

Mythic Transformations: Tree Symbolism in the Norse Plantation

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores tree symbolism as interpreted from a selection of Old Norse poetic and prose mythological sources. The primary poetic sources include the Eddic poems

Völuspá, *Hávamál*, *Grímnismál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Lokasenna* and *Baldrs draumur*.

Selected fragments from these poems are arranged and analyzed with particular attention to the symbol of the tree. Fragments are also selected from *Gylfaginning* of Snorri's *Edda*, and are explored alongside the poetic sources.

The focus topics progress from a description of the tree at the beginning of time, as the spatial structure of the mythic cosmos, the object of sacrifice, weapon of death, material of mortal creation, instrument of fate and, finally, source of rebirth after the cosmic destruction. The aim is to observe the transformation of the symbol of the tree both spatially, within the Eddic cycle, and temporally, as the prose accounts drawn from *Gylfaginning* are believed to be younger than the mythological poems. The abstract concept of the book is developed in relation to the symbol of the tree, and as the thesis progresses the relationship between tree, book and human is developed that ultimately seeks to mobilize the dynamism of such associations. The hopeful outcome undertakes to provide some insight into the human condition.

This thesis is also theoretical and two important sources are applied to the poetic subject: the socio-philosophical work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, along with the psychoanalytic interpretations of Carl Gustav Jung. Both of these voices address the symbol of the tree and its significance for the human condition, which, when considered alongside the close analyses of the textual fragments approach what is common to the tree, the book and the human, but also discerns where the three points diverge.

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1. The World Tree: Choosing a Point of Entry

This project explores tree symbolism in a selection Old Norse poetic and prose mythological sources. Yggdrasill, the world tree in the Norse cosmos, stands at the centre of the mythological universe, and is stated by the vǫlva in *Vǫluspá* 2 to be a seed in the ground at the beginning of time. Taking this first reference as our first point of entry into the mythological narrative, it will be seen that the tree will grow from this seed and multiply into various other points of entry. In the chapters that follow we will trace the growth and transformation of this most universal and significant symbol that is recognizable to humans from across cultures and belief systems. From the beginning of the creation period, before the cycle of time commences, the vǫlva remembers:

Ek man jǫtna
 ár of borna,
 þás forðum mik
 fœdda hǫfðu;
 níu mank heima,
 níu ívíði,
 mjǫtvið mæran
 fyr mold neðan. (Finnur Jónsson)¹

In the vǫlva's early remembrance of the time at the dawn of the creation period, before the arrival of humans, the first reference to the tree in the Norse cosmology is as a seed, beneath the surface of the earth. From the beginning of the Norse mythic cycle the tree is connected to the growth and the development of the world and its beings, and is in fact a preexisting condition for the narrative that follows. The line *mjǫtvið mæran* indicates that the tree is a measure, or that something may be measured by it, and it is an aim here to demonstrate that the force of life that travels and flows through both plants and animals is

¹ I, born of giants, remember very early
 those who nurtured me then;
 I remember nine worlds, I remember nine giant women,
 the mighty Measuring Tree down below the earth. (Larrington, *The Seeress's Prophecy* 2)

connected to the tree, the paramount plant, and may be measured by it. The lives of gods and humans, reflective of one another, are also measured by the tree. If there is such a reality as that of the life cycle, the energy of everything that lives is cycled through the tree. In Norse mythology the world tree is Yggdrasill.

The symbol of the tree is found in art from cultures from around the earth, as it is a representation of the natural cycle common to trees and humans, the cycle of birth, growth, maturation and inevitable death. The tree is perpetually reborn through seeds taking root in the ground, spreading across the surface of the earth and germinating where soil may be reached. The seeds then sprout, growing upward, spreading out horizontally and may then canopy downwards, back towards the earth. The regenerative forces of the tree are connected with the universal life force, the most central condition of natural progression, intricately weaving together the spheres of plants and humans, manifesting in the expression and transformation of symbols in ancient mythological narratives.

The conception of the tree as the centre of the cosmos is therefore not unique to any one mythology, but finds different forms of expression which are conditional to the culture and natural environment of the society from which the mythology evolves. The narratives from the Old Norse Eddic texts provide a picture of the tree as the axis mundi, the vehicle of sacrifice, the instrument of death, the material of mortal creation and the measure of time, which are accordingly primary themes of this analysis, and will be discussed in some depth below. The objective of the investigation is to approach the very inner-workings of the mythological framework, using the tree as the key with which to unlock the gate, and to, once there, travel across multiple lines of interpretation using a method that is not concentric, but decentered. In other words, the process is to approach a

root, the primary signifier of the tree, with a web that is representative of a multi-faceted method. Fragments taken from the Eddic poems *Völuspá*, *Hávamál*, *Grímnismál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Lokasenna* and *Baldur's draumur* are points in the web which relate to the cosmic picture and the tree, where threads of narrative are crossed with imagery of the central axis. Taken separately and together the poems permit for a glimpse into the worldview as it is expressed in the art of the culture which composed them, art, that is, in the modern sense of the term, for what the ancients considered their mythological narratives to be might be something that is impossible for the modern perception to define as art. The sensibilities of the authors will be found to manifest collectively in this grouping, as in some instances it may be proposed that the “author” was not one individual but a collective of multiple voices. *Gylfaginning*, a prose text belonging to *Snorra Edda*, and presumably composed at a later date than the poetic sources, further expands the scope of the Norse cosmic vision.² Taking into account that *Gylfaginning* cites much of the Eddic poetry further demonstrates the author’s later explication of the earlier sources, as the text is not simply a retelling of the narratives, but also an interpretation.³ With a careful analysis of the selected fragments from these sources, a tracing of the range and multitude of interactions within the narrative cosmic order may be grasped that will help to uncover layers of the plantation in the spheres of the Norse mythic gods and humans. A point of interest that will be considered but not overly elaborated or embellished is the transition of Icelandic society from a pre-Christian polytheistic belief system to a Christian belief system, and how such a transformation

² Much of the Eddic poetry is considered to have been composed ca. 1000 CE, while *Gylfaginning* is most commonly dated to the first half of the 13th century, and is attributed to the hand of Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241).

³ See Ármann Jakobsson. *Illa fenginn mjöður: Lesið í miðaldatexta*, 89-101.

influenced the composition of the sources. The sources under consideration here invite such a curiosity, but rather than trying to determine what the texts are saying in regards to the dominant belief system at the time of composition, it is the task here to interpret what the texts essentially transmit about such polytheism even while under the possible influence of Christianity.⁴

In order to widen the survey and enter a philosophical dialogue, integral to the analyses are two primary theoretical sources. The first voice is multiple, for it is of Gilles Deleuze (1925-95) and Félix Guattari (1930-92), and it is from the collaborative work of these two important twentieth century thinkers that an analysis such as the present is made possible. The two authors seek to mobilize works of art and ideas by plugging them in to other works and ideas. Abstract machines may be brought together in relation to other abstract machines—such as literary devices, theoretical devices, psychoanalytical devices, and more—that, when applied to mythology yield unique interpretations of the field at play within the narratives. Deleuze and Guattari in fact believe that works of art exist primarily for this precise purpose, and the bringing together of two related concepts that have not been brought together previously is an act of interpretation that is essential to the entire process of literature. Their approach, as elaborated throughout the present work, is principally a method of movement, and they term their action of socio-philosophical discourse *rhizoanalysis*, which will be outlined below. The second voice is that of Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), the Swiss psychoanalyst and mythological thinker, who forwards that the symbolic expression that is presented in mythological narratives is

⁴ It is important to note that the transition from the pre-Christian belief system to Christianity in Iceland is considered to be somewhat unique from similar transitions in medieval Europe. An explication of this uniqueness will be a part of the hopeful outcome of this thesis, implicit in the symbolic analyses being made.

always connected to the libido through the principle of desire, a desire, however, that is not strictly sexual, but may be symbolic of any one from a number of observations or concerns that the human condition brings about, such as the attempt to understand the nature of reality. The libido, for Jung, is the driving force behind all human action.

Both Jung and Deleuze and Guattari consider myths indispensable when exploring the human condition. Jung, arriving at myth from psychoanalysis, utilizes his clinical observations as the point of entry into ancient myths, mobilizing the comparisons he makes between the signs and symbols he extracts from the strata of an individual's unconscious and the mythic narratives. Essential to Jung's interpretations is the assertion that mythic symbols manifest in the dream-states and fantasies of modern humans in a similar manner as they do in the mythic stories from ancient periods, and it is this commonality that allows for his comparative method. The corresponding sets of symbols are thus deeply embedded in the collective unconscious, the level of the unconscious that is shared by humans within a particular culture, and, as is demonstrated through tree symbolism, often across cultures and through periods of time.⁵ During Jung's career, it should be noted, the conception of the collective unconscious widened, stemming from an idea of a "racial" unconscious, common to a particular group of humans who share a culture, to later descriptions of a universal, pan-human collective unconscious.

Deleuze and Guattari, while acknowledging the influence of myth on the modern human condition, qualify the significance that Jung insists is inherent to the relationship and its determined implications and effects. With Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, the connection with the human psyche that is established provides a framework and opens the myths up to the interpreter. Meanwhile, the rhizome analysis of

⁵ Another common symbol is that of water, which for many groups is symbolic of the unconscious itself.

Deleuze and Guattari does not draw concrete connections at all, but rather opens up a multitude of interpretive strategies, points of entry into the texts, and ultimately seeks to free human dependence from mythological complexes. It is important to note that both the theoretical voices consider desire to be central as it concerns existence. For Jung, desire is connected to the libido and is not strictly sexual. Deleuze and Guattari consider humans to be perpetually-desiring machines, a perception that goes beyond the libido, as desire is present in the entire assemblage. Before consulting the ideas of Jung, a few words are therefore required to discuss Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome as it relates to the main subject, the tree.

2. Mythological Strata and Symbols of the Unconscious

The introductory plateau, titled “1. Introduction: Rhizome,” in Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* serves as our point of departure into the idea of the rhizome, which is connected to their related concepts of the Body without Organs (BwO), assemblages and the substantial project of schizoanalysis. “Introduction: Rhizome” directly addresses the tree as a mode of thought and as a symbolic mode, one, they write, that has dominated Western culture since mythological times and continues to be at the forefront in many disciplines, linguistics for example. In this opening plateau, the authors situate the tree adjacent to the rhizome, a concept adapted from botany and turned into a theoretical approach, exemplifying both the binary structure of the tree and the principles of multiplicity of the rhizome. Although the tree has dominated much literature and thought in the West, they write, the rhizome more accurately represents natural orders.

The concept of the assemblage is central to Deleuze and Guattari’s thought, for they assert that works of literature, books, are composed of “lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Comparative rates of flow on these lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 3-4).⁶ These attributes come together in literature and constitute an assemblage. Writing, the generative act of literature, in fact, for Deleuze and Guattari is not concerned with signification, but with exploring unknown space, for which the lines of flight serve as entryways into the texts. The association of the act of

⁶ The concept of the “assemblage” has also been translated as “arrangement.” See Dosse 241.

literature with the exploration of space is a concept that is similar to that of their contemporary, Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003), who writes about the space of literature, and how writing and reading surveys such space.⁷

Considering more closely the mode of the tree, Deleuze and Guattari turn to the book. The authors write, “[a] first type of book is the root-book. The tree is already the image of the world, or the root the image of the world-tree [...] The book imitates the world, as art imitates nature: by procedures specific to it that accomplish what nature cannot or can no longer do” (5). The book, imitating the world, achieves a human conception of the world, which in the case of many Western writers is a tree or root-based conception of the world. The key word here is “imitate,” as to imitate is to function as a root or a tree, splitting and copying, rather than taking a point of departure into or out of the text along a line of flight. For, as they write, “[n]ature doesn’t work that way: in nature, roots are taproots with a more multiple, lateral, and circular system of ramification, rather than a dichotomous one. Thought lags behind nature” (5). Nature, again, filtered through human thought en route to literature becomes humanized. Nature as found in literature is a human conception of nature and not representative of natural phenomena (especially the case for Classical or Ancient literature). Modern literature, Deleuze and Guattari write, makes use of a second mode of the tree/root system, “[t]he radicle-system, or fascicular root,” where “the principal root has aborted, or its tip has been destroyed; an immediate, indefinite multiplicity of secondary roots grafts onto it and undergoes a flourishing development” (5). A book that demonstrates a radicle-system could, for example, be a book composed of fragments, each fragment of which, while an independent piece, is connected to the primary root which it has “grafted” from. The

⁷ See Blanchot’s *The Space of Literature* and *The Infinite Conversation*.

radicle-system is a step away from the tree/root hierarchizing system, demonstrating more multiplicities and connections, but like the first system, the tree/root system, remains attached to the tree, branching off of a principal root.

