

Fate and Cosmogony in *Völuspá*: Shaping History in a Moment¹

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IN CONTRAST to, say, the Christian religion that attenuated and eventually overwhelmed it, the pre-Christian tradition in Scandinavia seems never to have offered unconditional gratitude to the deities it recognized as its makers.² Instead, *Völuspá*, the most expansive poem inflected by these customs to survive, appears to consistently associate imperfections in these divine smiths and their methods with natural and social corruption, and with the approach of Ragnarök, an inevitable, world-destroying conflagration.

Therefore, after necessarily first establishing the specifics of the cosmogonic methods portrayed in *Völuspá*, this essay will reflect upon the philosophical underpinnings of this distinctive narrative of existence, focussing in particular on the relationship between the act of world-forging and the poem's understanding of fate. It could be argued that the ambivalence congenital to this view of creation is derived from commonplace attitudes to crafting and craftsmen, and that this context therefore provides a pre-existing model by which to judge the success of the Æsir (the group of Old Norse deities principally dealt with here). However, due to the constraints imposed by the length of this discussion, this wider circumstance will be largely overlooked, except where relevant comparative examples have been footnoted. The shaping of the beings that inhabit this cosmography will be treated in a similar way, for the same reason, although it could be argued that complementary, possibly isomorphic, principles are elemental to these creations too.

1 This article was the runner-up of the Magnus Magnusson Essay Prize (2011). It is in part drawn from an M.A. dissertation completed under the supervision of Dr. Matthew Townend at the University of York's Centre for Medieval Studies. I have to extend my gratitude to him for his support and many excellent suggestions. I am also very grateful to those who proof-read the original, including Alice Kilpatrick, Jacque Martinez and Aidan Taggart. The mistakes and solecisms that remain are entirely my own.

2 Cf., for example, Genesis, 1.31 (AV).

Analysis of *Völuspá* will be supported by the testimony of *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*, two other poems from the collection known as the *Poetic Edda*.³ Attempts at dating these poems have been made using methodologies of varying reliability and without widespread agreement, but, as it is possible that much of the *Poetic Edda* emerged from an oral tradition that preceded their transcription in Iceland, the premise of Eddic poetry possessing a specific point of conception may be misleading.⁴ Rather, as the variants of *Völuspá* extant in other medieval Icelandic manuscripts attest, alternative versions of these poems may have co-existed, articulating different traditions or beliefs, and influenced to varying degrees by the post-conversion, Christian milieu through which they were transmitted orally and later on vellum.⁵ The themes and narratives may indeed be entirely Christian or present in forms that only vaguely resemble pre-Christian conventions.⁶

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- 3 While this collection is amorphous, to a degree, it is typically understood as comprising the twenty-nine poems preserved in the Codex Regius (GKS 2365 4to), a manuscript written in Iceland c.1270 and held by Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, and *Baldurs draumar*, a poem which is found in another Icelandic manuscript, AM 748 I a 4^{to} (c.1300-25), held by Den Arnamagnæanske Samling. On the vagaries of the term Eddic poetry, see Joseph Harris, 'Eddic Poetry', in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. Carol Clover and John Lindow, *Islandica* 45 (Ithaca, second edn., 2005), 68-9. Margaret Clunies Ross's discussion (*A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* [Cambridge, 2005], 6-28) is also helpful, especially on the uneasy generic distinctions adopted regarding Old Norse poetry. Much of the following information on the *Poetic Edda* is adapted from Ursula Dronke's report on the Codex Regius. Exceptions are marked or original to this dissertation (Ursula Dronke, ed. and trans., *Poetic Edda: Volume I – Heroic Poems* [Oxford, 1969], xi-xii).
- 4 On the problems of dating Eddic poetry, see Bjarne Fidjestøl, *The Dating of Eddic Poetry: A Historical Survey and Methodological Investigation*, ed. Odd Einar Haugen, *Bibliotheca Arnamagnæana* 41 (Copenhagen, 1999).
- 5 Besides the version preserved in the Codex Regius, *Völuspá* can also be found cited or rendered in prose in Snorri's *Edda* (see below) and in a fourteenth-century Icelandic manuscript (AM 544 4to, from the group of manuscripts known as Hauksbók), which can be found in the Den Arnamagnæanske Samling. Dronke is critical of the Hauksbók version, and, though this reading partly derives from her own editorial standpoint, in some places the text of the Codex Regius is undoubtedly to be preferred (Ursula Dronke, ed. and trans., *Poetic Edda: Volume II – Mythological Poems* [Oxford, 1969], 61-2). While her critical analysis (*ibid.*, 61-92) of the divergences between versions of this poem is valuable, it should be read with McKinnell's caveats in mind (John McKinnell, review of *Poetic Edda: Volume II – Mythological Poems*, ed. and trans. Ursula Dronke, *Alvissmál* 10 [2001], 116-8).
- 6 For a fuller discussion of the nature of storytelling in an oral culture and of the consequences of literacy in medieval Iceland, see Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society, Volume One: The Myths*, *The Viking Collection* 7 ([Odense], 1994), 22. For a view that deals more specifically with the mutations that are possible in an oral culture, see John McKinnell, *Both One and Many: Essays on Change and Variety in Late Norse Heathenism*, with an appendix by Maria Elena Ruggerini, *Philologia* 1 (Roma, 1994), 20-6.

