

'I was on good terms with the spear's lord; I made myself reliable (*tryggr*) to trust (*trúa*) in him, until the *vagna rúni*, lord of victory, tore apart friendship with me.' Óðinn is characterised by two warlike kennings of lordship, 'spear's lord', 'lord of victory' and also by one very difficult kenning, *vagna rúni*, which means either 'secret converser with chariots (?)' or 'secret converser with killer-whales'. The text may be corrupt here; a pleasing emendation would be *varga rúni*, 'secret converser with wolves/criminals', since Óðinn is very much a wolf-god, who has dealings with the (hanged) criminal. Egill probably says that he was on 'good terms' with Óðinn (lit. 'I had [it] good with . . .'), though the phrase could imply 'I got good from Óðinn'. Then he presents his own good faith towards Óðinn, describing himself as *tryggr*, 'faithful, loyal, trustworthy', and using the (ultimately cognate) verb *trúa*, discussed above. This is contrasted with Óðinn's ill-faith towards him since Óðinn tore up (*sleit*) his friendship with Egill (*vinátt*, an emendation, but all alternative suggested emendations give the same sense). Óðinn is the lord who is bound by reciprocal ties of good-faith to his retainer, Egill, but who treacherously tears up such ties.

In the following verse, v. 23, Egill states:

Blót'ka ek því  
bróður Vílis,  
goðjaðar  
at ek gjarn sé'k;  
þó hefr Míms vinr  
mér um fengnar  
bölva bætr  
ef hit betra tel'k.

'So I shall not sacrifice to Vílir's brother, god-guardian, because I might be eager to; yet the friend of Mímr has provided for me recompenses for harms, if I count up what is better.' Óðinn is here described by three further kennings which show him as kinsman, divine guardian and friend. He is guardian against the foes who will ultimately destroy the world at Ragnarök; his friendship with Mímr is also associated with Ragnarök in *Völuspá*. Egill expresses his reluctance to sacrifice to him, and yet, grudgingly, acknowledges that Óðinn has paid him wergilds (*bætr*) for the harm done to him.

In v. 24, Egill says:

Gáfumk íþrótt  
ulfs um bági  
vígi vanr  
vammi firrða,  
ok þat geð  
er ek gerða mér  
vísa fjandr  
at vélundum.

'The Wolf's foe, accustomed to warfare, gave me a skill far removed from shame, and that frame of mind (*geð*) so that I made certain foes into tricksters.' Óðinn is now here explicitly described in terms of Ragnarøk and the one battle in which the god actually fights: when he is devoured at last by the Wolf Fenrir at the world's end. The 'skill' (*íþrótt*) which Óðinn gave Egill is of course poetry: that gift which characterised the earliest kennings for Óðinn in the entire poem. There it was a theft, but is now an ennobled gift. Set in parallel with the gift of poetry is also the frame of mind (though the word *geð* so translated here is cognate with OE *giedd*, 'poetic lay') which forces foes to dissemble (following the ms. reading *at*; most editors emend to give different sense without significant improvement). At least according to *Egils saga*, poetry was the most important and powerful weapon which Egill employed against his foes, so this is not unrelated; it also picks up the warlike imagery of the Óðinn-references in the first half of the verse.

The surviving text of *Sonatorrek* ends with a grimly valedictory verse, v. 25:

Nú er mér torvelt,  
Tveggja bága  
[njörfa] nipt  
á nesi stendr;  
skal'k þó glaðr  
með góðan vilja  
ok óhryggr  
Heljar bríða.

'Now it is difficult for me; the [ . . . ] sister of the foe of Tveggi stands on the headland; yet I must with gladness and good-will await Hel ungrieved.' Again Óðinn is characterised in terms of Ragnarøk: he is called Tveggi ('the Second', perhaps 'the double, duplicitous one', though also linking with his three-fold nature: cf. trinitarian terms such as Hár, Jafnhár, and Priði, as employed in *Gylfaginning* and elsewhere). But the third member of several Óðinn-trinities is Loki. Loki's offspring are also three-fold: the World-Serpent, the Wolf Fenrir, and Hel, goddess of the dead. *Tveggja bági*, 'Tveggi's foe', is the Wolf Fenrir, and the Wolf's sister is Hel. The one unintelligible word in l. 3 seems unlikely to disturb the sense significantly. Óðinn's end in the Wolf's jaws is associated with the figure of Hel, standing on the headland,

where according to *Egils saga* Egill's father and son are buried; he himself must await her glad and with good desire, ungrieving. So Egill considers his own death, which he has expressed in terms of the death of his god.

