

INTERPRETING BALDR, THE DYING GOD

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THE YEAR 1990 SAW THE PUBLICATION OF TWO BOOKS TAKING ON the problem of the interpretation of Baldr, the handsome young god who dies before his time. Although neither will, I fear, achieve the status of classic--Herbert Glöckner's *Auf den Spuren des Baldr* seeks Baldr's tracks among the constellations of the stars, and Frederik Stjernfelt's *Baldr og verdensdramaet i den nordiske mytologi* (apparently completed in 1985) masks some very clever observations about how the mythology works in an obfuscating language derived from Francophone structuralists--together they confirm that Baldr is still important. Indeed, Baldr has been the subject of innumerable other kinds of recent treatments, ranging from retellings for all sorts of audiences even to an opera for young people. This interest is somewhat puzzling. As a handsome deity cut down in his youth, the figure of Baldr logically appealed to romantic poets, but by any objective analysis of old Scandinavian or even Germanic religion, Baldr was not a figure of major importance. No archaeological artifacts attest his worship; few place names anchor his cult to specific landscapes; and his role in the extant myths remains tantalizingly small. Only a few texts devote themselves to him.

That Baldr has often been the subject of speculation and inspired poets may be credited in part to the rediscovery of the sources in modern times. A version of Saxo's Danish history edited by Christian Pedersen was published in Paris in 1514 under the title *Danorum Regum Heroumque Historiæ* and reprinted in Basel and Frankfurt during the sixteenth century. Subsequently each century has seen a new edition: by Stephanus J. Stephanus (Sorø, 1645), C. A. Klotz (Leipzig, 1771), P. E. Müller (Copenhagen 1839), and Jørgen Olrik and H. Ræder (1931). Danish antiquarians began to work with Old Norse texts

as early as the mid-seventeenth century. In 1665 Johan Peter Resenius issued editions of *Snorra edda* and *Völuspá* (along with *Hávamál*), and in 1689 Thomas Bartholin the younger made *Baldrs draumar* known as part of a work entitled *Antiquitates Danicae de Causis Contemptae a Danis adhuc Gentilibus Mortis*. Paul Henri Mallet translated *Gylfaginning* and referred extensively to *Völuspá* in an appendix (1756) to his *Introduction à l'histoire de Dannemarc, où l'on traite de la religion, des loix, des mœurs et des usages des anciens danois* (1755) and thus brought the mythology, including the Baldr story, to the attention of the burgeoning romantic movement of the eighteenth century. Translation into German and English appeared in 1765 and 1770 respectively. By then, however, Thomas Percy had already immortalized *Baldrs draumar* with the publication of a translation in his *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* (1763). Later translators routinely had both *Völuspá* and *Baldrs draumar*, such as the Austrian Michael Denis (1772) and the Dane Berthel Christian Sandvig (1779). What made the poems best known, however, was surely their inclusion among Herder's *Volkslieder* (1778-79) and Gräter's *Nordische Blumen* (1789).¹

But poets were hardly satisfied with mere translation.² In the leafy summer of 1773 the Danish playwright Johannes Ewald composed his 'Balders død: Et heroisk syngespil i tre handlinger' ('Baldr's Death: A Heroic *Singspiel* in Three Acts'), which was published in 1775 and first performed in 1778. The first performance with music, by Johann Hartmann, was in January 1779 (and an English translation, by George Barrow, was issued in 1889). Ewald was an interesting figure, balanced between piety and excess, country and city, asceticism and the bottle, and between classic and romantic, as this play exemplifies. Ewald follows Saxo in creating a love triangle, with the demi-god Balder playing the role of the young Werther against the mortal lovers Hother and Nanna. Hother is driven by thoughts of honour, and Balder by pride, but each would spare the other were it not for the machinations of Loki. As in Snorri, Loki provides Hother with the fatal weapon, and all the gods mourn when the raving Balder finally stumbles inadvertently onto it and dies in the last scene. Torn between

the world of the gods and that of humans, he dies because of his fate, and yet almost voluntarily.