Substantial reference will also be made to *Gylfaginning*, a prose retelling of Norse myth found in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (c.1221-5).⁷ Similar critical dilemmas are presented by this text, alongside additional problems of interpretation; as Anthony Faulkes notes, the redactor of the *Edda* was himself a Christian, with fewer qualms about altering old stories or even inventing new ones than those who treated the myths as sacred texts. In truth, the consistent orthodoxy of belief described by *Gylfaginning* probably never existed, but is instead the result of systematization, at times quite drastic, on the part of the author.⁸ The critical challenges posed by these texts will be addressed as required.

I

The Old Norse accounts of cosmogony disagree in several details, and even taken individually can resist comprehension. According to *Völuspá*, which, in the impressionistic mode typical of narrative Eddic poetry, chronicles a version of the world's history up to the aftermath of Ragnarök, in the very beginning there was only *gap ... ginnunga* ('a chasm of the abyss'),⁹ aside, possibly, from a primeval *jötunn* known as Ymir.¹⁰ Into this, the sons of Burr *biöðum um ypho*

7 Clunies Ross, *History*, 157. Although it is not indisputable, the author of the *Edda* is generally accepted as Snorri. Rightly or wrongly, this is therefore the label used here. For an introduction to this issue, see Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (London, 2005), xii-xvi. Quotations from *Gylfaginning* and occasionally *Skáldskaparmál*, another section of the *Edda*, are taken from Faulkes's editions: Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (London, 2005); and Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, 2 vols., ed. Anthony Faulkes (London, 1998). The translations are my own.

8 Faulkes, *Gylfaginning*, xxvi. However, it should be remembered that there are points at which Snorri simply presents contradictory narratives together rather than choosing between them or editing them together, sometimes offering his own opinion as to which is more reliable (see for example, *Gylfaginning*, 44).

9 *Völuspá*, 3:7. Quotations of Eddic poetry are taken from Neckel and Kuhn's edition, retaining its emendations, spelling and punctuation (Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn, eds., *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern; Vol. 1: Text*, (Heidelberg, fourth edn., 1962). Translations are my own, although in this instance the rendering is actually appropriated from La Farge and Tucker's glossary (Beatrice La Farge and John Tucker, *Glossary to the Poetic Edda: based on Hans Kuhn's Kurzes Wörterbuch*, Skandinavistische Arbeiten 15 (Heidelberg, 1992), s.v. *Ginnung*). However, as shall become apparent from subsequent discussion, it is contentious.

10 The common English translation of *jötunn* (pl. *jötnar*) is 'giant'. Ymir appears here in two manuscripts of *Völuspá*, the Codex Regius and Hauksbók, but not in a variant quoted in *Gylfaginning*, 4. The point is still questionable but Dronke's hypothesis that Snorri altered the line to concur with the direction of his wider narrative seems most persuasive (Ursula Dronke, ed. and trans., *Poetic Edda: Volume II – Mythological Poems*, 79). For other perspectives, cf. Clunies Ross, *History*, 181-2; Lars Lönnroth, 'Töðr fannz æva né upphiminn: A Formula Analysis', in *Speculum Norrænum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. Ursula Dronke et al. ([Odense:], 1981), 311n; Paul Schach, 'Some Thoughts on *Völuspá*', in *Edda: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Robert Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (Winnipeg, 1983), 87.

(‘raised up the lands’)¹¹ and initiated a golden age of civilisation.¹² The celestial bodies were organized to order time, altars and forges were constructed, and the *dvergar* and humanity created, all before three females (Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld) emerged from a lake under Yggdrasill, the world tree, and chose fates for mankind.¹³ *Grímnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál* are, by comparison, compendia of mythic knowledge rather than pseudo-historical annals, and therefore make for less comprehensive documents of cosmogony. However, both do record details absent from *Völuspá*: that the world was actually created from Ymir’s assorted body-parts,¹⁴ and that the *jötnar* are descended from Aurgelmir.¹⁵ Further contradictions are provided by *Gylfaginning*, which proposes several intriguing additions and amendments. Firstly, it claims that two regions called Muspell and Niflheimr pre-date the earth and (possibly building on *Vafþrúðnismál*, 31) that the meeting of natural phenomena from these places engendered Ymir.¹⁶ Snorri’s elaboration on the creation of mankind is also notable,¹⁷ but not more so than his contention – alone among all these sources – that Ymir was murdered at the hands of the sons of Burr.¹⁸

At first glance, there may seem to be little correspondence between the cosmogonic processes portrayed in these poems – and, if true, this would be unsurprising. Attempting to harmonize the particulars of the various sources, as if they were simply aspects of a single, fairly comprehensible tradition, is problematic, given the possible plurality of Old Norse culture.¹⁹ While

11 *Völuspá*, 4:2.

