

Myth or Poetry, a Brief Discussion of Some Motives in the Elder Edda

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The question of the origin of the mythological poems in the manuscript Codex Regius has still not been answered. *Some* scholars have suggested that *some* poems could be literary, written products from the 11th century, or from about the same period as the manuscript. But the dominating trend still is to consider these poems as originally oral. As such, the mythological poems of the Elder Edda are taken to be a versified version of Old Norse myth. Although today the poems are not thought to have the same religious or cultic function as previously believed, they are regarded as expressions of mythological material or mythological structures, which also means that they express heathen thoughts and ‘truths’. As myths they are regarded as collective products, formed and changed through a long process of oral delivery.

In my investigation of these poems, however, I am trying to study them from a literary point of view, as poetic compositions or works. That means that I try to read and analyse the poems as poetic language, as art, as written texts, such as they are presented to us in the manuscript. After all, the written texts are all we have, and all we know something about.

The question of the relationship between myth and poetry is complex, and could fill my whole paper. I will just say that although myth and poetry in one way belong to the same language of fictional discourse, I see it as languages with different semiological functions. While myth is a product of a whole culture, a collective product, poetry, as art, is an individual expression. That means for instance that poetry is creating its own autonomous poetic universes. By way of personification and anthropomorphism, myth projects its phenomena into narratives in an outer world, and thereby focusses on what is general or common. Poetry, as a symbolic language, rather tries to show the general or common through the individual. When using material from the mythological tradition, poetry will, by a process of poetic transformation, also try to liberate itself from the very same tradition. As literature poetry is thus using mythological motives for its own purpose. In order to become aware of this purpose, poetry must be understood on its own merits, not by standards of meaning imported from outside. And to understand poetry on its own merits we must look at all the aspects of the poetic language.

In this paper I will try, by a few examples from some of the mythological poems in Codex Regius, to show how literary analysis may produce an understanding that is different from a 'mythological' one.

I start with a stanza from the beginning of *Völuspá*, asking whether this reflects the thoughts and ideas of a heathen culture concerning the creation of the universe, or whether it is a free poetic use of mythological motives. Stanza 5 sounds like this:

Sól varp sunnan
 sinni mána
 hendi inni hægri
 um himinjöður
 sól þat ne vissi
 hvar hón salí átti
 stjörmor þat ne visso
 hvar þær staði áttó
 máni þat ne vissi
 hvat hann megins átti.

Already the characterization of the sun as *sinni mána*, 'the moon's companion', makes this a bit confusing as an expression of a cosmological theory, since we are rather used to be thinking of the relationship between sun and moon in a pattern of oppositions. And besides it seems strange that the sun, which already in the preceding stanza was shining on *salar steina* (4/6), now does no longer know its *salr*. Many scholars find it difficult to see how stanza 5 is related to stanza 4, and some think it must have been interpolated. Ursula Dronke thinks lines 5-8 are interpolated, while the original lines are missing. These lost lines could have helped to make it clearer how this relates to an archaic concept of the cosmic mill, by which the heaven turns on the world pillar (Dronke 1997: 116). If we take what is said here about the heavenly bodies, not as a reference to heathen thoughts about the universe, but as elements in the poem's own

fictional world, we can understand the stanza in another way. As a poetic symbol, the sun has connotations of light and life, whereas the moon connotes the opposite, namely death. As *sinni mána*, the moon's 'companion', the sun could then refer to light or life as the companion, or counterpart, of death. A similar approach by way of symbolic interpretation will also show that the last line, telling us that the moon was not aware of its power, suggests that darkness or death are the ultimate powers, as it is also in the poem by the figure of *Niðhoggr*, the dragon with the dead bodies in its feathers, breaking the light of the new world with its dark and threatening shadow in the last stanza (66).

