Drinking from Odin’s Pledge: 
On an Encounter with the Fantastic in Völuspá 28–29

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A secess or völva performs an útseta, a ritual of sitting outdoors, during which she has an encounter with the fantastic: A god, Odin, comes to her. She tells him that she knows where he put his eye — in that famous Well of Mímir — and every morning, Mímir drinks mead from the pledge of Odin. Then Odin chooses rings and necklace for her, and the völva starts to prophecy about Ragnarök.

Why does the völva tell Odin about his eye and pledge in particular? And why does this particular information make him choose rings for her, leading to her prophecy? Scholars have suggested many answers to these questions, and I am going to offer yet another idea. At my presentation at the Saga Conference in Durham, I shall also take a look at the overarching implications for the mythic poem in which we find this encounter between the völva and Odin.

The encounter is described in Völuspá 28–29, and the pledge of Odin is also mentioned in the preceding stanza, Völuspá 27. Snorri’s Edda does not report on the encounter, but mentions the myth to which the völva is alluding — the myth within the myth. According to Gylfaginning ch. 15, the Well of Mímir contains wisdom and intelligence, and Mímir drinks of his well from the Gjallarhorn. Odin came to have a drink from the well, but had to pledge his eye in order to have one. Snorri cites the last half of Völuspá 28 as his source. So Snorri identifies Odin’s pledge with Odin’s eye, but does not have Mímir drinking from it, while the poem has Mímir drinking from Odin’s pledge, but does not identify it with Odin’s eye (or anything else). What exactly does the völva refer to when she mentions Odin’s pledge?

Before an attempt at answers, here are the texts in question with my literal translation, including a few of the alternatives that may be of importance:

Völuspá
27

Veit hon heimdallar
hlið um fólgít
undir heiðvönum
helgom baðmi
á sér hon ausaz
aurgóm forsi
af veði valfðars
vitð ér enn eða hvat.

She knows Heimdall’s
hearing (alt.: horn) is placed
beneath clear-wonted
holy tree.
She sees stream is drawn (alt.: On her she is showered)
in druggy cascade
from Valfather’s pledge.
Do you know yet, or what?

28, 1–6

Ein sat hon úti
þá er inn aldni kom
ygghungr ðása
ok i augo leit
hvers fregnið mik
lvi freistið mín

Alone she sat outdoors
when the old one came,
awe-striker of gods,
and into eyes peered.
What do you (pl.) ask of me?
Why do you (pl.) test me?
28, 7–14
allt veit ek óðinn
hvar þú auga falt
i inom mara
mímis brunní
drekkur mígð mímir
morgon hverian
af véði valfardís
vitóð ér enn eda hvað.

All (alt.: Quite) I know, Odin,
where you placed eye:
in that famous
Well of Mímir.
Mímir drinks mead
every morning
from Valfather’s pledge.
Do you know yet, or what?

29
Valdó henni herfjór
hringa ok men
fé spiðil spáklig
ok spá ganda
sá hon vítt ok um vítt
of verpló hvað.
Warfather chose for her
rings and necklace,
wealth of wise spells
and prophecy-spirits.
She saw far and afar
over every world.

Gylfaginning, chapter 15:
En undir þerí rót er til hrímbursa horfir, þar er Mímis brunní, er spekð
ok manvís er í fólgi, ok þeitir saga Mímir er á brunní. Hann er fullr af
visindum fyrir því at hann drekkur úr brunninum af horninu Gjallarhorni.
Þar kom Alfóðr ok beiddið énts drykkjar af brunninum, en hann fekk eigi
fyrr en hann lagði auga sitt at véði. Svá segir i Vþulsþa: [st. 28, 7–14].
And under the root [of the Ash of Yggdrasíll] that reaches toward the
frost-giants, there lies Mímir’s well, which has wisdom and intelligence
placed in it, and he is called Mímir who owns the well. He is full of
insight because he drinks of the well from the horn Gjallarhorn. Allfather
came there and asked for a single drink from the well, but he did not get
one until he deposited his eye as a pledge. Thus it says in Vþulsþa: [here
follows st. 28, 7–14, see above]

(The Old Norse texts above are from Neckel 1927 – sans the interpretative punctuation
– and Faulkes 1982/88.)