12 The identity of Burr’s sons remains a source of some debate, being recognised alternatively as Óðinn, Hœnir and Lóðurr (*Gylfaginning*, 9) and Óðinn, Vili and Vé (*Ynglinga saga*, 3; *Ynglingatal*, 3:2; *Gylfaginning*, 6; *Skáldskaparmál*, v15:2; *Lokasenna*, *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn, 26:4; not all of these accounts are likely to be independent witnesses to this identification). For the purposes of this study, this topic can be largely ignored; it is only important to note that Óðinn’s kinship with Burr and therefore with Ymir, through Burr’s wife Bestla (*Gylfaginning*, 6; *Skáldskaparmál*, v25:2), is a constant. For more information, see Dronke, *Völuspá, Mythological Poems*, 4:1n; John Lindow, *Handbook of Norse Mythology* (Oxford, 2001), s.nn. ‘Lódur’, ‘Hœnir’. *Ynglinga saga* and *Ynglingatal* can be found in Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 3 vols., ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornit 26-8 (Reykjavík, 1941-51), vol. 1, 9-83.

13 *Völuspá*, 6, 7, 9, 17-18, 19-20. *Dvergar* (sing. *dverggr*) is the Old Norse cognate of ‘dwarfs’.

14 *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn, 21; *Grímnismál*, *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn, 40-1. Cf. *Gylfaginning*, 8.

15 *Vafþrúðnismál*, 30-3. Cf. *Gylfaginning*, 5.

16 *Gylfaginning*, 4.

17 *Gylfaginning*, 9.

18 *Gylfaginning*, 7. Snorri names them as the sons of Borr, but it is generally accepted that this is the same group: cf. Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 158; Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, trans. Angela Hall (Cambridge, 1993), s.n. ‘Burr’; Lindow, *Handbook*, s.n. ‘Bur, Bor (son)’.

19 Cf. Dronke, *Mythological Poems*, 32-5; John Stanley Martin, ‘*Ár vas alda*: Ancient Scandinavian Creation Myths Reconsidered’, in *Speculum Norraenum*, ed. Dronke et al., 361.

Vafþrúðnismál and *Grímnismál* state unequivocally that *ór Ymis holdi / var iöð um scöpuð, / enn ór sveita siór* ('the earth was shaped from Ymir's flesh, and the sea from his blood'), *Völuspá* does not explicitly posit a process of crafting, but only, as mentioned above, one of lifting up.²⁰ However, crucially, a description of Burr's sons as *þeir er miðgarð, / mæran, scópo* ('those who shaped great Miðgarðr') is placed appositively to this act, which actually uses the same verb of creation, *skapa* ('to shape'), as *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*.²¹ However, given the pervasiveness of *skapa* in this context, it is more likely that the agreement here is due to this verb's popularity than a common source or influence.²² Instead, this apposition might be understood as *commoratio*, thereby revealing that the lifting was once registered as an act of manufacture. Or it may be that *skapa*, in keeping with *Völuspá*'s adumbrative style, alludes to an accompanying act of fabrication:²³ as Dronke observes, *yppa* connotes revelation as much as lifting up, which implies that the sons of Burr are in fact manipulating a previously created object.²⁴

Dronke has furthermore established that the earth is imagined here rising out of a sea, which is more consistent with the latter hypothesis than the former and suggests a shared cosmogonic tradition with *Vafþrúðnismál*, which arguably also envisages Ymir's body being pulled from a primordial ocean.²⁵ Even though this relies on identifying Ymir with Aurgelmir, this proposal is not without foundation, considering that both are described as primal *jötnar*²⁶ and progenitors of their race.²⁷ Indeed, *Vafþrúðnismál* posits this identification quite scrupulously, asking *hverr ... elztr... / Ymis niðia / yrði í árdaga?* ('who ...

20 *Vafþrúðnismál*, 21:1-2, 4. *Grímnismál*, 40:1-3 is near-identical.

21 *Völuspá*, 4:3-4.

22 Cf. *Grímnismál*, 43:3; *Völuspá*, 7:7; *Hávamál*, *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn, 126:8; *Rígsþula*, *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn, 15:3. For specifically cosmogonic acts, see *Skáldskaparmál*, 9, v 269:3, v270:1; Prologue to *Gylfaginning*, 1; *Gylfaginning*, 9, 18; *Grímnismál*, 41:6; *Vafþrúðnismál*, 29:1-2, 35:1-2.

23 Cf. the episode of Þórr and the giant builder. Related in one cryptic stanza of *Völuspá*, it occupies a full chapter of *Gylfaginning* (*Völuspá*, 26; *Gylfaginning*, 42).

24 Dronke, *Völuspá*, 4:2n. Cf. *Grímnismál*, 45:1.

25 Dronke, *Völuspá*, 4:2n. This is supported by the return of the earth after Ragnarök *ór ægi* ('from the sea'; *Völuspá*, 59:3), given the conscious parallels that *Völuspá* draws between the creation of the world and its restoration.

26 *Vafþrúðnismál*, 20-1, 29.