After the two tree/root-based systems are introduced, Deleuze and Guattari describe the attributes of a rhizome. They write, “[a] rhizome as subterranean stem is absolutely different from roots and radicles” (6), and, further, “[t]he rhizome itself assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers” (7). A rhizome, accordingly, extends itself across a wide area or condenses itself into a small one. The principle qualities of a rhizome are: 1) and 2) connection and heterogeneity; 3) multiplicity; 4) signifies rupture; and 5) and 6) principle of cartography and decalomania (7-12). A rhizome differs from a tree or root in all of these principles, even though, as will be discussed below, a tree may have rhizome-like qualities. Importantly, in a rhizome, “[t]here are no points or positions [...] such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines” (8). From this the authors advance that the book does not mimic or replicate the world, as is often believed; the book “forms a rhizome with the world” (11). The book, like the tree/root, although not forming a rhizome, may become a line in a rhizome, a strata or line of flight, constituting part of an assemblage. Plants, even though they may have a tree/root structure, connect outside of their own structure with other plants or animals. This principle will form the basis for our later comparisons between the tree, the book and the rhizome, in which it may be reached that the three entities form a rhizome with each other.

Charles Stivale writes about the rhizome in his interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari’s work in an essay entitled “The Literary Element in *Mille Plateaux*,” supporting

the idea that “[t]he system called rhizome is the production of the multiple” (Stivale, “The Literary Element in ‘Mille Plateaux’ 21). Stivale discusses how Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome project, and, further, their substantial project of schizoanalysis, is one of surveying, not of defining concretely. Such an approach highlights how the nature of a literary text is interconnected within itself and also connected outside of the text. The terms that Deleuze and Guattari use in their method, such as rhizomatics and schizoanalysis, Stivale continues, are used “to produce assemblages—strata, molecular chains, lines of flight or rupture, circles of convergence—which themselves constitute diverse plateaux that usually overlap at various points of the assemblage” (21). At points of overlap it is possible to observe connections that may be used as points of entry into the text, or into phenomena outside of the text that they are most connected with. In this way, for example, Deleuze and Guattari, while discussing a literary text, such as a work by Kafka, may then enter into a discussion of the law, as Kafka’s work may overlap and unfold with the law at certain points in the assemblage.⁸

Trees are indicative of hierarchizing power structures, and, as Deleuze and Guattari write, “[i]t is odd how the tree has dominated Western reality and all of Western thought [...] The West has a special relation to the forest, and deforestation” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 18). This is contrary to the East, suggest the authors, as a more rhizomatic model may prevail there. America, moreover, the authors view as the meeting place of East and West, and as such not as strictly tree-based as the European West.⁹

⁸ It is also significant that the first full appearance of the concept of the *rhizome* in the collaborative work of Deleuze and Guattari arrives with their piece *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, originally published as *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure* (1975).

⁹ American filmmaker Terrence Malick (see Patterson) and 19th century writer Ralph Waldo Emerson are two examples that come to mind when considering the way in which an artist’s natural space is integral, in

Importantly, the tree/root and the rhizome do not oppose one another, as is demonstrated by the American condition, which the authors exemplify by pointing to the work of William S. Burroughs and Henry Miller, who fold each text into another. Deleuze and Guattari write, “the first [tree/root] operates as a transcendent model and tracing, even if it engenders its own escapes; the second [rhizome] operates as an immanent process that overturns the model and outlines a map” (20). The rhizome is open to be entered at any point, and from that point, is connected to all other points. The tree is linear, as are root-systems. Radicles branch off of the principal root, opening the tree up to other lines, yet remain connected to the tree. It is important, however, that a dual or binary structure does not arise between tree/root and rhizome, for in nature the world is always an interconnected, becoming-chaos: “[t]rees have rhizome lines, and the rhizome points of arborescence” (34). The rhizome marks the maturation of the concept of the Body without Organs, a body that has no central controlling structure, but is made up of independent points of convergence that are connected to each other. This is related to the connectedness of multiple plateaus of thought. The authors write, “[a] plateau is a piece of immanence. Every BwO [Body without Organs] is made up of plateaus. Every BwO is itself a plateau in communication with other plateaus on the plane of consistency. The BwO is a component of passage” (158).¹⁰

The tree is most commonly found in the forest, which is a striated space as opposed to a smooth space. The special connection humans in the West have with the

part, to the creation of the artistic work, and how the uniqueness of the American condition manifests in such works of art.

¹⁰ The Body without Organs (BwO) is a central concept in Deleuze and Guattari’s first work, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, which, related to the concept of the assemblage, later morphs into the rhizome.

forest may be partly associated with the striated nature of such spaces, as opposed to more open, smooth spaces. “Smooth or nomad space lies between two striated spaces: that of the forest, with its gravitational verticals, and that of agriculture, with its grids and generalized parallels, its now independent arborescence, its art of extracting the tree and wood from the forest” (384). Striated spaces can be managed and more easily surveyed by humans, and this manifests in literary texts. Smooth spaces are, for Deleuze and Guattari, the unknown that must be discovered through writing, yet the foundation of Western thought uses striated spaces as more common points of departure. The authors write,

[a]t the level of theory, the status of multiplicities is correlative to that of spaces, and vice versa: smooth spaces of the type desert, steppe, or sea are not without people; they are not depopulated but rather are populated by multiplicities [...] without symmetry, the stems of the rhizome are always taking leave of the trees, the masses and flows are constantly escaping, inventing connections that jump from tree to tree and uproot them: a whole smoothing of space, which in turn reacts back upon striated space. (506)

When literature surveys such striated spaces, it de-striates the space, creating the possibility for more multiplicities. In other words, it makes the familiar less familiar. The rhizome method, by catalyzing the de-stratification of space, initiates the possibility for more multiplicities. They continue, “[o]r language: the trees of language are shaken by buddings and rhizomes. So that rhizome lines oscillate between tree lines that segment and even stratify them, and lines of flight or rupture that carry them away” (506).

The rhizome communicates from tree to tree, each tree acting as a part of the assemblage, part of the book, part of the literary text. This type of movement is not one in which a model will be applied to a text and meaning extracted. Their method is scientific and philosophical: “[s]chizoanalysis is not only a qualitative analysis of abstract

machines in relation to the assemblages, but also a quantitative analysis of the assemblages in relation to a presumably pure abstract machine” (513). Rhizoanalysis is a study of movement, not within a system or structure, but of movement between bodies or assemblages in relation to one another, seeking to interpret their interconnectedness and multiplicity.¹¹

N. Katherine Hayles writes about Deleuze and Guattari’s method, noting the interconnectedness of the bodies and lines within the fields they survey, as well as the power of language that they assume when they make their analyses. Deleuze and Guattari substantiate the importance of desire, as a hunger and a motivation for action and movement in and across strata. Hayles writes, “[b]y insisting that flows of intensities follow only the dictates of desire, Deleuze and Guattari erase the powerful role of constraints in creating complex feedback loops that make organism and environment into an integrated system” (Hayles 155). The organism may here be the book or the tree that through its connectedness to its surroundings and as an assemblage, enters into a new assemblage that carries it away from its own structure and into a structure-less rhizome. Environment and organism are inseparable from one another. The power of language is paramount to this process, as it is through language that such conditions are created. Hayles writes, “Deleuze and Guattari show every evidence of believing that language has the power to create reality (or at least a perception of reality) that will not be constrained by biological requirements and that can be brought into existence through redescription alone” (156). Re-description, such as the acts of writing and literature, and, in fact,

¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari’s method ultimately challenges the project of structuralism, which rather than identifying movement abstractly, seeks to identify order, firstly, then interprets movement within an ordered framework. On structuralism, see Claude Lévi-Strauss *Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture*, 12.

expression by groups in mythological narratives, may therefore create a perception of reality that stands alongside the natural environment when approached in a way that adheres to the possibility of multiplicities, interconnectedness and the structure-less arrangement of assemblages.

The rhizome, as discussed above, grows from the Body without Organs. Stivale writes about this manifestation/mutation/maturation, “as a framework for their multiplanar interdisciplinary theorization of multiplicity” (Stivale, *Two-Fold Thought* 13). Through the rhizome, continues Stivale, Deleuze and Guattari expound “the multiplicity of sociocultural and creative dynamics other than in binary terms. The ‘rhizome’ constitutes a model of continuing offshoots, taproot systems that travel horizontally and laterally, constantly producing affective relations/becomings that themselves contribute to the dynamic multiplicity of creation and existence” (71). The rhizome assigns neither subject nor object, especially when applied to the book: “[i]nstead, it [the body under consideration] is constituted only by lines of articulation (segmentarity, strata, territorialities), on the one hand, and by lines of flight (movements of deterritorialization and destratification), on the other” (105). Rhizoanalysis does not produce meanings or definitions, nor does it seek for them, but is a process by which multiplicities, interconnectedness and ruptures may be recognized, and interpretations extended based on the connections. The relationships between bodies within a rhizome system may be qualified and quantified through this method, which will lead to further discovery of multiplicities, connections and ruptures. The possibilities for discovery are

always greater than the results of the investigation, as concrete answers are not necessarily sought after.¹²

A foundation of Deleuze and Guattari's project is their interpretation of the forces of desire, demonstrating their deep involvement in the psychological discourse. Freudian, and later Lacanian psychoanalysis, as is known, focuses on the passage through the Oedipus complex on the path to maturation. As will be discussed below, Jung created a distance from the Oedipus complex by asserting that there are other desires than only sexual ones at play in the libido. Jung, however, retained a connection to the myth of Oedipus and its influence on the transformation of the human psyche, placing it amongst other myths of transformation. Underlying almost all of Deleuze and Guattari's principles is the idea that the individual need not pass through the Oedipus complex and may desire as wished, individually and, indeed, schizophrenically. This idea may be their most controversial and most important, for it posits that the human condition cannot be universalized under a central theory of sexual desire, for humans are desiring-machines, and that the necessity to pass through the Oedipus complex is deceptive. One such criticism, from Leonard Jackson, attacks Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the freedom of individual desire. Jackson writes, about Deleuze and Guattari, that their *Anti-Oedipus* "reverses the Freudian proposition that the passage through the Oedipus complex is the entry into culture and humanity. Better for us all, it says, not to pass through; we should all remain schizophrenic desiring-machines" (Jackson 161). Although Jackson does connect with the schizo-state that Deleuze and Guattari maintain as a method in their work, it is not actually the case that to not pass through the Oedipus complex is to be a schizophrenic, and furthermore, schizoanalysis does not necessarily call forth a state of

¹² See also Stivale, "Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: Schizoanalysis & Literary Discourse."

schizophrenia by any means, but is similar to the perspective of multiplicity maintained by a schizo-condition. The schizo, or rhizo-project is concerned with identifying multiplicities and overthrowing universalizing structures imprisoning thought and interpretation. Although Deleuze and Guattari, in much of their work, are responding to Lacan, it may have been Jung, making the initial break from Freud, and asserting multiplicity in the libido who will be most effectively read alongside these two theorists, Deleuze and Guattari, who in their multiplicity, are many.¹³

Jung approaches mythological narratives from the standpoint of psychoanalysis, as myths correlate to elements that Jung uncovers in the unconscious layers of his subjects. In many of Jung's writings there is a direct attention to the symbol of the tree, and, as the author forwards, the making of symbols and myths is a function of the human unconscious. The unconscious holds within its strata universal symbols that manifest in the consciousness of subjects when those symbols are called forth by conditions that necessitate their appearance. In the words of Vernon Gras, on Jung's ideas regarding the relation between mythological symbols and the human psyche: "[t]he only adequate hypothesis, says Jung, is to view myths and certain universal symbols (i.e., other than personal images) as products of the psyche itself which emerge from the unconscious when the psychic conditions they are said to symbolize call them forth" (Gras 472). The tree, for example, is a symbol for the male and the female, the father and the mother, a symbol that is connected to human origins. Writing of mother-symbols generally, Jung advocates, "[a]nother equally common mother-symbol is the wood of life [...] or tree of life. The tree of life may have been, in the first instance, a fruit-bearing genealogical tree,

¹³ Deleuze and Guattari personalize their schizophrenic approach in the opening lines of *A Thousand Plateaus*, where they write, "The two of us wrote *Anti-Oedipus* together. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 3).

and hence a kind of tribal mother. Numerous myths say that human beings came from trees, and many of them tell how the hero was enclosed in the maternal tree-trunk” (Jung, *Symbols of Transformation* 219). The mother-symbolism of the tree coincides with the phallic symbol of the father, demonstrated by the tree trunk, standing straight up from the ground. Therefore, the character of the tree is essentially male and female, bisexual (221), and may represent the mother, the father and birth.¹⁴