*Sonatorrek* expresses with great and grim power the complexities of Egill's own, god-given (poetic) personality, of his god-given grief, and of his god-given recompense for that grief, poetry itself. He is bitter and resigned at the same time; his god has betrayed him yet granted him a wergild of incomparable worth. The death of Egill's sons is brought about by Óðinn, amongst others, if indeed Óðinn has assumed them to the ranks of the Einherjar in Valhöll to await Ragnarök. And from their deaths, Egill looks forward to his own death, and to the end of Óðinn himself at Ragnarök. As a passionate exploration of the relationship between a heathen Norseman, Egill Skalla-Grímson, and his heathen god, Óðinn, *Sonatorrek* is of unparalleled power, and because it is virtually unique as such, of unparalleled importance. If its attribution to the historical Egill is correct, as it may well be, it gives us direct, first-hand, acquaintance with the religious experience of a believing pagan. Even if it is a later construct, it is still of value as a reconstruction of what its author believed a pagan to be and believe. Of course, since we lack other comparable texts, we cannot be sure that *Sonatorrek* represents anything typical in Norse paganism. Egill is presented, at least in his saga, as a very striking and unusual person, and he may not have been a typical Óðinn-worshipper. He was an Icelander, and Icelandic paganism is unlikely to have been typical of Norse paganism in general. The cult of Óðinn may well have been dissimilar to, for instance, the cults of Þórr and Freyr, let alone the cults of the goddesses. Even allowing for this possible spread of variety, *Sonatorrek* must be fundamental to any analysis of belief in Norse paganism.

*Sonatorrek* is also fundamental to an understanding of the use of myth in pagan belief. Egill's use of kennings for Óðinn involve reference to an organised range of myths. This technique is universal in skaldic poetry, and quite widely found in Eddaic poetry also. The use of kennings in *Sonatorrek* is of itself to this extent unremarkable, although the extent to which the Óðinn-kennings can be seen to form an organised system within the poem is unusual. Unremarkable the use of kennings may be, but not without possible function. There has been much speculation on the extraordinary frequency of the use of kennings in Norse poetry, especially skaldic. Tabu-terminology is one likely source of the kenning, and in the case of Óðinn is also probably to be connected with the extraordinary number of *heiti*, poetic names, for this god. Óðinn is not lightly to be invoked. But the use of kennings, while it may simply be a poetic convention with merely literary function, or might almost equally simply be a sensible precaution against invocation of a perilous god, can also constitute a kind of invocation in its own right. The god is invoked through reference to the myth; the myth expresses the aspect of the god relevant to the invocation. So in *Sonatorrek*, Egill's discussion of his own death is pointed by Óðinn-references which deal with the death of this death-god, and the death with him of the entire divine and human world at Ragnarök. Similarly but more importantly, Óðinn is invoked as god of poetry at the very beginning of the poem (vv. 1–2), whereas the full relevance of the gift of poetry, as wergild for Egill's sons, only emerges at its end (v. 24). This is no

mere literary device. The poem is structured around its own nature as incantation, and so constitutes it.

*Sonatorrek* may reasonably be taken as actually or purportedly the account of a believing pagan of his own relationship with his own god, and as a demonstration of his own use of myth in that relationship. It is or purports to be a primary source. But other texts are also useful in this discussion. Late texts may, for instance, show a stratigraphy of attitudes. While this can be complex, it can also show a range of approaches, all of which may at their differing levels be valid. In fairly complete contrast, it is useful, therefore, to discuss a very well-known passage from *Snorra Edda*, describing Þórr's encounter with Útgarða-Loki. This is a fairly well-defined separate episode within *Gylfaginning*, the first part of *Snorra-Edda* (Faulkes 1982, 37–43; Finnur Jónsson 1931, 48–61). It is a lengthy and justly well-known passage, not only because it is included in E.V. Gordon's *Introduction to Old Norse*. The questioner in the wisdom-game is a Swedish king named Gylfi, here disguised as a wanderer called Gangleri, who asks mythological questions of an Óðinn-trinity, Hár, Jafnhár and Þriði. This entire wisdom game is presented as an illusion set up to delude Gylfi, and hence the name of the entire section, *Gylfaginning* 'the Deluding of Gylfi'. He enquires whether Þórr had ever encountered an opponent so strong or magically powerful that he was outmatched. All three persons in the trinity reply, until the story itself is told at the climax of a pleasing little three-part crescendo. The narrative itself is also tripartite, with the sections of increasing length and emphasis. The problem of belief is raised explicitly by Hár: 'all are under obligation to believe that Þórr is mightiest'. All must believe this; it is not, however, necessarily true, and by the end of the narrative the audience, internal and external, will know that in some senses it is untrue. This is taken up by Jafnhár in terms of factual belief: 'we have heard tell of those events about which it seems unbelievable to us that they could be true'. Both of these aspects of belief are to be explored in the following stories, with constant verbal reminders of belief and incredulity, appearance and actuality. Only after these two statements of the nature of faith does Þriði, reluctantly, tell the story.

