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CONTENTS

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The articles in this volume, as in all others in the Collected Studies Series, have not been given a new, continuous pagination. In order to avoid confusion, and to facilitate their use where these same studies have been referred to elsewhere, the original pagination has been maintained wherever possible.

Each article has been given a Roman number in order of appearance, as listed in the Contents. This number is repeated in each page and is quoted in the index entries.

PREFACE

Early Norse lands have left us so unique an inheritance of verse and prose, profuse, varied and subtle, that the first question which springs to a reader's mind is often 'Where did they get it from'? Although it is a discourteous question, it is not wholly unfair. The early Norsemen were great adventurers and traders; from the first centuries A.D. the influence of Roman culture is evident in Scandinavia in the grave-finds of Roman bronze and glass vessels, beads and swords. Where there is trade, there is talk, and often friendly entertainment. The migrating tribes of Goths and Heruli, in touch with the Hellenistic world by the Black Sea or the Danube, did not sever links with their Baltic homelands; the Heruli sent home for their kings of royal blood, if need arose (*ca.* 520 A.D.). With the later Viking invasion and settlement in Ireland and England, the Norsemen lived surrounded by a Christian culture that was based on classical learning. How much of this literate world might have become significant for the unlettered Norsemen?

To such questions of contact three essays in this collection are addressed (I, II, XII). A related problem of 'contact', this time between the literate Norse mythographer and Latin writers, is considered in essay III, where the originality of the thirteenth-century Icelandic account of the rise of many gods and of the gradual growth of the heathen understanding of the existence of a single god, is examined in relation to Latin analogues.

Seven essays (IV, V, VI, VII, VIII, IX, X) are concerned with the elucidation of mythological allusion in Eddic and scaldic poetry, the relative dating of mythological material, and its religious import. One essay (VIII) highlights the folklore of the heron as a model for myth. The work in these essays was part of the preparation of my edition of *The Poetic Edda II. Mythological Poems.* Clarendon Press, Oxford. The essays are referred to in the edition, but for reasons of space not repeated there. In the edition I have developed further some of the enquiries begun in essays VI and IX.

One essay (XI) is directed to the problem of Anglo-Saxon knowledge of Norse myths. The setting of *Beowulf* is heathen Scandinavia, and the background of the political conflicts of Swedes, Geats and Danes preserves more detailed traditions than any Norse source. Yet the poem is a Christian poem with a profoundly moving Christian moral centre.

Consideration of the heathen–Christian synthesis in the poem has been confused by the uncertainty of its date of composition, since some scholars would place it after the Viking invasions of the late ninth century. I consider this difficulty to be removed by Peter Clemoes' book, *Interactions of Thought and Language in Old English Poetry* (CUP 1995), in which a date of circa 725–750 is substantiated by sociological evidence. An important step in the same direction was made by Michael Lapidge in his article *'Beowulf', Aldhelm, The 'Liber Monstrorum' and Wessex* in *Studi Medievali* ser. 3a, XXII (1982) 151–192.

The remaining four essays (XIII, XIV, XV, XVI) offer a contrast between some traditional narrative structures and one very untraditional structure. In ancient Germanic poetry a twofold structure of action and counter-action, with a pause between, as of a dice-throw, was deeply loved. So too was the narrative of mixed verse and prose which allowed for a broader field of events and change of scene. In Icelandic the genre of the Skalds' Sagas – dateable at least as early as 1119 (see XV) – was highly popular, in which a famous poet's life was traced and in which his own poetry was recreated for him in many an invented circumstance (only rarely can we suppose the poems to be his own). We see in these sagas the passion for envisaging events and narrative moments, and then seeking for the right knot of poetical words to express the mind of the man caught in those moments. The Skalds' Sagas, while thus claiming to be authentic, usually touch the heights of fiction. *Njáls Saga* differs structurally from every other saga, in the way it begins, the way it ends, the way it proceeds. I have attempted to analyse one of its components, the scenery of sex against which the action plays.

URSULA DRONKE

Cambridge
July 1995

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I

CLASSICAL INFLUENCE ON EARLY NORSE LITERATURE

For more than a hundred years Norse scholarship has been haunted by the problem of classical influence upon the vernacular literature, and the ghost has not yet been laid, nor the ancestor proved.

The conversion of the Scandinavian lands to Christianity and to literacy did not begin effectively until the end of the tenth century, but some of the vernacular poetry can be shown to be at least one hundred years earlier. So the span in time of the early Norse literature with which I am concerned reaches from the end of the ninth century to the end of the thirteenth, the close of the great creative period. The geographical span of Scandinavia open to classical influence reaches from Iceland and the Norse kingdoms of Ireland and England in the west, to Sweden and the Swedish settlements in Russia to the east. In the middle of the eleventh century there was a Norwegian bishop of Kiev and a bishop of the Greek Church established in Sweden, and three bishops of the Greek Church preaching in Iceland, much to the displeasure of the Roman See. Greek merchants, we are told by Adam of Bremen, found good harbouring in the Baltic, at the mouth of the river Oder. The Norse language was being spoken on the banks of the Volga until the thirteenth century.[1]

The possibility of classical influence through some of these early and wide-reaching contacts has excited the imagination of scholars for very good reason. The Norse vernacular is one of the richest in medieval Europe in the originality of its literary forms: no parallels are extant in other Germanic languages for the stylistic variety of the poems of the *Edda*, nor for the profusion of complex metres and the arcane intensity of diction in the poetry of the scalds, the court poets of the kings of Norway, nor indeed is there any parallel for the genre of the prose saga. Where so much is unknown, scholars seek in known fields for understanding. So, to account for the unique phenomenon

[1] See Magnús Már Lárússon, 'Um hina ermsku biskupa', *Skírnir*, CXXXIII (1959), 81–94 for a well-documented account of early Scandinavian connections with the Greek Church.

