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Politicized Use of Norse Myth  
and Tor Obrestad's *Misteltein* (1987)

The politicization of Norse mythology goes back at least as far as the time the stories were first written down. When the Danish priest and historian Saxo Grammaticus stated in his *Gesta Danorum* (History of the Danes) that the Norse gods were actually deified Danish heroes, he was ostensibly following the Twelfth Century church's anti-pagan teachings, but he was also simultaneously claiming for Denmark the reflected glory of heroes so mighty that people believed them to be gods. In Sweden the royal dynasty of the Ynglings traced their ancestry back to the god Frey (Yngvi-Frey) demonstrating their divine right to the throne. This tradition of gaining reflected glory through association with ancient mythology and mythological figures continued through the work of a variety of scholars, among them Olaus Rudbeck who, in the late Seventeenth Century, used Old Norse texts to support his claim in his *Atlantica* that Sweden was the lost land of Atlantis and therefore the centre of the foundation of Western culture and civilization (see Mats Malm, in Wawn 1994, 1-26), and, in the politically rearranged Scandinavia after the Napoleonic Wars, writers in Scandinavia looked to the glorious Viking past to create or reaffirm a sense of national identity. In Norway, the ancient Norse texts were employed in the building of the newly recreated nation and Snorri's *Heimskringla* was hailed as exclusively Norwegian.

In our own century, the apparently constructive literary use of the Norse myths in the first half of the Nineteenth Century developed into an exploitation of the gods and heroes in a more sinister form. Through National Socialist propaganda, notably the work of Alfred Rosenberg, the Norse/Germanic myths and legends were combined with

other Indo-European traditions to form an Aryan system. In *The Feminist Companion to Mythology* (1992), Carolyn Larrington describes the style of rhetoric Rosenberg inspired:

A popular propaganda image was that of Hitler as the Hero awakening Germany, the sleeping Valkyrie, an image deriving its potency from the ancient motif of the land as bride to the king, the approaching conqueror as the husband who will sexually awaken her and make her fertile. [Larrington 1992, 159]

Mythical allusions were widely used in Nazi Germany and by the indigenous National Socialist movements in the Scandinavian countries. An article in the Norwegian Nazi party's monthly periodical, *NS Månedshäfte*, in February 1943 takes the verses describing the lead-up to Ragnarok – the downfall of the gods – in the Eddic poem *Voluspá* (The Sibyl's Prophecy) as a prediction of the turmoil and destruction of the Second World War to be followed by a National Socialist golden age. The author, Kai Normann, takes symbols directly from one of *Voluspá's* most ominous verses:

Brothers will die,	slain by their brothers,
Kinsmen betray	their close kin;
woe to the world then,	wedded to whoredom;
battle-axe and sword rule,	split shields asunder,
storm-cleft age of wolves	until the world goes down
only hatred	in the hearts of men.

[Terry 1990, 5]

writing:

Vi lever enda ikke i fredens og gudsríkets forjettede tidsalder, vår tid er sverdets tid, jernetid, ulvetid. [*NS Månedshäfte* 1943:2, 57]

[We are still not living in the promised age of peace and the kingdom of God, our time is the time of the

sword, time of iron, time of wolves.]

Although the main connection made between the Norse myths and the Second World War is their use by the Nazis, they were also used by elements within the Scandinavian resistance. In *Skaldemjödöt i berget* (The Mead of Inspiration in the Mountain, 1996), Lars Lönnroth sites the example of the Danish resistance movement during the occupation of 1940-1945 and among other examples mentions Aage Møller, a Grundtvigian priest from South Jutland, who heralded those fighting the Nazis as belonging to "asarnas ätt" (the race of gods) (Lönnroth 1996, 164).

Echoes of the Nazi use of Norse myth can be found today on the margins of shady political groups (see Lönnroth 1996, 208-218), and in the words and actions of politically extreme characters such as "Greven" (The Count) in Norway, whose defence for murder and the burning of churches during his trial in 1994 came from his religious and political viewpoint as a heathen. In contrast to these figures stand a number of contemporary Scandinavian authors who can be seen to be expressing a more left-wing anti-establishment viewpoint through the vehicle of the Norse mythology. Among these is Danish author Villy Sørensen whose *Ragnarok* provoked interest and controversy when it was first published in 1982. Sørensen's allegorical adaptation of the Eddic stories can be seen to have broken new ground and parallels the dangers of the duality of the Norse cosmos – with gods and giants are in opposition – with a cold war situation that concludes in a nuclear holocaust-style environmental collapse.