The first section of the narrative tells how Þórr and Loki set out on an unmotivated journey, came to a house where Þórr killed the goats which drew his chariot and served them up as a meal for the household. Þjálfi, son of the householder, broke one of the goat's thighbones to get at the marrow. In the morning, when Þórr hallowed the goats' skins and bones with his hammer Mjöllnir in order to resurrect them for the day's travel, one of the goats had a broken thigh. In settlement for this injury, Þórr took Þjálfi and his sister, Rǫskva, as servants, and they have accompanied him ever since.

This little story is presented as if explanation of how Þjálfi and Rǫskva came to be associated with Þórr; it is recorded nowhere else, though *Hymiskviða* 37–8 gives a curious very brief narrative:

Fórut lengi áðr liggja nam  
hafr Hlórriða hálfdauðr fyrir;  
var skær skökuls skakkr á beini,  
en því inn lævísi Loki um olli.

En ér heyrð hafið – hverr kann um þat  
 goðmálugra gørr at skilja –  
 hver af hraunbúa hann laun um fekk,  
 er hann bæði galt börn sín fyrir.

Here Loki is blamed as the causative agent for the breaking of the goat's leg, and the father of the two children paid in recompense is identified as a stone-giant. But although this also took place on a journey involving a major encounter with (another) giant and above all with the World-Serpent, it is associated with the myth of Þórr's fishing trip for the World-Serpent, and is placed on the return journey from that. Loki plays no other part in the narratives of *Hymiskviða*, and it is nowhere explained how he caused the goat's lameness.

Þjálfi is also known from Eilífr Goðrúnarson's *Pórsdrápa*, attributed to the end of the tenth century, and from *Hárbarðsljóð*, an Eddaic poem in the Elder Edda, of unknown date; these both assume general knowledge of him. Røskva is only known from one other reference, from the early fourteenth century, which could easily derive knowledge of her from *Snorra Edda*. Þjálfi at least, therefore, is safely attested independently of *Snorra Edda*. The little story given here has some apparently archaic features. Þórr's goat-drawn vehicle is unlikely to be of Icelandic origin, since wheeled vehicles were unusable in Iceland before the nineteenth century, whereas ceremonial vehicles for gods are attested in Scandinavia from Tacitus onwards. The meal of goat-flesh seems to represent the sacral feast, though the animal usually eaten was the horse; if the story were simply a late re-working of standard motifs, then horses would be more expected, more dignified for the god, and more readily available for Icelanders. The resurrection of the meat-animal the next morning is strongly reminiscent of the boar Sæhrímnir, who supplies everlasting pork for Valhöll. While it is very difficult to exclude association of Þórr's goats with the paschal lamb, no bone in which must be broken, representing Christ resurrected after the sacral feast, no such blasphemous association is likely to have been set up by a believing Christian. If the Christian imagery has any input into this narrative, it may be more comparable with the possible example of the Crucifixion as the model for the myth of Óðinn's self-hanging upon Yggdrasill. That is, it is likely to be due to early contact, perhaps through apostasy or 'parody' between Christianity and active paganism. Another comparable example is the apparently pagan use of baptism, which if of Christian origin is likely to have been adopted as 'parody' in order to provide a heathen equivalent for the Christian rite. The offence done to the god, and the consequent allegiance of the other participants at it to the god, expresses pleasingly the necessary offence done to the god at the sacral feast, in slaying the divine animal (which may embody the god in animal form) and eating it, as the primary act of worship of that god by his devotees.

It is likely, therefore, that this little narrative of Þórr's goats, Þjálfi and Røskva is fairly archaic, and may be ancient. Certainly it does not seem to have been invented for present purposes. It is presented here as mythological 'explanation' for the presence of Þjálfi and Røskva in the mythology and this particular mythic narrative:

a story to explain stories. This of course reflects the Chinese-box structure of *Gylfaginning* itself, stories within stories, setting up levels ever more remote from external reality. But this pattern may be archaic within Norse: although it seems to be largely avoided in Eddaic poetry, it is implicit in the use of kennings in skaldic poetry. Myth as Explanation is an early and familiar 'explanation of myth', but here, at least in *Gylfaginning*, we see rather explanation as the means of growth and elaboration of a mythology systematised not by theological or philosophical logic, but by narrative linkage.

