

Riding the Tree

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The various journeys of the gods – often towards Jötunheim or Útgardr, and occasionally also to Hel – form the basis for many myths. At first glance, these travels appear to follow the map of a kind of mythical landscape, resembling a physical landscape, in which the traveller can proceed from one point to the next, on foot or riding on an animal. I should like to show that this interpretation of travelling is only one of many levels of understanding, which I should like to refer to as ‘levels of literary understanding’. On the literary level of understanding, we encounter the myth as an account of the ‘adventures’ of the gods, giants and other figures. On this level, each figure appears as an individual. The scene in which a myth is set is vividly anthropomorphic. This level of understanding is most strongly characterised in the chronological, systematic narration of *Snorra-Edda*. Besides this level of understanding, others may be defined and lead us to different interpretations of travelling and sometimes also of the travellers as well as the means by which they travel. In this paper, I should like to focus on one of those other levels, which I should like to refer to as the ‘inter- and para-mundane level of understanding’. On the inter- and para-mundane level of understanding, the physical landscape of the journey is supplanted by a parapsychical landscape, the distinctions between the traveller and other figures merge, and the means by which the journeyer travels is no longer an ordinary animal.

The ‘love story’ of Freyr and Gerðr in *Skírnismál* shall be picked out as one example of this. At first glance, *Skírnismál* provides a tale about three main characters: Freyr, Skírnir and Gerðr. However, it is striking that the borders between these three characters are blurred throughout the entire lay. In stanza 10, Skírnir, before embarking upon his ride to Jötunheim, speaks of *báðir vit* ‘we two’ (*báðir vit komom, / eða ocr báða tecr / sá inn ámátki iotunn* (Neckel, 1983, 71) ‘we two arrive at the destination, / or captures the two of us / this omnipotent giant’). The question arises, who these two are, since the only two figures who, on the literary level, are on their way to Jötunheim are Skírnir and the horse. It may be doubted, however, that these are the unit of two meant here, for Skírnir and the horse are not conceived as a unit anywhere else in the song, very much so, however, Skírnir and Freyr, who according to stanza 5 *í árdaga* (Neckel, 1983, 70) ‘in primeval times’ were together. In addition, *báðir vit* ‘we two’ in stanza 10 is reflected in Gerðr’s *vit bæði* in stanza 39. Who Gerðr is referring to here is a matter of some doubt. *Vit bæði* can mean Gerðr and Skírnir or Gerðr and Freyr. The distinction between ‘servant’ and ‘master’ is blurred, and not only at this point. Skírnir and Freyr appear to be on such familiar terms that Skírnir, in stanza 26, speaks of his will (*at minom munom* (Neckel, 1983, 74)) to tame Gerðr. In stanza 35 he likewise execrates her according to his own will (*at minom munom* (Neckel, 1983, 76)). The distinctions between Skírnir and Freyr, who in stanza 43 of *Grímnismál* is also described with the adjective *skírr*, appear within *Skírnismál* not only blurred but rather beg the question as to whether Skírnir has anything at all to do with an autonomous figure.

Let us now turn to Skírnir's preparations for the journey and the journey itself. In stanza 8, Skírnir calls for a horse to carry him through the 'wavering fire' (*Mar gefðu mér þá, / þann er mic um myrquan beri, / visan vafrloga* (Neckel, 1983, 71) 'Give me a horse, / that carries me through the dark, / everywhere known wavering fire.'). For the ride through the *vafrlogi*, it is obvious that a very special horse is needed. Parallel examples to this are Sigurðr's horse (*Skáldskaparmál* 48) and Óðinn's horse Sleipnir, with which not only Óðinn (*Baldrs draumar* 2), but also Hermóðr is able to jump over the boundary fence to Hel (*Gylfaginning* 49). Thus the question arises as to what kind of world that very Jötunheim represents in *Skírnismál* when Skírnir needs such a horse in order to get there. In the lay, there are several references to his ride through the fire. In stanza 8, it is the universally known *vafrlogi*. It can be gleaned from stanzas 17 and 18 that Skírnir comes to Jötunheim *eikinn fúr yfir* (Neckel, 1983, 73). *Eikinn* is of complex meaning. The etymology of the word is controversial. In Modern Icelandic *eikinn* is used in reference to fierce bulls, in Nynorsk, *eikjen* means 'belligerent' (Von See, 1997, 96). Most interpreters understand *eikinn* as 'violent, raging, furious, mad'. Though there might also be some connection with *eik* 'Oak' (Von See, 1997: 96). So this *eikinn fúr yfir* might mean that Skírnir rides to Jötunheim through a very fierce fire (maybe an oak wood fire). Having arrived there, he also has to get past the hounds of Gymir (stanza 11). One parallel is the hounds that, according to *Baldrs draumar* (2 f.), Óðinn has to pass on his way to Niflhel. And later, just as in *Skírnismál* (14), also in *Baldrs draumar* (3) the earth shakes. The underlying sense of impending threat is further reinforced by the question of the shepherd (stanza 12: *ertu feigr, eða ertu framgenginn* (Neckel, 1983, 72)), whether Skírnir is fey or risen from the dead. Skírnir answers:

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| <p>13. <i>Kostir ro betri,
heldr enn at klæcva sé,
hveim er fúss er fara;
eino dægri
mér var aldr um scapaðr
oc alt líf um lagið.
(Neckel, 1983, 72)</i></p> | <p>There are better possibilities,
than lamenting,
for him that is ready to do;
for (half) a day (exactly)
my term of life was destined
and the whole life determined.</p> |
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The Jötunheim that Skírnir enters at this point seems to be a place on the threshold of death. At this threshold he enters Gymir's *garðar* and struggles for Gerðr. The term *garðar* and the name *Gerðr* underline the threshold character of this transitional world¹. The distinction between Freyr and his 'servant' Skírnir becomes blurred in this

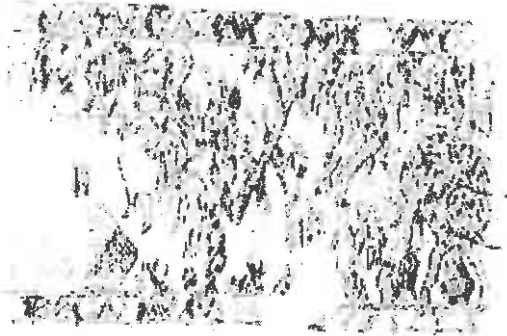
¹ The significance of such a threshold is illustrated, by the way, in a ritual involving a young girl who has been condemned to death, which is described by Ibn Fashlan as follows: *...so führte man das Mädchen zu einem Dünge hin, das sie gemacht hatten, und das dem vorspringenden Gesims einer Thür glich. Sie setzte ihre Füße auf die flachen Hände der Männer, sah auf dieses Gesims hinab und sprach... 'Sieh! hier seh' ich meinen Vater und meine Mutter', das zweite Mal: 'Sieh! jetzt seh' ich alle meine verstorbenen Anverwandten (zusammen) sitzen'; das dritte Mal aber: 'Sieh! dort ist mein Herr, er sitzt im Paradiese. Das Paradies ist so schön, so grün. Bei ihm sind (seine) Männer und Knaben. Er ruft mich; so bringt mich denn zu ihm.'* (Fraehn, 1976, 15 & 17). This ritual has a parallel in the 13th stanza

process. One cannot escape the impression that Skírnir merely represents another aspect of Freyr, who half a night long (42: *hálf hýnótt*) is sent out into the transitional world of Jötunheim in order to establish a lasting contact with that transitional world.