### *Re: Interpreting Sources*

The existence of conflicting use of Norse myth in the same era and society demonstrates the essential openness of the mythological material, and the range of possibilities the myths present for re-interpretation by different generations and ideologies. One of the aspects that increases the flexibility of the Norse mythology in particular is the

uncertainty regarding interpretation of the content and the reliability of the two main literary sources: the *Poetic Edda* and Snorri's *Prose Edda*. Our view of Norse mythology is constructed from interpretations based on the interpretations of earlier commentators in a tradition that reaches back to the earliest recorders of the myths, and although one should not unduly exaggerate the influence of Christianity on the myths, it should not be forgotten that the Eddas were recorded about two hundred years after the Icelandic conversion.

In later re-constructing of tales from the extant material, Snorri's *Prose Edda* has often been given preference over the *Poetic Edda* for the simple, and understandable, reason that it is easier to digest. But while Snorri's ready-made stories allow us to avoid having to grapple with obscure references in the Eddic poems, we have no reason to regard them as "pure". Although Snorri's Edda is largely read for its mythological content, his principal stated objective was to preserve a knowledge of scaldic poetry through the preservation of the language and stories of the Eddic poems. By re-examining the arguably more "original" material from the *Poetic Edda*, it is possible to re-evaluate our view of Norse myth and gain increased insight into pagan beliefs.

The power of the revision of myth, specifically in literature, has largely been defined by feminist critics, and Diane Purkiss describes the rewriting of myth as denoting:

participation in [...] historical processes and the struggle to alter gender asymmetries agreed upon for centuries by myth's disseminators. [in Larrington 1991, 441]

Purkiss continues, describing how feminists can employ myth in the gender battle:

When feminists envisage that struggle, they often think of the rewriting or reinterpretation of individual stories: for example, by changing the focus of the narrative from a male character to a female character, or by shifting the terms of the myth so that what was a 'negative' female

role-model becomes a positive one. [Larrington 1991, 441-42]

The inconsistency between Snorri's version of the story of Odin's acquisition of the mead of poetic inspiration and the poetic source in *Hávamál* led Icelandic author Svava Jakobsdóttir to dig beyond the standard version based on Snorri, and the result of her research was the novel *Gunnlaðar saga* (The Story about Gunnlod, 1987) which rewrites the myth, empowering the female figure of Gunnlod.

*Gunnlaðar saga* is composed on two time planes – the Danish Bronze Age and in modern Copenhagen – and is ostensibly the story of Dis, an Icelandic girl arrested in Denmark for stealing a priceless chalice. Although separate stories unfold on the two levels, the planes are interwoven through imagery, language, and allusions and through the character of Dis who relives Gunnlod's experiences. The imbalance created by Odin's betrayal in the past is paralleled to social and environmental crisis at the time of the Chernobyl accident, and as with Sørensen's *Ragnarok*, the image of nuclear catastrophe is linked to the mythical Ragnarok.

With the exception of Svava Jakobsdóttir, there are few examples of contemporary Scandinavian women writers using Norse myth to any great degree. One possible reason for this is that Norse myth does not contain a large number of suitably strong female role models. However, any literary interpretations of mythology must contain an element of revision. Alicia Ostriker has described how myth revision appropriates a "figure or tale [...] for altered ends" (in Showalter 1986, 316), and this does not limit the definition to feminist, or necessarily to politically correct, rewriting of mythology. In the years following the publication of Sørensen's *Ragnarok*, a number of other Scandinavian male writers have used myth revision as a vehicle for social comment.