The function of this small story within the overall structure of this episode is primarily to introduce its *dramatis personae*, though it also introduces a narrative pattern which is to be explored much more fully later. Þórr takes lodgings with strangers, but his hosts get the better of him, particularly at the meal, and only at the end, the next day, is he able to redress the balance; this redress does not involve the general death and destruction of his opponents.

The second, considerably longer, section of the episode, tells of the dealings of Þórr and his new companions with the giant who calls himself Skrímir. At nightfall the companions come to a strange hall, where they take shelter. But at midnight there is an earthquake, followed by great noises. They flee into an inner chamber, where Þórr guards them. In the morning he goes outside and sees a giant lying outside snoring. For once Þórr is daunted and does not strike at him with his hammer Mjöllnir. The giant awakes and gives his name, Skrímir. The hall turns out to have been his glove, and the inner chamber its thumb-finger. Skrímir offers to share travelling provisions with them. But that evening Þórr is unable to undo the knot with which Skrímir has tied up the food-bag. Enraged, he strikes with his hammer at the sleeping giant, who wakes and asks if a leaf has dropped on his head. Skrímir falls asleep again, and at midnight Þórr strikes him a second time; this time Skrímir asks whether an acorn had fallen on his head. A third time, near dawn, Þórr strikes at Skrímir with all his divine might, but now the giant awakes and asks whether a bird-dropping had fallen on him. Then he gives them directions to the hall of Útgarða-Loki and leaves.

The story is entirely comic and is told as such; satirical use is also made of the brief references to Skrímir's glove and food-bag in *Lokasenna* 60, 62, and *Hárbarðsljóð* 26, Eddaic poems of unknown date preserved in the Elder Edda, which constitute our only other sources for this story. While *Hárbarðsljóð* seems to give Fjalarr for the giant named Skrímir in the other sources, both poems here have an identical refrain, *ok þóttiska þú þá Þórr vera* (Hbl 26,5, Lks 60, 6).

Again the narrative may contain archaic features. The giant's glove is a curious motif, and may perhaps be related to the strange dragon-skin glove, which Grendel uses as a sort of vessel in which to take his victims, including the hero, from Heorot in *Beowulf* 2085b-2091:

Glof hangode  
 sid ond syllic,    searobendum fæst;  
 sio wæs orðoncum    eall gegyrwed  
 deofles cræftum    ond dracan fellum.  
 He mec þær on innan    unsynnigne  
 dior dædfruma    gedon wolde  
 manigra sumne;    hyt ne mihte swa . . .

'A glove hung, wide and strange, firm in cunning bonds; it was all fitted out with skilful thoughts, a devil's powers, and skins of a dragon. He, the bold initiator of deeds [scil. Grendel], wished to put me, innocent, therein, one of many; he could not do so. . . .' The marauding ogre not unusually carries a vessel with which to transport its prey, though in the Icelandic sources the (she-) troll more frequently carries a trough. The containment of the hero in the glove, though not less humiliating than it would have been for Beowulf, is given a different narrative function for Þórr. The monster's food-bag is still present, but for Þórr it is a separate object, distinct from the glove, which humiliates the hero in a different way: he cannot undo the cords with which it is tied up. If this interpretation is correct, then the glove/food-bag with its emphasised 'cunning bonds' is an ancient motif, but the two aspects of the vessel have here been separated out into two different objects, which humiliate the hero and his (cowardly) companions in two different ways. Another feature which may possibly suggest that this narrative is not recent is the name *Skrýmir*, which is of disputed etymology and certainly does not seem to be a recent or conventional coinage; it also appears as a sword-name. That it alternates with *Hrbl Fjalarr*, which also has a strange range of usage, may suggest the possibility that more than one version of this story was known. The story also makes the correct association between *eik* 'oak-tree' and acorns: neither were known in Iceland. This could suggest that this part of the story was not composed in Iceland. But of course, Snorri Sturluson, in common with most of the more wealthy Icelanders, had visited Norway and could quite easily have envisaged a mainland scene. Nonetheless, the setting is not Icelandic.