Odín’s Pledge

Most mythologists want to have their cake and eat it too. We accept the poem’s
information about Mímir drinking from Odín’s pledge, and we accept Snorri’s
identification of Odín’s pledge with his eye. But how can Mímir drink mead from an
eye?

According to Vþulsþa, Mímir drinks from Odín’s pledge, and some druggy
liquid is drawn or showered from it. These descriptions apparently do point toward
some sort of container of a liquid. Mímir’s well is such a container, but Odín did not
pledge a well, and a pledge can hardly denote its depository as suggested by van
Hamel (1925: 299). The Gjallarhorn mentioned in Gylfaginning is another container
candidate. It is associated with Heimdall (Vþulsþa 46) and may be identical with
Heimdallr hliðr (Vþulsþa 27). The placing of the hliðr is clearly a parallel to Odín’s
placing of his eye and thus could be seen as another pledging (Nordal 1927: 64). It does explain why Snorri would bring up the Gjalarrhom, but unless we identify Odin with Heimdall (which may make a lot of sense — but that is for another paper), it does not make the horn a pledge of Odin.

Heimdallar hildd is usually understood as Heimdall’s hearing. The hearing and the eye are also parallels, both concerned with senses of perception or observation. Though the two interpretations of hildd — hearing and horn — are normally seen as contradictory (Nordal 1927: 64), they can be argued to be two expressions of the same idea, a conscious poetic use of the meanings of hildd (Dronke 1997: 49). A similar double meaning for auga has been suggested — a well may be called an eye (Fleck 1971: 400) — but this is not a use attested in Old Norse (Lassen 2003: 98). Still, an eye actually can be perceived, at least poetically, as a container of a liquid — namely tears. Is Odin’s pledged eye crying over the approaching Doom of Ragnarok in a droppy cascade of mead that is drunk by Mimir, the scornful giant? However attractive this thought may seem from a poetical point of view, we would have to invent a new myth to support it.

In order to get away from the idea of the eye as a container, Sigurður Nordal pointed out that Old Norse dretka af does have other possible translations than ‘drinking from’. It could mean ‘drinking the liquid made from […]’ — in this case made from Odin’s eye (Nordal 1927: 66). Taking Nordal’s cue, we may consider the other possible meanings of Old Norse af, of which Fritzner’s dictionary lists twenty-five. In number 17 of these, af translates into ‘because of, as a consequence of’. Accepting this meaning, Odin’s pledge would be a cause rather than a container — a source of a less literal nature. Because of Odin’s pledge, a stream is drawn (or the veplva is showered) in droppy cascade — implying that until then, there was no stream or showering, or it was not ‘dreglo’, filled with material from the bottom of the well. Because of Odin’s pledge, Mimir now drinks mead every morning — implying that until then, he just drank plain water? If Odin’s pledge is his eye, how can it cause these events? What are these obviously parallel events about? If both events are a consequence of Odin’s pledge, we may expect them to relate somehow to the reason why Odin made his pledge in the first place.

Odin pledged his eye in order to get a drink from the well of knowledge, according to Snorri’s Edda. This makes it part of a greater theme in Old Norse mythology, that of Odin’s quest for knowledge. In several variants of this mythic theme, Odin seeks and obtains knowledge from the part of the Old Norse cosmos associated with either death or the giants (or both), usually situated ‘below’. This knowledge of chthonic origin is of a numinous and occult nature, often described as rünar (secrets, runes), which may have the form of spells or magic songs, and often symbolically represented by a drink, in particular a drink of mead. Mimir’s well fits perfectly in this context. As a well it reaches down below and forms a link to the cosmic underworld. And apparently the liquid in the well of Mimir is (or becomes) mead.

The drink is not the only form in which Odin obtains knowledge from Mimir. In another myth, Mimir’s knowledge is expressed as tidings from other worlds, telling of hidden things, truthful speech and advisory talk — all of it spoken words. In Inglingasaga ch. 4, Snorri tells a myth of the war and peace between two groups of
gods, the æsir (Odin’s group) and the vanir (who are possibly chthonic, cf. Schjødt 1991). Hostages were exchanged, among these Mímir was sent by the æsir. But the vanir felt cheated. The saga goes on:

Ynglingasaga, chapter 4
pá toku þeir Mímir ok hálshjoggu ok sendu hǫfuðt ásum. Óðinn tók hǫfuðt ok smurði urtum þeim, er eigi mátti fiðna, ok kvað þar yfir galdra ok magnadí svá, at þat maelti við hann ok sagði honum leynda hluti.