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of scaldic poetry, it has been suggested that the influence of Latin hymn metres, transmitted through Irish, together with certain Irish habits of poetic style, may have inspired one brilliant Norwegian poet, the first whose name we know, Bragi Boddason, to compose in a completely new manner of metre and diction. This creative step would have been taken towards the end of the ninth century, not long after the establishment of the Norse kingdom in Ireland.[1]

Against this theory of the individual creation of a novel poetic mode stands an important consideration that is also linked with the problem of classical influence. Two of the earliest scaldic poems, one of them by Bragi himself, are 'shield poems', odes in which ornate stanzas describe scenes carved or painted on a shield, and offer static fantasias upon the heroic and mythological narratives portrayed. It was argued by Hellmut Rosenfeld in 1936[2] that this literary genre should be related to the shield-descriptions in Homer and Hesiod and their imitators, and should be linked with a cult of votive shields which may at one time (he suggests) have been common in Scandinavia, either as a native cult, or one that had travelled in ancient times from the Black Sea regions. From these regions, early Byzantine and provincial Roman influence on Scandinavian art is well attested:[3] that a literary genre so closely associated with representational art should also have been stimulated by Greco-Roman tradition is not impossible. The value of Rosenfeld's argument, however, consists not so much in establishing any specific origin for a Norse poetic genre, as in providing the background against which this poetic genre must be understood, a background of cult, involving close association with mythological themes, meticulous preservation of tradition, and a heightened, obscured, periphrastic sacral language, to which Rosenfeld compares the language of Pindar. This cannot therefore be a diction created by a single man; it is ancient and rooted in ancient, pagan religious practice: perhaps that is why it survived nowhere else in Christian Germanic Europe. Any possible metrical influence, therefore, from Irish Latin in the ninth century can only have contributed to a scaldic style of composition already highly developed.

[1] See G. Turville-Petre, 'Um dróttkvæði og írskan kveðskap', *Skírnir*, CXXVIII (1954), 31–55.

[2] 'Nordische Schilddichtung und mittelalterliche Wappendichtung', *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, LXI (1936), 232–69.

[3] Besides Rosenfeld's references, see H. Shetelig, *Classical Impulses in Scandinavian Art from the Migration Period to the Viking Age* (Oslo, 1949).

EARLY NORSE LITERATURE

For many Norse poems and for many aspects of Norse mythology classical origins or influence have been claimed.[1] In the general context of a study of classical influence all these claims could be re-examined with great profit, but I can pause only on one: the influence of the Sibylline Oracles upon the greatest of the Norse mythological poems, *Völuspá*, 'The Prophecy of the Sibyl'.[2] Here an awesome seeress, fostered by giants, summoned from the other world by the command of Óðinn, declares before the audience of mankind the origins and fate of the world, the encroachment of evil, the slaughter of the greatest gods by monsters, the destruction of the world by flood and fire, and its resurrection, cleansed and renewed, rising from the sea. As in the Greek Sibylline Oracles and in the rare Latin version that Professor Bischoff has discovered in two ninth-century manuscripts,[3] there is here too the conjunction of past and future—as if it were the grasp of the past and its truths that gave the sibyl confident power of insight into the future. All the narrative facts in the Norse poem are drawn from the native pagan mythology —these are not borrowed. But what has galvanised these facts into a sibylline structure? In no other Norse poem is the fate of the world and of the gods presented as a matter of urgent concern, or linked with the moral degeneration of gods and men. Is this particular Norse poem uniquely inspired by the Sibylline Oracles of the Hellenistic-Christian world, or has a mode of sibylline composition, anciently common to Greco-Roman and Germanic paganism, been fortuitously preserved only in this one poem? One thing at least is clear:

[1] For example, influences of a general, and perhaps popular, kind, as of Greek legends on the myth of Iðunn's apples (S. Bugge, 'Iduns Æbler', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* (*ANF*), IV (1889), 1–45), or of the legend of Daedalus on *Völundarkviða* (cf. J .de Vries, *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte* (2nd ed. 1964–7), I, 85), or of the legend of Protesilaos on *Helgakviða Hundingsbana*, II (most recently, A. Kabell, 'DgF 90 and the Danish Novel', *Scandinavica*, VI (1967), 85), or of Hellenistic astral religion on *Grímnismál* (F. R. Schroeder, *Germanentum und Hellenismus* (1924), pp. 15 ff.); as well as influences which may derive from a literary contact, as the influence of Lucian, *Assembly of the Gods* on *Lokasenna* (F. R. Schroeder, 'Das Symposium der Lokasenna', *ANF*, LXVII (1952), 1–29), or of Ovid's tale of Procne on *Atlakviða* (S. Bugge, 'Erpr og Eitill', *Christiania Videnskabsselskabs Forhandlinger* (1898), pp. 1 ff.), or of Martianus Capella on Eddic cosmology (H. Falk, 'Martianus Capella og den nordisk Mythologi', *Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie* (1891), pp. 266–300), or of Boethius, *Consolatio Philosophiae*, upon the elegiac verses of Egill Skallagrímsson (A. Bouman, *Patterns in Old English and Old Icelandic Literature* (Leiden, 1962), pp. 29 ff.).

[2] See A. C. Bang, 'Vøluspaa og de Sibyllinske Orakler', *Christiania Videnskabsselskabs Forhandlinger* (1879, no. 9), pp. 1–23; countered by V. Rydberg, *Sibyllinerne og Völuspá*, in his *Skrifter*, XII (1898), 317–434.

[3] B. Bischoff, 'Die lateinischen Übersetzungen und Bearbeitungen aus den Oracula Sibyllina', *Mittelalterliche Studien*, I (1966), 150–71, especially 164 ff.

if this poet has borrowed from an alien source, he has borrowed at the highest level of understanding, and has incomparably enriched the theme that inspired him. Comparison with classical tradition here establishes the stature of the vernacular.

Before the introduction of Christianity and clerical learning to Scandinavia, any influence from classical sources must have been upon illiterate Norsemen, and the channels by which such influence could have operated require very careful study—a study in which conjecture must base itself upon all available evidence as to the nature of the contact between the literate and illiterate worlds. With the establishment of Christianity came the reading and writing of Latin, sacred and profane; classical and Christian learning were absorbed by literate Norsemen in a society still rich and inventive in native oral tradition. In Iceland one of the first bishops, at the end of the eleventh century, struggled simultaneously against the immorality of young clerics reading Ovid and against the native custom of love-singing, in which men and women sang lascivious verses to each other.[1] The biographer adds ruefully that the bishop was not able entirely to stamp out this custom, though evidently he prevented these verses from achieving written record.

In his splendid articles on classical manuscripts in Scandinavian libraries and on the contribution of Scandinavia to the Latin literature of the Middle Ages, Paul Lehmann drew together ample evidence of the reading and translation of classical authors in medieval Scandinavia, especially historical, didactic and grammatical writings —Sallust, Lucan, Justinus, Josephus, Pliny and Isidore, Priscian and Donatus.[2] What needs now to be established is precisely what this Latin culture contributed to the formation of the original vernacular literature—in what does its creative influence consist?

In Iceland and Norway, Latin and vernacular historical writing are closely interlocked. The first writer of the history of the kings of Norway, the Icelander Sæmundr Sigfússon, wrote in Latin; he was educated in France, probably in Paris, about 1070. His works, which are now lost, were regarded as authoritative by the Icelandic historians who followed him. Around 1130 another Icelander, Ari Þorgilsson, also trained in Latin learning, wrote in Icelandic the history of Iceland and its first settlers, basing this on the oral memory of native

[1] *Jóns Saga*, ch. 13.