Although stylistically the use of myth can influence an author's work quite dramatically, authors who use myth intertextually seem not to be turning to the myths for

thematic inspiration, rather they tailor the mythological material to their own overriding preoccupations. Thus the theme of the perils of duality psychologically and politically, which is present throughout Villy Sørensen's authorship as a whole, is one of the main themes highlighted by the mythical conflict between the gods and the giants around which the plot of *Ragnarok* is centred. The use of myth in literature not only gives an added depth of texture to a work, but also lends credibility to the underlying themes and ideas in the author's work by lending it the weight of history.

### *Misteltein*

The Norwegian writer Tor Obrestad (born 1938) can be seen to be drawing on this historicity and following in the footsteps of those writers who have previously combined political goals with literary re-use of mythology. Obrestad is primarily associated with the *Profil* literary group in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This group, which was connected to the Norwegian periodical of the same name, radicalized writing in Norway, initially advocating a move away from traditional realism towards European modernism and Nordic myth and folktale for inspiration. By 1968, however, the group of authors had more or less abandoned modernism in favour of using fiction as a vehicle for left-wing political ideas and social models, and it is for his writing from this period that Obrestad is best known.

His political agenda has always been openly expressed. In his selection of essays *Tenningar* (Ignittings) he writes:

"kunst" som ikkje impliserer og ikkje er skapt ut frå dagens problem er likegyldig fordi den formidlar falsk eller uinteressant informasjon og tilbyr ikkje innsikt om vår situasjon her og nå. [Obrestad 1982, 36]

["art" which does not implicate, and which is not created on the basis of today's problems is irrelevant because it

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conveys false or uninteresting information and offers no insight into our current situation.]

This political commitment comes through clearly in his poetry cycle *Misteltein* (Mistletoe, 1987). As a collection, *Misteltein* has a high content of political poems but the sixty-nine poems have a greater eloquence than Obrestad's prose writing of the 1970s and, by his use of mythology, he can be seen to combine his political ideals with a renewed interest in mythology.

Written in the minority Norwegian written language Nynorsk, *Misteltein* consists of poems written over at least a nine year period (the poem "Barnelærdom" (Elementary Knowledge, p. 67) is dated 1978). Despite this – and the diverse subject matter of the poems it contains – the collection has a cohesive quality which has much to do with its structure. The poems are divided into four sections, the first three of which have the separate voices of Balder, an unnamed poet and a factory worker called Schrøder respectively. The central importance of the mythological theme suggested by the title is indicated by the content of the first three poems in the first section, and this is returned to in the single poem in the final section – "Balders bålferd" (Balder's pyre, p. 89-90). The circularity produced by this framework, and the meeting of the three main characters in the third section, combined with the recurrence of images and motifs such as the sun, the snow and trees and foliage all contribute to the impression that the work is a "whole" – a cycle – rather than a disparate collection.

### *The Death of Balder*

The poems in Balder's voice in the first section of *Misteltein* are poems about the everyday life of a man; however, the mythical god Balder is best known for the circumstances surrounding his death.

The story of Balder's death is described in Snorri's *Edda* in *Gylfaginning* (The Deluding of Gylfi). Snorri tells how

Balder the Good was plagued by nightmares suggesting his life was in danger, and to allay his fears Frigg, his mother, makes all things swear not to harm him, apart from the mistletoe which she considers too young. After this the Aser demonstrate that any missiles they throw at Balder do not harm him. The trickster character Loke goes to Frigg disguised as a woman and discovers that the mistletoe has not sworn the oath, and he picks it and gives it to Balder's brother, the blind god Hod, and assists him in aiming at Balder, who shoots and kills him. The Aser burn Balder in his boat at sea with his wife Nanna who has died of grief.

Hermod the Bold rides to Helheim to see if Hel, ruler of the realm of the dead, will accept a ransom to allow Balder back to Asgard. Hel agrees to release Balder if he is as widely loved as Hermod claims:

And if all things in the world, alive and dead, weep for him, then he shall go back to the Æsir, but be kept with Hel if any objects or refuses to weep [Faulkes 1987, 50]

Everything on Earth weeps except for a giantess called Tokki (Thanks), who is presumed to be Loke.