Within the fictional world of the poem lines 3-4, telling that the sun was throwing its right arm around the edge of heaven, can also be understood as a metaphorical reference to the sun's course as it is searching for its *salar* throughout the entire poem. As I mentioned above, the sun is shining at *salar steina* already in stanza 4. *Salr* is here usually understood figuratively as 'earth', a meaning which we also find in some kennings. If we follow the poem's narrative course, we will see that *salr* is an element which is repeated throughout the text. From this stony *salr* in the beginning we move to Frigg's *Fensalir* (33), then to the three *salr* filled with anguish and pain, at *Niðavollom*, *Ókólni* and *Náströndo* (37,38), and finally to the bright *salr* at *Gimlé* in the new world (64). Thus we must conclude that *salr* is not only a kenning for earth, but must be understood as a reference to different 'rooms' or 'places' which outline a way from the hard and stony beginning, through the sorrowful *Fensalr* (by its name a figure of a 'wet place') moistened with Frigg's tears, to the following *salr* of anguish or pain, until we end with the glimpse of the bright *salr* at *Gimlé*. This narrative line forms a movement through different 'rooms' which can be understood as figurative expressions of mental 'rooms' or emotional conditions. As we know, the sun in the vision of *ragnarök* goes black and disappears in the ocean before the new earth emerges. In some glimpses the last part of the poem gives a picture of this world, where the *salr* at *Gimlé* is *sólo fegra*, 'more beautiful than the sun'. This can be understood as a vision of 'ideality', of 'eternity', or should we say, of 'heaven'. Thus we can interpret the sun stretching its right arm around the 'edge of heaven' as a reference to this final vision. The beginning both suggests and conceals what will follow, and a complete understanding of the beginning is not available until we have reached the end. In this manner the poem also manifests itself as an artistic composition, as a work of art.

My next example is some stanzas from the second poem in the manuscript, *Hávamál*. I will not discuss here whether this poem is composed as a poetic unity or put together from different materials by a scribe or an editor, but just look at one part of it. The part I have in mind (stanzas 96-110) tells the two love-stories leading to the acquisition of the mead of poetry. Commenting on the last of these stories, scholars usually refer to Snorri's 'version' in his younger Edda. Snorri's myth in *Skaldskaparmál* (ch. 5-6) tells how *Óðinn*

obtains the mead of poetry by seducing the daughter of the giant *Suttungr*. By means of the auger Rati he bores an opening through the rock, and by turning himself into a snake he gets access to *Suttungr's* dwelling so that he can bring the mead with him out. I will look briefly at some of the elements of the poem's version of the story, in order to show how I think Snorri's myth can be understood as a translation of the poetic language into the language of myth.

I start with some comments on the first story, that of *Billings mey*. This woman has been interpreted in different ways, both as daughter and wife of *Billigr*, who is explained by Gering as a giant like *Suttungr*, the father of *Gunnlǫð* (Gering 1927: 124). But Gering also notes that *billigr* means 'twin'. I think it could be a possible interpretation to read *Billings mey* as a reference to a 'twin woman', that is, the twin of the man who finds her sleeping in her bed, *sólhvitr*. Maybe you will find this interpretation too daring, but my suggestion is that this way of naming the woman can be understood as a reference or allusion to the myth of love told by Aristophanes in Plato's dialogue *Symposion*, where man and woman originally were two parts of the same being. After having been divided, the parts will be striving for a reunion, and this search is what we call love. In *Háv.*, the 'reunion' with the twin does not, however, lead up or back to an original ideality, as was the hope of the ancient Greeks, but to a fall and to struggle. Maybe this can be understood as the poem's way of marking a distance to the pre-Christian ideas of antiquity? The Christian idea of division and fall has, as we know, quite another character. The following shows that *Háv.* rather reflects this idea of an inner division or splitting. Next stanza says, for instance: *Auk nær apni/ skaltu, Óðinn, koma...* (98/1-2). Like Gering I think *auk* in this connection should be understood as 'more', not 'again'. Stressing the importance of coming back as 'more', or should we say coming back 'stronger', the point of the poem seems to be that the man who is searching for the woman sleeping *sólhvitr* in the bed is lacking something, which is also in my eyes confirmed by what is said afterwards, in the much discussed second part of the stanza:

...
alt ero óskǫp
nema einir viti
slíkan lǫst saman

(98/4-6). If such a 'defect', or maybe 'desire', is not 'belonging to' or affecting 'both together' (*einir saman*), everything will be 'disorder' (*óskǫp*). Grammatically *einir saman* must be understood as a reference to two masculines, also confirms that this can be understood as a statement of the consequences of the man's split mind. Although this is not analogous to Eve tempting Adam with the apple, we can see that the place where the man finds the woman, the bed, together with the epithet *sólhvitr*, and her being asleep, are elements that are pointing to a kind of slumbering bodily condition, connected with sensuality and unconsciousness.