The narrative is symmetrically structured, introduced by Þórr's parallel humiliations with the glove and the food-bag. These are compounded by his three abortive attempts to gain vengeance, with a progression of three increasingly mighty blows on *Skrýmir*'s head at evening, midnight and dawn, compared to a falling leaf, acorn and bird-dropping respectively by the unperturbed giant. The overt function of the story is to mock the primary characteristic of the god: his strength wielding his hammer *Mjöllnir*. But this strength, we are told at the end, is in fact undiminished, and the equally characteristic quality of the god which in actuality is mocked is his stupidity. He cannot recognise a glove when he sees one, he cannot in fact see that the food-bag is tied up with iron, and above all he did not realise that the giant, far from failing to notice his blows, had been obliged to shield himself with a mountain into which the god smote three dales. The double sense of the passage of course incidentally mocks its audience, who is hoodwinked into laughing at the wrong thing. That audience is firstly internal to *Gylfaginning*, being *Gangleri*, but it also secondarily includes us.

So the story seems satirically to question the god's most important primary characteristic, his strength, but in fact equally comically confirms another of the god's primary characteristics: stupidity. By testing, and apparently undercutting, belief about the god, it therefore corroborates that belief.

The third and main part of the episode, dealing with Þórr's visit to the court of Útgarða-Loki, is by far the longest and most elaborate. Þórr and his companions reach a fortress, where Þórr is unable to open the portcullis, and so they are obliged to crawl between its shafts. Útgarða-Loki, the king of the fortress, greets them mockingly and tells them that no-one may be there unless he excels others in some sort of skill or ability. Then Loki, who came last, claims to be able to eat as fast as anyone. He contends against a figure named Logi 'flame', and each of them eats from opposite ends of a trough filled with meat. They meet in the middle, but whereas Loki has eaten all the meat off the bones, Logi has eaten the meat, the bones and the trough as well. So it seemed to all that Loki had lost the game.

Then Útgarða-Loki asks what Þjálfi could do, and he says that he will try running a race. He contends against a figure named Hugi 'thought', and Þjálfi loses all three races by increasing amounts.

After these fairly briefly narrated contests, Útgarða-Loki asks Þórr what exploit he will wish to show them. Þórr suggests a drinking-match. A horn is provided, and Þórr is told that the best drinkers in the hall drain it at one draught but some take two; no-one is so small a drinker that they cannot drain it in three. But Þórr looks at the horn, and thinks that it is not big, though rather long; also he is very thirsty. So he drinks a great draught. It is hardly possible to see the difference. After a second, even greater, draught, there is even less difference. In fury Þórr drinks a third and greatest draught, and now there was a visible difference. He hands back the horn and refuses to drink more, and Útgarða-Loki asks him if he wants to try anything else.

Útgarða-Loki suggests that small boys have a game of lifting his cat. Then a grey cat runs on to the hall-floor, rather a large one. Þórr goes up and puts his hand under the cat's belly and lifts. But the cat arches its back as much as he lifts. But when Þórr stretches up as far as he can, then the cat lifts one foot.

In response to Útgarða-Loki's mockery, Þórr challenges anyone to a wrestling-match, and Útgarða-Loki calls on his aged foster-mother, named Elli 'old age', to wrestle with him. And the more strongly Þórr seizes her, the more firmly she stands. And then she tries wrestling-throws on him, and he has to fall to one knee. At that point Útgarða-Loki stops the match.

The companions spend the night there, and are well entertained; in the morning they prepare to leave. Útgarða-Loki accompanies them out of the fortress, and at their parting asks Þórr what he thought of his journey, or whether he had ever met anyone mightier. Þórr acknowledges his humiliation. Útgarða-Loki then reveals the truth. He has employed illusions against Þórr. In the person of Skrímir he had bound the provision-bag with (magical?) iron, and has shielded himself from Þórr's blows with a mountain. Loki and Þjálfi had contended in his halls against Flame and Thought. Þórr himself had been drinking unknowingly from Ocean, and had caused



low tide. The cat was none other than the World-Serpent, and Þórr had stretched so high that it was only a short way to the sky. And the aged foster-mother was Old Age herself, who brings all to a fall. On hearing all this, Þórr grasps his hammer and swings it aloft, but then he sees no sign of Útgarða-Loki, and when he turns back to the fortress, it has vanished, and he can only see wide plains. So he goes to his own home, meditating vengeance on the World-Serpent.

No other source tells this story. Many features of the actual narrative suggest that in its present form it is late. Útgarða-Loki's fortress is apparently described as a castle with a portcullis, and the motif that only those who excel in some capability are allowed membership of the king's court may be derived from romance. The abundant use of overt personification, Flame, Thought and Old Age, is without parallel in other myths. But it is an essential aspect of this story that they actually are personifications, because only as personifications can they defeat their divine opponents. Personification seems to be found rarely if at all elsewhere in Norse mythology, but has an obvious source in (Christian) literature. Explicit nature myths are rare elsewhere in Norse mythology, but here Þórr's drinking causes low tide. Again it is an essential aspect of this story that the story of Þórr's drinking from the horn is, not in seeming but in fact, the god drinking the sea. The story plays with the relationship between appearance and actuality.