The death of Balder can be seen in the mythology to lead to the onset of Ragnarok – the downfall of the gods – both in Snorri's *Edda* and in the *Poetic Edda*: in *Voluspá* the verses which describe Balder's death (23-24) come shortly before the apocalyptic verses describing the collapse of social order before Ragnarok, and in *Baldrs draumar* (Balder's dreams) the witch consulted by Odin also connects the events to the downfall of the gods.

According to Saxo Grammaticus, Balder is not a god, but a human warrior defeated by Hoder who is his rival for Nanna's love, and in Obrestad's poems in the first section of *Misteltein* it is a very human version of Balder we meet.

### *The Life of Balder*

The section voiced by Balder is not political, and deals



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primarily with situations common to the lives of most people, demonstrating the simultaneous ordinariness and extraordinariness of human life. We follow, among other things, the course of Balder's love for his wife in a number of poems, his feelings at her giving birth, "Nå er du her, min mørke song" (You are now here, my dark song, p. 34), and accompany him on a walk in the Nordic summer, "Den hemmelege stranda i den nordiske sommaren" (The secret beach in the Nordic summer, p. 30-33).

However, among the descriptions of life is knowledge of death, and Balder's section also contains a poem marking the death of a friend, "Ei siste helsing frå deg til meg" (A final greeting from me to you, p. 42). The inevitability of death is alluded to in the first poem of the collection "Brått badar lyset over Balder" (The light bathes suddenly over Balder, p. 6) which has mythological references to Balder's death and subsequent burning made explicit in the final poem "Balders bålferd" (p. 89-90). The image of Loke sitting above in the poplar tree hints at Balder's fate:

Der, mellom greinene, sit Loke.  
I det fjerde tre frå venstre,  
der veks mistelteinen.  
Han skal hente pila  
her, i Frigg sin hage  
veks den nordlegaste misteltein  
i denne verda. Snart kverv han  
under granene innunder åsen,  
på veg til den blinde Hód.

[There, between the branches, sits Loke.  
In the fourth tree from the left,  
there the mistletoe grows.  
He is fetching the arrow  
here, in Frigg's garden  
grows the northernmost mistletoe  
in the world. Soon he disappears away  
beneath the spruce trees under the mountain,  
on his way to the blind Hód.]

And there are also images of fire connected to the pyre in the final poem – the shining leaves in the foliage are described:

[...] Dei skal bli tente  
av sola sitt honninglys [...]

[... They will be lit  
by the honey-light of the sun ...]

In spite of these images of fire, and the reference to Balder's nightmares, "Drøymer vonde draumar midt på lyse dagen" (Dreaming dreadful dreams in the middle of the light day), and to Odin's knowledge of events, "Odin veit det" (Odin knows), the poem concludes on an almost euphoric note. Despite, and possibly because of, his knowledge of his own mortality, Balder is content to glory in the beauty of the spring day and seems elated in the second poem of the collection: "Den blinde truskulda er alltid utan angst" (The blind innocence is always free of fear, p. 7). Balder sees the innocent, but blind Hod being prepared by Loke to shoot; he laughingly cries out, not against the inherent injustice of the situation, but against the fact he still has so much to do:

[...] eg ler, ropar –  
Vent! Her er så vakkert!  
Så mykje ennå  
skulle ha vore gjort.

[... I laugh, shout –  
Wait! It is so beautiful here!  
There's so much left  
that should have been done.]

The sinister nature of the situation comes across not through Balder's account, but through the coldness and brevity of Loke's words:

Stram bogen, seier Loke.

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Slepp pila.

[Draw the bow, says Loke.  
Release the arrow.]

The third poem in the first section is spoken not through the words of Balder, but by the mistletoe of the title, and this breaks the pattern of each section having only one voice. In a riddle-like manner the plant describes its nature:

Det kom ein fugl med meg  
vengene var ikkje mine.  
Spira gjorde eg  
i det han la att etter seg.  
Voks gjorde eg  
gjennom andre sine røter.  
Eg står utanom,  
er meg sjølv, og er med.  
Poppelen slepper bladene  
og vintergreinene hylar.  
Eg står grøn mellom dei  
som ei sommarleg sky.  
Eg er organisert, lever og veks  
som kreft. Derfor  
kjenner eg kreften si gåte.