Before I turn to the next story, I would like to comment briefly on two elements that suggest the further development of this relation. Stanza 100 tells of *vígdrótt ǫll um vakin* which is contrasted by *saldrótt um sofin* in the next stanza (101/3). The ‘fighting troop all awake’ has become a ‘sleeping household’, or, the struggle has come to an end. And finally the poem also tells us that the ‘good woman’ is replaced by a ‘bitch’. I think this bitch tied to the bed should be understood metaphorically, figuring a bit of the same state as the ‘sleeping household’. In other words: The sunbright woman he first found was wakened and stirred to fight by the man who came to her bed and then just left her. This the waking *vígdrótt* tells us. In this manner she was a ‘good woman’. *Saldrótt um sofin* points to a condition of sleep, which leaves a free way to her bed. Tied to the bed, or should we say enslaved by desire or lust, she becomes a ‘bitch’. *Ek* telling this story concludes by stating that he got nothing from this woman, nothing but humiliation (102). After referring this experience, the poem states the importance of language in a proverbial stanza (103), then in the next is telling that ‘I’ was searching the old giant *Suttungr*, ‘*Suð-þungr*’ (104). This we could call a prosopopeia, figuring the experience of heavy sorrow. In these ‘halls of heavy sorrow’ ‘I’ gained little by being silent. So, to his own advantage he spoke ‘many words’, or: by means of the language he managed to get out from these ‘halls’, or condition of sorrow.

Then we come to *Gunnlǫð* (105) and the next story, and I will look a bit closer at the stanzas 105-107. As the name says *Gunnlǫð* is an ‘invitation to battle or struggle’ (by the combination of the elements *gunnr* (*guðr*), ‘battle’ and *lǫð*, ‘invitation’). This woman gave *Óðinn* a drink of the ‘precious mead’ on a ‘golden chair’, which seems to be something quite different from what he gained from the bitch in the bed. *Ek*, however, gave in return *ill iðgjöld*. The woman had to pay for her gift with her *heila hugar* and *svára sefa*, with her ‘whole mind and heavy heart’.

The next stanza tells about *rata munnr*, which is thought to be the ‘auger’ Snorri is referring to, boring a hole through a stone wall in *Suttung*’s dwelling. According to the poem, however, this seems rather to be something boring inside the ‘I’. The poem says:

Rata munn
létomk rúms um fá
ok um grjót gnaga,
...

(106/1-3). *Létomk* must be the same as *lét ek mér*, (also Gering), and then this *rata munnr* should be something that is ‘let to have room in me’. As we see, there is no stony wall either. The stone (*grjót*) also seems to be inside the *ek* or ‘I’, expressing a hardness which is now bored by means of this *rata munnr*. *Rata* means to ‘roam’ or ‘rove’, a semantic element often repeated in the corpus. If you are roaming you may also fall, and that is (according to De Vries) another possible meaning of the verb. So this ‘auger’ can be a figurative

expression of the effect on *ek* of his roaming or falling: something gnawing like a mouth through his hardness. And this ‘stony’ condition at the beginning, a condition which is changed through an overthrowing movement, or a ‘fall’, could have its analogue in the sun’s movement through the different *salir* in *Vsp.*, which I have already mentioned.