Then they took Mímir and decapitated him and sent the head to the æsir. Odin took the head and embalmed it with herbs so it would not decompose, and sang magic chants over it and worked magic in such a way that it spoke to him and told him hidden things.

– The saga adds in chapter 7:
Óðinn hafði með sér hǫfuð Mímis, ok sagði þat honum tíðendi ör ðrum heimum.

Odin had Mímir’s head with him and it told him tidings from other worlds.

Mímir’s head as a transmitter of knowledge to Odin is confirmed by the mythic poetry, where it is called the Mímr’s head:

Völuspá 46, 7–8
melir óðinn
við mímms hǫfuð
Odin consults
with Mímir’s head

Sigrdrifumál 14, 4–6
þá maelti mímms hǫfuð
fróðlikt it fyrsta orð
ok sagði sanna stufr.
then spoke Mímir’s head
wisely the first word
and said truthful speech.

Mímir being dead, killed while a hostage with the chthonic vanir, associates him closely with the underworld. At this stage, his knowledge is also ‘dead’ or passive and would be lost if it were not for Odin’s magic. This reflects a paradigm found throughout the Old Norse myths. The underworld represents a ‘raw material’ of passive resources, which the gods obtain in various ways and turn into culturally useful objects, concepts and abilities. This also includes intellectual resources such as knowledge (Clunies Ross 1994: 68). The giants memorize and store a wealth of knowledge, but all they do is sit on it. For instance, they do not drink the mythic ‘mead of poetry’ (a symbol of the knowledge of composing poetry), but hide it in a cave beneath a mountain. Only when Odin steals it, the mead is processed and passed on and drunk, and its potential for inspiring poetry is activated.

Mímir’s knowledge is a similarly passive potential, represented in the form of the head and decapitated Mímir. The act of Odin’s magic turns the passive potential into active knowledge, expressed in words spoken by Mímir’s head. In a detailed and thorough analysis, Jens Peter Schjødt (2003: 138–161) demonstrates a close structural parallel between this and the other myth about Mímir. In the case of Mímir’s well, the active knowledge is expressed not in words, but in the form of a drink – the single drink that Odin obtains or the mead drunk every morning by Mímir. The well, then, becomes a symbol of the passive potential, the latent knowledge. Schjødt declares that
it is not possible to reach an even remotely reliable interpretation of Odin’s pledge itself – but here he is the width of a hair from reaching one himself.

Odin’s pledging parallels his act of magic in the reviving Mímir’s head. Placing his eye in Mímir’s well is what transforms it into active knowledge, expressed as a drink, the mead that is drunk (perhaps only once) by Odin and every morning by Mímir. The latent knowledge of the well (and possibly of Mímir) does not manifest itself until Odin pledges his eye. Odin’s pledge functions as an investment. As a pledge (as opposed to a payment or a sacrifice) the eye is still his and works to his benefit, even though it may be permanently deposited in a foreign place. When Odin consults the Mímir’s head, he reaps the knowledge obtained every morning by Mímir.

The decapitation of Mímir transforms him into ‘pure intellect’ expressed in the physical metaphor of a bodiless head (Schjødt 2003: 156). If Mímir is the pure intellect, the analytical mind, Odin invests his experiential insight, his eye and what it has seen. In return he gets – through a drink or the words of Mímir – useful knowledge or wisdom upon which he can act. Mímir’s head is the fountainhead of thought.

The mead of Mímir’s well is used in the same metaphorical way as the mead of poetry, called Öðrarír ‘mind-mover’, which Odin gets or steals from the giants. Snorri tells a perhaps overly elaborate version of this myth in his Edda (cf. Frank 1981), but the poem Hávamál also alludes to the myth in several places. In stanza 140, Odin describes the effect of obtaining the mead:

\[
\text{Hávamál 140, 4–6:} \\
\text{ok ek drykk of gat} \\
\text{ins dýra miðar} \\
\text{ausinn Óðrer.}
\]

And drink I got
of that precious mead,
showered with Óðrarír.

