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## In the beginning was the Scream Conceptual thought in the Old Norse myth of creation

The masculine name formation *Ymir* is mentioned in one of the *þulur*, the name lists, of Snorri's Edda as a *heiti*, a synonymous name, for 'hawk'. As such we are in no doubt that the name is derived from *ymja* 'to scream' and may refer to the bird's shriek. The very closeness to the similarly derived noun *ymr* 'scream, noise' makes it hard to miss the association and must have been evident to any Old Norse audience.

Ymir is also the name of the proto-giant of Old Norse cosmogony. In this context, however, the consensus supports the name meaning 'twin' or 'hermaphrodite', derived from the theoretical Indo-European root-word *\*iemo* 'twin'. This may not have been quite as obvious to our Old Norse audience as it seems to be to the modern historians of religions. The etymology is favored by the latter group because Ymir thus becomes comparable with twin-figures of myths from other cultures. It was first suggested exactly eighty years ago by Hermann Günther (1923), and has been unanimously supported and explicated by scholars of the comparativist observation ever since. To my knowledge, no one outside the comparativist circles have found reason to protest, either.

Nevertheless I intend to show that 'scream' constitutes the better meaning for the name Ymir. Ymir is presented to us in the poems *Grimnismál* 40-41 and *Vafþrúðnismál* 21, where he is referred to as *inn hrimkaldr iötunn* 'the rime-cold giant'. Earth was created from his flesh, mountains from his bones, the firmament from his skull, the sea from his sweat, trees from his hair, storm clouds from his brain – "and from his eyelashes the kind powers made Midgard for the sons of man" (*en ór hans brám gærðo blíð regin miðgarð manna sonum*).

Very clearly, Ymir is here described both as a giant and as the raw material from which the gods created the world. This accords with the observation made by Margaret Clunies Ross (1994, 68): "Characteristically [...] the gods covet important natural resources which the giants own, then steal them and turn them to their own advantage by utilising them to create culture, that is, they put the giants' raw materials to work for themselves. These raw materials are of diverse kinds and include intellectual capital such as the ability to brew ale as well as the cauldron in which it is made, and abstractions made concrete like the mead of poetry and the runes of wisdom." Clunies Ross later adds that the giants' raw materials also "may take the form of abstract entities, like the knowledge of past and future events that Óðinn seeks" (1994, 128). To this list of raw materials the proto-giant himself, Ymir, may be added.

The cosmogony thus is in keeping with a paradigmatic theme recurring in several Old Norse myths: That which belongs to the sphere of giants are natural resources, and these resources become culturally useful only through the creativity of the gods. This creativity – including the creation of the world – is the process that transforms the raw material into the world as we know it. As this transformation is effected by the gods, the creation myth may illuminate how the power of the gods is thought to influence and shape the world in practical terms, and generally how the spiritual and the concrete spheres are thought to work in relationship with each other in Old Norse mythology and religion.

Of course, the process of creation is dependent on the nature of the raw material. A processing is defined by its raw material, just like tree or iron defines whether it needs carpentry or forging. By understanding the nature and character of the raw material – in this case by understanding what Ymir is or represents – we may also be able to define the nature of the gods' activities.

Ymir is defined as a giant, and Vafþrúðnismál characterizes the nature of giants in a separate origin myth (st. 28-35) a few stanzas after the cosmogony (st. 20-21). Ymir is linked to the origin myth by the kenning *Ymis niðjar* 'Ymir's descendants' for the race of giants. This is apparently not to be taken literally – the kenning is also known with other giant names, and the poem represents Aurgelmir, not Ymir, as the primordial being from whom all giants trace their lineage. According to Vafþrúðnismál 30-31, Aurgelmir was made by poisonous drops spraying off the waves of Élivágar (*Ór élivágom stukko eitrdropar svá óx unz ór varð iötunn*). Élivágar means 'stormy sea' or 'sea of strife', and the meaning of the myth seems to be that the race of giants originated from the depths of the aggressive and the destructive, that which can not be controlled. A threatening chaos seems to be implied.