When a generation or so later Adam Oehlenschläger, later to be crowned the prince of Nordic poets, took up the subject, the success of Ewald's play made his situation delicate. Oehlenschläger therefore distanced himself from Ewald by relying exclusively on Snorri (he does, however, make Nanna human) and by trying to fashion a play (not very successfully) in the style of Greek tragedy. The reliance on Snorri may be glimpsed in the play's title, *Baldur hin gode* ('Baldr the good') which uses the modern Icelandic form of the name as opposed to the normal Danish form used by Ewald. It was composed during Oehlenschläger's *Wanderjahre* during the first years of the nineteenth century and published in 1807, just four years after his Digte had introduced romanticism to Denmark.

Baldur hin gode is the middle piece of a collection called *Nordiske digte* ('Nordic poems'), which begins with the mock-heroic epic *Thors reise* ('Thor's journey') and ends with the historical drama *Hakon jarl hin rige* ('Hakon jarl the powerful'). Together the three plays proceed from a world of gods and giants--the subject of *Thors reise* is Thor's visit to Útgarda-Loki--to a world of humans locked in the struggle of the conversion of Scandinavia to Christianity. *Baldur hin gode* presents the death and permanent loss of Baldr with a bridge to *Thors reise* through the enmity of the giants, now deadly serious, and to *Hakon jarl hin rige* through the consequent immediate threat of the demise of the gods and the impending conversion to Christianity, which indeed a seeress proclaims in the last words of the play.

The reader of *Baldur hin gode* who is familiar with Snorri's version of the story will find no large surprises of plot. The first act culminates in Baldur's death at the hands of his blind brother Hødur at the instigation and with the aid of Asa-Loke (so named to distinguish him from Utgarde-Loke, who incites him to the deed). Baldur has had his bad dreams; Frigga has taken the all but universal oaths, and Asa-Loke, in the guise of a young maiden worried about her lover, has retrieved the fatal information about the mistletoe. The funeral is relegated to an offstage scene described during the beginning of the second act, which recounts the journey of Hermodur to Hel and the

failed attempt to weep Baldur back to life. What strikes the reader approaching the text from the perspective of Scandinavian mythology, besides the skill with which Oehlenschläger employs various narrative devices to shift between offstage and onstage action, and the dialogic voices of the various gods, who are so taciturn in the Norse sources, is primarily the increase in the role of Frigga, at the expense of Oden; here it is Frigga who, like Odin in Snorri, seems to understand the full implications of the death of Baldur. These involve Ragnarøk (which Oehlenschläger calls *ragnamørker*, a Danish version of Götterdämmerung) and here as indeed elsewhere Oehlenschläger shows a strong and clear (if intuitive) grasp of how the mythology works. *Baldur hin gode* focuses more on strong females than does Snorri, and indeed one can read the play as a struggle between Frigga and Freia (whom Oehlenschläger allows to play Frigg's role in dispatching Hermodur) on the one hand and Hel and Loke on the other, with Loke adopting both young and older female personae. As one who believes that inimical female forces were stronger in the mythology than Snorri or even the eddic poets would have us believe (Lindow 1988), I approve of this poet's liberty with his source. Indeed, I would argue that whatever his own conscious view of the mythology (this doubtless involved allegories of nature), Oehlenschläger's play is the first successful modern attempt to interpret Baldr the dying god. Baldur dies because when Asa-Loke is forced to choose between his status among the gods and his giant genealogy, he chooses the latter. The killing is devastating because it was done by a brother and because it was permanent. Even Odin's silence is, as I shall argue later, motivated, as are the last words of the play, which transpose Baldur into a Christian symbol.