The special horse needed for this journey is reminiscent of Sleipnir; the circumstances of the journey into the transitional world to the threshold of death as well as the shaking of the earth recall Óðinn's journey to Hel. Yet Óðinn does not travel to the other world only on Sleipnir. Another of his journeys, according to *Hávamál* (138), begins with him clinging to a wind-blown bough. Of the tree from which he is hanging, it is said that no-one knows from which roots it springs. There are similar reports about the tree Mímameiðr in *Fjǫluspá* (20), about which people do not know from which root it grows. Mímameiðr could correspond to Yggdrasil. According to *Vǫluspá* (19), the well of Urðarbrunnr is located under Yggdrasil; *Gylfaginning* (15) adds Mímisbrunnr and Hvergelmir. Though *Míma-* in *Mímameiðr* cannot be derived from *Mímir* – only from *Mími* – nevertheless there are strong grounds for association with Mímir. Yggdrasil is generally interpreted as 'Yggs drasil', i.e. the horse of Yggr (= Óðinn) (Simek, 1984, 467). It is conspicuous, however, that the compound *Yggdrasil* does not use the genitive form of *Yggr*, i.e. *Yggs*. It is therefore doubtful whether *Ygg-* in *Yggdrasil* can be derived from *Yggr* as a term for Óðinn. Thus, *Ygg-* could simply mean 'terrible' and could be a term for a 'tree of terror / hanging tree' or gallows (Dettler, 1897). At this point reference shall be made to the kennings *gálga valdr* 'lord of the gallows' (Helgi traust) and *gálga farmr* 'load of the gallows' (Eyvindr Finnsson skáldaspillir) for Óðinn – and also to the numerous kennings which refer to the act of hanging, such as *Hangi* 'the hanging one' (Tindr Hallkelsson, *drápa* on Hákon jarl 1), *Hangaguð* (Hávarðr halti, *Lausavísur* 14) and *Hangatýr* (Víga-Glúmr, *Lausavísur* 10; Einarr Gilsson, *Selkolluvísur* 7). Thus, the association with Óðinn/Yggr is so obvious that, in my view, it cannot be excluded from the meaning. An understanding of Yggdrasil as Óðinn's horse seems to be implied. And yet the association with 'gallows' resonates, menacing. At this point reference may also be made to the kenning *hábrjóstr hǫrva Sleipnir* (Finnur Jónsson, 1929, 6) for the gallows (*Ynglingatal* 22). If both Sleipnir and Yggdrasil are understood as horses of Óðinn, it may be safely assumed that the conceptions of both are comparable. Yggdrasil appears as a tree, connecting various worlds. The particular association of Yggdrasil with the world of the dead is reinforced by the term *fyr nágrindr neðan* (Neckel, 1983, 76, 109) 'under the corpse's cage' (*Skírnismál* 35 as well as *Lokasenna* 63) as the position of the roots of Yggdrasil (Hel's position in *Lokasenna*). Yggdrasil appears here as the connecting link between the world of the living and the world of the dead. In order to cross this boundary, it is necessary to have – just as in *Skírnismál* – a particular means of transport – there a particular kind of horse. Skírnir's journey, as already mentioned, recalls the rides of Óðinn and Hermóðr to Hel (on Sleipnir). Whether Yggdrasil is a tree (as in *Vǫluspá* 19) or a horse attached to a tree (as in *Vǫluspá* 47 and *Grímnismál* 35 and 44) is perhaps not so important as the fact that both – the tree as well as the horse – appear to be the means necessary for depicting the journey between the world of the living and the world of

in *Vǫlsa þáttr*. Also Anders Andrén's (1993, 33-56) research on gateways as a symbol of the entrance to other worlds, in particular, those of the dead, must not go without mention at this point.

the dead. That the transition between tree and horse may be seen as fluid here may also be evidenced in a textile fragment discovered among the finds from the Oseberg ship burial. The sacrificial ritual depicted there shows persons hanging from trees, the strongest branches of which terminate in heads which could be construed as the heads of horses.



Sketch: textile fragment from the Oseberg find (Ingstad, 1992, 242)

Thus Yggdrasill appears as a connecting link between the worlds, whereby the crossing of the boundary into another world is just as fraught with dangers as it is with opportunities. The journey on a tree – depicted by Óðinn's self-sacrifice – leads to the acquisition of wisdom, to the knowledge of secrets. One example of the acquisition of wisdom through contact with the world of the dead is offered by Óðinn's comment in *Hárbarðsljóð* (44) that he has learned from the old people in the forests:

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| 44. | <i>Nam ec at mǫnnum
þeim inom aldrænom,
er búa í heimis scógom.</i> | I learned from the people,
from the old ones,
who abide in the forests of the homeland. |
| 45. | <i>Þó gefr þú gott nafn dýsiom,
er þú kallar þat heimis scóga.</i>
(Neckel, 1983, 85) | So you give the mounds of stone (over the
dead) a good name,
by naming them forests of the homeland. |

The forest – just as Yggdrasill – appears as a connecting link to other worlds outside and beyond the world of the living. At this point reference may be made to the technical term *búa í skógum* 'to be banished'. The forest (*skógr*) is not to be perceived as part of the world of the living but rather as being outside of it, opening the gateways into the world of the dead. The other world, the world of the dead, appears to begin at the threshold to the forest. In *Hyndluljóð* (48) Hyndla, who could be seen as a *vǫlva*,² is called forest dweller:

² Hyndla is not explicitly called *vǫlva* here. The question arises as to what we should understand here by a *vǫlva*. The term *vǫlva* in Old Norse literature is not clearly distinguished from terms like *spákona* or *seiðkona*. The concepts tend to overlap. It appears hardly possible

48. *Ec slæ eldi
of íviðio,
svá at þú eigi kemz
á burt heðan.*
(Neckel, 1983, 295f.)
- I (will) cast fire
over the forest dweller,³
lest she go
from here.

Her vicinity to the world of the dead is also revealed in stanza 46:

46. *Snúðu braut heðan!
sofa lystir mic,
fær þú fátt af mér
fríða kosta...*
(Neckel, 1983, 295f.)
- Away with you from here!
I long to sleep,
little will you get from me
of things to delight you...