In Völuspá 3 we find another characterization of Ymir, this time by his environment: "It was the dawn of time. There where Ymir resided was neither sand nor sea nor cool waves. Earth did not exist, nor heaven above – it was a gap of *ginnungar* – and grass nowhere." (*Ár var alda þar er ymir byggði vara sandr né sær né svalar unnir iörð fannz æva né upphiminn gap var ginnunga en gras hvergi.*) This place, the Ginnunga gap, is characterized by what it is not. It is not all the things defining the tangible, visible world. In other words, it is an abyss of something intangible and invisible. Jan de Vries (1931, 65) identified this 'something' as *Zauberkraft*, magical power, in an argument that may be outdated due to the lack of reflection on the actual role of magic in Old Norse myth and society (cf. Raudvere 1998, 136 n.24). In my opinion, we need to take the meaning of *ginnungar* one step further than 'magic' and see it as denoting the encounter with the incredible as such, be it *Zauberkraft*, sacred mysteries, or trickery by impenetrable illusions like the *ginning* of Gylfi. The prefix *ginn-* likewise denotes not 'magic', but something beyond comprehension, like *ginnheilög*, incredibly holy, more holy than we can grasp, or *\*ginnrúnar*, inconceivable secrets. This accords well with the description of Ginnungagap by a series of negations – it is a 'place' beyond description in conceivable positive terms.

Accordingly, this environment defines, or at least informs, Ymir as a being of the intangible, the invisible and the inconceivable – or in other words, of the abstract, the intellectual and the spiritual (which in the end may not be that different from *Zauberkraft*). The giant nature informs this abstract 'matter' as chaotic and threatening. This is the raw material of which the world is made. When the gods created the world, they took control of the raw material, ordered it and made it conceivable and comprehensible to us. How did they do it?

According to Völuspá 4 the state of abstraction represented by Ymir in Ginnungagap lasted "until the sons of Burr did *yppa* the grounds" (*ádr burs synir biöðum um yppo*). The verb *yppa* have several denotations – lift, raise, bring up, come into being, proclaim, reveal. Usually, in this case, it is translated 'raise' – the gods raised the earth. Thus we get the vision of the trinity of Odin, Vili and Vé raising the Earth out of the sea, a vision that may be wrong in every detail. The interpretation is due to Völuspá 59 where the seeress, after her great vision of Ragnarok and the end of the world, sees the rebirth of the Earth as it ascends from the sea: "She sees coming up, for the second time, earth from the sea..." (*Sér hon upp koma öðro sinni iörð ór ægi...*). If the Earth after Ragnarok ascends from the sea for the second time, the first time may very well have been when "the sons of Burr did *yppa* the grounds" in Völuspá 4 (even though the Earth apparently does not need a lift the second time). But actually there's no mention of being raised from the sea the first time around, neither in Völuspá, nor in Snorri's Edda or any other source of the Old Norse cosmogony. Needless to say, neither does this interpretation fit with the myth of creation by dismemberment of Ymir's body.

Rather, we may be faced with a problem of translation, here. The phrase *öðro sinni* 'for the second time' in Völuspá 59 could actually refer to *sér hon* 'she sees' in stead of the

Earth coming up. After remembering the events of the first part of the poem (including the creation of the world), the seeress has her first grand vision of the destruction of the Earth, including the events leading up to it. Now she sees for the second time – she now has her second vision of things to come. It is in fact reasonable to discern a separation in two of the seeress' vision at exactly this point. According to the seeress in Hyndluljóð 44, this is the point in the future where few dare to see further – *fáir séa nú fram um lengra*.

The gods did not raise the Earth from the sea. According to Grímnismál they created the world from a raw material, the body-parts of Ymir. We are not told how the gods did it in this poem, but Völuspá fills in the gap if we accept that the two poems belong to the same tradition (perhaps reflected in their common inclusion in Codex Regius?). When the sons of Burr did *yppa* the world, they made it come into being from the parts of Ymir. As mentioned, *yppa* may also mean 'proclaim' and this, I am convinced, is what the gods did. They proclaimed Ymir's flesh to be earth, his bones to be mountains, his sweat to be sea, etc. They created the world by ordering and defining it in a comprehensible way. They proclaimed the world by transforming Ymir – the scream – into words. The scream is the raw material of words. Words are shaping the world.