Not many years passed from the publication of Oehlenschläger's play before scholars began to interpret the material, and some of this older material bears reading even today, if only for those with antiquarian tastes. N. F. S. Grundtvig saw Baldr's plight as a metaphor, with moral overtones, of the struggle between light and darkness, and nature mythologists like Uhland and Simrock made it a myth of the seasons. Where others saw metaphor, Karl Müllenhoff and

Viktor Rydberg saw the *alci* or *dioscurii*, Friedrich Kauffmann saw the heroic remnants of a royal sacrifice, and Sophus Bugge and Kaarle Krohn saw the greatest sacrifice in western culture, that of the Son of God for mankind.

The middle years of this century were dominated by interpretations that treat Baldr as a god who provides fertility through his death and resurrection. The initial charge was led by Gustav Neckel (1920), but the line stretched back to Sir James Frazer's attempt to fit Baldr into his theories concerning the worldwide distribution of certain vegetation customs; for Baldr, of course, the basis was slim indeed (Martin 1974). What Neckel had to offer was a plausible, carefully argued thesis, based not on preconception but on the texts themselves, to the effect that Baldr was a cultural loan from the Orient, specifically based on such dying gods as Tammuz, Attis, Adonis, and the *baalim* of the ancient Near East. Franz Rolf Schröder soon adopted a version of this thesis (1924) placing more emphasis on ritual, and he continued to argue it in various ways for nearly four decades (e.g., Schröder 1953, 1962); indeed, among his last published works on the mythology were articles suggesting Near Eastern parallels for Heimdallr (1967a) and Odin (1967b)--the latter for his exile after siring Bous, the avenger of Balderus in Saxo's version of the Baldr story.

A sense of the importance of fertility may be glimpsed from the structure of what is doubtless the most lasting contribution to recent Baldr research, the article on 'Der Mythos von Balders Tod' by Jan de Vries (1955), which begins by presenting several persuasive arguments against the fertility hypothesis. Baldr is not one of the *vanir*; rather he is the son of Odin and Frigg. He is slain by Hqðr, whose name likely means 'warrior' (<**haduz*). This contradicts the system of the mythology; a vegetation god ought to be a *vanr* or at least should be associated with the *vanir*. Furthermore--and this is the most telling point--Baldr does *not* return, at least not before the beginning of a new mythological cycle. The import of the entire myth in Snorri and Saxo both is that Baldr's death is irreversible in the context of the current cosmic order. These two points alone are sufficient for rejection of the hypothesis of a vegetation god borrowed with his myth from the Near East, at least as it was formulated when de Vries was writing. The

only way to salvage the dying god in this context is to follow the lead of Kurt Schier (1976a) and argue only typological similarity with the oldest Near Eastern dying gods, who, it seems, actually did stay dead; by the time any contact could have obtained with the Germanic world, they were popping up again with annoying regularity, which explains Schier's reliance on typology. Schier, too, does not seem to see gods of the Baldr type as having to do primarily with fertility.

After disposing of fertility, de Vries presented his own explanation of the myth. The 'mythologem' consists of three segments: Baldr's death, his funeral, and Hermóðr's journey to the world of the dead (1955, 47). Each had particular mythic significance. For de Vries, Baldr's death represents the first appearance of death in the world, and, simultaneously, provides the paradigmatic model for initiation into Odin cult. Baldr's funeral, following this first death, establishes the custom of funerary burning; here de Vries has recourse to ch. 8 of *Ynglinga saga*. According to the key passage there, the euhemerized Odin, a man who lived long ago, established in Scandinavia the customs which had been prevalent among the *æsir*, including funeral burning on a pyre. Here one should stress again the importance of Baldr's funeral in the sources. Snorri's account of the funeral, for example, makes up more than one fifth of all he has to say on the subject of Baldr's death. It is told with as much detail as the other parts of the story and is one of Snorri's most effective scenes. In the structure of the story it is central, providing a pivot for the unintended slaying and the unsuccessful attempt to contravene or reverse death, and it offers many symbols central to the story. Outside of Snorri, too, the funeral was perceived as an important scene. As de Vries noted, its inclusion in Úlfr's *Húsdrápa* has more than purely textual significance, for it demonstrates that the scene was of sufficient general interest to merit inclusion among the artistic decoration of a great chieftain's hall (de Vries 1955, 51). Further, the scene of Baldr's funeral provided the greatest moment of wisdom lore, the unanswerable question of Odin's last words to his dead son on the bier. The motif circulated, apparently, in oral tradition independently of a poetic formula, as it is expressed differently in *Vafþrúðnismál* 54 and the last of the *Gestumblinda gátur*.