[A bird brought me  
the wings weren't mine.  
I shot up  
in what he left behind.  
I grew  
through the roots of others.  
I stand outside it all,  
am myself, and am a part of it.  
The poplar drops its leaves  
and the winter branches howl.  
I stand green between them  
like a summery cloud.  
I am organised, live and grow

like cancer. Therefore  
I know cancer's riddle.]

This image of the parasite becomes particularly relevant in the poems in the subsequent sections where the theme of the exploitation of people is explored, and the mystical dual nature of the mistletoe also sheds light on the themes in the collection. There is a great sense of paradox in many of the poems, for instance that life, love and the world can be both good and bad, enjoyable and intolerable at one and the same time. This paradoxical nature of life is reflected in the mistletoe:

As neither tree nor shrub it symbolizes that which is neither one nor the other, which, by extension is the realm of freedom from limitation, so that anyone under the mistletoe is free from restrictions, but also free from protection, and re-enters the world of chaos. [Cooper 1978, 106]

Clearly connected to the symbolism of the mistletoe is the motif of the tree which is repeated in a number of poems throughout the collection. This is connected inevitably to the image of the world tree, the ash Yggdrasil, but also to the idea of people having roots, for example in the poem "Telemark" (p. 50):

Eg frys, er som eit gammalt tre  
Det har grodd fast  
Røtene kan ikkje flyttast på

[I freeze, am like an old tree  
It has grown solid  
Roots can not be budged]

The trees in the collection referred to by name are (like Yggdrasil) largely deciduous (poplars, cherry trees) and thus cyclical, and the frequent use of the foliage motif throughout emphasises this.

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Many of the poems in the first section contain elements of the duality of life. In the poem "Vi sat på kaféen" (We sat in the cafe, p. 11) love is seen to be accompanied by happiness and wonder for example:

Vi sat på kaféen  
Du såg på meg  
Eg strauk mi hand  
over kinnet ditt  
- Er du glad i meg?  
- Eg er glad i deg  
- Og eg i deg  
Vi kysste kvarandre  
Det var heilt banalt

Men det var eit under  
Nå, etterpå  
har eg tenkt -  
Kven var det  
som åpna for oss?  
Og gjorde den  
vennlege rørsle  
med handa?

[We sat in the cafe  
You looked at me  
I stroke my hand  
over your cheek  
- Do you love me?  
- I love you  
- And me you  
We kissed each other  
It was totally banal

But it was a miracle  
Now, afterwards  
I have thought -  
What was it  
that opened up for us?

And made that  
friendly movement  
of the hand?]

The poem can be read as implying that the love referred to may have died – "Nå, etterpå" (Now, afterwards) – and this sense of disappointment and resignation that can accompany love, and life, is clearer in "Veit ikkje om eg ga deg" (p. 33):

Veit ikkje om eg ga deg  
det du ville  
eg skulle gi, veit ikkje  
om eg ga deg roser  
Nå får du dette  
Her fins det ikkje løgn  
Ikkje bitterhet  
Her fins det  
som vi har gjort

[Don't know if I gave you  
what you wanted  
me to give, don't know  
if I gave you roses  
Now you get this  
Here are no lies  
No bitterness  
Here is what  
we have done]

Love can be seen to blossom and fade in a cycle, and this cyclic quality of life as a whole is reflected in the inner structure of the first section: the final poem in the section concerns a child leaving home, and this is referred to as "ein liten død" (a small death, p. 45), the reference to death creating a mini-cycle within the first section.

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### *Poetic Vision*

The story of Balder is one of lack of vision: it is not just Hoder who is blind, but Frigg who is "blind" to the danger of mistletoe, which Obrestad describes as coming from "Frigg sin hage" (Frigg's garden) ("Brått badar lyset over Balder", p. 6). World problems can also be seen to be problems of lack of vision, and the metaphor of sight comes up regularly throughout the collection.