In the retelling in Snorri's Edda, in Gylfaginning chapters 4-8, of how the gods created the world from the giant's body-parts – generally following Grímnismál 40-41 which Snorri quotes – 'proclamation' is not the word that comes to mind. Snorri relates how the gods made a bloody mess of killing the proto-giant. In fact, all the giants of the time drowned in the blood spilling from the murder – all but one couple who promptly proceeded to reestablish *status quo* by procreating new generations of giants. Snorri accentuates his version by having the gods create the sea from the proto-giant's blood rather than his sweat as the poems have it. The distinction may only be in words, not in meaning. Poetically, blood or sweat may double as any other body-fluid. Nevertheless, words are a distinction. Rather than seeing this as conflicting contents, Snorri's version of the myth may simply reflect different levels of concepts, understanding and interpretation. It may, however, also be Snorri's own invention.

According to Snorri, Ymir and his ilk were evil which was why the gods killed the proto-giant and thereby attempted to drown the entire race of giants. But the giant Bergelmir and his wife escaped the deluge on a *luðr* which Snorri apparently understands as an ark (Faulkes 1988, 121). Bergelmir on a *luðr* (without a wife) is the earliest memory of the giant Vafþrúðnir according to Vafþrúðnismál 35 which Snorri quotes as his source. In the context of the poem, the *luðr* is probably a cradle – the point of the stanza seems to be that Bergelmir was naturally born, as opposed to his father who was generated otherwise. A *luðr* may also be a coffin, however, for which another word is *örk* like in the Ark of the Covenant (a chest), but also like in the Ark of Noah (a ship). The association between coffin and ark – supplemented by kennings for the sea like 'Ymir's blood' and 'neck-wound of the giant' – seems to have led Snorri to piece together an Old Norse parallel of the biblical deluge. The giveaway is the fact that Snorri's myth is not primarily concerned with the creation of the world. The killing of Ymir is not motivated by the need for raw materials, but is rather a Christian inspired act of divine punishment of evil – just like the Flood. The creation of the world is not what moves the events in Snorri's version, but is rather a coincidental side effect after the murder of Ymir. It is also noteworthy that the poems are not concerned with the death of Ymir at all.

In deducing a Flood myth in the source material, Snorri was motivated by the wish to show how his pre-Christian forefathers had anticipated Christian learning in their myths and poetry (references in Clunies Ross 1994, 231 n.2). We see this motivation throughout Snorri's Edda, and in particular in the retelling of the Old Norse cosmogony. Snorri is hardly reporting Christian influences in the Old Norse religious sources, but rather consciously seeking common ground between the heathen past and his contemporary Christian age. This is revealed by the distinctive medieval blend of Christian orthodoxy and neo-platonic

philosophy of nature informing Snorri's representation of the myths. This is nowhere clearer than in the myth of Ymir.

Christian orthodoxy maintained the belief that God had created the world *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. Medieval philosophers like William of Conches, writing about one hundred years before Snorri, speculated in reconciling this dogma with a neo-platonic understanding of the elemental composition of the world. These two thoughts – God creating *ex nihilo*, and the world composed of the four elements – do not seem to inform Old Norse mythology as we know it from other sources (Clunies Ross 1983), but can be seen to account for all the differences between the cosmogony of the eddic poems and Snorri's version.

Snorri composes a new synthetic cosmogony by picking out selected eddic stanzas and making a few closures, the most important of which is the equation of Ymir with Aurgelmir, the progenitor of the race of giants according to the origin myth told in *Vafþrúðnismál* 28-35. As both represent an essence of giant nature, the equation is semantically valid. The only point of discerning between two individuals seems precisely to be in order to keep the myths apart. Snorri, at least, apparently feels a need to argue his point and quotes *Hyndluljóð* 33 which states that "all emergent giants are of Ymir" (*ero [...] iötnar allir frá Ymi komnir*). Aurgelmir may be identical with Ymir according to tradition, or maybe just according to Snorri. If they are the same, I find it noteworthy that the suffix *-gelmir* of Aurgelmir's name, like so many other giant names, means – or denotes a personification of – 'scream'. Though Snorri probably does not perceive the proto-giant as a personified 'scream' – in fact, he does not seem to reflect upon the name at all – he does see Ymir as raw material for the creation of the world by the gods. By equating the two giants, Aurgelmir provides Ymir with an origin, which Snorri uses to define the raw material as the four elements and their accompanying four qualities.