For de Vries, Hermóðr's journey to the underworld is tied closely to the proto-death; an attempt to overcome or revise death falls before an unfulfillable condition (1955, 51ff.). He cites a similar tale from Indonesia which, in isolation, is hardly convincing. The force of the argument, however, is substantial. The origin of death is a subject so common to world mythology as to approach the universal. The basic principle, as in the Baldr story in Snorri, is that death was once something that could have been avoided, but because of some failure or mistake, often on the part of the closest relative of the deceased, death became permanent.

And indeed, Baldr's appears to be the first individual death to occur in the framework of the mythology as it is presented in our Norse sources. Prior to the death of Baldr there is only the killing of the proto-giant Ymir as a prelude to his dismemberment for the formation of the cosmos, and the attempted killing during the war between the *æsir* and *vanir* of the enigmatic Gullveig, who, however, does not stay dead. Thrice burned, thrice reborn, she yet lives (*Völuspá* 21). Only Baldr dies, is commemorated in funeral ritual, and stays in the world of the dead.

This, then, could have been one sense of the myth as told centuries before our medieval poets reworked the material. If Frigg had been successful in gathering oaths from all creatures, Baldr would not have died, and there would not be death among humans. If Hermóðr and the envoys of the *æsir* had been successful in persuading all creation to weep--whether the motif is original or borrowed is not relevant to the hypothesis--Baldr would have returned, and death would not have been permanent. As de Vries noted, the 'innere Zusammenhang' of the story is mirrored in this frame: only one plant, only one giantess (1955, 47). Indeed, like the mistletoe, the giantess was almost overlooked. And if Loki belonged to the original form of the myth, he would provide a parallel to the numerous trickster figures who contribute to the establishment of death.

Having said all that, I must express my misgivings. These are concerned not so much with the neglect of any source to report that Baldr's was the first death or that thereafter death was irreversible, despite the apparent fidelity to inherited

motifs and narrative structures, nor indeed with the lack of cognate myths--citation of an Indonesian text does look rather desperate on the part of de Vries--but rather with context within the mythology itself. Hel, it seems, was ready for Baldr, and her readiness is taken for granted. When Hermóðr approaches Hel's abode, Móðguðr, the guardian of the bridge, reports that five columns of dead men rode over it the previous day and challenges him with the statement that he lacks the colour of a dead man. Perhaps she has learned quickly and these dead men were Baldr's retinue, but it seems as though the way to Hel is well trodden already. And let us recall that the seeress who informs Odin in *Baldrs draumar* of the impending death of Baldr must herself be revived from the dead. I do not wish to impose too much order on the mythology, but it does seem that there is a reasonable doubt that anyone in the Viking Age or later understood Baldr's as the proto-death until 1955.

The instigation of funeral burning is another problem. Although ch. 8 of *Ynglinga saga* states that Odin's new burial procedures included the provision that the ashes of the deceased could be carried out to sea, it does not say how, and the whole issue of ship funerals is a messy one. Certainly Snorri's emphasis on the launching of the ship by a giantess cannot simply be explained away as part of the institution of a new form of funeral ritual. Yet more troubling, perhaps, are the enigmatic words of *Völuspá* concerning Gullveig: three times the *æsir* stuck her with spears, and three times they burned her in the hall of Hár. It may be usual to regard this burning as another attempt to keep this powerful enemy dead, but could it not also mean that she was, in effect, thrice killed and ritually dispatched to the other world, and yet she lived on?