The poem "Den blinde truskulda er alltid utan angst" (p. 7) suggests not that blindness/ignorance is bliss, but that it is inherently dangerous. The poem "Eg har eit varmt auga" (I have one warm eye, p. 13) alludes to Odin's blind (cold) eye through the loss of which he gained insight, and connects the image of sight to perception; the (passionate) warm eye sees surface finery, and the cold (dispassionate) eye sees beyond the superficial:

Eg har eit varmt auga  
og eit kaldt  
Skal eg sjå på deg med det varme?  
Sjå stasen din og det raude blod?

Skal eg sjå på deg med det kalde?  
Det som ser tvers gjennom  
lakk, fakter, fjas  
Heilt inn. Der lyser  
beingrinda

Du skal vite:  
Eg går gjennom verda  
med åpne augo

[I have one warm eye  
and one cold  
Should I look at you with the warm eye?  
See your finery and red blood?

Should I look at you with the cold eye?

Which looks straight through  
 veneer, gestures, frivolity  
 Right inside. There glows  
 the skeleton

You should know:  
 I go through the world  
 with open eyes]

The theme of vision also appears in the cycle's second section, notably in the poem "Sommarhelsing" (Summer greeting, p. 52). As well as extending the idea of circularity through emphasizing the opposing seasons, this poem is also about vision: the "poet", through whose words this section is voiced, clears his vision through his cleaning of the window and sets himself down at his typewriter to look out, and presumably to convey his view to others:

I natt har eg sove godt, Olav  
 Kjende at eg nok kunne skriva eit dikt  
 Og eg sette meg ned  
 kikka ut vindauga  
 Det var støv og skit  
 Ubrukeleg, såg ikkje klart  
 Derfor fylte eg bøtta med lunka såpevatn  
 tok gummihanskane og ein nal  
 ei side med Aftenpostens annonser  
 Det er midt i januar. Ei grad mildt  
 Nå er det blitt så lyst  
 at eg kan slukke lampene  
 Sette meg til maskinen  
 for å sjå ut

[Last night I slept well, Olav  
 Felt that I could probably write a poem  
 And I sat myself down  
 Looked out of the window  
 There was dust and dirt  
 Useless, couldn't see clearly



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Therefore I filled a bucket with lukewarm soapy water  
got the rubber gloves and a rag  
a page of adverts from The Evening Post  
It is the middle of January. One degree above  
Now it has got so light  
that I can turn off the lamp  
Sit myself at the machine  
to look out]

The implication in the poem is that he looks out at the world, not through the window, but through the machine at which he is working. By using the word "maskin" (machine) to describe his typewriter rather than the more normal "skrivemaskin" (typewriter – literally: "writing machine") Obrestad draws a parallel between the writer and the worker, and this ties in with his openly political agenda for his writing.

*Misteltein's* second section contains a number of poems about international politics and the people affected by political events around the world. From his "machine" the poet gives us his insight into events not just in Norway but in places such as Macedonia in "For ein Makedonsk Venn" (To a Macedonian friend, p. 55-56), Ireland in "Slaktarane møter Bobby Sands" (The butchers meet Bobby Sands, p. 59-61), and Poland in "Det Polske Flagg" (The Polish flag, p. 57).

One of Obrestad's main criticisms is aimed at the lack of action against injustice in the world. The second section as a whole begins with a poem entitled "Fragment av ein syklus" (Fragment of a cycle, p. 47) which is critical of those who fail to take responsibility into their own hands:

Eg vil ikkje  
vil ikkje  
ta ansvar  
har ikkje tid  
ikkje råd  
vil ikkje  
tenke på det

I lengre tid  
 har eg vakna  
 klokka tre  
 om morgonen  
 og ikkje gjort anna  
 enn å tenke

[I will not  
 will not  
 take responsibility  
 don't have time  
 don't have the money  
 will not  
 think about it

For a long time  
 I have woken  
 three o'clock  
 in the morning  
 and done nothing  
 but think]

International problems – wars and injustice – are more distant in this third section, although their presence is felt from the very first poem "Schrøder", when the news breaks the idyll of the summer day. The injustice touched upon in Schrøder's section is mainly injustice within Norway. Although Norway is hailed as "Det rikaste landet i verden" (The richest country in the world, p. 68) it becomes apparent through the poems that Obrestad does not consider that everyone gets an equal share of the wealth, or luxury: "Kven sier at slitets tidsalder er over" (Who says the time of hard labour has passed, "Barnelærdom", p. 67), although the inequality is shown to be greater on an international scale ("Lønn", Wages, p. 65).