Jung’s theory of the unconscious as outlined in his early works states that mythological symbols from the past are stored in the collective unconscious. Jung’s break from Freud, taking place at the same time as these early writings, during the second decade of the twentieth century, specifically stems from different ideas concerning the libido, as introduced above. In Beatrice M. Hinkle’s introduction to *Psychology of the Unconscious*, she illustrates this separation and its implications: “[i]n developing the energetic conception of libido and separating it from Freud’s sexual definition, Jung makes possible the explanation of interest in general, and provides a working concept by which not only the specifically sexual, but the general activities and reactions of man can be understood” (Hinkle xxvii). Jung’s variation from strictly Freudian-thought is a first movement away from the Oedipus complex, allowing for more diverse and multiple analyses of psychological structures, leading to his later definition of archetypes. Esther Harding writes,

[b]ehind the imago of the parents that Freud had already described, he [Jung] began to realize that images of a more general, more universal, more august nature operated within the psyche: images that had been expressed throughout the ages in myths and religious symbols, things that could not possibly belong to the

¹⁴ Mircea Eliade elaborates on the concept of the earth-mother: “[o]ne might say that the Earth-Mother constitutes a form that is ‘open’ to, or susceptible of, indefinite enrichment, and that is why it takes in all the myths dealing with Life and Death, with Creation and generation, with sexuality and voluntary sacrifice” (*Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* 185).

dreamer's personal experience, and so could not come from repressed memories. These he called *archetypal images*, and the deeper layer of the unconscious from which they emerge he called the *collective unconscious*. (Harding 250)

It is the space for analyzing more general symbols, ones that are not connected strictly to sexuality that Jung created for psychoanalysis. Within such an interpretive space, which has been adapted by literary critics such as Northrop Frye (1912-91), for example, with his archetypal criticism, and Joseph Campbell (1904-87) in the field of comparative mythology, a symbol such as the tree may be traced through narratives with the object of interpretation being the transformation of the symbol, rather than an analyses of the symbol's sexual connections and connotations.¹⁵

As a psychoanalyst Jung engaged in modern scientific and empirical research. He sought the history of science and learned, as he travelled backwards through time, that science dissolves into mythology, with the common end of explaining the world. In his work, "Concerning the Two Kinds of Thinking" Jung writes about what modern humanity may seek in the past: "[e]xcept for a sensitive perspicuity towards works of art, not attained since then, we seek in vain in antiquity for that precise and concrete manner of thinking characteristic of modern science. We see the antique spirit create not science but mythology" (*Psychology of the Unconscious* 24). Modern humanity does not express symbols in the same manner as the ancients did in mythology, but does so through the unconscious in dream and fantasy-states, elements of which manifest in art and literature. Jung's interest in mythology is linked to his pursuit of the interpretation of dreams, as symbols exhibited from the unconscious originate in mythology, and "[f]rom all these signs it may be concluded that the soul possesses in some degree historical strata, the

¹⁵ See Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology*, especially "The Archetypes of Literature," 7-20.

oldest stratum of which would correspond to the unconscious” (37). The stratum of the unconscious is common to people within a culture, and some elements are common to people across cultures: the collective unconscious. On the collective unconscious, Jung writes, “*there must be typical myths which are really the instruments of a folk-psychological complex treatment*” (40).

Jung disagrees with the view that mythological symbols should be interpreted as signs or allegories for something concrete, something known. To this end, the author insists “[w]e take mythological symbols much too concretely and are puzzled at every turn by the endless contradictions of myths. But we always forget that it is the unconscious creative force which wraps itself in images” (*Symbols of Transformation* 222). The “unconscious creative force” is lodged in the human psyche, which may explain why mythological narratives are not always rational, but often irrational, as is human behavior. The formation of symbols, for Jung, is rooted in human instinct, and finds expression in mythological and literary texts. Jung, once more, uses the symbol of the tree as an example: “[t]he various meanings of the tree—sun, tree of Paradise, mother, phallus—are all explained by the fact that it is a libido-symbol and not an allegory of this or that concrete object” (222). The libido, as primary instinctual force, not solely tied to sexuality in the Freudian sense, may draw connections between the tree and birth, growth and death. Jung continues, “[j]ust as the myths tell us that human beings were descended from trees, so there were burial customs in which people were buried in hollow tree-trunks” (233), illustrating the connection between the tree and death. At the end of time on earth, moreover, humans will return to the tree, the place from which they were born.

In *Vafþrúðnismál* 45, the great giant Vafþrúðnir foresees that the human pair Líf and Lífþrasir will hide themselves in the tree to survive the death and disaster of Ragnarøk. This fragment will be analysed in chapter 7, and, at the moment it is important to refer to Jung's description of the occurrence. Jung, drawing on Norse Mythology, describes the return to the tree: "[i]n the wood of the world-ash Yggdrasill a human pair hide themselves at the end of the world, and from them will spring a new race of men. At the moment of universal destruction the world-ash becomes the guardian mother, the tree pregnant with death and life" (246). The tree gives birth to humans, nurtures their growth and after enclosing them at the time of death, will give them birth again, in a new age; the guardian-mother, at the time of absolute chaos, is a regenerative force.

Jung also addresses the myth of Baldr and the mistletoe, describing how the mistletoe is a parasite, a young growth on the tree, like a child, that was considered too young when actions were being taken to protect Baldr from death. The mistletoe, Jung writes, may be considered as "the child of the tree" (258), as mistletoe is a symbol of youth and renewal, like Baldr. Jung writes, "[t]his type is granted only a fleeting existence, because he is never anything but an anticipation of something desired and hoped for" (258). Baldr, like the mistletoe, when separated from the mother, as the mistletoe becomes separated from the tree, must die (see chapter 4).

The tree, as demonstrated, is connected to many phenomenological concepts, the mother being only one manifestation of such, although it is a primary manifestation. Jung writes about the most common associations, such as "growth from below upwards and from above downwards, the maternal aspect (protection, shade, shelter, nourishing fruits, source of life, solidity, permanence, firm-rootedness, but also being 'rooted to the spot'),

old age, personality, and finally death and rebirth” (*Alchemical Studies* 272). Such a wide range of symbolic associations confers with a primary theme of this thesis, which will be developed throughout and concluded in chapter 7: namely, that the tree is universally symbolic, but not necessarily symbolic universally. On the change that an archetypal symbol such as the tree undergoes, Jung continues, “[t]he outward form of the tree may change in the course of time, but the richness and vitality of a symbol are expressed more in its change of meaning. The aspect of meaning is therefore essential to the phenomenology of the tree symbol” (272).

This is especially significant, for it is the transformation of the symbol of the tree that is at the core of this project. The concept of transformation inherently has as a central feature the principle of multiplicity, as found in Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome: the ability to enact change. In other words, the focus is not on the tree as a concrete symbol, but on how the tree as a symbolic entity manifests in diverse and varied ways. There are numerous and specifically-focused threads in Jung’s interpretation of mythological symbolism, the most important of which is the transformation symbols undergo.

Leon Edel writes about Jung’s significant influence on the field of literary criticism, creating a bridge between literature and psychology that rests on the exploration of humanity’s subjectivity in research conducted in both fields. Edel writes,

Jung came to believe that the experience of an individual’s ancestors embodied in mythical themes are ultimately transmitted as a ‘racial [collective] unconscious.’ He saw these images as archetypes common to whole epochs of society. Rejecting Freud’s emphasis on the instincts, Jung insisted that man seeks not only the gratification of his appetites, but from the beginning of history, required a religion, and a philosophy of history, which he embodied in his myths. (Edel 132)

Jung, again, acknowledges the importance and continuation of the Oedipus complex, for example, as a mythological structure that exists in the collective unconscious, but resists

the Freudian insistence that the inherent desires associated with Oedipus wholly dominate human activity. As Barbara Stevens Barnum writes, the separation between Freud and Jung may be rooted in different conceptions of what is real. She writes, concerning the different ideas of the two psychoanalysts: “[f]or Freud the answer is much simpler than it is for Jung. Freud labels as real what can be seen, touched, felt and shared with others—so-called naïve realism. For Jung, there are shared realities and personal realities, realities of the physical world and realities of realms of consciousness” (Stevens Barnum 354). The realities humans observe in the physical world over time become embedded within the collective unconscious, finding their expressions in myths, while in the modern period the archetypal symbols rise from the unconscious strata in dream and fantasy states. Jung travels into the human psyche to uncover realities, which, although rooted in the past, exist abstractly in the modern human mind.

There is reason to be cautious, however, when consulting Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious for interpretation of mythological narratives and symbols, for to attribute such symbols solely to the human capacity to explain their surroundings, and the subsequent manifestation of such symbols in fantasies and dreams, would be to continue to read the past in terms of the present, and vice versa. It is also advisable to try to understand these narratives and symbols in terms of their specific time and place of generation and subsequent transformation, consulting Jung’s ideas as one consults a travel guide when moving through unknown space. Jung’s theory does, however, create a bridge between modernity and antiquity. Campbell entertains the possibility of Jung’s interpretations in relation to the collective unconscious, viewing it as important, as Jung does, to avoid the temptation of viewing cultures and groups as biologically distinct from

one another. The possibility of a cross-cultural collective unconscious is important, as it is a pan-human interpretation. The best approach, writes Campbell, when attempting to interpret mythological symbols and narratives, “is to be, as far as possible, skeptical, historical, and descriptive—and where history fails and something else appears, as in a mirror, darkly, we indicate the considered guesses of the chief authorities in the field and leave the rest to silence” (Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology* 49). Jung is acutely aware of the problems of interpreting mythology, and writes about the advancement to such a pursuit that psychology attempts to give to the daunting task. Jung writes,

[m]yth-interpretation is a tricky business and there is some justification for looking at it askance. Hitherto the myth-interpreter has found himself in a somewhat unenviable position, because he only had exceedingly doubtful points for orientation at his disposal, such as astronomical and meteorological data. Modern psychology has the distinct advantage of having opened up a field of psychic phenomena which are themselves the matrix of all mythology—I mean dreams, visions, fantasies, and delusional ideas. Here the psychologist not only finds numerous points of correspondence with myth-motifs, but also has an invaluable opportunity to observe how such contents arise and to analyse their function in a living organism. (*Symbols of Transformation* 390)

Jung’s subjects supply a framework that is living, granting access to, as he terms it, the “matrix of all mythology,” the collective unconscious. This view, while somewhat universalizing, gives to the reader of mythology a point of departure into ancient narratives, for his insights surely maintain creative and analytic force. Jung’s work is of primary importance for this project not so much because of its methods, but because of the keen insight of his analyses of ancient myths. It is important to take note, as is done here, of the theories which underlie his interpretations, but it is the interpretations themselves that are at the forefront and will be consulted below. To depart, for now, J. Ehrenwald writes, “[t]he soul itself, according to Jung, is the reaction of the personality

to the unconscious” (qtd. in Stevens Barnum: 356-57). On that note, our discussion turns directly to the tree: *askr Yggdrasils*, which, as our primary archetypal symbol under consideration, will hopefully grant some insight into the human spirit.

3. *askr Yggdrasils*: Cosmic and Sacrificial Matrix

The hanging of Attis, in effigy, on a pine-tree, the hanging of Marsyas, which became a popular theme for art, the hanging of Odin, the Germanic hanging sacrifices and the whole series of hanged gods—all teach us that the hanging of Christ on the Cross is nothing unique in religious mythology, but belongs to the same circle of ideas.
-C. G. Jung¹⁶

Descriptions of Yggdrasill appear in the Old Norse sources that describe it as the spatial support and matrix of the Norse mythic cosmos. The root structure is composed of three roots, branching off of the tree, running in three directions, demonstrating multiplicity: the tree does not merely split into a binary pairing, but into a triad. Considering this tri-functionality, this chapter will outline certain important theoretical analyses of Georges Dumézil (1898-1986) related to the Indo-European tradition. Dumézil argues that within the narratives found in mythological texts, a society experiencing social and religious transition may demonstrate the retention of the former belief system's values. Óðinn's self-sacrifice in *Hávamál* 137-40, as a focal point of the tree as matrix of the cosmos, is open to an interpretation that demonstrates the survival of the pre-Christian belief system in Old Norse sources that may have been composed around the time of conversion in Iceland, and were transcribed in to manuscripts centuries later. Firstly, the spatial reach of Yggdrasill as it relates to the structure of the Norse cosmos is considered in order that an understanding of the tree's dimensions is established.

The account of the roots of the ash in *Grímnismál* 32, in which Óðinn under the guise of Grímnir describes the cosmos, is as follows:

¹⁶ *Symbols of Transformation* 233.