27 Cf. *Vafþrúðnismál*, 30-3, and *Hyndluljóð*, *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn, 33:7-8. See also, Dronke, *Völuspá*, 3:3n; Martin, 'Creation Myths Reconsidered', 358. Snorri, in fact, explicitly equates Aurgelmir with Ymir (*Gylfaginning*, 5), though his systematizing ethos undermines the credibility of this as representative of earlier beliefs. His inference was clearly guided by *Hyndluljóð*, 33:7-8, which he quotes in support, and which admittedly is itself likely to be younger than the other poems examined here – the part of the text in question appears to be stylistically modelled after *Völuspá* (stanzas 29-44 are widely known as *Völuspá hin skamma*, after Snorri's designation).

was the oldest ... of Ymir's descendants in primeval times?')²⁸ and answering – even though, as Machan remarks, it seems obvious that the answer must be Ymir himself²⁹ – with the name *Aurgelmir*.³⁰ This is doubly confusing as *Aurgelmir* cannot be both Ymir's descendant and born from an accumulation of poison-drops, as *Vafþrúðnismál* subsequently denotes.³¹ The simplest explanation is that these two *jötnar* are in fact one at this stage in the textual history of *Vafþrúðnismál*, even if they originated as different figures, and this is supported by an etymological analysis of the name *Aurgelmir*. Dronke understands it as constructed from 'ocean that roars' (*gelmir*) and 'fertile, damp soil' (*aurr*) – that is "the submarine soil that will emerge as the earth".³² While *Aurgelmir* is usually translated more simply as 'mud-screamer' – Dronke's reasoning imputes that she is working back from the result she finds towards an acceptable hypothesis, rather than starting from her evidence – her point remains tenable, and not only connects *Aurgelmir* to Ymir, but ultimately also hints that a belief in the earth being pulled from a flood was associated with both names.³³ Moreover, even Lindow, a sceptic of this thesis, admits that *Aurgelmir*'s ensuing hermaphroditic pregnancy fits better etymologically with Ymir, which credibly means something like 'doubled'.³⁴

A caesura of information exists between stanzas three and four of *Völuspá* that is elegantly bridged by the narrative of Ymir's dissection, re-shaping and upheaval. The *jötunn*'s copious haemorrhaging in *Gylfaginning*, 7, is normally dismissed as an analogue of the Judaeo-Christian flood story, but it need not be.³⁵ It is rational that an anatomized body would bleed heavily and need pulled out of this pool, if the rest of it was to be used. Additionally, it makes sense

28 *Vafþrúðnismál*, 28:4-6. The tautology in these stanzas is especially obvious if *niðr* is translated as 'son', which appears to be its earliest sense, or by extension 'descendant' (cf. *Fáfnismál*, *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn, 44:7; *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn, 5:2; *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn, 8:2; 47:4; *Ynglingatal*, 6:11), although it is also used more loosely with the meaning 'relative' (cf. *Atlakviða*, *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn, 9:1; *Atlamál*, *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn, 49:6; *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, 28:3; 11:8; *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn, 11:4). Cf. Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford, second edn., 1957), s.v. 'niðr'.

29 Tim Machan, ed., *Vafþrúðnismál* (Durham, 1989) 28:4-6n.

30 *Vafþrúðnismál*, 9:6.

31 *Vafþrúðnismál*, 31:1-3.

32 Dronke, *Völuspá*, 3:2n.

33 Cf. Lindow, *Handbook*, s.n. 'Aurgelmir (Mud-Yeller)'; Machan, ed., *Vafþrúðnismál*, s.n. 'Aurgelmir'. Nevertheless, Dronke does find support in Simek's reading of it as 'the roarer born from sand' (*Dictionary*, s.n. 'Aurgelmir').

34 *Vafþrúðnismál*, 33; Lindow, *Handbook*, s.n.n. 'Aurgelmir (Mud-Yeller)', 'Tuisto'. Cf. Simek, *Dictionary*, s.n. 'Ymir'.

35 On this consensus, see Lindow, *Handbook*, s.n. 'Bergelmir (Bear-Yeller, Mountain-Yeller, or Bare-Yeller)'. Cf. Genesis, 1:6-10.

that Snorri would reconcile the detritus of Iceland's pre-Christian heritage with the narratives of the Bible, if the prominent motifs of both traditions were easily accorded, given his intention to illustrate his ancestors' 'creed as a misguided reflection of Christian orthodoxy'.³⁶ Nevertheless, whilst it seems likely that the story of Ymir's dismemberment underpins the early stanzas of *Völuspá*, the awkward truth of reconstruction is that arguments can only be demonstrated, not proven.

Even if the above reasoning is not accepted, *Völuspá*'s use of *skapa* remains conspicuous. If it is, the Ymir narrative becomes implicated in *Völuspá*'s negotiations with the enigmas of cosmogony, and the problems of narrative and imagery that result from that. Conceptualizing the forging of existence was as difficult a task a millennium ago as it is today. Even with the crutch of science, twenty-first century discourse is still reliant on negation and antithesis to circumscribe the concept of pre- and non-existence, on terminology like *a-spatial* and *no-thing*. It is a fundamental psychological, as well as artistic, problem: a system of signification cannot be developed for what cannot first be conceived. *Völuspá*'s attempts resort to litotes, claiming that *vara sandr né sær ...* ('there was neither sand nor sea ...') and *gap var ginnunga*, with the latter among the poem's most obscure passages.³⁷ Just as Snorri envisages Ginnungagap as a place name (presumably extrapolating from this phrase), Dronke notes that *gap* ('opening') exists as a Norwegian place-name element.³⁸ Moreover, as an opening, it naturally cannot exist without an area to surround it. Hence, it unavoidably possesses a spatial dimension. Furthermore, *ginnung*, here used genitively, appears to have the sense of a 'yawning emptiness'.³⁹ Although the difficulty of translation here prohibits any sureness,⁴⁰ the state before existence is, therefore, defined as a place, of nothing, filled with absence.