Yet the story may not be invented in whole for the present text. Nowhere in the text is there any explanation of the name Útgarða-Loki, 'Loki of the Outward Enclosures'. Útgarðr is an obvious opposite to Miðgarðr, OE *middangeard*, the 'middle enclosure' of human habitation. Outside it, beyond Ocean, dwell the giants, here ruled by Útgarða-Loki, master of delusion. But Loki is here one of Þórr's companions, and in this version of the narrative is presented as faithful, though in *Hymiskviða* and in other instances when Loki accompanies Þórr to the world of the giants, he seems to wish to betray him, as in the myth of Þórr's journey to the court of the giant Geirrðr, told in Eilífr Goðrúnarson's *Pórsdrápa*. Eventually, of course, as told in *Völuspá* and frequently mentioned elsewhere, Loki will encompass the death of Baldr, and will himself be bound in torment until Ragnarök, when he will come as lord of giants with the Wolf Fenrir and with the World-Serpent, to destroy the gods. There is no question of more than one figure in the mythology with this name: Loki appears here in both his aspects. If this story had simply been invented for *Snorra Edda*, this strange reduplication of Loki would have been unnecessary: Loki plays no characteristic role in this version of the narrative as Þórr's companion here. Further, there is a very strange narrative given by Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum* VIII xiv-xv, which Saxo explicitly derived from Icelanders. A hero called Thorkillus undertakes consecutive journeys beyond Halogaland and Bjarmaland to the realm of Geruthus and his brother Guthmundus, and subsequently to that of a figure called Utgarthilocus. Geruthus and Guthmundus are certainly the supernatural figures Geirrðr and Guðmundr of Norse legend, and a later Icelandic source, *Þorsteins þátr bæjarmagns* (*Fas* III 397-417) attributes the first of these journeys to another human figure, Þorsteinn, a retainer of King Óláfr Tryggvason of Norway. The two accounts of human journeys, those of Thorkillus and Þorsteinn, are certainly

euhemerised re-tellings of the myth of Þórr's desperate journey, enticed by Loki, to the court of the giant Geirröðr. This is told in Eilífr Goðrúnarson's *Pórsdrápa*, which is quoted in *Snorra Edda* where further material is also given. The relationships between the different versions of these narratives are not simple (Tolkien 1960, 85–5). In Saxo's account of the journey to Utgarthilocus, motivated by a vow made to him on the earlier journey, Thorkillus comes after curious trials to Utgarthilocus, who is a giant bound by monstrous fetters in a stinking cave surrounded by poisonous serpents. This figure is clearly the bound Loki, with serpent venom dripping upon him, described in *Völuspá*. It is reasonable to see this as (part of) a euhemerised myth, just as the earlier journey to Geirröðr and Guðmundr, and it is this myth which must also underlie the story in *Snorra Edda*. On his journey to Geirröðr's court, Þórr is nearly swept away in a river supernaturally swollen with the urine of giantesses; this might suggest that Þórr may have other connections with myths of low and high water than the severely rationalised account given in *Snorra Edda*'s account of Þórr's drinking contest. Monsters in cat-like form are known from Celtic folklore, and are sometimes associated with the figure of the giant's mother. The wrestling match with the giant's aged foster-mother may also represent or be modelled upon material of great antiquity: certainly a number of divine or semi-divine heroes associated in other ways with Þórr have consecutive contests with a giant and his mother, in which the latter at least is a wrestling match in which the hero is brought to a fall. Only the most obvious example is that of Beowulf and Grendel's mother, which has excellent close parallels in Norse, familiar from for example *Grettis saga*.

It is conceivable that poisonous serpents provide some link between Saxo's strange little story and that of *Snorra Edda*, and they may also link the first section of that to its third. Þórr's final foe is the World-Serpent, monstrous child of Loki, which will destroy him at Ragnarök by its poison. In *Hymiskviða* the episode of the goat's leg, attributed to Loki, is associated with the preceding narrative of the god fishing for the serpent, caught and lifted from the ocean-floor. And in Útgarða-Loki's hall, one of Þórr's contests is to lift the giant cat, which is in fact the World-Serpent. Snorri actually uses Þórr's desire for vengeance upon the World-Serpent to introduce the narrative of the fishing-trip, which immediately follows that of the journey to Útgarða-Loki.