Þrjár rætr
standa á þrjá vega
undan aski Yggdrasils;
Hæl býr und ęinni,
annarri hrímþursar,
þriðju męnskir męnn. (Finnur Jónsson)¹⁷

In this account one root runs to Hel, a second reaches the hrímþursar, and a third one is in the human sphere. *Grímnismál*, which is older than *Gylfaginning*, connects a root of Yggdrasill to the human world, Miðgarðr, rather than to Asgarðr. In *Gylfaginning* 15 there is a detailed description of Yggdrasill. Jafnhárr, speaking to Gangleri, describes the world tree:

Askrin er allra trea mestr ok bestr; limar hans dreifask vm heim allan ok standa yfir himni; þrjár rætr tresins halda því vpp ok standa afar breitt. Ein er með asvm, en avnvr með hrímþvsvm, þar sem forþvm var Ginvngagap; en þriþia stendr ifir Niflheimi, ok vndir þeiri rot er Hvergelmir, en Níðhavgr gnagar neþan rotna. (Finnur Jónsson)¹⁸

Yggdrasill acts as the centre of the world, and accordingly unites with its roots three cosmic spheres: the realm of the Æsir, that of the hrímþursar, and the dark world, Niflheimr. The difference between the two versions represents the transformation over time of the symbol of the world tree, and also entertains the possibility that in *Gylfaginning* Snorri drew his information from a different source. John Lindow accounts for this difference by suggesting that Snorri is possibly expanding the universal principle of the world tree, moving the third root into the “mythological plane” (Lindow, *Norse*

¹⁷ Three roots there grow in three directions
under the ash of Yggdrasill;
Hel lives under one, under the second, the frost-giants,
the third, humankind. (Larrington, *Grimnir's Sayings* 31)

¹⁸ The ash is the largest and the best of all trees. Its branches spread themselves over all the world, and it stands over the sky. Three roots support the tree and they are spread very far apart. One is among the Æsir. A second is among the frost giants where Ginnungagap once was. The third reaches down to Niflheim, and under this root is the well Hvergelmir; but Nidhogg [Hateful Striker] gnaws at this root from below. (Byock)

Mythology 321). In any case the variant accounts of the root system of Yggdrasill demonstrate the multiplication of the function of the symbol of the tree.

There are questions that arise from such a transformation. As the poetic source is older than *Gylfaginning*, and Snorri most likely would have consulted a version of it when composing his *Edda*, then it may be prospected that Snorri's version draws a connection between humankind and the Æsir, in that the root of the world tree formerly associated with the sphere of humans in the poetic source is also open to association with the world of gods. Or, it is also probable that such a transformation draws humankind out of the mythological cosmos supported by Yggdrasill, distancing gods and humans. If the latter is the case, then it may be expanded by the connection that Bifröst bridges between Miðgarðr and Asgarðr, which connects the world of humans with the world of the Æsir, yet not granting humans direct contact with the ash.¹⁹ Furthermore, Snorri's account may also be due to the connections that can be made between the Æsir and humans. The gods are essentially human in character, and are primarily distinguished as a result of their exceptional abilities, but ultimately succumb to the same conditions of existence as humans (see chapters 4 and 6). Therefore, based on the connection between the Æsir and humans, the root that reaches the Æsir in *Gylfaginning* also reaches humankind, but, in turn emphasizes the human aspects of the Æsir, perhaps suggesting a Christian interpretation of the mythological narrative in *Gylfaginning* emphasizing that the Norse pantheon is not divine, which, of course, it is not (see chapters 4 and 6).²⁰

Christopher Abram writes about the religious context of Snorri's *Edda* regarding the preservation of a pre-Christian belief system from the perspective of a Christian

¹⁹ See Byock, appendix 1: "The Norse Cosmos and the World Tree" in *The Prose Edda* 119-22.

²⁰ It is also important to note here that in the narrative of *Gylfaginning* the gods are humans.

outlook. Abram concludes that Snorri's *Edda* "aims to preserve and exhibit traditional pagan culture, primarily for aesthetic reasons and in the context of its overriding interest in poetics. At the same time, it subtly demonstrates the falsehoods that lie at the heart of pagan religion" (Abram 22). This dual function of purpose for Snorri's *Edda*, as a text meant to both capture and dismantle the pre-Christian belief system of ancient Scandinavia, is further demonstrative of a Christian interpretation of the text.²¹ There is also a line of thought suggesting that to be able to re-tell such narratives, as is done in Snorri's *Edda*, requires the continuation of such a belief system and not merely a memory of its narratives, motifs and symbols. This interpretation forwards that the pre-Christian belief system is therefore engrained within the collective psyche of the transitional society and cannot be simply superseded by a new, more dominant belief system.

Dumézil contributed a substantial amount of comparative analytical studies in the areas of Indo-European mythology, including Norse Mythology, with an interest in demonstrating the longevity of the Indo-European structure in transitional societies. When attempting to trace the tree as a mythological symbol in the Norse cosmos, Dumézil's tripartite structure proves useful. His system, consisting of three functions—sovereign, warrior and agricultural—situates the mythological gods, the Æsir and the Vanir, into a common Indo-European comparative framework, which accordingly places narratives involving the tree into specific functions with specific gods. The episode of Óðinn's self-sacrifice on Yggdrasill for nine nights and nine days specifically demonstrates the god's inclination to sacrifice himself to himself for knowledge of runes

²¹ Anthony Faulkes, translator of Snorri's *Edda* forwards in the introduction to his translation that it is most probable that Snorri was aware of the waning importance of the traditional forms of skaldic poetry due to the introduction of new forms of literary composition, especially Latin, and therefore composed his *Edda* with the intention to preserve the older style.

and magic. In Dumézil's tripartite structure Óðinn is a god belonging to the sovereign function (Þór to the warrior function; Freyr to the agricultural function). This function is both sovereign and magical, and Óðinn's sacrificial act heightens his magical abilities and accordingly secures his sovereignty as the most dominant god.²²

The use and application of Dumézil's theory of tri-functionality is an area of study that is not only controversial but leads to varying results. Dean A. Miller, for example, when referring to Dumézil's assertion that the old Indo-European tripartite system continued to function in Scandinavian societies in the centuries immediately following the conversion to Christianity, especially in Iceland, strikes on one of the most important points of contention in the comparative method: the fact that "paganism," as such, had been challenged by Christianity did not negate the Indo-European cultural mindset, and therefore the individuals belonging to the collective compiling the mythological narratives in poetry and prose, although in a Christian era, retained the theology of the pre-Christian period. If this is the case, then it is possible when interpreting the narrative of Óðinn's self-sacrifice to read it as representative of a pre-Christian ritual. Miller writes that critics of Dumézil initially "objected that nearly three hundred years of Christianity in the Scandinavian lands 'must' have eliminated the older pagan tripartite myth and the ancient I-E memory supporting it" (Miller 28). Miller, paraphrasing Dumézil, continues, writing that whether or not Christianization "must" have had this effect, evidently it did not, and the "proof is clearly in the survivals, in the patterns embedded in the sagas themselves. The thing speaks for itself, and so 'collective representation' (a pattern replicated and demonstrated in language and its artifacts) is

²² Dumézil defines the three functions in *Mitra-Varuna* as follows: "magic sovereignty (and heavenly administration of the universe), warrior power (and administration of the lower atmosphere), peaceful fecundity (and administration of the earth, the underworld and the sea)" 121.

demonstrably stronger than a change of cult” (28). Miller suggests that, for Dumézil, texts written down in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries retain in their mythological discourse, cultural and social artifacts from many centuries past, and also demonstrate the continuing existence of the ancestral ideology. Furthermore, as is evident here, support for the perseverance of the pre-Christian mindset is sought out in the social organization of Iceland in the thirteenth century, which still, like the preceding centuries, utilized a form of collective representation which had been for the most part overcome by Christianity in other lands in medieval Europe. Miller’s use of the tripartite framework is potentially over-exhausting the Indo-European approach, however, by turning the literary interpretations of the sources back upon the groups that composed and compiled them.²³

Dumézil further recognizes that while Germanic-Norse mythology is compatible with the tripartite structure, the society creating the myths did not distribute and organize its people strictly according to their belief system, but in fact demonstrate the continuation of the Indo-Germanic tendency to organize their societies with a de-centered structure. Dumézil writes that “the Germanic peoples profess a clear trifunctional theology (presented in Scandinavia as ‘Odin, Thor, Frey’), but do not divide their societies according to these three functions” (Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen* 118). The mythological narratives impact different groups of people within the Norse sphere uniquely, which most probably accounts for the emphasis placed by geographically variant cults on different individual gods. Therefore, it is not necessarily the adherence to the tripartite social structure that is important for the comparison between belief and social mindset, but rather the non-adherence to the Christian social

²³ For further exemplification of the application of Dumézil’s theories to Indo-European mythological narratives see Emily B. Lyle “Dumézil’s Three Functions and Indo-European Cosmic Structure.”

organizing principles, of the king and priest as representatives of the sovereign function on earth. Resistance to such a hierarchizing structure is clear in the society of Iceland in the centuries surrounding the conversion period, but the exact impact it had on the mythology must remain hypothetical.

The Indo-European comparative method suggests that the myths written down by Snorri and other collectors of mythological narratives were in fact re-tellings of pre-Christian narratives in a Christian era, even though, as stated above, varying degrees of Christian influence are evident in different texts. Through comparison to other pre-Christian traditions, pre-Christian qualities may be affirmed for the myths. Stephanie von Schnurbein writes about Dumézil's influence on the field of comparative mythology and the subsequent theological approaches that arose in response to the comparative method:

[a]ccording to this account [the reaction to Dumézil], Snorri's interest, and indeed the essential impulse underlying the whole corpus of Old Norse literature, was motivated precisely *not* by theological historical interpretations but rather by an attempt to preserve the pagan cultural tradition of the North by embedding it in the high medieval worldview, integrating it into the Christian understanding of history, and thereby molding a genuine Scandinavian cultural consciousness. (von Schnurbein, "Function of Loki" 112)

This perception, which counters Dumézil's indication that the pre-Christian outlook was still intact in thirteenth-century Iceland, seeks to synthesize the pre-Christian and the Christian worldviews in medieval Scandinavia, rather than emphasize, as Dumézil does, that it was not necessarily a conscious effort to preserve ancient traditions, but that those traditions were still present at the time of recording of the narratives. Óðinn's self-sacrifice on the world-ash Yggdrasill, himself to himself, may be looked at from this perspective: as a narrative instance it is comparable to the hanging of Christ on the cross in sacrifice, but is essentially related to pre-Christian initiation rituals and sacrifices.

In Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson's *Under the Cloak* a great amount of literary evidence is interpreted that details the pre-Christian belief system in Norway and Iceland before the time of conversion. It is concluded that in the century directly preceding the conversion of Iceland ca. 1000 CE, polythesitic practices were in existence in Iceland. The author concludes that the sources, primarily *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*, although composed after the conversion in the Christian period, are arguably reliable in their accounts of human sacrifice in Iceland. He writes, "Old Norse sources concerning the worship of the old gods suggest that a common feature of all sacrifices was the quest for some form of revelation as to what the future was likely to bring" (*Under the Cloak* 209). The search for answers in the future is in fact one of Óðinn's principle characteristics, and although there is no mention of self-sacrifice for this purpose in the Old Norse sources, Jón Hnefill details the occurrence of human sacrifice. Óðinn's hanging is also symbolically similar to that of Christ on the cross, and the two narratives invite comparison with one another. Now, we turn to the fragment in question.

Yggdrasill, standing as it does at the centre of the Norse cosmos is powerfully symbolic when considering its function as the nexus of Óðinn's self-sacrifice, himself to himself, for nine days and nine nights. Multiple planes are traversed in the act, the tree serving as a mystical space where the god's command of spells and words increases. Hanging from the tree, Óðinn becomes more perceptive and powerful. *Hávamál* 137-140 reads:

Vęitk at ek hekk
vindgameiði á
nætr allar níu,
geiri undaðr
ok gefinn Óðni,
sjalfr sjölfum mér,

á þeim meiði,
es mangi veit,
hvers af rótum rinnr.

Við hlēifi mik sældu
né við hornigi;
nýstak niðr,
namk upp rúnar,
œpandi nam,
fellk aptr þaðan.

Fimbulljóð níu
namk af hinum frægja syni
Bólþorns, Bestlu fǫður,
ok ek drykk of gat
hins dýra mjaðar
ausinn Óðreri.

Þá namk frævask
ok fróðr vesa
ok vaxa ok vǽl hafask;
orð mér af orði
orðs leitaði
verk mér af verki verks (leitaði). (Finnur Jónsson)²⁴

²⁴ I know that I hung on a windy tree
nine long nights,
wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin,
myself to myself,
on that tree of which no man knows
from where its roots run.

No bread did they give me nor a drink from a horn,
downwards I peered;
I took up the runes, screaming I took them,
then I fell back from there.

Nine mighty spells I learnt from the famous son
Of Bolthor, Bestla's father,
and I got a drink of the precious mead,
poured from Odrerir.