What is gained, is stated in the next stanza as *Óðrerir*. How this comes about is discussed among scholars. *Vel keyptz litar/hefi ek vel notit/fás er fróðdom vant*,...is the first statement of the poem (107/1-3). Gering (following Richert) thinks *litar*, should be understood as ‘a poetic circumlocution for *Gunnlǫð*, as an expression of ‘beauty’. Then the first line should mean: ‘der glücklich erworbenen Schönheit’, as an expression of how the mead was gained by *Óðinn*’s seduction of *Gunnlǫð* (Gering 1927: 128). I think this needs some more interpretation, and I think *two* semantic elements are of special interest in these lines: *litar* and *vel*. *Litar*, a form of *litr*, ‘colour’, ‘hue’ (also Evans 1986: 121), must be a reference to the outward appearance or what we could call the sensual and living aspect of a human being. I think we have the same word in the third element given to Ask and Embla in *Vsp.* (...), *lá ok lito góða* (18/8). So what is ‘bought’ and ‘enjoyed’ or ‘used with advantage’ is the ‘sensuality’. But in what way? *Vel* in *vel keyptz* can also be understood in different ways, as Gering says, or as *vél* with a long vowel. Then the expression could mean ‘bought by fraud’ rather than ‘glücklich erworben’ (La Farge and Tucker 1992). And is not that just what is said in stanza 105: *Ill iðgjöld* was what he gave her for the precious mead. To make it even more complex: *Vél* with a long vowel, has a double meaning. It also means ‘skill’ or ‘work of art’. And by this double meaning *vél* points to the same connection between the acquisition of the gift of poetry and ‘fraud’, as does also the whole stanza. *Vel keyptz.../vel notit* thus is a figure that is emphatically stressing this special and quite interesting double aspect of *vél*.

The name of the mead adds further information: According to De Vries, *Óðrerir* means ‘der den Geist zur Extase erregt’ (De Vries 1962). It is what ‘sætter sjælen i bevægelse’, ‘moves the soul’ says *Lexicon Poeticum*. In my opinion, translating *óðr* as ‘Geist’ or ‘soul’, implies an interpretation. According to *Vsp.* *óðr* is the element given to Ask and Embla by *Hæmir* (18), while *qnd* is given by *Óðinn*. So maybe we should just let it mean ‘rage’, or ‘excitement’? What the poem tells us then is possibly that *óðr*, the ‘rage’ has been moved by *litr*, and so by *vél* as a third component referring to both ‘fraud’ and ‘art’ *Óðrerir* is brought up to *alda véð jarðar*, ‘men’s (holy) homes on earth’. According to the last statement this acquisition of *Óðrerir* by *vél* implies that something is brought up from the underground and has become a kind of joint ownership of men.

Is this the same story that Snorri tells us? According to the poem *Gunnlǫð* is not *Suttungs* daughter, *rata munnr* is no auger, *grjót* is not a stony wall. Or could it be? If we look at the elements in Snorri’s myth as a translation from the

poetic language to the language of myth, we will see that maybe it is in a way the same story. But before I explain how I think this could be so, I must say something about how I think this last story is related to the foregoing story of *Billings mey*. I think we here have to do with a kind of self-reflexive repetition. As von See has pointed out, the story of *Billings mey* is framed as the experience of the 'I' by the lines *þat ek þá reynda...*, *þá ek þat reynda* (96, 102) (von See 1972: 56). This experience is referred to in both stanzas as an experience of getting nothing, or of a loss. And this naturally leads the 'I' into the halls of *Suttungr*, 'the heavy sorrow'. By means of language, by 'many words' as is said in stanza 104, the 'I' gets out from these halls. What is told afterwards, in the new story, is perhaps not the story of another woman, but the story of how the experience is transformed into poetry. The story of *Billings mey* is thus the experience which by the story of *Gunnlǫð* is given back or reshaped as poetry. (As a transformation of an experience of loss this is also connected to a long and well known tradition of how melancholy is regarded as a source of poetry). And this transformation from experience to poetry the 'new' story both tells or refers to, and shows or symbolizes. As I have already mentioned it tells how 'the colours' bought by 'fraud' or *vel*, brings about poetry, and it tells how *Gunnlǫð* is paying for this with her wounded heart. Furthermore, this leap from experience to poetry is shown or symbolized by several elements, for instance the bed from the story of experience is turned into a golden chair, the struggle of the 'good woman' into this new woman called *Gunnlǫð*, and the experience of having 'nothing but humiliation' has become a *drykk ins dýra mjaðar*, a 'drink of the precious mead'. In this way the poem also confirms its character as a work of art that by the poetic language is both referring to and symbolizing what it is about.