The narrative of Skrímir, the glove and the food-bag, has no visible connection of content with either of the other stories. The abrupt self-identification given by Útgarða-Loki at the end of the entire episode is quite clearly an authorial device to give narrative unity to an episode composed of disparate material. It is, of course, put in a narratorial voice: that of Útgarða-Loki, who had been the author of the illusions, speaking to the internal audience of the episode, Þórr, and earlier also to the internal audience of all those present at the giant's court. But this in its turn is set within the narratorial voice of the Óðinn-trinity speaking to Gangleri/Gylfi as internal audience of *Gylfaginning*, within the authorial voice of *Snorra Edda*, speaking to the external audiences of the text: an actual but unknown thirteenth-century audience and of course ourselves.

The careful organisation of this episode is obvious. Again there are two preliminary humiliations in the single contest between Loki and Logi, and the threefold contest between Þjálfir and Hugi. These are then followed by the three contests, the first of which is also threefold, in which Þórr himself takes part. These mirror the structure of the Skrímir episode, with the two preliminary humiliations involving the glove and the provision-bag, followed by three apparently ineffective blows with Mjöllnir. None of them this time involve Mjöllnir, which is only swung, again ineffectively, at the very end of the entire episode. Þórr's three contests apparently represent an increasingly humiliating sequence, since drinking-contests are standard enough, but being unable to lift a cat or wrestle with an old woman is grossly shameful. Yet in their meaning these form a climax. Causing the tides establishes Þórr's function in the ordering of the physical universe, contesting with the World-Serpent looks towards the end of the divine universe at Ragnarök. But Þórr, in wrestling with Old Age herself, shares a fundamental human experience. The whole episode, including its introduction by all three members of the Óðinn-trinity, is therefore structured around the number three, and also by recurrent but partially ineffective threefold use of Mjöllnir to resurrect the lamed goat, to try to strike at Skrímir, and to try to strike at Útgarða-Loki and his fortress. This gives an extremely pleasing structural harmony to the episode as a whole.

Almost equally importantly, the episode deals with the relationship between actuality and delusion, truth and 'literary' fiction, within the mythology, and it does so with great subtlety and delicacy, both internally and for its external audiences, ultimately ourselves. At the simplest and most obvious level, internally to the mythology, it functions as had the Skrímir story, as comic corroboration of the characteristics of the god: Þórr's strength and his stupidity. His drinking-prowess is so great that it can almost drain Ocean itself. Then, from Ocean, his strength is so great that he can raise Ocean's denizen, the World-Serpent, his mortal foe at Ragnarök, almost to the skies. Lastly his strength of endurance is so great that he can almost withstand Old Age herself, Time that lays low the gods themselves in the end of things at Ragnarök. Yet he is incapable of seeing through even such trivial illusions as personified Old Age, although she is named as such for him by Útgarða-Loki.

There is also an undertow of qualification throughout this narrative. Þórr never quite manages to achieve anything fully either in these formal contests within the narrative, or in the contests represented by the successive narrative events as such. His goat is lamed despite Mjöllnir's reviving powers; Skrímir succeeds in defending himself against the power of Mjöllnir's three blows; Útgarða-Loki and his fortress vanish when Þórr is about to employ Mjöllnir's power against them. This may be particularly significant in that the episode certainly seems to look forward to the end of the gods at Ragnarök and Þórr's final, fatal conflict with the World-Serpent. In the mythology of Norse paganism as a whole, the power of the gods is itself to fail in heroic death; just as the heroes must die heroically in order to fulfil their heroism, so the gods themselves perish. In particular, as has widely been noted, Útgarða-Loki's fortress and its mighty inhabitants vanish at the end of the narrative, just as the entire

dwelling of the *Æsir* vanishes at the end of the wisdom-game in *Gylfaginning*. After recounting Ragnarøk and the beginnings of a new world thereafter, Hár admits the end of his knowledge. Then there is a rumbling around Gangleri, and on looking around he is alone on a flat plain. In a sense Þórr has won his contests, but ineffectively; he has also encountered his mortal foe, the World-Serpent, who will destroy him at Ragnarøk, when finally the gods succumb to Time. The conflicts with the cat and with Elli thus, in a sense, answer Gangleri's final question, whether Þórr encounters an opponent so strong that he is outmatched. In a sense Gangleri has won the wisdom-game, for he has exhausted the wisdom of Óðinn, but he has achieved no greater wisdom. And at this ending of knowledge the gods themselves vanish from sight, like the delusions encountered by Þórr. The loser of the wisdom-game ceases to be. So at this point in *Snorra Edda* the gods cease to be gods, and the text comes full circle, returning to its initial 'explanation' of them as wandering conjurors fleeing from fallen Troy. Once an end is reached of the wisdom of the heathen gods, the whole is gone. The mythology, represented in most of the poetic sources as interlacing narratives of divine knowledge, only exists and functions from within: on exit it ceases to be. *Snorra Edda*, this subtle and sceptical work, turns this essential aspect of Norse mythology against itself.