[2] P. Lehmann, 'Auf der Suche nach alten Texten in nordischen Biblioteken', *Erforschung des Mittelalters*, I, 280–306; 'Skandinaviens Anteil an der lateinischen Literatur und Wissenschaft des Mittelalters', *ibid.* V, 275–393.

informants. While he owes much to his Latin training—his systematic method, the logical construction of his periodic sentences—the vitality of the vernacular narrative that underlies his writing frequently shines out. Fifty years later the Norwegian monk Theodricus wrote a Latin history of Norway in which he cites moral and political *sententiae* from Sallust, Lucan, Ovid and Pliny, but claims that his main source of information is the oral poetry of Icelanders. Consciously profiting from the confluence of two cultures, Theodricus epitomises a situation that must have been common to many Norse clerics of his time.

A more dynamic step is taken in Norse historical writing when at the end of the twelfth century the incredible King Sverri of Norway—a renegade priest from the Faroe Islands, who claimed to be a bastard son of a Norwegian king—assured his own fame by hiring an Icelandic abbot and 'sitting over' him while he wrote the saga of his life. This saga, unforgettably vivid both in its exultant, polemical speeches and in the homely actuality of its scenes, bears unmistakable marks of Sverri's clerical training: a persuasive style designed for the pulpit, a superstitious imagination nurtured by hagiography, and a biblical romanticism that inspired him to see himself as a David anointed by God.[1]

In the thirteenth century the vernacular almost entirely takes over the task of historical writing, and a style of narrative develops refined from all moral and judicial comment: judgement flows through the presentation of facts, and through the arguments that are put into the mouths of the historical characters themselves. Some scenes have become so polished by the imagination of successive tellers that they stand out with a symbolic quality that irradiates the whole saga. The finest exponent of this historical style is Snorri Sturluson. Sigurður Nordal states categorically that Snorri knew Sallust, but does not set out any evidence.[2] If Snorri knew Sallust, what did he learn from him? From Snorri's use of known vernacular sources we can gauge

[1] The first thirty chapters of *Sverris Saga* are, in all probability, those written under Sverri's supervision. On Sverri's learning see G. M. Gathorne-Hardy, *A Royal Impostor* (1956), especially p. 90.

[2] S. Nordal, 'Sagalitteraturen', *Nordisk Kultur*, VIII B (1952), 221. Some scholars have examined certain aspects of (mainly Christian) Latin influence on Norse saga-writing (especially L. Lönnroth; see the references listed in the summary of his researches, *European Sources of Icelandic Saga-writing* (Stockholm, 1965); and Jakob Benediktsson, 'Traces of Latin prose-rhythm in Old Norse', *Fifth Viking Congress*, Tórshavn, 1965). These valuable studies are not, however, directed towards the particular problem I have in mind, the nature of the narrative art of the native oral traditions.

the perceptive, rationalising, clarifying quality of his mind. If Snorri had studied Sallust, it seems certain that he would have learnt from Sallust's historical genius at the highest level of understanding. Thus it is, I think, an imperative task to make a comparative stylistic study of the Norse and the classical historians, to try to distinguish the intellectual and artistic stature of the native oral historical traditions upon which the influence of classical writers would work. Was this influence only the initial stimulus to writing history at all, with the occasional copying of a mannerism of style—or was it a more subtle thing, an external influence that held up a mirror to the native traditions, stimulated self-recognition, and developed in the native creative genius a power of coherence and of carrying through themes of imagination on a scale greater than oral tradition was capable of maintaining?

This problem is vital because upon it depends also our understanding of the literary development of the great tragic sagas, the family sagas. It is firmly maintained by many scholars, most recently by Walter Baetke,[1] that the Icelandic sagas had no artistic form before the influence of Christian and classical literature. Neckel stated dogmatically: 'Like all new literatures, that of Iceland also arose from the contact of ecclesiastical education and Greco-Roman tradition with the cultural heritage of the people.'[2] Was this 'cultural heritage'—*geistiger Besitz des Volkes*—formless, waiting for centuries like a bear-cub, to be licked into literary shape? Until a more thorough analysis of learned and literary influence on the family sagas is undertaken, so that the artistic character of the native traditions can emerge, we are left in doubt, in the dark.

One more problem of classical influence must be the last I mention, though it is by no means the last there is.[3] In 1220 Snorri Sturluson wrote his *Prose Edda*; for the plan of this work no source has been found, though Rudolf Meyer insisted that it must go back to some variant version of the Third Vatican Mythographer.[4] The first part

[1] *Über die Entstehung der Isländersagas* (Berlin, 1956).

[2] G. Neckel, 'Von der isländischen Saga' I, *Germanisch-romanische Monatsschrift* (1911), 371.

[3] I would note here two further subjects for study: (1) a comparison of Snorri's work on the art of poetry (*Skáldskaparmál*) with Latin *Artes Poeticae*: Snorri's work appears to be highly original, while that of his nephew on rhetoric (*Málskrúðsfræði*) is conventional, based mainly on Donatus; (2) an examination of Saxo's use of the 'mixed' form of verse and prose composition in his first nine books, reflecting both classical (Martianus Capella) and native (*fornaldarsögur*) traditions; an analysis of the classical elements in his verses will also help us to achieve a clearer picture of his lost vernacular sources.

[4] R. M. Meyer, 'Snorri als mythograph', *ANF*, XXVIII (1912), 109–21.

presents a euhemeristic account of the Norse gods—a variation on Euhemerism found in no other source and presumably devised by Snorri himself. It is remarkably close to the fiction that Euhemerus himself devised (which Snorri, of course, cannot have known at first hand), in that it consists of a journey to a strange land, which reveals to a human being the historical existence of the men now thought to be gods. This part of the *Edda* has a wonderful prologue, for which again no source has been found. In it Snorri accounts for the fact that wisdom could exist among the heathen. Through wickedness mankind lost knowledge of God, even of the name of God; but though they were spiritually blind, God still granted them intellectual insight, 'so that they knew all earthly matters and every phase of whatever they might see in the air and on the earth'. He describes their growing awareness of the living nature of the earth, and of the analogy between the physical construction of man and the earth: 'Boulders and stones they likened to the teeth and bones of living beings...' Snorri must have had in mind in this prologue Christian scientific speculations on the nature of the world, on microcosm and macrocosm, speculations that have their roots in Hellenistic thought.[1] At the same time he surely could not help recalling his native mythology, verses he himself quotes, that depict the creation of the cosmos from a gigantic body:

> From his flesh the earth was made,
> from his blood the sea,
> rocks from his bones, trees from his hair,
> and from his skull the sky.

