

LOKI AS A TERRIBLE STRANGER AND A SACRED VISITOR

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Loki still remains one of the enigmatic figures in the Norse pantheon, although many scholars have endeavored to explain Loki's complicated character from various points of view. It might be said, following the criticism of John S. Martin, that the former attempts fail to give a complete explanation of Loki's nature, but concentrate on one or more aspects in isolation (p. 88). I believe that the total figure of Loki could be disclosed, if we would direct our notice to a certain specific pattern of action of Loki. That is to say, Loki, by nature, comes from the other world and intrudes into the divine world, or into 'our' world in a semiological sense. In other words, Loki can be defined as a traveling deity, who is invested with preeminent divine powers, especially when making a completion of a difficult journey, and therefore Loki appears to be a sacred visitor, sometimes, or to be a terrible stranger, at other times.

In the twenties of this century, Shinobu Orikuchi, one of the pioneers of Japanese folklore, offered a brilliant idea of Mare-bito (interpreted as 'a sacred visitor') in order to explain the stereotyped stories of Old Japanese literature and a series of folkloric phenomena, which are still observed even today. Orikuchi gives a definition of Mare-bito as follows: "'Marebito is originally some divinity, who coming from 'the paradisiacal region beyond the ocean' (called Tokoyo: '常世'), would regularly pay a visit to the villages in olden times to bring forth happiness and fortunes for the people'". Orikuchi maintains that Mare means 'rare', with the original sense of 'the only', 'solitary' and 'respectful', and that Bito, or Hito which is commonly used in modern Japanese, originally means the 'person who is invested with divine

powers'. In 1928, Masao Oka, a Japanese ethnologist, wrote the introductory but monumental essay on the stranger, saying that primitive people generally hold an ambivalent inclination toward Ijin (with the meanings of 'stranger', 'alien' and 'visitor from a foreign country'), sometimes showing their respectful and favorable attitude by thinking that Ijin might be some divinity, or, at other times, assuming their hostile and defiant attitude, as if he were a progeny of some demon or evil spirit coming from the other world. For further relevance, it would be more appropriate to differentiate this ambivalent character of a stranger by referring to them as either 'a fortunate stranger' or 'a terrible stranger'. And Marebito or a venerably divine stranger, especially at the time of his arrival, can be called 'a sacred visitor', or 'der sakrale Besucher' in the term of Alexander Slawik.

Since his opportune encounter with M. Oka, and through some period of joint research with him (when Oka studied at the University of Vienna in 1929-35), Slawik has shaped his ideas about the stranger aspect in olden cultures. It is well-known, especially after his impressive work was translated into Japanese in 1984, that Slawik is one of a few European scholars who pointed out the uncanny similarities between Old Germanic and Old Japanese cultures, from the perspective of 'Kultische Geheimbünde', on which Otto Höfler (1934) had accomplished an elaborate work in the field of Old Germanic culture. While he ingeniously noticed the significant similarities between the Norse god Odin and the Japanese stranger-divinity Susa-no-o, either of whom would pay a visit in disguise to the community, assuming the character of a culture hero and a ruler of the death world, Slawik failed to notice the stranger aspect of Loki, Baldr, Hqðr, and Beowulf. At any rate, his revealing work would be a breakthrough for future research and give validity to the comparative study between Old Norse and Old Japanese mythology.

Thus I have applied the Japanese stranger theory to the interpretations of the Norse myths in order to shed fresh light upon the figure of divinities and

herces, such as Njqrđr, Baldr, Hqrđr, Loki, Starkađ and Beowulf. In my recent paper entitled "'Beowulf As A Terrible Stranger'" (in The Journal of Indo-European Studies, vol. 17, 1989: Although it is awful to say, there are many misprints and a few errors, for the author had no chance to proofread the article before it was published), I proposed my view that Beowulf might commit the apparently accidental killing of Herebeald, a Geatish prince with the nominal connotation of the Norse god Baldr, in the comparative study together with the Norse myth of Loki's instigation to shoot Baldr to death and the Lydian legend on the accidental killing of Atys (in History of Herodotus: Book I. 34-46). Beowulf, in my view, turned out to hold the same character of a terrible stranger, just as Loki in the Baldr myth and Adrastus in the Lydian legend. Conclusively, as is accounted explicitly or implicitly in the Anglo-Saxon poem, Beowulf reveals the ambivalent character of a stranger, 'a fortunate stranger' and 'a terrible stranger'. That is, Beowulf shows the aspect of a fortunate stranger, when he would appear before the Danish people to overcome the monster Grendel and his dam, and could eventually relieve the Danes from distress, or when he becomes a stranger-king to rule the Geats in peace for fifty years. But on the other hand, Beowulf, originally coming from the people of the Wægmundings, turns out to reveal another aspect of a terrible stranger, from my perspective that he would be responsible for the successive deaths and the downfall of the Geatish royal family. Such an ambivalent character of the stranger can be also true of the figure of Loki.