Obtaining the mead and the knowledge it represents is like being showered, soaked in mind-moving wisdom. The same word, ausa, is mentioned in context with Odin’s pledge in Völuspá 27, 4–7. According to the traditional translation, the vǫlva sees a stream gushing forth (ausaz) from Odin’s pledge in a dreggy or muddy cascade, understood as a reference to Snorri’s account in Gylfaginning ch. 16 of the three norsm showering the Ash of Yggdrasill with muddy waters from the well of Urðr (Nordal 1927: 65). This version of the vǫlva’s vision does not give much meaning to the context of the poem, an odd bit of stray information. However, it is possible to translate the lines in a different way, as suggested above.

The liquid in question is described as aurugr, full of aurrr, which denotes the sedimentary gravel or mud at the bottom of a body of water. This reference to the bottom may indicate the ultimate source of whatever is showered. If it is knowledge, it originates from the depths, the chthonic spheres of death and giants. The vǫlva knows that Heimdall placed his hearing beneath the clear-wonted, heaven-wonted, holy tree – the world tree that connects the various worlds of the Old Norse cosmos. Heimdall invested his attention in the underworld. Perhaps he discovered something that led to Odin pledging his eye? In any case, the result follows: In a way similar to that of Odin in Hávamál, the vǫlva describes how she is showered in a cascade of numinous knowledge. She is soaked in wisdom – as a consequence of Odin’s pledge. The following stanzas have been left out of the version of the poem found in Hauksbók,
perhaps because they add no more substance to this mythic theme? They do, however, add more details.

The Encounter with Odin

In most modern readings of Völuspá 28–29, Odin is portrayed as a failure and a loser. This goes back to the (probably Christian-inspired) idea that the event of Ragnarök is the fate or the Doom of the gods. According to this reading — starting with Snorri’s Edda and elaborated all the way up to the present time — the gods caused an irreparable damage to the cosmic order by committing the cardinal sin of breaking an oath to a giant. Though the effect was slow in coming, it could not be averted. As a consequence, Odin started a ‘mission impossible’ of gathering intelligence about the giants and the coming Doom. He sacrificed (!) his eye in order to get information, but lost an important tool for his quest in the bargain and played his eye into the hands of the enemy: It is Mimir who benefits from it now. On this (incredibly improbable) background the encounter is usually interpreted.

Odin is seen as the ‘doubter’ and the ‘fearful brooder’ filled with dread over the fate of the gods, while the völva is ‘gigantic in knowledge’ (Nordal 1927: 17, 65–66). This is why Odin seeks her out while she performs an útiseta, a ritual of sitting outdoors. (The original reason for the ritual remains undisclosed.) Odin tries to intimidate her by glaring into her eyes. The all-knowing völva refuses the challenge — ‘Why do Ye test me?’ she asks, desperately according to Jan de Vries (1931: 48), but scornfully according to everybody else. To gain an equal footing with the sovereign god of wisdom, she immediately goes on: ‘All I know, Odin,’ and then she reveals her knowledge of his most ‘terrifying secret’, the pledging of his eye (Nordal 1927: 67). What a sorry excuse for a god, indeed!

Apparently this encounter between völva and god has proved irresistible to mythographers (perhaps in particular among the ladies?) as demonstrated by these wonderful snippets by Ursula Dronke (1997: 50–51, my underlining):

‘The völva’s sardonic tone borders on insult when she tells Óðinn that she knows where he has ‘hidden’ his eye [...] There is no suggestion in her words (28/7–13) that Óðinn’s act was either laudable or fruitful.’

‘[...] the bitterest variant of the legends of Óðinn’s acquisition of wisdom, the forfeit of his eye [...]’

‘[...] a grotesque image of his futile sacrifice, ved Valpðors, the eye in the well.’

‘Óðinn has given half his sight to gain knowledge, and yet here he comes to the völva (28), craving her knowledge and her foresight, because his own fails him.’

‘The attack of his glance she encountered with a taunt of words, the betrayal of his secret.’