Aurgelmir was made by poisonous drops spraying off the waves of *Élivágar*, the 'sea of strife'. Snorri apparently makes another closure, however, and equates *Élivágar* with the rivers mentioned in *Grímnismál* 26-28, because these rivers emanate from the spring "from where all water has its flow" (*þaðan eigo vörn öll vega*) – in other words, the spring of the element of water. From the ultimate conflagration, the flames of Ragnarok, Snorri brings in the element of fire. By quoting *Völuspá* 52 out of context, the fire demon Surt – coming from the South to scorch the world at Ragnarok – acquires preexistence to the creation of the world. Surt's place of origin in the South contrasts the North and the cold which can freeze the vapors of *Élivágar* to ice over *Ginnungagap*. Snorri names the contrasting regions *Muspell* ('world destruction' – hardly an original place name) and *Niflheim* ('fog-world' – perhaps derived from *Niflhel*). From *Muspell*, the element of air – the wind – brings forth a heat that thaws the ice, and this meeting of cold (or moist) and heat produces Ymir. When the gods subsequently create earth from Ymir's flesh, the element of earth completes the composition. The aspect of God creating *ex nihilo* is seen in Snorri's representation of *Ginnungagap*. He quotes *Völuspá* 3, but in another version: "It was the dawn of time. That which was not, was neither sand nor sea nor cool waves..." (*Ár var alda þat er ekki var vara sandr né sær né svalar unnir...*). The line *þar er ymir byggði* has been replaced by *þat er ekki var*. From describing the nature of Ymir through his environment, the stanza here becomes a description of a void matching the biblical state of pre-creation, a state identified by the medieval philosophers with *Chaos*, which again was defined as primal matter consisting of the elements in disorder (Maurach 1980, 35-36, 133). When Ymir originates in *Ginnungagap*, as represented by Snorri, he personifies the chaos of elements. Perhaps in order to avoid confusion with the biblical vision of the Spirit of God moving over the primordial deep, Snorri emphasizes that Ymir in *Ginnungagap* is not a god. That the Christian creator is present behind the scenes anyway, is indicated by the way Ymir was produced by heat that

thawed the ice. The melting ice-drops were quickened "by the force that sent the heat" (*með krapti þess er til sendi hitann*) – according to Snorri (Clunies Ross 1994, 155).

Once Snorri's agenda becomes clear, his process of synthesizing the mythological material also becomes transparent. Most of his sources are well known to us, and those parts that are not, gain in value as primary source material when we manage to catch a glimpse beyond Snorri. An excellent example in this context is the myth recounted in Snorri's Edda of how Ymir was nurtured by the cow Auðhumla. While Ymir drank the milk flowing from its utter like four rivers, Auðhumla herself licked salty rime-stones. After three days, the cow had licked a handsome, big and strong man free of the stone. His name was Buri, and he got the son Borr whose sons were the first gods. Snorri is our only source for this myth, but it is hardly a fabrication of his own. As opposed to many other details of the creation myth, it does not fit into the general agenda of Snorri's Edda, so we may reasonably trust it to be reported fairly untouched by interpretation. On the other hand, it fits remarkably well with the semantics of the eddic poems as outlined above.

The name of the cow is composed of *auðr* 'abundance, wealth' – which is also what cattle, *fé*, generally symbolize – and *humla* 'to hum'. The primordial cow represents an 'abundance of humming', the stage of vocal sound before it is released as inarticulate screams or spoken words. The giant was nurtured like a passive, suckling baby from the utter at the rear end of the cow, while up front – at the seat of mind and conscious thought – the god was revealed by the cow's tongue. The god had been there all the time, but became visible or got shape and form only when he was revealed by the tongue, the instrument of the word. The myth characterizes the difference between giants and gods, but also describes Auðhumla as a link between them, an abundance of humming between scream and word. In this instance, at least, Snorri's Edda also seems to strengthen the probability of Ymir meaning 'scream'.