To summarize the mythological themes of Loki (with another name Loptr 'sky-traveller', according to E.O.G. Turville-Petre) as a traveling deity, Loki habitually yearns to intrude into the divine world and shrewdly stays there, even though he is said to be the son of a giant. But eventually at the outbreak of some mishap, he is expelled from there, charged with all the responsibilities of the distress and the misfortunes, which befall the gods and throw their world into confusion. Then Loki is compelled to make a journey almost

alone, and regains his own status of the wanderer. In other words, at this stage, he is given an opportunity to become a 'terrible' or 'fortunate' stranger. Loki appears to be a fortunate stranger, when he comes back, after some period of time, to make sufficient amends for the past misfortunes. In that case, Loki turns out to be a bounteous provider or Marebito, who brings forth the precious treasures for the gods (Sksm 43). From this viewpoint, we should give much deeper significance to a series of the provider myths of Loki, possibly than Anna Birgitta Rooth (1961) appreciated. At the time of his re-appearance, Loki must have assumed preeminent divine power, beyond any other god, as he accomplished a difficult journey from the other world, or from the faraway lands of elves, dwarfs, or giants. Paradoxically, in this respect, Loki is somewhat like Christ who is said to be reborn after his own sufferings. Thus the myths revealingly tell that only Loki could relieve the gods from various kinds of distress. But sometimes, especially when gods or the people had enjoyed blissful happiness and peace, the sudden and unexpected appearance of a stranger could be a premonition of the occurrence of some awful misfortune. According to a mythical account (Ls), for instance, it was when Fimafeng, a servant of the sea-god Ægir, earned unstinted praise from every attendant of the divine feast, that he was killed by Loki. Besides, at the time when Baldr apparently proved to be invulnerable from any direct attack, Loki's instigation triggered off his death (Gylf 49). The mistletoe, which rightly flew and killed Baldr who had been put in the center of the divine gathering, must be symbolic of magical powers of strangers who were thought to have desires to live within the core of the divine world, in an epistemological sense, as is mentioned below.

Revealing the ambivalent character of a sacred visitor and a terrible stranger, Loki must be a representative of strangers. As is readily acknowledged, Loki is told to be responsible for almost any kind of crisis and calamity, but Loki himself retrieves the situations, sometimes making much more satisfactory

amends, than the party concerned might expect. Loki, in that case, is nothing but a North Germanic Marebito who would bring forth happiness and fortunes for the people. Loki is, as it were, the 'only one' (Mare) that can be properly entitled to recover the universal principle of life and death, and to make the temporarily suspended world move over again. Thus Loki plays an integral part of a traveling deity in the myths, including the primary mythological themes of creation and destruction, such as anthropogony (as the name Lodurr: Vsp 18) and Ragnarok (Gylf 51). Quite ironically, Loki works as a Christian agent to destroy the pagan world, in a sense.

Masao Yamaguchi (1975), one of the leading ethnologists in Japan, explicated the appearance of strangers from the phenomenological and semeiological standpoints, making use of the terms, 'center' and 'periphery'. In Yamaguchi's terms, it is generally acknowledged that people are inclined to distinguish 'our world' from 'their world' and that our world, in an epistemological sense, keeps on occupying 'the center' of the universe, casting their world away into the peripheral areas. As Yamaguchi tells us, such a world view is merely a product of an inner state of our subconsciousness, and so people have to forge the fictitious world of 'theirs' in the region of peripheries, even if 'they' were not to exist, in order to reinforce 'our' solidarity and to maintain 'our' identity. It goes without saying that any stranger is usually put into one of 'their peripheral' regions. Upon 'his' arrival or intrusion into 'our' world, however, the stranger can be held to be a revelatory being who might cast light on the vulnerability of our community. Thus 'He' turns out to exert benevolent or malevolent influences upon the inner incongruities of our central domain.

As far as we retain such a world view, strangers are easy to appear at the boundary between our world and theirs. Obviously, the Norse creation myth typifies such an ideology of the world, giving an account that gods are to dwell in Asgard as the center of the universe, human beings are positioned in

Midgard, and the races of giants, their antagonists, are forced to dwell in Utgard. Thus the inner, middle, and outer worlds are disposed so definitely that these mythological conceptions would naturally open the way for strangers to come over and over again into the inner region. Loki reveals himself indubitably as such a typical figure of strangers, who are indispensable for 'our' world to be activated. Accordingly, Loki either as a sacred visitor or as a terrible stranger would make his appearance before 'us' in those times, to bridge the gap among the different regions and to activate the universe, or to throw some established order into confusion and eventually to create a new order.

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