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### *Fate and Freedom*

The opening poem in the third section, "Schrøder" (p. 63), is linked linguistically and thematically to the first poem in the Balder section through the factory worker, Schrøder, being pictured standing in a cherry tree, and through the images of fire:

Det er den siste julidagen, sola gneistrar  
på det blanke morellskalet  
og tenner tusen soler kring meg der eg står.

[It is the last day of July, the sun sparkles  
on the shining cherry skin  
and lights a thousand suns around me where I stand]

In sharp contrast to this idyllic summer scene comes the news on the radio of bombing in Beirut. The lines "endå ingen kastar anna enn sol over oss, her, / i det grøne Norden" (even though no-one is throwing anything other than sun over us, here/in the green North) allude to the throwing of missiles at the mythical Balder, and also, by the juxtaposition of Scandinavia and unrest, implies that unrest could take place in Norway. Additional discord comes from the introduction of the fact that Schrøder's personal fortunes are in the hands of "Akkordstyret" (The Management) who "sopar saman restane / av den store treforedlingsfabrikken eg jobba på" (brush together the remains / of the big wood processing factory I worked at).

In the same way as Balder, Schrøder seems to feel a sense of elation from danger; it is unclear whether the branch will hold or not, but at the same time it gives a sense that he is reaching out for something better:

Eg strekker meg/på tåspissane etter sola" [p. 69]  
[I reach up/on the tips of my toes towards the sun].

The feeling of elation combined with uncertainty emerges once again when he is unsure whether he can make it back to

shore when he is swimming in the sea "Til venstre ser eg fyrlykta på Østnestangen" (On the left I can see the light-house on Østnestangen, p. 82).

Throughout the Schröder section, the personal is political: being laid off from the factory can be seen to lead to financial and marital problems ("Status", Status, p. 68), but is also equated with a kind of freedom as described in "Fri" (Free, p. 69):

Eg er fri  
 på den måten ein har fri  
 når fabrikkjen står.  
 "Det varer iallfall 14 dagar  
 til å begynne med"  
 Vi traskar ned gjennom orekrattet  
 poeten og eg, vi har sorger  
 som skal leggest i bløyt  
 Suter som eit sett skitne arbeidsbukser  
 Bløytevatnet har eg på lomma  
 Gløymslevegen mellom askene –  
 – Kor er dama? spurde han  
 – eg såg bilen då eg la meg.  
 – Veit ikkje, svarar eg, – hon tok barna  
 i bilen og drog. Slik er det nå  
 Uråd å få til noko  
 Uråd å få sammanheng i noko  
 Uråd å vite nokonting om framtida  
 – Det er eit fritt land, sa han  
 Så tok vi oss ein klunk og lo

[I am free  
 to the extent one is free  
 when the factory is shut.  
 "It will last, in any case, 14 days  
 to begin with"  
 We tramp down through the alder thicket  
 the poet and I, we have sorrows  
 which need to be left to soak  
 Anxieties like a pair of dirty work trousers

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I have the soaking-water in my pocket  
The Road to Forgetting through the ashes –  
– Where's the wife? he asks  
– I saw the car when I went to bed.  
– I don't know, I answer, – she took the children  
in the car and went. That's how it is now  
Impossible to do anything  
Impossible to make anything make sense  
Impossible to know anything about the future  
– It's a free country, he said  
So we took a swig and laughed]

Alongside the theme of social inequity and injustice, the collection also contains the theme of man in nature and at the whim of nature, or fate. In a way the power of nature can be seen to be greater than the power of man.

The element of water is very important in connection with the character of Schrøder, and several of the poems in his section describe him swimming in the ocean. When in the water he experiences a releasing sense of indifference: "Ei underleg likesæle i vatnet" (A strange indifference in the water, p. 79), and when he is thrashing about in the metre-high waves he feels free: "sanneleg er eg fri" (truly I am free (in "Energien har slått ein sirkel kring kroppen", The energy has drawn a circle around my body, p. 84). The indifference he experiences is only lifted by the thought of his children: "Eit einaste spørsmål held me flytande: / Kor skal vel barna mine ta vegen?" (A single question keeps me afloat: / How will my children get along? p. 81).