Then I began to quicken and be wise,
and to grow and to prosper;
one word found another word for me,
one deed found another deed for me. (Larrington, *Sayings of the High One* 138-41)

This act of hanging in self-sacrifice for nine nights on the world-Ash Yggdrasill is comparable to a shamanistic initiation for an increased knowledge of magic and poetry, and specifically for a higher command of the runes. John Lindow agrees with this interpretation, confirming that it is acceptable “to assume that Odin entered a shamanic trance or even died on the tree and that his spirit travelled to Giantland and acquired the mead while the body was left behind” (Lindow, *Norse Mythology* 249). The shamanic interpretation of Óðinn’s sacrifice is important, as it further supports the interpretation that Óðinn’s self-sacrifice does not simply derive from the similar Christian motif of Christ hanging on the cross, although the interpretation that Óðinn dies on the tree supports this, for connections to Indo-European shamanistic practices are evident.²⁵ Campbell remarks that a primary difference between Óðinn’s hanging and the crucifixion of Christ is that Óðinn’s “aim and achievement here was illumination, not the atonement of an offended god and the procurement thereby of grace to redeem a nature bound in sin” (Campbell, *Occidental Mythology* 489). Christ sacrificed himself on behalf of all humanity, whereas Óðinn had as his aim the maturation of his own powers and perception.²⁶

Mircea Eliade (1907-86), an important figure in comparative religion primarily interprets the shamanistic nature of Óðinn’s self-sacrifice on Yggdrasill, arguing that it represents belief in the shamanistic principles that existed long prior to the introduction of Christianity into the Northern lands of medieval Scandinavia. Eliade writes,

²⁵ See von Schnurbein, “Shamanism in Old Norse Tradition”; Lindow, “Cultures in Contact.”

²⁶ There is an active discourse which compares sacrifice and initiation in this context, analyzing the differences between the two acts. Ultimately, the episode of Óðinn’s hanging demonstrates characteristics of both sacrifice and initiation. See Jens Peter Schjødt, *Initiation between Two Worlds*, 184-202.

Woden is ‘the great shaman’ who stays hanging from the tree of the world for nine nights, and discovers the runes, thus getting his magic powers (this is undoubtedly a reference to some initiation rite). His very name shows that he is master of [...] Drunken joy, prophetic excitation, the magic teaching in the Scaldic schools—all these have their counterparts in shamanist techniques. (Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* 81)

In Óðinn’s self-sacrifice the ash signifies the procedure, the ritual through which the god must pass in order to gain knowledge; the ash does not impart knowledge, but is the medium through which the acquisition of such may be attained, it is the means to mystical enlightenment. Eliade draws a further connection between Óðinn’s hanging and the role of the tree elsewhere in world religions. The tree serves as the medium for the individual’s passage into greater understanding and ability. The shamanistic interpretation of Óðinn’s sacrifice, with the important symbol of the tree as the means by which Óðinn sacrifices himself to himself, emphasizes that although this narrative was recorded after Iceland’s conversion to Christianity, the narrative is expressive of the belief system from the pre-Christian age.²⁷

To draw our discussion of the tree as matrix of the Norse mythological world towards a close in this chapter, it is important to make reference to the events leading up to Ragnarøk, which follow Óðinn’s hanging, as in the next chapter the concept of death concretely arrives to the world of the Æsir. The mythological cycle, as mentioned at the onset of chapter 1, is reflected in the ash: at the beginning of time the great tree is a seed, during the narratives the tree is important to the progression of events, and, as Ragnarøk approaches, the ash symbolically expresses the coming doom and return to chaos. In *Völuspá* 47 the Sybil makes reference to the world tree and how it signals the onset of destruction:

²⁷ For further comparative analyses of Óðinn’s sacrifice with other pre-Christian belief systems see Campbell, *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology* 486-88.

Skelfr Yggdrasils
 askr standandi,
 ymr aldit tré,
 en jötunn losnar;
 hræðask allir
 á hælvegum
 áðr Surtar þann
 sevi of gleypir. (Finnur Jónsson)²⁸

In *Gylfaginning* 51 the description is much the same:

Þa skelfr askr Ygdrasils ok engi lvtr er þa ottalass ahimni e(ða) iorþv. (Finnur Jónsson)²⁹

It is clear that in the series of events the description of the trembling ash, which has been standing and unwavering up until this point, demonstrates that events are past the point of no return. The ash shudders and the state of the cosmos is reflected in the tree.

The sections of narrative analyzed above comprise a thread through the creation-destruction-creation cycle within the Norse mythological texts. The same world-tree is a part of the whole cycle, and as such provides the careful reader with an evolving point of reference from which to interpret the narrative. The issue primarily addressed here is the question of the Christian interpretation of the mythological narratives which have their origin in pre-Christian times, yet were placed in manuscript form in the centuries following the conversion. Starting from the opening quotation from Jung, which illustrates common examples of hanging from trees in variant mythic traditions, the structure and space of the tree have been shown to be the inner-workings, or the matrix of the cosmos. It is the fact that the tree is such a universal image that makes it such a

²⁸ Yggdrasill shudders, the tree standing upright,
 the ancient tree groans and the giant is loose;
 all are terrified on the roads to hell,
 before Surt's kin swallows it up. (Larrington, *The Seeress's Prophecy* 47)

²⁹ The ash Yggdrasil shakes, and nothing, whether in heaven or on earth, is without fear. (Byock)

common symbol, connected with common motifs from variant traditions. The tree is a point of transversal, of coming and going between worlds, a terminal. As such it is open to be entered as a rhizome, from any point, which Óðinn demonstrates in his sacrifice. His body hangs from the tree, but his spirit is in movement. Now the investigation will turn to events in the mythic present which bring on the conditions that lead to the shaking of Yggdrasill.

4. *Mistilteinn*: Deadly Projectile and Crucial Turn

Up to this point our focus has been on the world-ash Yggdrasill as the spatial support of the Norse cosmos, and as the object through which Óðinn performs his self-sacrifice. Now we will take up the myth of Baldr, focusing on the shoot of mistletoe that strikes him dead. The purpose is to investigate how the offspring of the tree, a mere twig, comes to have such a profound effect upon the whole course of cosmic events. The young mistletoe is overlooked by Frigg when she is taking oaths from everything in the world not to harm Baldr because she thinks it is too young to pose a real threat to Óðinn's son, the most beautiful of all the gods. The two instances, first when Loki plucks the mistletoe from the tree, and second, when the mistletoe strikes Baldr and he falls dead to the ground are crucial moments in the mythological narrative that lead to a climax in the mythic present, and, it is argued, set the events leading to Ragnarøk in motion. Mistletoe is itself rootless, which is significant as it springs from a tree that has roots, it is an offshoot. In this chapter the ideas of Jung along with those of Deleuze and Guattari are again brought into the dialogue in relation to the two instances mentioned above. Firstly, the relevant textual fragments are provided and discussed.

Völuspá is the most significant and comprehensive poetic source available relating the events that surround the death of Baldr. In the poem the völva prophesizes Baldr's death and that the shoot of mistletoe will be the object that strikes him. In *Völuspá* 31-33 she says of the fatal event:

Ek sá Baldri,
blóðgum tívur,
Óðins barni,
ørlog folgin;
stóð of vaxinn
vøllum hæri

mær ok mjök fagr
mistiltæinn.

Varð af meiði,
þeims mær sýndisk,
harmflaug hættlig,
Höðr nam skjóta.
Baldrs bróðir vas
of borinn snimma,
sá nam Óðins sonr
þinnættir vega;

þó hann æva hendr
né höfuð kembði,
áðr á bál of bar
Baldrs andskota.
En Frigg of grét
í Fensqlum
vö Valhallar.
*Vituoð ér enn eða hvat? (Finnur Jónsson)*³⁰

In stanza 31 the fate of Baldr is connected to the mistletoe, first with the reference to Baldr's imminent death, and then the description of the weapon that brings it about. In the following stanza it is stated that it is his brother Höðr who will strike him dead, and finally in stanza 33 that Baldr's death is a great loss. Making reference to this fragment, Lindow notes, "[i]n the pivotal 32nd stanza the Sybil reveals that from mistletoe a shot was made, that Höðr threw it, and that Baldr's brother was born; here we must understand that Baldr has died and that an avenger was sired" (Lindow, *Murder and*

³⁰ I saw for Baldr, for the bloody god,
Odin's child, his fate concealed;
there stood grown—higher than the plain,
slender and very fair—the mistletoe.

From that plant which seemed so lovely
came a dangerous, harmful dart, Hod began to shoot;
Baldr's brother was born very quickly;
Odin's son began fighting at one night old.

Nor did he ever wash his hands nor comb his hair,
until he brought Baldr's adversary to the funeral pyre;
and in Fen-halls Frigg wept
for the woe of Valhall—do you understand yet, or what more? (Larrington, *The Seeress's Prophecy* 31-33)

Vengeance 21). The death of Baldr is so significant that simultaneous to his falling, there is a life brought into the world in order to seek vengeance for the terrible loss.

There is no mention of Loki as Baldr's killer in *Völuspá*, as it is Høðr who is clearly stated by the völvá to be the one who projects the mistletoe. In *Lokasenna* 28, however, when confronting Frigg, along with the other gods, Loki alludes to his role in the imminent death of Baldr:

Enn vill þú Frigg,
at fleiri teljak
mína meinstafi,
ek því ræð,
es ríða sérat
síðan Baldr at solum. (Finnur Jónsson)³¹

These two fragments taken together implicate both Høðr and Loki in the death of Baldr; Høðr as the assassin and Loki as the mastermind behind the act. There is another textual fragment from *Baldrs draumar* 9, where Óðinn is questioning a völvá about the nature of Baldr's prophetic dream, in which he foresees danger for himself:

Høðr berr hovan
hróðrbaðm þinig,
hann mun Baldri
at bana verða,
ok Óðins son
aldri ræna;
nauðug sagðak,
nú munk þęgja. (Finnur Jónsson)³²

³¹ 'Frigg, do you want me to say still more about my wicked deeds; for I brought it about that you will never again see Baldr ride to the halls.' (Larrington, *Loki's Quarrel* 28)

³² 'Hod will dispatch the famous warrior to this place; he will be Baldr's killer and steal life from Odin's son. Reluctantly I told you, now I'll be silent.' (Larrington, *Baldr's Dreams* 9)

Here, as in *Völuspá* it is Hǫðr who is noted as Baldr's killer. This fragment is especially interesting, however, for in *Baldrs draumar* 13 the two speakers in the poem identify one another from behind the masks they have been wearing throughout the dialogue. Óðinn is identified by the vǫlva as the seeker of answers and Loki as the one providing the responses. The possibility that it is Loki speaking with Óðinn at this instance is one reason for the further stress placed on Hǫðr as Baldr's killer.

Estat Vegtamr,
sem ek hugða,
heðr est Óðinn,
aldinn gautr.
Ó. kv. Estat vǫlva,
né vís kona,
heðr est þriggja
þursa móðir. (Finnur Jónsson)³³

Óðinn refers to the female with who he has been speaking as “þriggja þursa móðir” (the mother of three monsters), and this is a probable reference to Loki, the bearer of Fenrir, Miðgarðsormr and Hel. If this is the case, it is understandable why the vǫlva, perhaps Loki in disguise, does not implicate Loki in the death of Baldr. Further, whether or not Loki is implicated in this act may be irrelevant in the context of the poetic fragment, for it is Hǫðr who actually performs the act, and is ultimately held responsible.³⁴

Where the majority of the responsibility for Baldr's death truly rests is therefore not clear when the poetic sources are consulted exclusively. In *Gylfaginning* there is a

³³ ‘You are not Way-tame, as I thought,
rather you are Odin, the ancient sacrifice.’
‘You are not a prophetess nor a wise woman,
rather you’re the mother of the three ogres.’ (Larrington, *Baldr's Dreams* 13)

³⁴ Jan de Vries suggests that Hǫðr may be a hypostasis of Óðinn, primarily based on Óðinn's lack of one eye and Hǫðr's blindness. Dumézil disagrees with such an interpretation, writing, “Hǫðr is one of the figures in the orbit of the sovereign-magical-warrior god Odin, and one of those closest to him, to be sure, but he remains distinct, and I am not resigned to admitting that Odin, in the myth of Baldr, openly, under his own name, should at first try to prevent and in the end lament a murder which he has meanwhile committed under cover of another name” (Dumézil, *The Stakes of the Warrior* 48).

series of important textual fragments which elaborate intricately on the information available in the poetic sources. The fragments, drawn from *Gylfaginning* 49 are as follows:

Frigg: vex víðar teinvngr ein firir vestan Valhavl; sa er mistiltein kallaðr; sa þotti mer vngr at krefia eiðsins<<. Þvi næst hvarf konan abrvt; en Loki toc mistiltein ok sleit vpp ok geck til þings. (Finnur Jónsson)³⁵

Loki: skiot at honvm vendi þesvm<<. Havðr tok mistiltein ok skavt at Baldri at tilvisvn Loka; flavg skotit igognvm hann, ok fell hann daðr til iarþǫ, ok hefir þat mest óhapp verit vnit með goþvm ok monnvm. (Finnur Jónsson)³⁶

In Snorri's account of the events surrounding Baldr's death it is clearly Loki who plucks the mistletoe from the tree that stands to the west of Valhøll, which may in fact be quite close to Yggdrasill, or Yggdrasill itself. It is also Loki who encourages the blind Høðr to join in with the other gods and give to Baldr the honour of shooting the projectile at him, as the others are doing, in order to demonstrate his invulnerability. It is, importantly, Høðr who in both the poetic and prose sources actually launches the mistletoe at Baldr, striking him dead. Lindow interprets this dilemma as follows: "[w]hen we read this passage we often think of Loki guiding Høðr's hand, but in fact all Loki has done is to point out the location of the target and provide the weapon" (Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance* 65). No matter how easy it may be to place all of the blame on Loki, the trickster who invites suspicion when evil is near, even when both the poetic and prose sources are consulted in regards to the matter, responsibility for Baldr's death remains

³⁵ "A shoot of wood grows to the west of Valhalla. It is called mistletoe, and it seemed too young for me to demand its oath." Immediately afterwards, the woman disappeared. Loki got hold of the mistletoe. He broke it off and went to the assembly. (Byock)

³⁶ "Shoot this twig at him." Hod took the mistletoe and, following Loki's directions, shot at Baldr. The shot went right through Baldr, who fell to the ground dead. This misfortune was the worst that had been worked against the gods and men. (Byock)

somewhat ambiguous. The point that is clear is that it is a shoot of mistletoe, the offspring of a tree that fells the beautiful god.