Was it perhaps the confrontation of pagan myth with Christian scientific speculation that inspired his apologia for heathen wisdom, a wisdom granted by God to the heathen, though they had lost knowledge of him? Has Snorri recognised that European mythology has here come full circle?

I hope that this rapid survey may indicate in some measure what substantial and exciting literary and historical exercises remain to be undertaken, in which classical scholars can contribute profoundly to the studies of their Norse colleagues, and may in their turn receive illumination in their own field of work from a medieval literature unique in its close relationship to oral traditions.

[1] See R. Allers, 'Microcosmos', *Traditio*, II (1944), 319–407; F. Rico, *El pequeño mundo del hombre* (1970) 11–45. A. Holtsmark (*Studier i Snorris Mytologi* (1964), 11, 32) does not note what is distinctive about this part of the prologue.

II

VǪLUSPÁ AND SIBYLLINE TRADITIONS

We have been attracted to Groningen today by the difficulty of the subject that has been set for us: *Germania Latina*. It is difficult and at the same time central to our understanding of Germanic tradition. We have to use Latin writings as a compass to find our bearings in Germanic. Commonly, we have to compare a very full literary record, developed through centuries of Latin tradition, with what appear before us as only the fragments of a distinct culture—not a written culture until so taught by Latin. Yet sometimes it may happen that the Germanic work is more complete and more complex than any extant Latin counterpart.

Just such a problem confronts us with the Old Norse poem *Vǫluspá*, 'The Sibyl's Prophecy'. [1] In it we have preserved the most perfect example of a Sibylline Oracle that exists. If we take for comparison the most substantial and fully structured Greek and Latin Sibylline Oracles—nine in Greek and two in Latin [2]—we can see that there are many characteristics that reappear in more than one text: the female speaker of

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[1] References to Eddic poems will be to Jón Helgason ed. *Eddadigte*, 3 vols. (Copenhagen, 1951-2).

[2] The Greek texts I take for comparison are those edited and translated into German by Alfons Kurfess, *Sibyllinische Weissagungen* (Berlin, 1951). The Books I am concerned with (1-8 and 11) date from the second century BC to the second century AD. Books 3-8 were known to Lactantius *ca.* 300. Translations into English, with valuable Introductions and Bibliography, are given by J. J. Collins in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, edited by James H. Charlesworth (London, 1983), pp. 317-472. Collins includes three later Oracles and fragments; these add little to the older material. The Latin texts are (1) the Tiburtine Sibyl (also in Kurfess, pp. 264-279); the oldest MS is mid-eleventh century. A Greek original, from which the Latin differs in many respects, dates from the fourth century; see P. J. Alexander, *The Oracle of Baalbek: the Tiburtine Sibyl in Greek dress*, Dumbarton Oaks Studies 10 (Washington, 1967); A. Momigliano, 'From the Pagan to the Christian Sibyl: Prophecy as History of Religion', *Warburg Institute Surveys and Texts XVI: The Uses of Greek and Latin. Historical Essays* (Warburg Institute, University of London, 1988), especially p. 15. I have hardly used the Tiburtine Sibyl in this discussion, as the structural devices and political emphasis of this Oracle have little to compare with *Vǫluspá* except the Sibyl herself. (2) the *Prophetia Sibillae Magae* (see p. 6 and note 10 below).
For all bibliographical references and guidance on the Greek and Latin sibylline material and on the early music of the *Cantus Sibyllae* I am indebted to Peter Dronke, and in particular to his inaugural lecture of 9th March, 1990, *Hermes and the Sibyls: Continuations and Creations* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), which illuminates the *Prophetia* and the *Cantus* in their proper contexts.

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the Oracle, enjoined by God to address mankind; the story of the genesis of the world and the prophecy of its terrible and imminent end; the tumultuous history of events leading to this end; signs of the physical degeneration of the world and the moral degeneration of men; the superhuman battle of opposing forces; the collapse of the cosmos; the different fates of the good and the evil after death, and the revelation of a new world for the worthy. But—it may be because almost all of these Greek and Latin texts are structurally defective, composite with accretions of different dates, or broken up with lacunae—these characteristics never appear all gathered together in any one Greek or Latin text. Yet they do so appear in *Vǫluspá*, ordered, moreover, in a virtually flawless structure. This poem gives us, as it were, the ideal version of a Sibylline Oracle, nowhere else realized—not in Germanic, nor in Greek nor in Latin. How has this happened?

We are not the first to consider the question of the relationship between *Vǫluspá* and the Sibylline Oracles. In 1879 the theologian A. C. Bang argued that *Vǫluspá* was 'a Norse Christian Sibylline Oracle': [3] a Norse Christian poet's imitation of Greek sibylline texts—the only sibylline texts then known to Bang—in which the Norse poet has substituted his native mythological and religious themes for the classical and Biblical themes of learned sibylline tradition. Bang asserted that, by following the Norse poem step by step, at virtually every point he had found parallels with the Greek Oracles: a two-fold structure ('All Sibylline Oracles of any significance fall into two main parts, the one concerned with the past, the other with the future'); a climax prophesying the world's future; an oracular ambiguity of style; alternation of factual and ecstatic statement, reflecting the sibyl's own psychic changes; the combining of Christian and pagan elements, and the use of a pagan sibyl as the chosen instrument of Christian revelation. 'I believe', Bang concludes, 'that it is quite unthinkable that likenesses of such a kind and extent could have arisen unless the author of *Vǫluspá* had had the Oracles as source and model'. And he makes a wide-reaching inference: 'I believe that *Vǫluspá* is wholly unfit to serve as evidence that Norse heathenism was capable of producing deep insights and elevated thoughts'.

Bang's thesis was warmly accepted by some scholars. Hugo Gering, for instance, declared that as a result of Bang's discovery of the dependence of *Vǫluspá* upon the Sibylline Oracles, the Norse poem 'naturally loses all its

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[3] A. C. Bang, 'Vøluspaa og de Sibyllinske Orakler', *Christiania Videnskabsselskabs Forhandlinger* (Christiania, 1879) No. 9, pp. 1-23. The text of the four passages cited in translation will be found on pp. 1, 3, 22, 23 (here the original reads: *Jeg tror, at Vøluspaa er aldeles uskikket til at tjene som Bevis for, hvilke dybe Anelser og ophøiede Tanker, det nordiske Hedenskab har kunnet producere*. The tone is strangely scornful).

value as a source for our knowledge of ancient Germanic mythology'. [4] Clearly, much is at stake in the solving of this problem.