But what, then, are the arguments for the hitherto uncontested denotation 'twin' for Ymir? The arguments are an intricate web of equations between comparable elements in the cosmogonies of Old Norse, Germanic, Roman, Old Iranian and Old Indian mythologies, spanning about two and a half millennia between the sources, from the Old Indian Rigveda (1200 BC) to Snorri's Edda (AD 1220). The point of the equations is to prove the existence of a proto-Indo-European creation myth from which all the known cosmogonies in Indo-European languages have originated. The existence of a proto-myth in turn proves the verity of the equations. A complex, but nevertheless circular chain of argument.

I shall sketch this web of equations in the following, but in order to do the full argument justice I must refer to Hermann Güntert (1923, 315-394) and Bruce Lincoln (1975), including references to sources and research in the latter article.

Myths all over the world comprise the basic element of cosmos created from the body of a primordial being. The comparativist exercise, however, is to isolate a structure of elements that can be defined as particularly Indo-European. To reach that goal, Ymir is equated with the Old Indian figure Perusa and the Old Iranian Gayomart.

Perusa is a primordial man (the name literally means 'man') from whose body-parts the gods created the natural world as well as the social world (the caste system) by performing the first sacrifice with Perusa as the victim.

Gayomart ('mortal life') is also a primordial man who died from illness inflicted by an evil spirit. Various metals (lead, gold, silver, etc.) manifested from his body-parts, which explains their value to men. When dying he emitted his semen from which mankind originated. Likewise his primordial ox passed away and all animals originated from its semen. Of these three myths various traits are selected to constitute the Indo-European proto-myth. Of the three types of death (murder, sacrifice, and illness), sacrifice is chosen without argument, even though it occurs only in the myth of Perusa. Subsequently, all other types of death are regarded as later cultural transformations of the myth, which has lost its true, deep-

structural semantic value in the process. This lost value can then be restored through the comparative method. In the Old Norse case, this means that Ymir was sacrificed by the gods – and so was the cow Auðhumla, paralleling the death (i.e. sacrifice) of Gayomart's ox. This is of course not attested by the Old Norse sources, in which the murder of Ymir may even be a speculative elaboration by Snorri, as shown above.

Another trait selected for the hypothetical Indo-European proto-myth is the equation of the figure from whose body-parts the world was created with the progenitor of generations. The trait may be observed in Gayomart, if we accept that the etiological myth of the metals getting their value is a culturally transformed yet structurally identical version of the creation of the world, linked through body-parts playing a role in both myths. Mainly, however, the trait is seen to be 'preserved' in the Old Norse equation of Ymir with Aurgelmir (which, as we saw, may or may not be a speculation by Snorri, too).

Aurgelmir is a progenitor of generations who produces offspring without a partner and can thus be seen as a hermaphrodite. He is equated with Tvisto, a Germanic god issued by Earth (*deum terra editum*) and father of Mannus ('man'), who in turn sired three eponymous sons to whom all the Germanic tribes trace back their lineage. Tvisto is a god coming out of Earth, not a giant from which the Earth was created, and may be more comparable to Buri (literally 'he who gives birth') than to Aurgelmir. All three are progenitors of generations, however. The name Tvisto means 'parted in two', which in the context is likely to indicate a partition in genders. Semantically it makes no difference whether this results in a being of both genders or a pair of twins of both genders. This equation of hermaphrodite with twin seemingly confirms the equation of Aurgelmir (hermaphrodite/twin in fact) with Ymir (twin in name) – if, of course, Ymir means 'twin'. Phonologically, this is no problem. Deriving the name Ymir from the theoretical Indo-European root-word *\*iemo* 'twin' (Güntert 1923, 334-8; Lincoln 1975, 129) is a generally accepted etymology.

Through his name, Ymir is then equated with another set of Old Indian and Old Iranian mythological figures, Yama and Yima respectively, both names meaning 'twin'. Yama is an Old Indian god or demon ruling a realm of death. With his twin sister Yami he is a progenitor of mankind. Yima is an Old Iranian golden age king who succumbed to falsehood whereby his 'glory', his kingly power, left him in the form of a bird – a common symbol of the spirit. The bird was seized in sequence by several other mythical figures who thus got their share of the power. Yima was later killed by his twin brother, linking a fratricide type of twin myth – as opposed to the incest twin myth – to the web of equations.