The connection to swimming and water can be seen to be a metaphor for Schrøder's life and this becomes apparent in the poem "Eg sym gjennom livet med åpne spørsmål" (I swim through life with open questions, p. 86). "Tenkte aldri på havet" (I never thought about the ocean, p. 87) continues this metaphor:

Tenkte aldri på havet  
Tenkte alltid havet  
er der

like bortanfor horisonten

[I never thought about the ocean  
Just thought the ocean  
is there  
just beyond the horizon]

implying that the lack of reflection – along with a feeling that there is something beyond his experience – applies equally to the way Schröder has gone through life.

The freedom, and external control, Schröder experiences out in the open sea is present in his life as a whole. He is subject to chance and market forces over which he has a little control as an individual as his forebears had over the force of fate. The element of chance is emphasized in two poems, "Eg svingde av den bare hovudvegen" (I turned off the bare main road, p. 70) and "Døden er ein tømmertrailer ned bakken" (Death is a timber truck down a bank, p. 71) the first of which describes a close escape from death:

[...] – det skal ein liten sving  
bort frå situasjonen du kontrollerer  
til situasjonen der du er kontrollert,  
ein svings sekund  
frå du tronar i beltet,  
konge over veggen og dine ni liv,  
til vala dine er umogelege.  
Og så den svingen  
som ikkje var nødvendig, ein feil,

[... – it just takes a small turn  
away from a situation you can control  
to a situation where you are controlled,  
the second of one turn  
from lording over it in the seat-belt,  
king of the road and your nine lives,  
until your choices are impossible.  
And then that turn  
which was not necessary, a mistake,]

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and the second which describes a fatal accident in which the tragedy was not avoided:

Døden er ein tømmertrailer ned bakken  
i ukontrollert fart.  
Sjåføren skal klare akkorden.  
Det han trur han styrer  
styrer han. [p. 71]

[Death is a timber truck down the bank  
at uncontrollable speed.  
The driver has to complete his quota.  
The thing he thinks he's steering  
is steering him.]

However, while chance can be seen to play a part in whether one lives or dies, it is human error that is the crucial element.

The idea that it is a fallacy to imply that one's fate depends on chance reappears in "For det er som på en fest" (Because it is like at a party, p. 51) which describes "det" (it) – presumably life – as being:

[...] som eit spel poker  
Vi byr opp: fritid og pengar  
arbeidet, tilliten på jobben  
ekteskapet, stoltheten, barna  
si framtid, og vi skal til å satse meir –  
Då veltar han bordet og ropar  
Spelet er regissert  
frå ende til annan?

[... like a game of poker  
We bid: time off and money  
work, confidence at work,  
our marriage, pride, the children's  
future, and we want to bet more –  
Then he tips over the table and shouts  
The game is fixed  
from one end to the other?]

This notion that the fate of the individual, and society, is neither dependent on chance, or self-determined can also be connected to Norse mythology; however, Obrestad portrays the determining factor not as the Norns – the goddesses of fate – but as market forces over which the individual has no control.

Alongside allusion to mythology through the work's overall structure, mythological imagery, and through linking chance to the mythical notion of fate, the continued significance of myth/mythical patterns on society is suggested by the clear reference to folk customs that remain to this day, in the final poem "Balders bálferd" (p. 89-90). This poem connects the myth of the burning of Balder with the folk traditions surrounding the summer solstice and the burning of bonfires at mid-summer parties. These festivities are based on the tradition that this was the anniversary of Balder's death, and of his descent into Hel, and their continuation indicates how deep seated the Norse mythological tradition remains in the Nordic psyche – consciously or unconsciously.

This underlying presence of Norse traditions within Norwegian culture, and their role in the creation of Norway as a nation state, gives Obrestad's use of Norse mythology in his social critique a powerful impact: his directly political message in *Misteltein* is backed up by the deepest roots of the culture.

### Note

The translations of Obrestad's poems are my own.

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