Fortunately, Viktor Rydberg knew the sibylline texts better than Bang. In 1881 he replied to Bang's arguments with over one hundred pages (as against Bang's twenty-three!) of marvellously intelligent, masterly criticism of the errors, imprecise thinking and failure of scholarly imagination that underlay Bang's claim, and, while Bang concentrated on the likenesses between *Vǫluspá* and the Greek Sibylline Oracles, Rydberg demonstrated what was *dissimilar* in all the parallels that Bang had drawn. Above all, he sharply derided Bang's notion that the ill-put-together Oracles could have inspired the structure of *Vǫluspá*: this is no more likely than that 'an aesthetically and practically well-ordered home should have as its model a chaotic auction-room'. [5]

As to the likenesses that Bang had emphasized, Rydberg was content to suppose them of very archaic origin: 'That an age-old kinship should be found between concepts in Aryan myth and comparable concepts in Biblical tradition is wholly probable'. [6]

Since Bang and Rydberg wrote, however, the terrain of research has changed in at least two significant respects. They believed that they had to contend with the difficult question of the influence of Greek texts on a Norse poet, but more recent scholarship has uncovered a stronger Latin sibylline tradition in the early Western Church than was previously known—a tradition more readily accessible to the western Vikings, from whose lands the extant Norse poetry stems. From the ninth to the eleventh century, for example, a *Cantus Sibyllae* was introduced into the Office of the Church in the celebration of Christmas (musical notation for the *Cantus* survives from the late ninth century). [7] This 'Sibyl's Song' consisted of the twenty-seven acrostic verses on the 'Signs of Judgement' translated from the Greek text in *Oracula Sibyllina VIII*, and first recorded in Latin by Augustine. [8]

Iudicii signum: tellus sudore madescet.
E caelo rex adveniet per saecla futurus,

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[4] *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 11 (Halle, 1880), 496.

[5] Viktor Rydberg, *Skrifter* 12 (Gothenburg, 1898), pp. 315-434: *Sibyllinerna och Völuspá*. The text cited in translation will be found on p. 422: *Att sibyllinerna i kompositionsväg tjänat Völuspá till förebild, är därför inemot lika sannolikt, som att ett estetiskt och praktiskt välordnadt hem haft mönsterbilden i en skräpig auktionskammare.*

[6] Rydberg (1898), p. 424.

[7] Cf. H. Anglès, *La musica a Catalunya fins al segle XIII* (Barcelona, 1935); S. Corbin, 'Le *Cantus Sibyllae*: Origine et premiers textes', *Revue de musicologie* 31 (Paris, 1952) 1-10. For fuller presentation of the text and tradition of the *Cantus* see Peter Dronke, op. cit. in note 2, pp. 10-11, 16-23.

[8] St. Augustine of Hippo, *De Civitate Dei* XVIII, 23.

6

Scilicet ut carnem praesens, ut iudicet orbem...

The sign of Judgement: earth will drip with sweat.
From heaven will come the King who will be for ever,
That indeed in his own presence he may judge flesh
and the world...

A variant Latin version of the Greek was known to Aldhelm (d. 709), [9] made either by himself or in the circle of his teachers, Theodore and Hadrian, who were themselves Greek speakers and Greek scholars, at Canterbury.

The *Cantus Sibyllae* has only a few of the motifs that characterize the Sibylline Oracles. The focus is on the terror to come and the ominous signs of the world's hastening end, when God will judge man. Earthquake will level the hills' rivers will blaze, the sounds of lamentation and gnashing of teeth will fill the air; the sun's ray will die; from on high the trumpet will send its dismal note and gaping earth reveal the chaos of Hell. The sibyl who sings is not mentioned in the text. The literary concept of the acrostic takes precedence over any ordered sequence of thought, which becomes oblique and repetitive. Nevertheless, while the *Cantus* could not have suggested the full structure of a Sibylline Oracle to a hearer, it might well have impressed upon him the warning figure and theatrical power of the Sibyl herself, confronting the whole of mankind.

Closer in form to the Greek Sibylline Oracles and to *Vǫluspá* is a Latin text discovered by Professor Bernard Bischoff and published by him in 1951, a *Prophetiae Sibillae Magae* of 136 lines. [10] Of the three manuscripts of the poem, two date from the ninth century. One of these two manuscripts is from Tours or a place influenced by Tours. This brings it within the range of possibility that the *Prophetia* could have been known in England in Anglo-Saxon times, as the scholarly links between Tours and York were strong: Alcuin, who had been head of the school at York, was Abbot of Tours from 794 to his death in 804.

The poem seems complete and directly in the tradition of the Sibylline Oracles: as Bischoff says, 'Es ist ein echter Ausdruck der religiösen Gedankenwelt, in der die sibyllinische Dichtung lebt'. Many textual

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[9] Cf. W. Bulst, 'Eine Anglo-Lateinische Übersetzung aus dem Griechischen um 700', *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* 75 (Berlin, 1938), 105-6; Aldhelm, *The Poetic Works*, translated by Michael Lapidge and James Rosier (D. S. Brewer, 1985), p. 16.

[10] Bernard Bischoff, 'Die Lateinischen Übersetzungen und Bearbeitungen aus den Oracula Sibyllina', *Mittelalterliche Studien* (1966) I, pp. 150-171 (reprinted from *Mélanges Joseph de Ghellinck, S. J.*, Museum Lessianum, Section Historique 13 (Gembloux, 1951) pp. 121-147).

problems remain to be solved, [11] but the structure and verbal quality of this work can be perceived despite this. It is a well-rounded, radiant and impassioned poem, full of rare ideas and phrasing. The persona of the sibyl marks the whole text: she describes herself at the opening—she is of this world, mortal, but mortal souls have their celestial origin 'in a star':

Mundus origo mea est, animam de sidere traxi
The world is my origin, my soul I have drawn from a star.

She is a holy virgin, touched only by God—a vestal, a mystic, inspired by God with some knowledge of his sacred truths. And she is literate; she writes her songs from the mind of God:

Intactum corpus concutit omne deus ...
Multum mea mecum dixerunt carmina carmen—
Carmina, quae scribo, noverit illa deus. (ll. 2, 5-6)
My virgin body God has set trembling in every limb ...
Many a song my own singings have uttered within myself:
The songs that I write, those God has known.

The poem ends with a humble prayer for the close of her life:

En ego mortalis, quae scivi, carmina dixi ...
Digna si sum, rapiat animamque in sidere condat.
Vita brevis hominis finita solvitur annis. (ll. 133, 135-136)
Now I, a mortal, have uttered the songs that I knew ...
If I am worthy, may he seize me and set my soul on a star.
The brief life of man when ended is melted with the years.