‘Mimir can breakfast every morning from that mead, a single sip of which cost you—Óðinn!—your eye. That is the tone of her taillery.’

There is probably no scholar who has not participated to some degree in building this modern myth. I think Gro Steinsland comes closest to explaining the popularity of this theme: ‘He [Odin] does not see as far and as deeply as the völva herself.’ (Han ser ikke
så langt og så dypt som völven selv. Steinsland 1999: 56). A mere human — and a woman, at that! — proves herself superior to an impotent (male) god. Odin’s humiliation becomes complete in stanza 29. He craves her knowledge to such an extent that he pays her rings and jewellery, and finally she gives in and he is given her prophecy (by way of emending the fe of the manuscript to fekk).

Well, the scorn and the sardonic tone of the völva, the fearfulness and impotence of Odin, the fact that his pledge is a terrible secret — or a secret at all — all of it is pure fantasy, of course. There is not a word to that effect in the source material. We need to get back to the basics, which are the texts at hand, cited above.

The völva performs an útiseta. It is a ritual of sitting outdoors with the distinct purpose of making contact with supernatural beings or the spirits of the dead in order to make them give you wealth and/or information about the future. In a complete survey of every bit of source material concerning the útiseta, Gisli Sigurðsson finds no exception from this pattern and concludes that the völva in Völuspá obviously performed her ritual in order to contact Odin — not the other way around (Sigurðsson 2001). John McKinnell has reached the same conclusion and suggests that our völva reverses the traditional pattern: She is dead, like the giantess in Baldurs draumar, and is ‘sitting out’ in order to contact the living god (McKinnell 2005: 98, 200).

The result of the útiseta in Völuspá also follows the pattern attested by Gisli’s research: Odin ensures her wealth — he chooses (which is not necessarily the same as personally giving) rings and necklace for her — and he provides her with the tools, the spells and spirit helpers, that she needs in order to obtain her visions of the future. Odin is not the seeker of information in this case — he is the giver.

In the opening stanza of the poem, the völva declares that she speaks according to the will of Odin. ‘Vildo at ek, Valspör, vel fyrtelia...’ — ‘You, Valfather, will that I well recount...’ What follows through the next twenty-six stanzas, is the history of the mythic past, the memorized knowledge of the völva, which she learned from her contact with the ancient giants that nurtured her spirit in the nine worlds ‘below’ — probably similar to the way the giant Vafþrúðnir obtained his munificent knowledge (Vafþrúðnismál 43). But at this point in the poem, stanza 28, the völva has reached her limits. She cannot see the future without help. As she acts on the will of Odin, he is naturally the one to whom she turns for assistance, which she proves able to get.

Odin is the awe-striking god, veggjandr, summoned by the völva’s ritual. He peers into her eyes, seeking to know ‘What do you people ask of me? Why do you all test me?’ (fregnd and freistid are in the plural). These are his questions, not hers (Sigurðsson 2001: 10). He might be slightly annoyed, testy — but that is just a guess.

When the völva replies, she does not claim to know everything. At least, that is not the most natural translation of ‘Allt veit ek hvar...’ which rather means something like ‘I know quite well where...’ (cf. Fritzner). Still, she does claim to know where Odin put his eye and the effect it had on the morning diet of Mímir. Why? Why does the völva choose to mention in particular her knowledge of Odin’s eye and pledge?

Well, in a situation like that, what a girl needs is a powerful spell to bend the will of the summoned god her way. The völva describes the effect of Odin’s pledge because that is what she needs for herself. She knows that when Odin invests his insight in the latent knowledge of the underworld, the kind of knowledge she has recited for the past twenty-six stanzas, it will transform this stored data into useful
information on which you can act, plan a strategy, set some goals. By declaring her level of awareness, her knowledge of the spiritual mechanics, she proves herself worthy and thus makes the god accommodate her wish. She is showered in a dreggy cascade of numinous knowledge – because of Odin’s pledge.

The myth of Odin’s pledge tells of Odin’s acquisition of knowledge – a variant of a well-known mythic theme. But he does not gather knowledge just to passively sit on it, like the giants did. That is why Völuspá frames the myth within another myth about the encounter between Odin and the völva, possibly the grandest example of what Odin actively does with his acquired wisdom. He passes it on.

Bibliography