Though Yama and Perusa are completely separate figures in Old Indian mythology, they are equated through comparison with the Ymir-Aurgelmir equation. Likewise, the Old Iranian Yima is seen as an older version of Gayomart, and the distribution of Yima's 'glory' is equated with dismemberment into body-parts, which again is equated with instituting the first sacrifice – and so on. Numerous details and equations – some perhaps more or less far-fetched (the cow Auðhumla equating the she-wolf which nurtured the twins Romulus and Remus) – may be added in support of these ideas (for a compelling read see Lincoln 1975).

The conclusion of all this is that the world – both the physical and the social world, including domesticated animals – originated in the first sacrifice of the primordial man (and his cow) by the gods (Lincoln 1975, 144). The ritual institution of sacrifice creates growth and furtherance of whatever is offered. The gods established this system and may be seen as its guarantors. This interpretation certainly rings true as far as the Old Indian myth of Perusa is concerned. The link to the Old Norse version is the characterization of the Indo-European primordial man as a twin who either procreated mankind with his sister (or his female part) or was sacrificed by his brother – or both. These traits are found in (and partly derived from) Ymir. As Aurgelmir he procreated generations (though not of men). Through Auðhumla he

may be seen as a 'brother' of Buri who – albeit through his grandsons – 'sacrificed' the primordial giant. And, of course, Ymir may mean 'twin'.

Many scholars have proved in fact that the comparative method is a valuable instrument when the source material is too meager to yield any semantic substance. But it seems to me to be out of order in this case. Myths of great diversity are reduced to homogenous structures. Traits and micro-structures are selected to compose new hypothetical topics whose existence is proved by the way they make everything fit snugly in a (re)constructed ideal mythology. Contemporary influences informing the source material (e.g. Snorri) are not taken into consideration. Way too many semantically important details have to be disregarded in all of the mythologies involved. The most significant Old Norse example of the latter may be the lack of distinction between giants and men. Ymir and Aurgelmir are giants – their Indo-Iranian counterparts are men, some of whom are progenitors of mankind. Aurgelmir is the progenitor of giants. According to Old Norse myths, man was created in an entirely and fundamentally different way. The pronounced and semantically pregnant distinction between these groups of beings in the Old Norse mythological system is dimmed or obliterated in the comparativist interpretation.

In various combinations, the mythological traits discussed above are found in myths all over the world. Basically they reflect belief in a primordial oneness from which all originate, and subsequent etiological speculations on how the original 'One' became 'many'. In the case of creation by dismemberment of a human-like body, thoughts of microcosm and macrocosm are often at play. The Old Norse example of this is Ymir. In the case of genus, the original One is often thought to divide into two, male and female, who then produce the generations. These two may be seen as mother and son, father and daughter, or as twins, brother and sister, implying incestuous relationships, etc. Freyr and Freyia may be examples of this. Or the couple may be the (perhaps personified) genitals of the original One, who is then seen as a hermaphrodite – Aurgelmir being the obvious Old Norse example. Speculations like these seem to be part of the 'human package', one way or another. It is not surprising to find them – as we undeniably do – as layers of meaning in both Old Norse and Old Indo-Iranian myths, and the common themes may have no further interconnection. Some comparativists will not leave it at that, however. They seek a particularly Indo-European link between the relevant mythologies, and find it in one key element, namely the phonological possibility of interpreting the name Ymir as 'twin'. Because this also links myth with language.

The phonological possibility can not be denied, of course, but that does not make it an onomastic truth. Relating Ymir to Old Norse *ymr* 'scream' remains an equal phonological possibility. In the end, the decisive factor in this matter is the semantic content of the myth. To recapitulate, the creation of the world – and the creativity of the gods in general – is the process that transforms a raw material into the world as we know it. The creation myth may thus establish a paradigm of how the power of the gods is thought to influence and shape the world in practical terms, and in general how the reciprocity between the spiritual and the concrete spheres are thought to function.