She opens her song by the swift evocation of the creation, as God picks night and day out of chaos 'to take turns with their luminaries and be moved with the stars' (l. 13). In four lines she encompasses the flood, the rainbow covenant, the incarnation of Christ—'when the Father approached closer (l. *proprius*) to himself in that birth' (l. 20). Her verse then flows into wider contemplation of this mystery, 'when he came down as a lamb—he whom the circle of the world could hardly hold' (l. 24) and now 'absolves the globe of its guilt' (l. 28). After a brief kingship, he will return to the skies:

Pacatumque reget patriis virtutibus orbem,
Postea caelos repetens et patris aurea tecta. (ll. 31-32)
He shall rule an earth made peaceful by his father's virtues,
Afterwards returning to the heavens and his father's golden roofs.

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[11] A new edition of the *Prophetia*, based on a fresh study of the three MSS, will be published by Peter Dronke, with extensive discussion of the poem, in *Studi medievali*. An extract is edited, op. cit. n. 2, pp. 30-32.

8

From tender praise of God—'who allows me to speak, though he restrains the whole ocean !' (l. 34)—her thought turns to his consummate knowledge, penetrating even to uncommitted sins:

Ignis vobis notus est solis, qui scire potestis
Mortales sensus et cogitata crimina nostis. (ll. 51-52)
The fire of the sun is known to you, who can comprehend
Mortal feelings and have knowledge of crimes still in the mind.

In terror of human perdition, she calls on 'mortal man' to think of his misdeeds and prays God not to give her over to 'blood and fire' (l. 54). And yet she 'expects fire', and that she will be 'twice burnt' (ll. 57-58), though she knows that her 'form will return to her' (l. 56). Nothing can prevent the end: all worldly power, all magic arts are useless to forestall it, and 'no reader of auguries can bring comfort' (l. 72). The senility of the world is growing self-evident:

Cuncta fessa claudunt: honor, potentia, regnum. (l. 73)
All things limp in weariness: honour, power, sovereignty.

God will withdraw to 'the threshold of a snowy world' and give to his saints radiance to rest in (ll. 74-75). They pray that his wrath against man should cease (l. 76), and by their faith soften God's heart. He opens his grief to them, telling of the hurt that mankind has caused him. They have not recognized the marvellous Creator, nor perceived the ineffable delicacy and love with which their world was fashioned for them. Coarsely, they worship the world and not its maker—why did he save them?

En ego, cur meo redemi sanguine cunctos? (l. 110)
But I—why have I redeemed all with my blood?

'Their greed was greater than their dread of darkness' (l. 112) and that will be their destruction—

Ut mea sit anima, ipse me non tempore quaeret. (l. 113)
For man's soul to be mine, he will not seek me in time.

The sibyl exhorts men to learn before it is too late: not to lament only, but labour for reward, for time runs on to an end that is beyond her knowledge—

Urgentur anni, ad finem saecula currunt,
Quem deus novit et mihi scire negavit. (ll. 116-117)
The years are driven on, the ages run to an end,
Which God knows and has denied me knowledge of.

She watches the physical failing of the world—'all things grow small, the stars grow faint, the lands melt ...' (ll. 119-120).

Yet the sibyl offers hope—faith will purge guilt, and God 'will command a pure radiance to remain for ever' (l. 125). She rejoices in the ideal society that is to come—'under such a lord the rich shall have no place—the poor shall be rich, who believed from the depths of his heart'

(ll. 127-128). Sin has no future: 'to do exceedingly well, that is the short path to life' (ll. 129-130). She herself sets her hope upon a star (l. 135).

In its moral and eschatological themes the *Prophetia* has much in common with the Greek Sibylline Oracles, but it is clear from its unusual theology and the vitality of its rare idiom that it is a fresh creation within a still-living sibylline tradition, not an isolated antiquarian work. To have such a poem to compare with *Vǫluspá* is most fortunate.

That is the first scholarly advance in the field of Norse sibylline studies since the days of Bang and Rydberg. The second is in the interpretation of the text of *Vǫluspá* itself. Though Rydberg recognized the excellence of the construction of the poem, he still found many passages incomprehensible and confused. Today very few lines defy interpretation. We are in a far better position, therefore, to judge the poet's use of Christian sources and the intention of his poem.

Of the many ways in which we could compare and contrast the *Prophetia* and *Vǫluspá*, I shall select two.

I The moral structure of the two poems

The *Prophetia*, like all the Sibylline Oracles, focusses on the behaviour of men, *Vǫluspá* on the behaviour of gods. Men, in the *Prophetia*, are represented as having the power to save themselves from destruction after death through faith and atonement for sin:

> Facta gravant homines, perdunt cogitata nocentem;
> Sed perit exultans, ut fides crimina purget.
> Tunc genus omne reparabit, quod reddit ex se. (ll. 122-124)
> *Deeds weigh men down, contemplated deeds destroy the miscreant;*
> *But he dies exulting, that faith may purge his guilts.*
> *Then the whole race will restore what it repays from itself.*

God will award the prize of life to the pure, and fixed abodes—*habitacula* (l. 126). The poem is a solemn and anguished presentation of choice, and the destiny of each soul lies in the balance of will. As for the world, it is already doomed: it is weak and failing physically, because mankind is weak and failing morally. Only the great Judgement, when the world has ended, will give man his chance to live again.

The moral situation is not so simple in *Vǫluspá*. The certain coming of the end of the world is a central theme in the poem, but it is not—primarily—a moral theme. The poet represents Ragnarǫk, the dying of the gods and of the world, as a product of time. No act of the gods causes it, and no act of theirs can prevent it. Yet the popular and dreadful conviction that the world is moving to its end may—and in many cultures

does—bring with it the fear of a moral cause: the fear that the inevitable guilts and errors of the past are calling for ablution. So cosmic destruction becomes cosmic cleansing, and a brave new untarnished world will spring from it.

In *Vǫluspá* the moral superstitions associated with the ending of the world can be heard in two variations, one composed from heathen traditions, one from Christian. The poet makes them sound together as Ragnarǫk approaches.

In the Christian tradition that the poet has used, the last days of the world are days of human vice and merciless human violence, a time of such moral depravity indeed that the destruction of the world—a wholly human world—seems a despairing act of self-destruction: the world will 'fling itself' into annihilation—*verǫld steypiz* (st. 45). An end both due and deserved. This tradition is richly found in the Sibylline Oracles (though never so succinctly expressed).

In the heathen tradition that the poet has used, the progress to the end of the world is a dialectic of power untouched by human influence. The gigantic forces of cosmic murder become with time more insistent, more impudent (cf. sts. 8, 25). [12] At their climax of strength they inflict physical death upon the gods. The divinely ordered cosmos sinks black and burning back into the primordial ocean (cf. sts. 50-57).