Likewise, the *vǫlva* of *Vǫluspá* already appears to belong to the other world. Óðinn called her to learn about the fate of the gods. But the end of the questioning is determined by the *vǫlva* herself: *nú mun hon sæcqvaz* (Neckel, 1983, 15) 'now she will sink'. Also the sexual component, which becomes evident in *Sktrnismál* in connection with the other world, may be seen reflected in the *vǫlur*. *Vǫlva* may be derived from *vǫlur* 'staff' and means the staff bearer. *Skáldskaparmál* (18) relates that Þórr borrows from the giantess Gríðr the staff *Gríðavǫlur* 'Gríðr's staff', with the help of which he crosses a river. It is also possible to understand *gandr* as a staff, which is attributed with phallic significance. Thus, *gǫndull* in *Bósa saga* (11) is used in the sense of 'penis'. Accordingly, the term *gandreid* – by which we have another intersection of means of travel, *seiðr* and the other world – can also be read with a sexual undertone.⁴ The most extensive discourse on the connection between *vǫlur* and *seiðr*, sexuality and *gandir* has been conducted by Neil Price (2002), to whose work I may only make reference in the framework of this presentation.

It is also notable in this context that this meaning variant of *gandr* is not reflected in translations of *Jǫrmungandr* and *Vánargandr*. On the contrary, here *gandr* is frequently translated as 'monster', which actually forestalls interpretation. *Vánargandr* is found only in *Skáldskaparmál* (23), in which *Vánargandr* is used as a synonym for Fenrir:

Hvernig skal kenna Loka? Svá, at kalla hann ... fǫður Vánargands, þat er Fenrisúlfr, ok Jǫrmungands, þat er Miðgarðsormr... (Guðni Jónsson, 1954, III, 126f.)

to find a clear definition which distinguishes this term from others. See also e.g. Ólína Þorvarðardóttir (2000, 231).

³ Von See (2000, 828) shows that *viðja* is referred to in the *Fulur* as a troll woman (= giantess). Von See more freely translates *viðja* as 'witch'. Compare also this discussion on the use of the dative form *íviðju*.

⁴ Jenny Jochens (1996, 260) interprets *vitti hon ganda* in *Vǫluspá* (22) following Hugo Pipping as 'influencing the penis by magic'.

‘How shall Loki be called? So, that he may be called... father of Vánargandr, that is the Fenris wolf, and of Jǫrmungandr, that is the Midgard serpent...’).

Confirmation of the meaning ‘monster’ cannot be inferred from this passage, in which *Vánargandr* is used parallel to *Jǫrmungandr*.

Ursula Dronke (1997: 12ff.) translates *gandr* in *Vǫluspá* as ‘spirit’. With this, she follows the argument already put forward by Cleasby/Vigfússon (1874: 188) and Johan Fritzner (1877, 166-170) based on a well-known passage from the *Historia Norvegiae*.⁵ Maybe such a *gandr* is also the reason for the switch between the first and third person singular on the part of the *vǫlva* when referring to herself in the *Vǫluspá* (McKinnell, 2001, 394-417). Apart from the interpretation as two seers, one could also assume that there is a third figure in the form of a helpful spirit,⁶ comparable to the usage of *gandr* in *Fósthvæðra saga* (9):

Víða hefi ek gǫndum rennt í nótt, ok em ek nú vis orðin þeira hluta, er ek vissa ekki áðr. (Björn Karel Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, 1943, 234)

‘Far did I run with *gandir* into the night. Now I know things I knew not before.’

Cleasby/Vigfússon (1874: 188), too, had already point to the possibility of interpreting *gandr* in *gandreid* as a spirit. Moreover, attention is drawn to the meaning of ‘wolf’. Also wolf kenningar like *leiknar hestr* (Cleasby/Vigfússon, 1874, 382) and *kveldriðu stóð* (Cleasby/Vigfússon, 1874, 362) refer to the ride on the wolf into the other world. Finally the name *Viðólfur* ‘Forest Wolf’ – according to *Hyndluljóð* (33) an ancestor of the *vǫlur* – provides a further overlapping of tree/copse/forest and horse/wolf/*gandr*.