Jung interprets the character of the mistletoe as being similar to that of Baldr—a young child of the mother: the mistletoe of the tree, Baldr of Frigg—both of which may not be separated from the mother or they will lose their life. Jung writes that the narrative relates “that the mistletoe which killed Baldur was ‘too young’; hence this clinging parasite could be interpreted as the ‘child of the tree.’ But as the tree signifies the origin in the sense of the mother, it represents the source of life, of that magical life-force whose yearly renewal was celebrated in primitive times by the homage paid to a divine son” (*Symbols of Transformation* 258). Jung continues, stating that Baldr is such a figure, the divine son, and that these figures can only ever realize a “fleeting existence,” as they are the anticipation of desire, of something yet to come, not its fulfilment. Baldr, Jung forwards, is the “child of the mother,” and as such is a manifestation of the mother’s “life force.” Both the mistletoe and Baldr, being without roots, will die when separated from the respective mothers.

Jung’s interpretation of why the mistletoe kills Baldr when they are so alike, like brothers, is of further interest. Jung writes that realistically Baldr “is a parasite on the mother, a creature of her imagination, who only lives when rooted in the maternal body. In actual psychic experience the mother corresponds to the collective unconscious, and the son to consciousness, which fancies itself free but must ever again succumb to the power of sleep and deadening unconsciousness” (259). Baldr, who according to Jung represents the individual consciousness, must rely on the collective unconscious, without which he cannot exist. Mistletoe, a hypothetical brother of Baldr in the battle for freedom

from the mother, kills Baldr through Hqðr, the actual brother of Baldr. The complex interactions between siblings, both actual, in the case of Hqðr and Baldr, and symbolic, as is the case between Baldr and the mistletoe, are further complicated by the fact that it is Frigg, Baldr's mother who initially overlooked the mistletoe as a danger to her son. For, in the words of Lindow, "[i]f Frigg had been successful in gathering oaths from all creatures, Baldr would not have died, and there would not be death among humans" (Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance* 33). Furthermore, the brother who is sired in vengeance, Vali, the son of Óðinn must kill Hqðr. The vengeance in this case is not that of family against family, but is deeply embedded within the family of the Æsir.³⁷

Jung compares Baldr's betrayal by Loki to other mythological narratives, by making reference to similar motifs. Belonging to the collective, the betrayal motif Jung describes is the betrayal of a god or hero from among their closest ranks. It is no surprise to the interpreter that Loki is inferred as the mastermind behind the death of Baldr in the prose account, for it is an aspect of his inner nature that is clear in his actions throughout the mythological narratives. It is, however, significant for Loki is often considered to be amongst the Æsir, especially considering his connection to Óðinn, the two of which are bonded together through a blood oath. Jung writes, "[t]his myth is moving and tragic, because the noble hero is not felled in a fair fight, but through treachery [...] Though the myth is extremely old it is still a subject for repetition, as it expresses the simple fact that envy does not let mankind sleep in peace" (*Symbols of Transformation* 30-1). Beyond the motif of betrayal, it is also important to consider the actions of the Æsir prior to Baldr's

³⁷ Edgar C. Polomé entertains the possibility with some evidence that Baldr is in fact reborn in Vali. In his "Germanic Religion: An Overview" he writes about the resurrection of Baldr: "Baldr is not brought back from the dead, but, as it were, is reborn in another warrior, *Vali*, begotten by Óðinn to avenge his brother" (99).

death. It is almost as if, from an outside perspective, such as that of the reader, the Æsir are tempting fate by tossing projectiles at the most beautiful god. Although they were sure that nothing could harm him, their actions, in some way, invite the trouble that follows. Vésteinn Ólason writes about the emotional high that the Æsir enjoy immediately prior to Baldr's death: "[w]hen the Æsir believe that they have saved Baldr by making all things promise not to harm him, they are overjoyed, and a kind of *hubris* makes them throw all sorts of missiles at him, enjoying the fact that he is not harmed" (Ólason 154). This joy certainly vanishes the moment the Æsir are struck by Baldr's mortality. The gods are shown to be as mortal as humans, and must indeed succumb to the darkness of death, the return to the unconscious.

Jung's interpretation of the myth of Baldr is demonstrative of the relationship that the human subconscious has with mythological narratives in that the battle between good and evil is a constant occupation of the human condition. Baldr's death, as Jung notes, is tragic in that the beneficent god has been overcome by the forces of evil. Lindow discusses how the mistletoe is often associated with "health and good fortune in folklore generally," and how it is used quite differently in the Icelandic sources concerning Baldr's death. Here, it is important to note the reversibility of the meaning of symbols. The author writes, "[w]hether the Icelanders misunderstood the nature of mistletoe, or it became a weapon, like the reed that killed King Víkkarr, or Hqðr simply threw the sprig with supernatural force, Baldr's fall has a martial ring to it. Baldr's body has been pierced with a weapon, like that of a warrior, a dueller, or an ambush victim!" (*Murder and Vengeance* 6). It is certain that some of the Icelanders recording these narratives would have been familiar with mistletoe from travel in Scandinavia, but were not familiar with

it in their own land. The reason for mistletoe being associated here with death, while it is associated with health elsewhere is a sign that it is often what is closest and most trustworthy that may prove the most harmful. It is Loki, although he does not merit the most trust, and comes from amongst the ranks of the Æsir, even if only symbolically, who along with the mistletoe considered as harmless, proves to be fatal.

E. O. G. Turville-Petre (1908-78) interprets the mistletoe as being remarkably similar to the world-ash Yggdrasill. The author writes, “[l]ike the Yggdrasill, it grows from unknown roots, and seems to triumph over death and even over life” (*Myth and Religion of the North* 116). This interpretation is interesting, for it is contrary to Jung’s, which forwards that the mistletoe was the offspring of the tree, which botanically, it is, and therefore has no roots once it is separated from the tree—it has been cut off from its roots. Turville-Petre remarks that the mistletoe grows from unknown roots, assumedly the roots of the tree from which it was plucked. Taking into account the rhizome model of Deleuze and Guattari, the mistletoe, coming from unknown origins, is a multiple, something that has been generated from something outside of itself. The tree from which it grew is unknown (unless it is inferred that Yggdrasill is the origin), and, therefore, any further interpretation of the plant remains out of reach. The uncertainty surrounding the mistletoe is a significant issue for interpretation, and demonstrates the lack of necessity for concrete answers. One thing that is sure is its impact: this minute plant is able to completely alter the course of events, or, from another perspective, to allow events foretold in prophecy to come to fruition. Fundamentally, as Richard Dieterle remarks on the outcome of the mistletoe sequence, “[t]his alarming reversal of the divine order was brought to pass by the most insignificant member of creation, a mere twig of mistletoe,

transformed into a weapon potent enough to strike down the otherwise invulnerable Baldr” (Dieterle 285).

It is not only Baldr who is ambushed but all of the Æsir suffer from the death of the most beneficent and beautiful god, as it is a signal of the ultimate mortality of the gods. Lindow writes how immediately “[t]he gods are paralyzed. It is as though the mistletoe turned not into a dart or javelin but rather into Odin’s spear Gungnir, as though Høðr cast it not through Baldr’s body but, like Gungnir, over the corporate body of the æsir” (Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance* 67). Although the Æsir are indeed struck hard by this blow, they will fight back in return for this evil deed. The ensuing events lead up to Ragnarøk and are the direct result of the mistletoe striking Baldr dead. As the world-ash Yggdrasill functions as the support of the Norse cosmos, the events involving the mistletoe are at the crux of the cosmological narrative cycle. The tree is stable while the offshoot is volatile, and it is closer to Ragnarøk in time that Yggdrasill shakes.

In order to narrow the focus of our analysis of the mistletoe to the actual plant, the rootless offspring of the tree, we will again take up the idea of the rhizome of Deleuze and Guattari. The authors write about the organic connections that plants make with other species, and how whether a plant has roots or not greatly influences the plant’s ability to form such external connections. The authors write about “[t]he wisdom of the plants: even when they have roots, there is always an outside where they form a rhizome with something else—with the wind, an animal, human beings (and there is also an aspect under which animals themselves form rhizomes, as do people, etc.)” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 11). The mistletoe enters into an interconnected and multiple narrative structure when it grows from the tree, is overlooked by Frigg and then plucked by Loki, becoming

more intertwined in the narrative at each instance. When the mistletoe strikes Baldr, everything that follows is connected to this single event, and to this plant. Deleuze and Guattari have termed this capacity in plants to make multiple connections through ruptures into their surroundings as the “wisdom of the plants.” It is also interesting to consider the concept of the ‘power of the plants,’ which is coined here, when they are acted upon by external forces, for it is clear that it is not the mistletoe itself that is the evil force behind the deadly events, but it is a receptacle open to be acted upon. The power that is infused into this plant is what makes it so deadly and also the reason it is such a significant symbol in the Norse cosmos. The vitality of the mistletoe is a result of its freedom from the structures of roots; such a separation is also its death.

Another aspect of the rhizome that is applicable to the mistletoe is its elusiveness from categorization, a problem that is outlined above in regards to Turville-Petre’s interpretation. Even though in Snorri’s account Frigg does not consider the mistletoe dangerous, and this is the reason given for it being overlooked, it is also possible that the mistletoe did not fit into any of the categories of potentially dangerous objects, organic and inorganic, that oaths were secured from. The rhizome eludes categorization and structures, as does the mistletoe, which grows from a tree, but is not a tree and is, moreover, a coniferous offshoot on a deciduous tree: a multiplicity. Bruce Lincoln writes about the resistance of mistletoe to categorization, suggesting this quality to be the reason why the mistletoe caused Baldr’s death. The author writes,

[s]eemingly protected by binding oaths from all dangers – organic and inorganic; plants and animals; apeds, bipeds, and quadrupeds; evergreens and deciduous – Baldr proved vulnerable to an apparently harmless object which escaped a neat and logical system of categorization. It is not the inherent properties of the mistletoe which make it dangerous, but the inability of the taxonomic structure and classifying mind to deal with its peculiarities. (Lincoln 82)

Like the rhizome of Deleuze and Guattari, the mistletoe of the Eddic mythology is not disposed to categorization. As discussed above the world tree Yggdrasill functions as the matrix of the mythic cosmos, and from this matrix, embedded in the tree, springs the instrument of death. The tree, as the seed at the beginning of time, represents birth. In this case, the tree as the mother of the object that brings the original death to the gods is the primary symbol of a life that is extinguished.