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[12] St. 8 is allusive. As we do not know the story we have to guess at it. We are told that the gods were playing at *tafl*, were happy, had an abundance of gold, until three giant-girls of uncanny strength came from Giant-Land. The sequence of statements implies that the giant-girls put a stop to their carefree enjoyment of wealth. Keeping strictly to the context we are given, I would suggest that the cunning girls outplayed—out-gambled—the gods at their own game, and halted their easy run of luck: much, perhaps, as Midir from the fairy underworld challenged Eochaid, king of Erin, to a game of chess, allowing him to win the first games easily, but to lose the last, in which his wife was at stake (in *The Courtship of Etain*, translated by A. H. Leahy, *Heroic Romances of Ireland*, vol. I (London, 1905), pp. 23-32; see especially pp. 28-30). That the game in *Vǫluspá* ended in disorder, with the gods in furious bad temper overturning the chequer-board—as players who felt themselves cheated often did—is suggested by the fact that the golden chequer-pieces are found in the grass in the new world (st. 61)—just, no doubt, where they had fallen in the old. For a comparable scene of temper see *Óláfs saga Helga* ch. 153 in *Heimskringla*, *Íslenzk Fornrit* 27 (Reykjavík, 1945). King Knútr Sveinsson makes a false move that loses his knight to jarl Úlfr, and he wishes to take it back and replay the move: 'The Earl was furious and flung down the chess-board, got up and strode away' (*Jarl reiddisk ok skaut niðr taflborðinu, stóð upp ok gekk í brot*; p. 285). For further instances of quarrels over board-games, which were always played for stakes, see Willard Fiske, *Chess in Iceland and in Icelandic Literature* (Florence, 1905) especially pp. 9-23.

In st. 25 a giant in disguise as a harmless master-mason tries to win from the gods by a wager the fruitfulness and light of their world: the goddess Freyja and the sun and moon. Though the poet of *Vǫluspá* lets us glimpse the element of comedy in the discomfiture of the overconfident gods, he makes even plainer the menace that lies under the comedy.

In *Vǫluspá* the physical death of the gods appears as a consummation of heroic courage: dedicated and soldierly and wholly admirable. There is grief for their deaths: the grief for Óðinn's fall is a 'second' grief for Frigg, as grievous to her, that is, as her sorrow for Baldr, and as tender (cf. *Friggiar...angan*, st. 53); Freyr's death brings grief for his gleaming, branchy world blackened by killing fire (cf. *með sviga lævi*, st. 52), and with anguish we see great Þórr's strength ebbing (cf. *neppr*, st. 56). There is nostalgia and sorrow for the dying gods and no word of blame. Nor is there any word of blame or regret when the new Æsir in the new world talk of the past (st. 60).

Before the heralding of the gods' last battle, however, the poet has placed the *vǫlva*'s vision of the punishment of human sinners (st. 39) and the corruption of the human world (st. 45). Does he intend some moral reference in this to the gods themselves—the chief, almost the only, protagonists in the poem? Are we to think that the gods die because they deserve to die, because their world, like the human world, has become corrupt? If the poet does *not* wish to imply this, how is the Christian moral tradition at all relevant to his presentation of Ragnarǫk?

There is no suggestion in *Vǫluspá* that the gods suffer moral decline. In Norse sources the gods—with the exception of Baldr—are not commonly commended for moral perfection, and they appear in *Vǫluspá* as they traditionally do in tales of their deeds in archaic times—*í árdaga*—namely, as the enactors of myth, with many morally ambiguous roles to play in the service of myth.

The poet of *Vǫluspá* makes no direct statement on the moral nature of the gods: nevertheless, he does lead a quasi-moral thread through the course of events in their divine world. As the poem progresses, his image of the gods changes focus; they approach more and more closely a human likeness, until, with their mortality upon them, they seem like tragic heroes whose death is nobler than anything in their lives. Throughout their 'lives'—the cosmic cycle through which in the poem they reign—the poet shows them responding to the incursions of the gigantic forces with acts that successively diminish the vast initial stature of sovereignty and sanctity that they seemed to possess—*ginnheilǫg goð*—in primordial days, and expose them in closer view as the familiar gods, the Æsir of human worship and legend—vulnerable, limited, prone to 'ungodlike' error. The poet deliberately turns to traditions that do not show only the divine attributes of the gods, but the human ones with which men have invested them: the hubris, the frivolity, lack of foresight, that make them the butt of comedy in a myriad popular tales. For popular comedy is almost always a comedy of errors, and it is these originally comic errors that the poet makes use of to build a sequence of divine mistakes that form steps to Ragnarǫk. This sequence of errors becomes, within the overall theme of

cyclic time, a quasi-moral sub-plot, whose own theme is the link between luck and error.

The plot shows the movement towards Ragnarǫk as revealing itself in the waning of the gods' luck. They are *heillum horfin* [13] –abandoned by their auspicious fortunes–as their time runs out, the time of which they themselves began the reckoning (cf. st. 6). The waning of their luck is manifest in the three episodes that the poet has chosen to exemplify the falling away of the gods' supremacy: all three are connected in some way with the hazards of game and sport.

Firstly, and most conspicuously, the gods lose the game of *tafl*, their symbol of cosmic control, [14] and they can never resume it until the new earth restores the pieces (sts. 8, 58). Secondly, for the sake of a wager–confident that the giant builder will lose his race against time–they are led into swearing oaths, which they are later obliged to break to save Ásgarðr from destruction (sts. 25, 26). [15] These broken oaths find their direct retribution in the circumventing of the oaths sworn to protect Baldr. The poet reveals the hidden connection that he is making between the two occasions of oath-swearing by using a double-edged phrase, *á gengoz eiðar*, which means both 'oaths (1) were violated, and (2) countervailed each other' (st. 26). [16]

The force of this equation of oaths is seen in the third episode of hazard (which the poet assumes we know in a fuller version than he gives). The gods, in order to rejoice in and exhibit the immortality of Baldr, now play a game of target-practice in the very sanctuary of the Assembly-ground itself, with Baldr as their target–so blindly do they trust in the protecting oaths. It proves a perfect occasion for his killing (st. 32). The physical blindness of his killer is indeed symbolic.

It is in keeping with the intrinsic theme of fatal hazard that the poet elsewhere in the poem represents the determination of human fates (st.

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[13] This apt phrase is not from *Vǫluspá*, but from prose idiom; see Fritzner, svv. *heill* f. and *horfinheilla*. For a variant discussion of this theme of luck, see Ursula Dronke, 'Marx, Engels and Norse Mythology', *Leeds Studies in English. New Series 20. Studies in Honour of H. L. Rogers* (University of Leeds, 1989), 40-42.

[14] Cf. A. G. van Hamel, 'The game of the Gods', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 50 (Lund, 1934), pp. 218-242, for valuable discussion of this point.