So much for the origin of death and funeral ritual. Like most interpretations of Baldr the dying god, it has attractive features and contradictory ones. For de Vries a even more salient feature of the myth of Baldr's death was its putative place within the complex of initiation ritual into the cult of Odin. In this reading, Hqðr is an hypostasis of Odin, who symbolically slays the initiate, his own son. Baldr is then reborn as Váli (< **waihalaz* 'little warrior'), who effects vengeance when he is two days old, that is, two days after the ritual.

This theory too is attractive, particularly because of the many Odinic aspects of the Baldr story. At best, however, it is an unverifiable hypothesis, and it probably deserves to be rejected on closer examination. The crucial missing link is that between Baldr and Váli. Snorri, by de Vries's own admission the best source, ignores Váli altogether in his recounting of the story in *Gylfaginning*, and no other source comes even close--with one exception, curiously missed by de Vries. Among the kennings for Váli enumerated in the *Skáldskaparmál* of *Snorra edda* in Codex Regius, though not in the other manuscripts, is *hefniáss Baldr* ('Baldr the avenging god'). The other manuscripts have the expected *hefniáss Baldrs* ('avenging-god of Baldr'; *Snorra edda*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, 99, fn. 4). Probably the scribe of Regius made a mistake, but perhaps he knew more than we do. However, the regular pairing of Váli with Víðarr is troubling, for although Víðarr too is a figure associated exclusively with vengeance, that vengeance is extracted not for himself, as would have to be the case with Váli/Baldr, but rather for his father Odin.

In addition, if the Baldr myth deals with initiation, then the main characters must be divine heroes, as in Saxo, not gods as in Snorri. De Vries argues this point, too, and once again the argument must be rejected. It violates everything the sources tell us about Baldr, Høðr, and Váli.

Furthermore, the system of kennings offers a convincing argument that Baldr was not regarded as a divine hero, at least since the beginning of Norse literary tradition with the skalds. Baldr is perhaps after Njǫrðr the most frequently employed god name as base word in man kennings (Meissner 1921, 262). In contrast, names of divine heroes are very rare as base words in man kennings: Bjarki and Sigmundr are attested once only, Starkaðr never. The total omission of Starkaðr is perhaps the most telling in this context, for Starkarðr's role in the slaying of King Víkarr is generally pressed into service by those who, like de Vries, make Baldr a sacrifice to Odin. The skaldic evidence is incontrovertible: Baldr was a god, one of the *æsir*. Nothing by imagination can make him a divine hero and, by extension, an hypostasis of Odin.

Nor can Høðr be regarded as an hypostasis of Odin or as a divine hero. He is listed among the *pulur* as Odin's son (IVc). He

forms the base word of man kennings used by early poets including at least Egill Skallagrímsson and Hallvarðr Háreksblei and perhaps two others (Finnur Jónsson 1931, s. v. Hqðr). Furthermore, he is not listed anywhere among the lists of Odin names, neither in *Gylfaginning* nor in the AM 748 additions. We must conclude that Hqðr is a relatively old figure, an *áss*, and probably a son of Odin (who isn't?). He was apparently not well known, but nothing in the evidence contradicts the picture given by Snorri. In *Skáldskaparmál* we read that Hqðr may be called *blindi áss* ('the blind god'), *Baldrs bani* ('Baldr's killer'), *skjótandi Mistilteins* ('launcher of the mistletoe'), *sonr Óðins* ('son of Odin'), *Heljar sinni* ('companion of Hel'), and *Vála dolgr* ('enemy of Váli'). The entire picture is consistent. The characters in the Baldr story were gods, not divine heroes. We must set aside the hypothesis that the Baldr myth reflects initiation into Odin cult.