By a new repetition this transformation is also further developed in stanza 110. By the contribution of *Óðinn* an element from the 'high' sphere is added. When this is combined with what is gained from 'down' by the upbringing of *Óðrerir*, the mead, now named *sumbl*, is gained: *Suttung svikinn! hann lét sumbli frá! ok grætta Gunnlǫðo* (110/4-6). But I have to stop here.

Now we can return to Snorri and ask: Is not this interpretation also Snorri's interpretation when he calls *Gunnlǫð Suttung's* daughter? In the concentrated narrative of the myth this is an image of how she is a product of *Suttungr*, or of the 'heavy sorrow'. In the same way I think we can see how the other elements in Snorri's narrative can be understood as translations of the poetic language into myth. For instance *rata munnr*, as an auger boring a hole for the snake, is the mythological way of telling about the erotic 'meeting' -- or should we say 'sin'? And the stone wall which blocks the way into *Suttung's* dwelling is the myth's concentrated image of how hard it is to get through to the 'place' of sorrow. 'The same but different' must be the right characteristic when we compare these two texts. The myth has no *ek* or 'I'. The poem's reference to the inner state of an 'I' is here transformed to an outer mythological world of

animate beings.

Finally a third example, this time from the last of the mythological poems in the manuscript, *Alvíssmál*, which is a verbal duel between *Alvíss* and *þórr*. Again the stone forms a part of the beginning. Usually it is also understood to constitute a central element of the end of the poem, which then takes us from stone to stone, so to speak. I will try with a few comments to question this interpretation. *Alvíss* is, as he introduces himself in the beginning of the poem, a dwarf living under the earth and under a stone: *á ek undir steini stað*, he says (3/3), which to me sounds like a distressful condition of life. This seems to be confirmed by *þórr* when he comments upon his looking pale as death and thus not *til brúðar borinn* not ‘born to have a bride’(2/6). As his name suggests, *Alvíss* has enough knowledge, but now he also, according to his demand in the first stanza, wants to bring a bride back home with him. After an interesting discussion, which I will not comment on here, the duellers come to an agreement. If *Alvíss* can tell *þórr* the name of different phenomena in all worlds, he will not be ‘denied’ his bride. These questions and answers constitute the mainpart of the poem. I will proceed straight to the last stanza. *Alvíss* has answered the final question and *þórr*, after stating that he never saw *fleira forna stafí*, more ‘staves’, ‘words’ or ‘ancient lore’ in one bosom, tells *Alvíss* that he is betrayed: *...uppi ertu, dvergr, um dagaðr! nú skínn sól í sali!*, are the last words of the poem (35/6-7). The conclusion is usually understood as an expression of how the dwarf, by being kept up till dawn, has been betrayed and will be turned into stone. This interpretation is based on what happens to such figures in the fairy tales or in the myths. But once again, this is a poem. What the poem says is: *...uppi ertu, dvergr, um dagaðr!*, ‘you are up in the day, dwarf’. And why should this dwarf living under the stone in the beginning, just become a stone in the end? That the meaning of the poem is more complex is, furthermore, suggested in a quite sophisticated manner by the last line: *...nú skínn sól í sali!* Does not this line also remind us of the beginning of the first poem, *Vsp.*? There it was stated that the sun throws its right arm around the edge of heaven, still not knowing its *salr*. Does not this suggest that the edge of heaven, represented by *Gimlé*, is not the sun’s ultimate stop – a reading which is also suggested by the epithet *sólo fegra*, ‘more beautiful than the sun’? Could it not be that the sun (the poetic light, so to speak) is stretching its arms over the entire poetic corpus, finding finally its *salr* by bringing the dwarf up from the underground, in the final stanza of the last mythological poem of the Codex Regius? In that way, the rounded or circular structure of work of art is reopened at the moment of its closure by the suggestion of a new beginning.

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