36 Faulkes, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, xxvi. Cf. Lindow, *Handbook*, s.v. 'Bergelmir (Bear Yeller, Mountain-Yeller, or Bare-Yeller)'. Diluvian myths, and myths of primeval waters, are common in many religious cultures without Christian influence – indeed it is among the most universal of motifs – which implies that the burden of proof lies with those who would argue for Christian influence here, or indeed regarding *Völuspá*, 4:2. On the prevalence of flood myths, see Alan Dundes, 'Introduction', in *The Flood Myth*, ed. Alan Dundes (Berkeley, 1988), 2-3. For a compellingly lengthy list of recorded examples, see Stith Thompson, *Motif-index of Folk-Literature: a Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends* (Copenhagen, [1955-58]), A810-17, A910, A913, A1010-29.

37 *Völuspá*, 3:3, 3:7.

38 Dronke, *Völuspá*, 3:7n. Cf. *Gylfaginning*, 5, in which Ginnungagap eventually co-exists with Muspell and Niflheimr.

39 Cf. Dronke, *Völuspá*, 3:7n.

40 Dronke, *Völuspá*, 3:7n. Lindow (*Handbook*, s.v. 'Ginnunga Gap') summarises the scholarship on Ginnungagap, including the popular idea that it is somehow magical, which Dronke convincingly refutes here.

The tautology is important: it emphasises that it will be filled, the negation unavoidably anticipating what it negates – creation.

Gylfaginning adopts a different expository strategy from *Völuspá*, portraying a time before Miðgarðr that bustles, relatively-speaking, with activity. Snorri attempts to accommodate Ymir's existence, and that of the sons of Burr, alongside the question of first cause through a series of creations that the void in *Völuspá* seems to deny – though of course that poem's abstruse vignettes may be a misleading guide to its cultural background. Snorri rationalizes that Ymir-Aurgelmir was created not from nothing, but from the poisonous rivers of Élivágar,⁴¹ which are traced to a spring in Niflheimr. Yet this place is itself lacking a derivation. It is simply *gørr* ('made').⁴² On *Völuspá*'s description of this period before creation as *þat er Ymir bygði* ('when Ymir dwelt'),⁴³ Dronke's analysis is perceptive: '*Byggva* is rarely, if ever, used absolutely as here ... but, given Ymir's peculiar circumstances, what else can the poet say?' and this applies equally to Snorri's use of *gøra*.⁴⁴ The verbs underscore the lack of an environment – the want of a direct object illustrates spatial absence and the impossibility, or at least singularity, of the situation.

Both of these sources appeal to the staple imagery of shaping as a means of bypassing the epistemological uncertainties of cosmogony. Yet even while *Völuspá* and *Gylfaginning*'s abstentions seem to evade the normal criteria that things need to be created *from* something and disregard their own metaphysical peculiarity, ultimately their anomalous use of language can only emphasise a conventional order. Snorri's attempts produce a seemingly self-generating epistemological dialogue of creation upon creation upon creation, until it ultimately desists, shrouded in its own vagaries, which magnifies this sense of abnormality to an even greater extent than is present in the poetic cosmogony. This is a causal sequence that begins, as it only can, in a phenomenon without a creation, in an effect without a cause, just as the crafting in *Völuspá* does, since Ymir has no apparent beginning in that poem. The frustration of representing cosmogonic ideas develops, through the device of forging, into a philosophy that is complex, which pushes literature to its limits as a means of intellectual and imaginative expression, and which is ultimately, perhaps, inadequate for the task it is asked to accomplish.

41 Cf. *Vafþrúðnismál*, 31. Snorri is evidently at least partly indebted to this source for his own depiction.

42 *Gylfaginning*, 4.

43 *Völuspá*, 3:2, although Cleasby and Vigfússon demonstrate that the meaning of *byggva* ranges from 'inhabit' or 'possess' to 'build' (*Dictionary*, s.v. '*byggja*'), any of which would suffice here.

44 Dronke, *Völuspá*, 3:2n.

II

In *Völuspá*, the whole history of the universe crystallizes within the instant of creation. The poem judges Miðgarðr as it would any other created object, as a thing that decays over time and is intrinsically linked, in terms of its essential nature and quality, to the calibre of its materials and workmanship. Consequently, the world degenerates into, but is also constituted partly from, social and cosmological chaos. 'Niðhögggr gnaws' (*Scerðir Niðhögggr*) at Yggdrasill and is symptomatic of the discord afflicting the world.⁴⁵ Yet, as a scourge of the damned, the dragon is also incorporated into the Æsir's attempts to instil social order.⁴⁶ Læraðr, a tree presumably identical to Yggdrasill, is devoured by the animals who spur the flow of rivers.⁴⁷ Thus it is both desirable and not so that they feed, killing the universe that they sustain. The evergreen tree itself 'rots at the side' (*á hliðo fúnar*), its corruption ongoing, innate and eternal.⁴⁸

Several specific factors cause this malaise.⁴⁹ The first is the raw material of creation: while the transformation involved in forging can be extreme, a definite equivalence remains throughout the literary corpus between ingredients and the final product.⁵⁰ In this context, the exploitation of Ymir, one

45 *Grímnismál*, 35:4-6.