What, then, does it reflect? Any search for Indo-European cognates is essentially fruitless, as one learns from reading the remarks of the great comparatist Georges Dumézil in the 1959 (1971) revision of his survey of the Germanic gods. Dumézil postulated development from a parent Indo-European myth of the eschatological battle between forces of good and evil, culminating in the establishment of a new and better order. The 'cognate' texts are on the one hand the epic remnants of the *Mahabharata* and on the other hand Ossetic folklore gathered primarily in the nineteenth century, with supporting evidence from the Avesta and Mazdaism. While these offer worthy company to our medieval Icelandic man of letters and our Danish cleric, it is perhaps a telling methodological weakness that reconstruction is based only on Norse and Indo-Iranian. Further, the two aspects of the Baldr myth find respective parallels only in two different branches of Indo-Iranian: Baldr's death shows similarities to the Ossetic Syrdon's slaying of Sozryko, and the eschatological aspects answer to the Pandava story from the *Mahabharata*. As so often with Dumézil, we must admire the grand scheme and quibble over details. Pending location of the *tertium comparationis*, most scholars will no doubt continue to seek elsewhere the origin of Baldr's death.

Jarich G. Oosten's analysis in *The War of the Gods* (1985, 42-47) is shrewd and, in my view, essentially correct in its view

of the Baldr myth as a representation of the doomed nature of the æsir, but contrary to its subtitle, *The Social Code in Indo-European Mythology*, it uses no Indo-European analogues when discussing Baldr.

For Kurt Schier (1976a), as mentioned above, the search begins with the type of the earliest dying god, the one who stays dead, as does Baldr. The complex of death, mourning, and funeral is a means to help the deity assume a new form of existence in the underworld, one which will help him to act effectively in a new role. Although annual rites of mourning serve to strengthen the god's ability to intervene in earthly affairs, including fertility, Schier holds that Baldr was originally a local Danish deity parallel to Freyr in Uppsala, whose power consisted in having founded a dynasty and then dying and assuming a role in the underworld. The death of any monarch in the dynasty would have the same effect, thus explaining the existence of poems that, like *Ynglingatal*, catalogue the deaths of kings.

Schier's is a hypothesis still in formation (cf. Schier 1992), and points may change over time. It depends on a wealth of material, from folklore to the writings of the Scandinavian Reformation, and deserves to be expounded fully before it is subjected to full scrutiny. The troubling parts involve source criticism--Schier must permit Saxo to transmit genuine Danish traditions, not those of the Icelandic sources Saxo mentions in his preface, while at the same time he has to rely on such Icelandic sources as *Sögubrot* and the paraphrases of Arngrímur Jónsson--but they center on the equation between Baldr and Freyr, which is troublesome from the point of view of the Norse sources: it is difficult to associate Baldr with fertility, which is Freyr's main realm. If the two are to be joined as 'dying gods' (Schier 1968), it is through the medium of Frothi in Saxo. There may indeed have been local traditions about Baldr in Denmark, but they cannot go all the way in explaining Baldr in Norse poetry and prose.

Gro Steinsland also believes that dying is part of royal destiny and that Baldr's story has to do with the legitimation of regnal genealogy (1991, 230-33 and 260-70), in connection with ancient conceptions about gods and giants and especially their roles in cosmogony. This line of reasoning is promising, for it

pays attention to the fact that Baldr is the only fully legitimate son of Odin and Frigg in the mythology (all the others appear to have other mothers), and that his death therefore has dynastic implications (Clunies Ross forthcoming). Steinsland also sees, correctly, that the myth poses a problem of vengeance (1991, 265), as I shall suggest below, but her agenda does not include an analysis of all the parts of the story, much less its variant versions.

Indeed, it may be that the search for a unified Baldr theory is ultimately too grand an endeavor and should be scaled back to a series of attempts to interpret various texts or traditions. For example, the context of the Baldr stanzas within *Húsdrápa* might be examined with an eye to their meaning. In the extant stanzas of *Húsdrápa* two other myths are mentioned besides Baldr's death. The first is the struggle between Thor and the Midgard serpent, when the god fished up the demon from the bottom of the sea; this was a beloved subject of both poets and carvers during the Viking Age, perhaps the favorite mythic subject of both groups. The second, by contrast, treats the battle between Loki and Heimdallr, in the form of seals, apparently for a 'kidney of the sea', which many observers, following Snorri (*Snorra edda*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, 99) take to be a kenning for the *Brísinga men*, despite plausible evidence to the contrary (Schier 1976b). This myth is little known, and only a stanza relating to it remains from *Húsdrápa*, although we may assume that it occupied as much space in the carvings, and presumably also in the poem, as did Baldr's funeral and Thor's encounter with the Midgard serpent.