Accordingly, the links to the other world may be imagined in quite different forms, as *gandr*-spirit, wolf, horse or even a tree or part of one in the form of a staff, etc. Here it is not so much the form of the *gandr* which is decisive, but rather its function as a helping aid on the journey into other worlds.⁷ In this reading also the interpretation of Cleasby/Vigfússon (1874: 188) of the *gandr* as *an object used by*

⁵ *Historia Norvegiae*, 85f., cited and translated according to Neil S. Price (2002, 224): *Sunt namque quidam ex ipsis, qui quasi prophetae a stolido vulgo venerantur, quoniam per immundum spiritum, quem gandum vocitant, multis multa praesagia ut eveniunt quandoque percunctati praedicerent.* ‘There are some of these [Sámi sorcerers] who are revered as if they were prophets by the ignorant commoners, because by means of a foul spirit, which they call a *gandus*, when asked they will predict for many people many future events, and when they will come to pass.’

⁶ Neil S. Price (2002: 225), following on from Clive Tolley (1995, 57-75), develops the theory that *gandir* could frequently be helping spirits in the form of animals. Clive Tolley subdivides *gandir* into helping spirits in the form of wolves and those in the form of serpents.

⁷ Accordingly, it is possible to advance the theory that both Fenrir and the Midgard serpent can be understood as *gandir*, in the sense of entities that are able to establish (magic) connections between the various worlds. Read in this way, *jǫrmungandr* appears not as a ‘huge monster’, but rather as a *gandr*, whose positioning in the ocean leads to the stabilisation of the world, or whose disturbance to its destabilisation, respectively. According to the Christian perception, this interpretation would, of course be a *sjónhverfing*, a contradiction of the fact that the Midgard serpent in no way stabilises the world but rather that, the moment it is disturbed, it destabilises the divine order of the world. This interpretation would involve a degradation of this *gandr*, which would thus appear as a demon and a monster.

sorcerers makes sense – an interpretation which could be supported by the appellation *spá gandr* ‘*gandr* of prophecy’ in *Völuspá* (29).

The journeys into the other world, or on the threshold of the other world, not only pose a mortal risk for the traveller but also seem to bring with them knowledge and therefore power. Yet, in order to obtain this knowledge, it is necessary to undertake a tortuous ride on the threshold of death, a ride which, as briefly shown by several examples, also comprises a sexual component. Thus, it is not surprising that *Skirnismál* also evidences sexual components. However, this perspective does not constitute proof for the interpretation of *Skirnismál* as a ‘love story’, but rather appears as one component of a tale concerning journeys to the other world. Here, perhaps, a distinction can be made between *Skirnismál* and *Hávamál*, although there are also overlapping references in regard to the painful character of such connections with the other world (*Hávamál* 139: *nam ec upp rúnar, / æpandi nam...* (Neckel, 1983: 40) ‘I learned runes, / learned (them) screaming...’). Also the nine nights, during which according to *Hávamál* (138), Óðinn was hanging from the branch, are reflected in the nine nights (*nætr niu*) which lie in store for Freyr before he may join his ‘dearest one’ in the *lundr lognfara*, the calm and tranquil grove (*Skirnismál* 41). It should also be mentioned in this context that *Skirnismál* provides us with no clues as to where Freyr spends these nine nights. It is possible that it takes Freyr nine nights before he reaches the grove of Barri, though it is also possible that he must endure nine nights of torture before he is able to win Gerðr for himself from Gymirs *garðar*.

Thus, on the para-mundane level of understanding as argued here, *Skirnismál* does not present a love story but the struggle of the god Freyr for access to the threshold between life and death, to the threshold to the other world. Of course this may not be understood as the ‘actual’ interpretation of *Skirnismál*. It is merely one of several possible access routes – one of many possible levels of understanding upon which we may approach this lay. I hope that I have succeeded, by means of the perforce far too brief argumentations put forward here, in offering at least some food for thought for further possible interpretations of the journey of the gods and their means of transport, and that I have shown that horse, tree, *gandr* and perhaps even the wolf and the serpent, which could not be dealt with in this presentation, can be perceived not only as objects but may also be read as symbols of para-mundane journeys.

Moreover, from this point of view, one could also pose the question to what extent Baldr’s death, or more precisely his immolation and mission, could perhaps be interpreted as a journey, which would lead to a discussion of the role of Loki and to a discussion of *Hauströng*. In my far too ambitious abstract, I promised to discuss all of this, but then, this alone would probably have burst the bounds of the pages allotted for the preprints, which even without Baldr appear to me to be hopelessly overfull. Therefore, for this discussion, I should just like to refer to two of my articles (Bonnetain, 2000 and Bonnetain (at press)) as well as to my soon-to-be-published doctoral thesis (Bonnetain (at press)) and, in addition, I shall be pleased to make myself available for possible subsequent discussions on this subject.

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