The fact that mistletoe is without roots is particularly of interest in the Norse mythological context for another reason. Óðinn, in *Hávamál* 84, while listing things that one should never trust makes mention of “rótlausum viði” (Finnur Jónsson), amongst other things to be aware of. The mistletoe, without roots, may be used by any force that obtains it; it is precisely the lack of roots that makes it so dangerous. Being rootless, the mistletoe is less tied down than a root-based structure, and more open to be acted upon by external forces. Deleuze and Guattari write, “[t]rees may correspond to the rhizome, or they may burgeon into a rhizome” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 17). The mistletoe is such a rupture from a tree, connecting the tree to the cosmological progress of the mythological narrative in a violent manner, and further embedding the tree even more deeply in the overall mythological cycle. When compared to Yggdrasill, which influences the cosmos as a life-force, the mistletoe, seemingly insignificant due to its lack of roots, is perhaps fundamental to the progression of the mythological narrative, drawing the cataclysmic events together, bringing about the end of the world. Before arriving at the dawn of the new world, when Baldr will return, two more integral components of tree symbolism in the Old Norse sources will be considered. The first of which is the creation of the first humans from two pieces of wood that are found by three gods. The discussion moves

from how the tree is the instrument of death to its being the instrument of birth. Such a relationship bonds creation and destruction, marking them as inseparable from one another.

5. *Askr* and *Embla*: Creation and the Natural Cycle

The source of reality and life seen in the tree has not put forth its
creative power once and for all to give birth to the mythical ancestor
—it continues its creation unceasingly with every individual man.
—Mircea Eliade³⁸

A divine triad creates humankind from two pieces of wood in two accounts of the mythic creation of the Norse cosmos. In *Völuspá* 17-18 the vǫlva recounts the creation of the world, making reference to *Askr* and *Embla* as the figures the three gods find on land when they come to a house; in *Gylfaginning* *Askr* and *Embla* are also found by three gods, specifically on land by the sea. Óðinn, Hœnir and Lóðurr are named as the bestowers of life to the pair *Askr* and *Embla* by the vǫlva, whereas Snorri writes of the triad in terms of the three sons of Borr. Both versions reflect a common myth, but are from two distinct perspectives. *Völuspá* is most likely a poem that survives from ca. 1000 CE or earlier, and is much closer to the original myth in time, whereas *Gylfaginning* was written down in the first half of the thirteenth century, and is accordingly a re-telling of the same creation myth, and also an interpretation of it.

In *Völuspá* Óðinn bestows *œnd*, a term signifying breath, Hœnir *óðr*, which refers to mind or spirit, or words, and Lóðurr imparts *lǫ* and *litu góða*, physical attributes and *lár*, an Old Icelandic term that may mean “life-giving warmth” (Simek 190), or blood (Herman Pálsson, *Völuspá* 69). The first two attributes from Óðinn and Hœnir are spiritual, whereas Lóðurr provides physical qualities. There is much discussion about this triad, as it has been suggested that the character of Lóðurr may be a stand-in for Loki (Jan de Vries; Ursula Dronke) or perhaps an extension of Freyr (Edgar C. Polomé). There have been no decisive answers to this question, as will be discussed further, and most of

³⁸ *Patterns in Comparative Religion* 302.

the commentary on this topic agrees that what is most interesting in this myth is not the composition of the triad, but the qualities that are given to the first humans by the group of three. Here, most attention will be given to *Askr* and *Embla*, two pieces of wood that receive life and become the first male and the first female, simultaneously. The pair may be connected to the world-Ash Yggdrasill, as the description of the world tree follows these two stanzas in *Völuspá*, as well as the common word *askr*, which is furthermore demonstrative of the mythological theme of humans descending from trees and advances the discussion of the interconnected relationship between humans and plants.

The first two humans are directly descended from trees in this creation myth, which is in accordance with Jung's assertion in *Symbols of Transformation* that many myths describe the first humans as descending from trees and that this motif is common to many groups. The uniqueness of this creation myth is that it is three gods who bestow life on the inanimate objects to create humankind, as different from the bringing together of four elements that is common in other myths of creation, such as the myth of creation found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where the elements are arranged and the first human is created from clay.³⁹ Moreover, two humans, a couple are created out of the same substance at the same time, as opposed to the male being created first, and the female coming from the male, such as is the story with the creation of Adam, then Eve from one of his ribs. The Norse creation myth grants both the male and the female the same direct connection to the original material.

Askr is the Old Icelandic word for ash tree, marking a direct linguistic connection to *askr Yggdrasils*, described in *Völuspá* stanzas 19 and 20. *Embla* is more problematic in terms of associations, for there is no direct correspondence available for the name's

³⁹ See Book 1 "The Creation."

origins, although some suggestions have been made, one of which is that *Embla* is a derivative of elm (Hermann Pálsson; Ursula Dronke); another is that it is related to the Greek word for ‘vine’ (Orchard 38); and a third that suggests *Ask* and *Embla* to be two halves of wood used to make fire (Hultgård 60). This interpretation identifies *Ask* with the phallus and *Embla* with the vagina, the two halves needed for creation of life. Perhaps the most obvious interpretation of the two names connects the Norse couple directly with Adam and Eve, as the names are linguistically parallel, with both sets having common first letters for the first humans on earth.⁴⁰

Völuspá 17-18, the stanzas describing the coming into being of the first human couple, are as follows:

Unz þrír kómu
ór því liði
øflgir ok ástkir
æsir at húsi,
fundu á landi
lítt meḡandi
Ask ok Emblu
ørløglausa.

Qnd þau né øttu,
óð þau né høfðu,
lø né læti
né litu góða;
qnd gaf Óðinn,
óð gaf Høenir,
lø gaf Lóðurr
ok litu góða. (Finnur Jónsson)⁴¹

⁴⁰ Henning Kure outlines various interpretations of possible meanings of *Embla* in his most recent work: *I begyndelsen var skriget*, 182-83.

⁴¹ Until three gods, strong and loving,
came from that company to the world;
they found on land Ash and Embla,
capable of little, lacking in fate.

Breath they had not, spirit they had not,
character nor vital spark nor fresh complexions;

These two stanzas describe the three gods finding *Ask* and *Embla* with little strength and without destiny, lacking essence. In stanza 17 there is no direct indication that the two are in fact pieces of wood, but the etymology of *Ask* suggests such a connection to be drawn. The attributes the two are lacking are given in the first half of stanza 18, and then the corresponding gifts from the gods, which infuse the objects with the necessary human energy.

Snorri's interpretation of the myth retains the same structure, with three sons of Borr finding two pieces of wood, Óðinn, as before, and his brothers Vili and Vé. This interpretation of the older version adds to the myth found in *Völuspá*, as it describes the triad specifically walking along the edge of land by the sea, and it is easy to imagine two pieces of driftwood that have come in from the sea. In *Gylfaginning* 9, when Gangleri asks about how the people of the world came into being, Hárr answers him as follows:

Þa er þeir gengv með sævar strandv Borss(ynir), fýndv þeir tre tva ok tokv vpp
trein ok sköpvþv af menn; gaf hin fyrsti [o]nd ok líf, anarr vit ok hræring, iii.
asionv, mal ok heyrn ok sion; gafv þeim klæpi [ok] nafn; het karlmaðrin Ask, en
konan Embla, ok olz þaðan af mannkindin, sv er bygðin var gefin vndir Miðgarði.
(Finnur Jónsson)⁴²

It is added in Snorri's account that the first humans received clothing and names from the gods, and also that they were given a place to live in Miðgarðr.

This creation myth, which is the culminating episode of the creation of the cosmos described in both *Völuspá* and *Gylfaginning*, is interesting for the incorporation

breath gave Odin, spirit gave Hænir,
vital spark gave Lodur, and fresh complexions. (Larrington, *The Seeress's Prophecy* 17-18)

⁴² The sons of Bor were once walking along the seashore and found two trees. They lifted the logs and from them created people. The first son gave them breath and life; the second, intelligence and movement; the third, form, speech, hearing and sight. They [Bor's sons] gave them clothing and names. The man was called Ask [Ash Tree] and the woman, Embla [Elm or Vine]. From them came mankind and they were given a home behind Midgard's wall. (Byock)

of three gods in the creative act as a divine triad, and also for the unity that the triad exhibits. Edgar C. Polomé (1920-2000) describes this unity in relation to the greater body of creation myths, stating that “the characteristic feature of the Eddic account is the *unity* of the creative act in spite of the *distribution of the human attributes by three different gods*” (Polomé, “Some Comments” 31). Polomé continues, stating that Óðinn’s gift to the human pair, *qnd*, breath, is in keeping with his character, but that for Hœnir, *óðr* is not an obvious association. Despite the various suggestions that have been made, Polomé forwards that Hœnir rightly imparts to humankind mental activity, for, as a seeker of advice, Hœnir’s character is “interpreting the signs given by an outside Power, he is the vehicle of divine inspiration. It is also in this capacity that he is instrumental in endowing man with ‘inspired mental activity’”(33). This runs counter to an alternative interpretation of Hœnir which emphasizes his inability to make decisions on his own, as can be found in *Ynglinga saga*, during the description of the settlement between the Æsir and the Vanir, when it becomes apparent to the Vanir that Hœnir is unable to commit to a decision without Mímir.⁴³ John Lindow agrees with Polomé’s interpretation and adds that Hœnir may also be argued to be connected with boundaries, which would further explain his inclusion in the triad that gives life to the first humans, found on the edge of the shore—the boundary between land and sea (Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance* 167), and his behaviour in *Ynglinga saga*, in the need to seek greater advice for his actions.

The most difficult factor when analyzing the triad that gives life to humans is the third member, Lóðurr, who only appears as a character in the two stanzas of *Völuspá* 17-18 in the whole of the Eddic mythological narratives. Rather than attempt to draw parallels with other divine triads, of which Lóðurr is not a member, but is supplanted by

⁴³ See *Ynglinga saga*, Chapter 4. The War between the Æsir and the Vanir.

Loki, Polomé recommends a closer analysis of the traits that Lóðurr gives to humans: *lá*, *laeti* and *litogóða*. *Litogóða* may be understood as physical beauty or complexion, *laeti* as voice or manners, and *lá*, which is a more problematic term, that Geír T. Zoëga defines as “the line of shoal water along the shore” (Zoëga 262). Rudolf Simek suggests that the term might refer to “life-giving warmth” or blood (Simek 190), while Polomé suggests that the term refers to hair (Polomé, “Some Comments” 40). All of these interpretations are suggestive of a life-force which works at the edge of the body, mediating and drawing life from what is both inside and outside.

What can be surmised from Polomé’s analysis is that the first two gods in the triad, Óðinn and Hœnir impart spiritual qualities to the first human pair, while Lóðurr provides the physical qualities. Life has been granted to two inanimate objects through the unity of the creative act, in which life, wood and blood are mixed. As mentioned above, myths of creation often incorporate the bringing together of the four principal elements in the creation of humans. Jan de Vries recognizes that in *Völuspá* this is not the case, and that “[t]he poet of this stanza of the *Völuspá* has not had any idea in mind of different elements from which man could have been composed and he even could not have done so, because he relates quite a different creation-myth: not the forming of man from the four principal elements, but the animating of a lifeless object” (de Vries, *The Problem of Loki* 31). The lifeless object(s) that de Vries refers to are the couple *Askr* and *Embla*, which, although they are without life in the sense that they do not possess the qualities needed for human existence, are, however, pieces of wood, and are therefore connected to the tree of life, Yggdrasil, through this material likeness. On a microcosmic plane *askr*, being the word for Ash tree, easily suggests an interpretation that unifies the

force of life in the tree with the lifeless pieces of driftwood. *Embla*, although not clearly connected to an Old Icelandic term for a tree, is described as a piece of wood in *Gylfaginning*, and a similar interpretation for *Völuspá* is presumable due to the same structure for both versions of the myth. As noted above, the placement of the stanzas 17-18 immediately preceding the description of the world-ash Yggdrasill in stanzas 19-20 further strengthens this connection.

Ursula Dronke identifies that *Völuspá* stanzas 17-20 taken together compose a sequence of ideas which connects the first man and the first woman with the tree of life, and also forwards that prior to stanza 17 there may be a lost section of the poem that supplied a greater context for the creation of the first human pair. She writes that the four stanzas recognize the “kinship of man and world tree” (Dronke 39). After the *völva* describes the granting of life to the two pieces of wood she naturally turns her attention to Yggdrasill. Dronke suggests that this demonstrates that “[t]he myth of the fashioning of the first man and woman out of wood is linked to the myth that the world tree is the parent of mankind: the bridge between them is the common material...of man and tree” (39-40). Dronke draws a further connection between the activity of the Norns, who carve the fates of humans into pieces of wood, “skáru á skíði” (*Völuspá* 20), also the substance of humankind, to further reinforce that the whole being of humankind, from creation to death is embedded in the substance of wood. This clarifies that it is the gods who have made it possible for the fates of humans to come about, and moreover their own fate, in the creative act. John McKinnell notes, assuming that the three Norns at the base of Yggdrasill were ready and waiting for the creation of humankind, that “the gods have

themselves instigated the operation of Fate by the very ordering of creation” (McKinnell, *Both One and Many* 117).