The myths of Thor and the serpent and Heimdallr and Loki are joined by important similarities. In each case a god fights with a giant in a watery environment with important consequences at stake. Since a watery environment may be postulated for the Baldr funeral, too, in the form of the river that is the subject of the last relevant stanza, as well as by the boat that the giantess launches, we may wonder whether the other parallels hold as well. If so, the myth should involve a struggle between god and giant, with important or even cosmic consequences. The eddic poems would appear to suggest as the combatants Odin and a seeress, (or perhaps Odin and Loki, in the form of a seeress, in *Baldrs draumar*), and this might lead

us to wonder whether the funeral is somehow about a struggle between Odin and Hyrrokkin, like the seeresses an inimical female figure. Since the struggles between Thor and the Midgard serpent and Loki and Heimdallr are very close, with the god barely winning, we may imagine that Odin barely triumphs over his female adversary at the funeral. Perhaps the triumph is simply to grant to Baldr an honourable funeral and to force the giant adversary to acknowledge that honour by participating.

A second line of analysis might look at Hermóðr's journey, which has striking similarities to medieval vision literature, as it culminated in Iceland in the twelfth century with the rendering of such texts as, especially, *Niðrstigningar saga*, the visions of Drythelm and Tundal, and Bk. 4 of Gregory's *Dialogues*, not to mention *Sólarljóð*. By riding Sleipnir, the horse of the dead, Hermóðr paralleled those visionaries who fainted or even appeared dead. The nine nights of his ride to Hel through dales dark and deep correspond both to the length of visions and to the topography of the other world. Like every visionary, Hermóðr arrives at a river, where he encounters a guard. Most visionaries cross a bridge; Hermóðr jumps. But soon his story again looks much like that of any visionary, for he is led by a companion (Baldr, who accompanies him out) and given a token of his visit. He then returns 'ok kom i Ásgarð ok sagði öll tíðendi, þau sem hann hafði sét ok heyrt' ('came into Asgard and told about all the things he had seen and heard'); the insistence on telling everything is that of a visionary. This line of reasoning supplies a learned medieval context to one aspect of the story.

Finally, another approach might inquire as to the social meaning of some pieces of the Baldr story to the audience that consumed it in the forms in which we now have it, that is, in texts written down or copied in Iceland during the High Middle Ages, with a focus on the first half of the thirteenth century, when Snorri composed *Gylfaginning* and systematized skaldic poetry, and when the collection of the *Poetic Edda* began. Of the many possible paths that present themselves, I would like simply to point a sign toward one, namely the one leading through the most strikingly original long vernacular narratives of the period on native subjects, the sagas of Icelanders or

family sagas. Since these are without parallel elsewhere, they must tell us something unique about Iceland. These narratives as a rule are set in Iceland during the time before and after the conversion to Christianity and have as their subject the feuds that grew up in various districts and, according to the sagas, were resolved. Following the work of various anthropologists and social historians, which have found specific application to the sagas of Icelanders in the recent work of William Ian Miller (e.g., 1990), we may regard these feuds as representing a form of dispute resolution, one that probably obtained in medieval Iceland as it has in many other places and times.