There is a further, literary level of modified undercutting beneath this narrative. If the great marvels which outface Þórr in this episode of *Gylfaginning* are all ultimately revealed as delusion, what of the great deeds of Þórr himself as told one narratorial degree more closely in *Gylfaginning*? The entire structure of the work implies delusion within delusion, narratorial fiction within fiction. Each level of the narrative structure is most carefully placed within narratorial voices, in, as mentioned above, a Chinese box of stories. Each voice can confirm or repudiate what it tells, as Útgarða-Loki repudiates the reality of what he has told Þórr. This is rather crudely made explicit at the beginning and end of the work, but the interplay of narrative unreality is carried out much more subtly within the work, both in its structure and in its related use of narrative voices. Yet this is not of itself simply rejection of the reality of what is told. Þórr may think that he is lifting a cat, but in the next level of reality up in the text, that of 'mythological truth', he is 'actually' contending with the World-Serpent. Þórr may think that he is wrestling with Útgarða-Loki's aged foster-mother, but in the shared reality that we all inhabit, we all actually wrestle with Old Age, who brings all to a fall. These narratives are not 'untrue', though their truth is only operative at different levels. *Gylfaginning* explores the nature and relationships of literary and factual truth: it does not dismiss the gods, though it at all stages questions and tests them in contests of illusion.

It is not reasonable to try to summarise the meaning of a work as complex and subtle as *Snorra Edda*, since it establishes a network of implications, each valid at its own level, each qualified by its context, and each incomplete without every other element in the work. It expresses neither belief nor disbelief, but both, held together in a balance of literary voices, within and outside the stories, within and outside paganism itself. It contrasts in this one respect fundamentally with *Sonatorrek*, the

one voice of the one man, passionately contending with his god. Both show the myths as descriptive: they demonstrate the nature of the gods, worked out not in rational theology but by narrative. Both also make their ethical points about the relationships between the gods and their retainers, and between the gods and their foes. Egill is both Óðinn's retainer and, it seems to him, his foe; yet he is unable to break the bond of allegiance to his god. The god takes what is most precious, his sons, and gives what is most precious, poetry. In *Gylfaginning* Gylfi is both guest and opponent of the gods. Þórr's relationship with his retainers is mostly dealt with in the initial narrative about Þjálfi and Röskva, where again it is not entirely friendly: they are taken as retainers, by their divine guest and opponent, in recompense for an offence done to the god. The god is injured and takes recompense. But Þórr's relationships with his foes is more complex. He is Skrímir's guest and fellow-companion on a journey, and feels, possibly unjustifiably, offended at humiliation. Again, he is Útgarða-Loki's guest as well as his opponent, and is well entertained at a royal feast; he feels offended at humiliation in fairly normal contests set up as part of the general entertainment. Drinking-contests or wrestling-bouts are frequently enough mentioned as such entertainment, both at the literary level in human societies, and at the mythological level; at both levels they conventionally lead to friction. They express, in only barely sublimated form, the hostilities suppressed in normal societies. The gods share these suppressed tensions. Þórr plays these games and, on humiliation, attempts to avenge himself: failure in this vengeance leads to his real humiliation. The ethics of honour and humiliation are explored here in small, as a text such as *Egils saga* explores them in far more complex and powerful detail at length. This myth does not serve as ethical exemplum, more as ethical test-bed, to try out not only the god but his ethical system.

I began, after surveying the sources, by claiming that Norse pagan mythology did not require belief, did not impose ethical models, and did not imply a theology. I end, after having surveyed these two texts from near the beginning and near the end of the chronological range of our sources, by claiming that the relationship, of 'trust' rather than 'faith', between a man and his god in Norse paganism could be as complex and impassioned as any relationship between human beings, that this impassioned complexity was expressed in terms of the proud ethics of honour, and that the myths could not only explore this complexity, but could hold it together, not by logical rigour, but in narrative unity. Norse paganism was a religion which lacked many of the outer and some of the inner characteristics of Christianity. Nonetheless it seems to have functioned on its own terms, and sometimes we may begin to glimpse how it functioned, and what those terms may have been.

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