46 *Völuspá*, 39.

47 *Grímnismál*, 25-6. On this identification with Yggdrasill, see Simek, *Dictionary*, s.n. 'Læraðr' and Lindow, *Handbook*, s.n. 'Lærad'.

48 *Grímnismál*, 35:5.

49 The overview given here of contemporary attitudes to craftsmen and their works is unavoidably brief, due to constraints of space. However, an extensive body of literature has been generated on this and a range of related issues in recent times. For a summary of much of the evidence from the sagas, legends and mythology, see Lotte Motz, 'The Craftsman in the Mound', *Folklore* 88, no. 1 (1977), 46-8. For an interdisciplinary examination of the relationship between craftsmen and the social elite, see John Hines, 'Myth and Reality: the Contribution of Archaeology', in *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, The Viking Collection 14 (Odense, 2003), 165-74. To get some idea of regional and temporal variations in attitudes, see Greta Arwidsson and Gösta Berg, *The Mästermyr Find: a Viking Age Tool Chest from Gotland* (Stockholm, 1983), 33-4; and Julian Richards, *The Vikings: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions 137 (Oxford, 2005), 29ff. Helpful comparative perspectives are provided by Randi Barndon, 'Myth and Metallurgy: Some Cross-Cultural Reflections on the Social Identity of Smiths', in *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes and Interactions; an International Conference in Lund, Sweden, June 3-7, 2004*, ed. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert, and Catharina Raudvere, *Vägar till Midgård* 8 (Lund, 2006); and Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy*, trans. Stephen Corrin (Chicago, 2nd edn., 1978). Finally, for a summary of recent scholarship on these issues, see Lotte Hedeager, 'Scandinavia before the Viking Age', in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London, 2008), 15-16.

50 Cf., for example, the creation of Gleipnir, Fenrir's fetter, which possesses a strength to match the exceptionality of its materials, and a suitability for deceit that equals their inscrutability (*Gylfaginning*, 34); the correlation established in *Völundarkviða* between the eyes of King Niðuðr's murdered children and the gemstones they become, and the commentary this poem contrives herein on the subjectivity of valuation (*Völundarkviða*, *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn, 24-26, 35, 37); and the similarly emblematic formation of Otr's skin into a bag to measure out his worth in gold (*Reginismál*, *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn, prose introduction).

of a race that is habitually associated with social disruption,⁵¹ is provocative; just as *Vafþrúðnismál* links the *jötunn*'s formation from poisonous waters to his savagery, so too the corruption of the world should be understood as partially issuing from the re-use of his body.⁵² A bigger determinant, however, given the basic negative attitude to smiths and craftsmen in general in medieval Scandinavian literature which is replicated in the archaeological record, may be the involvement of the sons of Burr.⁵³ Moreover, any equivalence that had already been inferred between them and other smiths would only be compounded by the nature and context of the transformation act: it is an act of murder – worse, of kin-slaying – and this can be expected to reverberate through the finished work.⁵⁴ It should also be noted that *skapa* was employed to describe destructive, as well as creative, situations, although such instances are probably a metaphorical extension of the verb's basic implications of craftsmanship and skill.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, it may be that this connotation influenced its use in *Völuspá* and other cosmogonic circumstances.

Before their own infusion with life, *askr* and *embla* are *ørloglausa* ('fateless').⁵⁶ The creation act is clearly, therefore, identified with an imposition of fate here. Furthermore, there is a necessary circularity underlying this formation, which can be applied on a cosmological scale; without fate, if it is understood as guiding and being performed in causality and therefore individual action, human existence does not operate (without it, the materials of humanity are only lifeless debris). Yet, equally, fate only exists as a derivative of action and of time. Thus, *Miðgarðr* and its fate must be fashioned together,⁵⁷ and consequently so too must *Miðgarðr*'s end. The image of *Yggdrasil*

51 On this generally, cf. Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 156.

52 *Vafþrúðnismál*, 31.

53 For general surveys of smiths in Old Norse literature and archaeology, see n. 49. On their avariciousness, see *Reginismál*, prose after 4, 5, prose after 9; *Völundarkviða*, 5, 10. On their aggression, see *Skáldskaparmál*, 97; *Völundarkviða*, 24 and *passim*; *Reginismál*, prose after 14. On their corruption, see *Sáfnismál*, 32-9; *Völundarkviða*, 22-4, 27-8. On their ugliness, see *Reginismál*, prose introduction; *Alvíssmál*, *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn, 2.

54 On the matrilineal connection of the *Æsir* to *jötnar*, see n. 12; Lindow, *Handbook*, s.n. 'Bestla'; Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 158. Kin-slaying is an unsurprising taboo, but nonetheless the emotional weight that it carried in this society should not be understated. On this, see John Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance among the Gods: Baldr in Scandinavian Mythology* (Helsinki, 1997).

55 Cf. *Atlamál*, 52:7. The impression of proficiency underlying *skapa* is clear in *Grímnismál*, 43:3 and *Vafþrúðnismál*, 25:5.