Comparison of the mythology to the family sagas in the light of feuding reveals a curious tension. What the sagas show, in the face of a crisis, is the gathering of an action group meant to be kin in theoretical terms--bilateral kin according to the implications of the wergild laws--but in fact gathered from all manner of people: besides close and distant kin, these include in-laws, neighbours, lodgers, and so forth. This practice accords with ethnographic observation. The mythology, on the other hand, offers a black and white world, with very little grey. If the gods and giants are engaged in a feud (or if medieval Icelanders were to regard them in this way), the action groups are deeply and firmly set, and the governing principle is patrilineal kinship. If myth offers a means of dealing with and sometimes working out problems of society and the human condition, it is tempting to regard Norse mythology as a simplified system of action group identification projected against the messy reality of medieval Icelandic life, where nearly anybody could be recruited for an action group, and where the most obvious persons might not be. At the same time, however, the mythology expresses the failure of a system organized patrilineally when faced with one kind of crisis, namely a slaying within a family. This was a persistent literary problem (the fratricide Fáfnir, for example, assumed the form of a dragon, and the valkyrie's first counsel to Sigurðr in *Sigrdrífumál* (22) is to be spotless toward his kin and not take vengeance on them). Odin's solution is to sire an avenger from outside the system, but as long as patrilineal membership, the vengeance extracted will still be no more than another

slaying within the family. Wherever Odin sows his wild oats, they will still be oats of the *æsir*. And whatever oaths he swears with Loki cannot change Loki's ultimate identity, as Oehlenschläger saw nearly two centuries ago.

That these issues were real to Icelanders is made explicit by the inclusion in sagas of Icelanders of descriptions of ceremonies creating blood brotherhood--that is, of attempting to change the realities of kin reckoning. Fosterage presumably was invoked with similar goals. As in the mythology, these attempts fail, both in the sagas of Icelanders and in the contemporary sagas. Indeed, perhaps the best course of action was none at all. In *Beowulf*, King Hreðel turned his face to the wall when one of his sons, Hæðcyn, killed another, Herebeald, in a parallel long noted in the Baldr scholarship.

With respect to feuding, then, we might regard the mythology as one form of theory (law would be another) and the sagas of Icelanders (and contemporary sagas) as praxis: the theory may prove to be invalid, but then it is not terribly relevant to the way people actually conduct their lives. As the usual rules of feuding broke down during the course of the thirteenth century and open warfare took its place, as fratricide became an increasingly real possibility, narratives about the unraveling world of the *æsir* must have seemed apt. At the same time, Snorri's coda to the story may have offered hope, for after Ragnarøk he allows Baldr and Hqðr to return, both still living and apparently reconciled. Although Baldr's death redeemed no one, his similarity to Christ on the cross cannot have gone unnoticed; the extensive points of contact have been widely known to modern scholarship since Sophus Bugge's argument, now abandoned, that the Baldr story is no more than a derivative of the Christ story (1889, 34-70), and Anne Holtsmark, for example, takes them for granted (1964, 74ff.). They could hardly have been missed in the Middle Ages. Thus the ultimate failure of even a dualistic system to cope with the unsolvable problem of kin-slaying in a feuding society was easily mitigated when it was blended with the new mythology of Christianity.

And so I admire Oehlenschläger's setting of Snorri's account of this old myth. Loki had Hqðr kill Baldr because, being of giant lineage, he had to. The death was a disaster for

the gods because Baldr's fraternal relationship with his killer linked it ineluctably to the end of the world order. It could be redeemed, however, by regarding Baldr as a Christian symbol.

Ewald and Oehlenschläger were not the only poets to rework the Baldr material. Let me end by quoting Matthew Arnold, whose *Balder Dead* is from 1853 and which offers yet another solution to the problem that Odin faced. Hqðr, whose contrition has occupied Arnold for some time earlier in the poem and prompted the fratricide to urge Hermóðr's journey to the world of the shades, was:

loathing to meet, at dawn, the other Gods;
And he went in, and shut the door, and fixt His sword upright,
and fell on it, and died.

In the underworld, Baldr greets the suicide:

with benignant voice, Welcome, he said, if there be welcome here,
Brother and fellow sport of Lok.

NOTES

- 1 See the summary in Heinrichs (1991)
- 2 What follows is a very small piece of a large puzzle. Study and analysis of the reception of Old Norse-Icelandic materials in Danish literature received fundamental treatment in Rubow (1924) Jørgensen (1993) is the most recent treatment known to me. Here I am concerned specifically with two readings of the entire Baldr story that might, in their fullness, be regarded as interpretations.

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