[15] Cf. Ursula Dronke, '*Völuspá* and satiric tradition', *AION 22: Studi per Mario Gabrieli. Studi nederlandesi, Studi nordici. Annali dell' Istituto Universitario Orientale* (Napoli, 1979), 57-86, for the poet's handling of the legend of the giant-builder in *Vǫluspá*.

[16] This argument is presented with detailed discussion in my edition of *Vǫluspá* in the forthcoming *Poetic Edda* II. The second interpretation of *á gengoz* is most clearly paralleled in *Reykdœla saga* ch. 18, *Íslenzk Fornrit* 10 (Reykjavík, 1940), p. 210: *Sú var gørð þeira, at á gengusk vígin húskarlanna* ('This was their settlement, that the killings of the house-carls should be reckoned against each other').

20) and the divination of destiny, even in the new world (st. 63), as forms of lottery.

The gods have been tricked into committing errors, and any error will bring its own fate with it—despite all extenuating circumstances. [17] The fate it brings is potential bad luck, an incubus upon the future. Frigg identifies aberration with fate—*ørlǫg*—when she refers with horror to the obscene (but comic) travesties of Óðinn and Loki *í árdaga*. She dreads exposure of these deeds, lest the mere mention of them should awaken bad luck: one should put the deeds of the past far behind—*firriz æ forn rǫk fírar* (*Lokasenna* 25). For there is always the possibility that an error will escape its fate; that is when one is lucky. It is in this hope of escape that Frigg fears the vaunting of dubious deeds; she warns against ill-omened speech, as if she were constantly placating an elemental malevolence that will visit the deed upon the doer and turn the fear of bad luck into reality.

It would seem, then, that there have been two opposite ways of regarding Ragnarǫk and the ending of the world in native Norse tradition: tradition, that is, without any discernible dependence upon Christian thought. One is the tradition without moral emphasis: pragmatic, calm, optimistic: unconcerned with guilt or menace. This tradition is most fully seen in *Vafþrúðnismál*. There, in st. 18, Óðinn imperturbably recites the correct name and precise measurements of the fatal battlefield, *Vígríðr*, where it is destined that 'the sweet gods', *in sváso goð*, will encounter the overwhelming fire of Surtr. The death of Óðinn himself, in the cold jaws of the wolf, is accorded no moral comment, no sentiment here other than pride in the prompt vengeance of his son Víðarr, who tears apart the murderous jaws (st. 53). Vafþrúðnir confirms the renewal of the world after Ragnarǫk with all the assurance of his giant knowledge: a last human pair—'Life' and 'Life-Speeder'—will hide in the world-tree's grove, to re-people the earth when the great winter—the *fimbulvetr*—is over (st. 45); it is never suggested that this is because of any moral merit on their part. When the old sun has been destroyed by the wolf, her daughter will ride the roads of smooth heaven in her place (st. 47); and when the flames of Surtr's fire have died away, two sons of Óðinn and two sons of Þórr will inherit from their fathers the sanctuaries of the gods and the mighty hammer that defends them (st. 51; Víðarr the silent, who destroys the wolf, is one of these sons). And—perhaps even more remarkable—when the course of the present age is run—*í aldar rǫk*—the hostage-god Njǫrðr will 'come back home to the wise—the future-knowing—Vanir' (st. 39). Ragnarǫk cannot affect the realm of the Vanir, for they are always alive in the world of the dead. Their home must have been like the *Gimlé* of

[17] For example, it could well be argued that, as Þórr was not present at the oath-swearing of the gods, he was not bound to respect the giant's safety.

Vǫluspá 64, 'sheltered from the flames' of the world's end, a place of 'shining plains' – *Glæsisvellir* – or a 'cornfield of immortality' – *Ódáinsakr* – perpetually returning after the cyclic storms of time for new life to live in, like the 'eddying plains' – *Iðavellir* – of *Vǫluspá* (sts. 7, 60).[18]

The other traditional way of regarding Ragnarǫk is the satirist's way, the way of anger, accusation and pessimism. Loki demonstrates it in *Lokasenna*. All the acts of the gods can be jeered at and degraded and the coming of Ragnarǫk can be seen as a curse on their worthlessness (cf. *Lokasenna* 65). The comedy of errors has turned into a comedy of vice.

This second, accusatory, tradition, in which the gods are treated like human delinquents, opens the gate wide for Christian moral teaching to undermine Norse heathen faith. [19] The poet of *Vǫluspá* has not chosen this path. He has not chosen the myths that Loki has made malignant. He has not shown a divine world in degeneration. He has followed Christian tradition here and shown the human world as degenerate. In Norse theology the human role is subordinate to the divine. Men are the followers of the gods, they cling to the girdle of divine strength as the gods wade through death – just as Þjálfi clung to the *megingjǫrðr* of Þórr when he fought his way through the baleful flood of Vimur. [20] But the evil men in stanza 39, as they wade through the 'heavy streams' of their death, have no god to help them. They suffer absolute death in the maw of snake and wolf. [21] In stanza 45, in a passionate chaos of killing and lechery, men turn against themselves and destroy themselves. The gods do not do so. They turn against the monsters of death, and the human heroes from Hel fight with them. The gods are the sustainers of life, and resistance to death is the epitomization of their divine function.

So, after Ragnarǫk, when the world is renewed, the human heroes – the 'worthy hosts', *dyggvar dróttir* – again accompany their gods in the new,

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[18] On *Glæsisvellir* and *Ódáinsakr* cf. Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin, 1956, 1957), Sect. 519. I interpret *Iðavǫllr* as a comparable place-name, in which *Iða*, 'eddy', relates to 'return', 'rejuvenation', as in the goddess-name *Iðunn*.

[19] Hjalti Skeggjason in 999 uses this opening well. He makes up an epigram in which Freyja is called a bitch; he is outlawed for blasphemy. A year later, Christianity is accepted, and Hjalti is a free man; cf. *Íslendingabók* ch. 7, *Íslenzk Fornrit* 1. 1 (Reykjavík, 1968), p. 15.

[20] Eilífr Goðrúnarson, *Þórsdrápa* st. 9 (interpreting *skaunar seil* as 'band of defence', i. e. the girdle of strength, since Þórr has no shield – *skaun* – with him), *Skjaldedigtning* B I, p. 141. Snorri in his prose version of the tale has Loki, not Þjálfi, as Þórr's companion, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1931), p. 106.

[21] I am basing my concept here of 'absolute' Nordic death on the way in which *revenants* or *draugar* are prevented from continuing to live: pierced through the heart, or burnt to cold coals. No work that I know on Norse deals with this vital question. I am assuming, in my interpretation of *Vǫluspá*, that the poet means the monster-consumed corpses not to return to life.