In one interpretation, the world is shaped through the ritual of sacrifice. Through offering a small part of the concrete sphere to the gods, the powers of the spiritual sphere will in return ensure the growth of the concrete sphere as a whole. Though sacrifice is being referred to in Old Norse mythology, it can hardly be said to constitute a paradigmatic theme, and certainly not in the versions of the cosmogony transmitted by the sources. The interpretation is accessible only through the historical implications of the denotation 'twin' for Ymir. But it is a denotation that does not communicate its meaning. The possibility of the interpretation representing elements in the history of the myth should never be excluded. However, the history of the myth hardly had any meaning to its users. They did not perceive

Ymir as a twin because it made him comparable with Yama. Whether they saw Ymir as a twin or a scream, depended on their perception of the meaning of the myth – the conceptual thinking with which they invested the myth.

With ‘conceptual thinking’ I mean conscious intent, and not the kind of (often subconscious) ideology you can analyze out of any text and which has been the subject of many important recent studies. In this context, the anthropologically inspired analysis of societal hierarchy and gender patterns discernible in the Old Norse cosmogony by Margaret Clunies Ross (1994, 144-159) is worth mentioning as an example. My interest, however, is the ‘message’ that the tellers of myths intentionally attempted to relay to their audience.

Ymir denoting ‘twin’ would not yield much meaning to an Old Norse audience. The gods built the world from Ymir’s body-parts. Does the world being built from a giant twin or hermaphrodite make sense? How can this denotation qualify Ymir as raw material of the world? At best, it may represent an etiological layer of understanding – the twin or hermaphrodite as progenitor of giants – but why, then, is the name not consigned to the appropriate figure, Aurgelmir (whose name definitely comprises the meaning ‘scream’)?

The *heiti*-system described in Snorri’s poetics and the many *pulur* testify to the significance of names in Old Norse tradition. All the names we can decipher throughout the corpus of Old Norse myths have a meaning, not just in and by themselves, as qualifiers of the mythological elements and characters they name, but also as informers of the myths in which they appear. This importance of names in turn supports the interpretation deduced above from Ymir meaning ‘scream’.

In this interpretation, the myth tells us that in the beginning was the scream – the inarticulate and chaotic. The world was yet to be formulated and ordered. The process of creation is dependent on the nature of the raw material. In the case of the scream, it must be turned into words and language. Everything exists by being named, designated by a word. If we have no word for something, we cannot talk about it, put it into context, or keep it in mind and memory. Words and language organize and give shape to thoughts and spirit. We can only be conscious about that for which we have words.

The power of the gods, the power that shapes the world, is the power of the word. This is how the spiritual sphere is thought to influence the concrete sphere. The power of the gods is present in the words and the use of words, which in Old Norse tradition among other things are ritualized in formulaic speech, runes, and poetry (Raudvere 2002 and references herein).

The denotation ‘scream’ for Ymir communicates its meaning clearly in this context. It is part of a paradigmatic theme throughout the mythology, and is further supported by numerous details and motifs – Odin’s quests for knowledge and the myth of the mead of poetry being obvious examples. The interpretation represents the kind of conceptual thinking I believe we can find throughout eddic poetry.

I shall end this by returning to Ymir the hawk. Is it merely the bird’s shriek that earned it the *heiti* Ymir in one of the *pulur* in Snorri’s Edda? Actually, it may not be entirely unconnected with Ymir the giant. Birds are often symbols of spirit, in Old Norse myths, too. As a necrophagous bird of prey, the hawk has even stronger ties to the otherworld, just like the eagle. The birth of the hero Helga is announced by screams of eagles in Helgakviða Hundingsbana 1. In fact, the stanza opens with exactly the same poetic formula (words of power?) as that which Völuspá 3 uses to introduce Ymir: “It was the dawn of time. When eagles screamed, holy water fell from the mountains of heaven...” (*Ár var alda þat er arar gullo hnigo heilog vötn af himinfiöllum...*). The spirit descends from heaven to become man. The scream is associated with birth and beginning, the language of babies, the first utterance that through the process of divine creativity – the process of creating culture – will become words and language, the world as we know it.

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