56 *Völuspá*, 17:8. La Farge and Tucker (*Glossary*, s.v. 'ørlog-lauss') helpfully define it as 'fateless, in the sense of on whom fate has not yet been imposed'.

57 Cf. Anthony Winterbourne, *When the Norns Have Spoken: Time and Fate in Germanic Paganism* (Madison, 2004), 86-8, 91. The foremost virtue of Winterbourne's monograph is its accent on events being 'preordained in the past' (*ibid.*, 87; emphasis in original) – a simple point but worth underlining, at least with regard to *Völuspá*.

standing ‘ever green over Urðr’s well’ (*æ yfir, grænn, / Urðar brunni*)⁵⁸ visually represents this interdependence between the creation and fate, especially when contextualized by the image of Urðr herself, and her sisters, domiciled in a lake under the ash tree.⁵⁹ When this relationship is considered alongside the paradoxical and fundamental role of chaos in the universe’s good health, stemming from the inadequacies of its shaping, it becomes clear that fate is not only also required for the existence of action in the cosmos but is essential to its specific mode of functioning.

It is worth returning to *skapa* at this point to note that, at this stage in the development of Old Icelandic, the verb finds itself used prevalently in the sense of ‘to decree’, which is clearly a development of the conceit of an outcome being shaped by an external agency.⁶⁰ The idea that an object’s biography was crafted at its inception seems, therefore, basic to at least one conception of fate, even if alternative views did exist.⁶¹ In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, for instance, Helgi’s fate is shaped the night following his birth, while in *Reginismál*, amongst a number of perspectives on the operation of fate, fate is ‘shaped... in ancient days’ (*skóp ... í árdaga*), which could actually represent the opinion that an individual’s fate is shaped along with the world’s.⁶² If nothing else, this suggests that the notion of fate, as a belief or literary metaphor, should be approached with less fixity than is customary, taking into account that its conceptualization almost definitely varied between poets and audiences, and that its form may deviate from our received ideas.

Essentially, two cosmological schemas are enshrined in *Völuspá*. The first is a conventionally organized framework based on a fixed social hierarchy, which is exemplified by the status quo idealized in the early stanzas of *Völuspá*. The second is that of fate. It is intrinsic and necessary to *Miðgarðr* though it compels its deterioration. Only objectively, therefore, is it perceivable as

58 *Völuspá*, 19:7-8. Urðr, personified here, is a common referent for fate with cognates in many Germanic languages. See Winterbourne, *Norns*, 116.

59 *Völuspá*, 20:1-4. *Gylfaginning*, 16, makes explicit the role these women play in nourishing the tree.

60 Indeed, La Farge and Tucker (*Glossary*, s.v. ‘*skapa*’) construe it as ‘to shape, create, ordain’, whereas Cleasby and Vigfússon (*Dictionary*, s.v. ‘*skapa*’) restrain themselves to ‘to shape’..

61 An enlightening comparison may be drawn from *Reginismál*, in which the impression of an effect proceeding inexorably from a cause (notably, another act of creation: see n. 50) is amplified, when Hreiðmarr is warned (*Reginismál*, 6:4-6) that, because of the gold, ‘for your son, no good fortune is pre-ordained; it will be the death of both of you’ (*syni þínum / verðra sæla scöpuð, / þat verðr yccarr beggia bani*). See also the more ambiguous example, *eino dægri / mér var aldr um scapaðr* (‘on one day, a lifetime was shaped for me’; *Skírnismál*, *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn, 13:4-5), although it could sit as easily beside the other example drawn from *Reginismál* below (n. 62).

62 *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, 1-2; *Reginismál*, 2:5. The exact sense of *Sigurðarkviða hin skamma*, *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn, 7:5-6 may be similar to *Reginismál*, 2:5, but is more evasive still.

an order – from the viewpoint of the mythic narrative and the audience, it is a return to chaos. The mythology evidences a pessimistic imagination at work in early medieval Scandinavia: the first schema demands a forging that creates fate, yet fate ensures that this harmony is unattainable. The very act that creates the world consigns it to destruction.⁶³

III

The early medieval Scandinavian imagination may be pessimistic, perhaps, but it seems not to be wholly resigned. The same minds that etched out the misadventures of the Æsir at Ragnarök in *Völuspá's* penultimate stanzas described Miðgarðr rising again out of the ocean a second time in an appealing new form, reminiscent of the paradise of the first golden age but with a natural and social harmony that goes beyond even that.⁶⁴ Crucially, and logically in the view of the above argument, it may even be that fate has been reforged into an equally congenial form.⁶⁵ And yet, even if *Völuspá* appears

63 McKinnell (*Both One and Many*, 117) similarly deduces that the gods instigated fate by ordering creation, though based upon a conflicting argument and on time as the organized principle.

64 While the natural plenty of both paradises is emphasised, its second flourishing is lingered over in particular detail (cf. *Völuspá*, 4:5-8 and 59:4-8), with the remarkable feature that 'the fields will grow unsown' (*Muno ósáinir / akrar vaxa*; *Völuspá*, 62:1) is the most pronounced and desirable improvement. And not only is the return to social harmony specifically remarked upon – *böls mun allz batna*, 'all evils will heal' (*Völuspá*, 62:3) – and epitomized in the reconciliation of the family unit that had once embodied its disintegration (*Völuspá*, 62:5-7), but the promise that 'worthy lords shall ... enjoy bliss forever' (*skolo dyggvar / dróttir... um aldrdaða / ynðis nióta*; *Völuspá*, 64:5-8) intimates that it will endure this time. The absence of *jötnar* may also be a mitigating factor in the tranquility of this redeemed world (*Völuspá*, 59ff.). While the other major poetic portrayal of Ragnarök, found in *Vafþrúðnismál* (17-18, 44-53), is consistent with *Völuspá* in some regards, not least the immolation of the world in Surtr's fire (*Vafþrúðnismál*, 50:6, 51:3), it lacks such a clear depiction of a renewed world, and, as McKinnell persuasively argues (*Both One and Many*, 104-6, 120-8), appears to promote a different ethical system.

65 This argument is too involved to fully explore here. Nonetheless, it is evident that fate is envisaged as a part of the new world order as much as the old from one direct (and emphatic) reference to making prophecy (*Kná Hæinir / hlautvið kíósa*, 'Hæinir did select lot-twigs', *Völuspá*, 63:1-2), which is only possible in a deterministic universe. Clunies Ross (*Prolonged Echoes*, 240) identifies this as a continued cult of sacrifice, but without offering any justification. Fate's new temper is insinuated by the improvements in this world compared to the old – particularly persuasive in this regard is its apparent endurance and self-regulation (see n. 64) – but also the re-contextualization of the *töflor* ('board game pieces'; *Völuspá*, 61:3). It is noticeable that the pluperfect is chosen here to describe the surviving Æsir's contact with these objects (the Æsir 'had owned' them, *áttar höfðu*, *Völuspá*, 61:6), contending that their ownership had ended. This may be a sign (if the game was like *hnefatafl*, which was played between two teams of unequal strengths [Lindow, *Handbook*, s.v. 'game of the gods']) that the conflicts that once raged are no longer weighted against the Æsir or, more credibly, are redundant in this new order. Dronke (*Völuspá*, 8n) successfully discredits a few more and less likely hypotheses concerning this stanza, though her own suggestions are not much more workable.

to soften its philosophy for its medieval audience, it remains consistent, confirming its ideas to a modern one: this fresh spirit and air of hope correlates with the qualities of defiance and self-sacrifice that marked the gods' actions at Ragnarök, the world's reshaping,⁶⁶ in the same way that the Miðgarðr of old matched its own generation.

The only element undermining this conclusion is the reappearance of Níðhöggr, bearing *sér í fiððrom ... / náí* ('corpses in his pinions').⁶⁷ A number of rationales for his presence have been argued,⁶⁸ but regardless of which is preferred it is a foreboding note to end this history on, changing the tone and tension of the poem considerably, and above all challenging the promise of the renewed world, and the success of its re-creation. It is a fitting conclusion to *Völuspá*, summing up the poems themes and philosophy, as well as consummating its narrative. Because of the matrix of theories underlying cosmogonic imagery, Ragnarök is a hopeful yet still fearful and uncertain idea. But through Ragnarök and the poem's dark conclusion, it becomes clear that an act of creation is one of hopefulness entwined with an expectation, however concealed, of corruption.

The philosophical inquiry enacted through the discourse of cosmogony in *Völuspá* emerges from and builds upon practical conclusions. Its impetus comes from the congruent needs to explain and justify, to probe and argue, and to conceptualize and rationalize the same routine processes that preoccupy modern literature and thought: the creation of the universe and of consciousness, the mercuriality of life, even the simple fact of the natural deterioration of objects. Even if the texts never manage to answer, or even articulate, these problems to an extent that satisfies every twenty-first century observer, it appears equally unlikely from, for example, Snorri's extended string of creation on creation on creation that they satisfied all of their original witnesses either. Nevertheless, their attempts remain revelatory of how the medieval Norse mind apprehended and responded to the wider world and to interactions within it. The prevailing greater scholarly popularity of narratives of destruction (such as Ragnarök), over those of creation, is

66 The most prominent of the Æsir and Vanir – Óðinn, Freyr and Þórr (*Völuspá*, 53-6) – die protecting the world with a heroism that is typified by Þórr. The 'defender of Miðgarðr' (*miðgarðz véor*; *Völuspá*, 56:6) struggles on 'nine feet ... exhausted' (*fet níó ... neppr*; *Völuspá*, 56:9-11) after killing the Miðgarðsormr, before succumbing to his wounds.

67 *Völuspá*, 66:5, 8.

68 The two most popular are that his appearance represents the survival of evil (Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 64, 241; Schach, 'Some Thoughts', 102; Sigurður Nordal, 'Three Essays on *Völuspá*', trans. Benedikt Benediktz and John McKinnell, *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 18 (1970-3), 97) or the onset of Ragnarök in the present (Lindow, *Handbook*, s.n. 'Níðhöggr (Evil-Blow)'; McKinnell, *Both One and Many*, 112). Both are conceivable, exemplifying the artfulness of *Völuspá*'s composition.

therefore interesting, especially as it has emerged in spite of the importance of destruction *to* creation, and the pervasiveness of the doctrine of forging. The creation of the universe is the root of its own destruction.

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