Jung’s interpretation of the origin of humankind as descending from a tree or trees, as the writer forwards, is found in mythological and dream symbolism in modern humans, and is specifically connected to the human psyche and the libido. Jung writes that a symbol such as a tree does not represent merely a phallic symbol, as might be surmised from its form, which might denote birth and regeneration, but is in fact a symbol of the libido and expresses something that is unknown. Again, he writes that “[s]ymbols are not signs or allegories for something known; they seek rather to express something that is little known or completely unknown” (*Symbols of Transformation* 222). In this sense, the symbol of the first human pair as descending from the substance of a tree is a mythological symbol that draws a connection between humankind and the regenerative life force flowing through the tree, which is a symbol of the mother and the father: the object of the libido and the phallus. Jung’s research into mythology is founding in regards to the notion of archetypes. In this instance the tree is an archetype symbolizing the source of life, which requires both the feminine and the masculine.

Archetypes are the players of the collective unconscious, the psychic strata that Jung insists is common to all humans. On the collective unconscious, Jung writes, “[i]t is, in other words, identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us” (*The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* 4). As the present study has been considering the transformation of the symbol of the tree, the multiple occurrences of the symbol in multiple

manifestations encourages the interpretation of such as the transformation of an archetype. On archetypes of transformation, Jung writes,

[t]hey are not personalities, but are typical situations, places, ways and means, that symbolize the kind of transformation in question. Like the personalities, these archetypes are true and genuine symbols that cannot be exhaustively interpreted, either as signs or as allegories. They are genuine symbols precisely because they are ambiguous, full of half-glimpsed meanings, and in the last resort inexhaustible. (*The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* 38)

The tree is a typical place, found almost everywhere on the surface of the world that is neither desert nor water, and a substance, wood, that through transformation represents the cycle of life. The appearance of this transformation in the creation of *Ask* and *Embla* and in the world tree Yggdrasill demonstrates two manifestations of the symbolic transformation. Importantly, Jung writes that it is impossible to completely exhaust the possibilities for interpretation of archetypal symbols, for they are essentially incomplete, paradoxical and, as suggested here, rhizomatic.

Eliade also utilizes archetypal concepts, and exemplifies the impact that Jung's analyses and interpretations have on the study of religion. Vegetation symbols such as the tree, Eliade forwards, are archetypal symbols of the regenerative force of humankind and nature, and are represented as such across many religions. Discussing the myth of human descent from plants, Eliade writes that "[t]he fact that a race can be descended from a plant presupposes that the source of life is concentrated in that plant; and therefore that the human modality exists in it in a state of potentiality, in seed form" (Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* 302). When considering the intervention of the divine triad in the Norse myth of the creation of humankind, there is the evident question as to whether or not there was in existence within the tree the potentiality for human life prior to intervention from the gods, for it is stated that the pieces of wood were lacking such

qualities, and that the triad supplied them. If the seed of life was already present in the vegetal substance of the wood, the gifts of the gods were still required to bring life to the substance, and the total unity of the act, detailed by Polomé, also required the all-important material of the tree. Eliade compares various creation myths where humans descend from a tree or trees and surmises that, although there are differences in each tradition,

[w]hat is important in all these customs is this notion of the constant flowing of life between the plant level—as source of never-failing life—and the human; men are all simply projections of the energy of the same vegetal womb, they are ephemeral forms constantly produced by the overabundance of plants. Man is an ephemeral appearance of a new plant modality. (303)

Humans are the extension of the energy that is contained within the plants, and are again microcosmically reflective of the tree. There is a feedback loop between the human and the vegetal. The human is created from the plant, and will die and again return to the earth from which it originated. Deleuze and Guattari might argue that such an interpretation of the creation of humankind in terms of the tree is an indication of the human tendency to interpret the world in terms of the tree or root. It is possible, however, while recognizing the role of the tree in the traditional sense, as the centre of the cosmos with roots extending outwards, to also interpret the interconnectedness and principle of multiplicity in the relationship between plants and humans.

The concept of the world tree is intricately connected to the concept of microcosm and macrocosm, and this chapter attempts to exemplify some of the interpretations, identifying aspects of the microcosm in *Askr* and *Embla*. The synergetic relationship between humans and the tree, as seen in the creation of humans from the pieces of wood, suggests that a human may be a microcosm of the tree, for both grow from a common

material and interact in a life-giving cycle with the same regenerative force. Moreover, the human shape resembles that of a tree in appearance, the arms representative of the branches of the tree and the torso of the trunk. Such a resemblance forms the primary basis for the microcosmic theory. The tree in turn is a microcosm of the world, as it represents the flow of life and the ordering of the cosmos; the world may in some instances be explained in terms of the tree, as is the case in the Eddic descriptions of Yggdrasill. In these texts stories are narrated that are founded in mythological beliefs, and may be considered to be an imprint from the collective unconscious of humans from many hundreds of years into the past. Jung's theory of the collective unconscious maintains that what ancient humankind sought after with mythology manifests itself in the fantasy and dream-states of modern man, which in turn occasionally manifest in art and literature. Deleuze and Guattari write that "[t]he book imitates the world, as art imitates nature: by procedures specific to it that accomplish what nature cannot or can no longer do" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 5). When Jung's idea that what was once created in mythology may then appear in literature, as humankind progresses, is compared to Deleuze and Guattari's notion that the book seeks to represent what can no longer be found in nature, it arises that representations and interpretations of mythological narratives appearing in books are not a mere substitute for the once practiced religion or mythology, but are a part of the life-giving-force of the tree, the human and the book. This grouping is not simply a replication, as in the manner of Deleuze and Guattari's first type of book, the tree or root book; nor is it a root or radicle system, such as a book composed of fragments that are connected through offshoots from the principal tree/root.

The mythological book as a piece of literature is a microcosm of the world, and as such is a microcosm of the world-tree.

The nature of the book, as it is discussed by Deleuze and Guattari essentially returns the discussion to the concept of the assemblage. The authors write, “[w]e are no more familiar with scientificity than we are with ideology; all we know are assemblages. And the only assemblages are machinic assemblages of desire and collective assemblages of enunciation” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 22-3). The mythological book is surely a collective assemblage of enunciation, as far as an archetypal interpretation is concerned. The final point of entry that will now be turned to is the relationship between wood, the very material of the tree and of humans, and fate.

6. *Nornir*: Fate and Wood

Time is thus defined by the rising and setting sun, by the death and
renewal of libido, the dawning and extinction of consciousness.
-C. G. Jung⁴⁴

The gods of Norse mythology are essentially human in nature, and it is fate that accordingly plays the most significant role in the destinies of both the gods and humans. The gods, in other words, must succumb to the same conditions as humans in regards to the immanence of death as it is occasioned by the forward movement of time in the mythic narratives. Prior to the creation of time the gods enjoyed an age of prosperity without death, but fate arrives soon thereafter with the three Norns who make their home under the ash Yggdrasill, and after their introduction the narrative moves into the mythic present, and the events which lead towards Ragnarøk. Baldr's death is the first death of a god, the primary instance of divine immortality, and the foreshadowing of the eventual demise of the Æsir. As the Norns give "shape" to the lives of individuals, visiting each one at the time of birth, death becomes as much a part of existence as is living. Dying and living are in fact one condition and occur simultaneously with one another through the course of a life once the day of death has been fixed.

The Norns carve the fates of humans into wood and also nourish the world-ash Yggdrasill, both spatial concepts that influence the longevity of either a human life or the world tree. Importantly, the common material of wood—the substance into which the Norns carve and the tree—leads to the interpretation that the Norns in fact carve human destiny into the tree itself. The activity of the Norns with wood in both cases intertwines the temporal sequences of individual and cosmic time. The two acts, of nourishment and

⁴⁴ *Symbols of Transformation* 280-81.

carving, become one, intertwined purpose. The only difference between the two actions remains in the fact that the cosmos will undergo a re-birth after Ragnarøk, while the individual must succumb entirely to his or her death. The only possible exceptions to the rule of fate being the three pairs of gods who are to make it to the new world after Ragnarøk: the return of Baldr, who initially succumbs but will ultimately persevere, and Höðr from Hel, along with the survival of Viðarr and Vali, the sons of Óðinn, and Móði and Magni, the sons of Þór. Furthermore, the survival of the pair Líf and Lífþrasir, who will enclose themselves in the wood of a tree at the time of Ragnarøk, is also a possible exception to the rule, and will be discussed in the concluding chapter of this thesis. Overall, the interconnectedness of the lives of gods and humans with the cosmos composes a complex web of interrelations and multiplicities that is subject to the conditions of time. The connection between the tree and time is of primary interest here.

There are three Norns, Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld, dwelling near Urðarbrunni, the well of fate at the base of Yggdrasill. The triad of women, as noted in the preceding chapter, determines the fates of humans by carving their destinies into wood. *Völuspá* 19-20, where the activities of the Norns are described, is as follows:

Ask veitk standa,
 heitir Yggdrasill,
 hór baðmr, ausinn
 hvíta-auri;
 þaðan koma döggar
 þærs í dala falla;
 stendr æ yfir grønn
 Urðar brunni.

Þaðan koma meyjar
 margs vitandi
 þrjár ór þeim sæ,
 es und þolli stendr;
 (Urð hétu ęina,

aðra Verðandi,
 skóru á skíði,
 Skuld hina þriðju)
 þær lög lögðu,
 þær líf kóru,
 alda börnum,
 ørlög seggja. (Finnur Jónsson)⁴⁵

As mentioned above, these two stanzas directly follow the description of the creation of the first humans from wood, *Askr* and *Embla*, and form a sequence of four stanzas in which humans are connected to the world tree and both are connected to the Norns and fate. On the change that the arrival of the Norns signifies, Polomé remarks, “the turning point after the completion of the ‘creation’ is the coming of the Norns, which introduces fate into the cosmos as they take over control of man’s destiny (st. 20); their arrival also marks the end of the idyllic Golden Age which the gods enjoyed in the evergreen fields” (Polomé, “Germanic Religion” 90), which is described in stanza 8. In other words, the Norns set the narrative in motion for the events of gods and men to transpire. The gods introduced time and create humans, and then it is the Norns who determine the course of events (as noted above in chapter 5, it is the gods who create the conditions for the arrival of time and fate).

In *Gylfaginning* a similar description is given for the location and the role of the Norns in regards to their involvement with destiny, and, further, the Norns also have the

⁴⁵ I know that an ash-tree stands called Yggdrasill,
 a high tree, soaked with shining loam;
 from there come the dews which fall in the valley,
 ever green, it stands over the well of fate.

From there come three girls, knowing a great deal,
 from the lake which stands under the tree;
 Fated one is called, Becoming another—
 they carved on wooden slips—Must-be the third;
 they set down laws, they chose lives,
 for the sons of men the fates of men. (Larrington, *The Seeress’s Prophecy* 19-20)

responsibility of nourishing Yggdrasill, demonstrating the theme developed in earlier chapters highlighting the interwoven relationship between humans and trees. In

Gylfaginning 15 Hárr describes to Gangleri the home of the Norns near Urðarbrunni,

Þar stendr salr ein fagr vndir askinvm við brvninn, ok or þeim sal koma iii. mæyiar, þær er sva heita, Vrðr, Verþandi, Skvld; þesar meyiar skapa monnvm alldr; þær kavllvm vær nornir. En erv fleiri nornir, þær er koma til hvers barns, er borit er, at skapa alldr, ok erv þessar goðkvnigar, en aðrar alfa ættar, en enar iii. dverga ættar. (Finnur Jónsson)⁴⁶

Hárr then continues, imparting information about how the Norns determine the respective lives of humans, stating that it is dependent on the character of the Norn who visits each individual human:

Goþar nornir ok vel ættapar skapa goþan alldr, en þeir menn, er fyrir vskapum verþa, þa valda því illar nornir. (Finnur Jónsson)⁴⁷

It is in the next chapter, in *Gylfaginning* 16, that the connection between the Norns and the health of the world-ash Yggdrasill is referred to. Once again Hárr speaks to Gangleri:

En er þat sagt, at nornir þær, er bygia við Vrþarbrvn, taka hvern dag vatn ibrvninv ok með árin þan, er liggr vm brvninn, ok asa vpp yfir askin, til þess at eigi skvlv limar hans trena e(ða) fvna, En þat vatn er sva heilakt, at allir lvtir, þeir er þar koma ibrvninn, verþa sva hvitir sem hina sv, er skiall h(eitir), er inan liggr við egskvrn. (Finnur Jónsson)⁴⁸

The two versions presented here from *Völuspá* and *Gylfaginning* are like other narrative instances described above: they are complementary of each other and it is clear that

⁴⁶ A handsome hall stands under the ash beside the well. Out of this hall come three maidens, who are called Urd [Fate], Verdandi [Becoming] and Skuld [Obligation]. These maidens shape men's lives. We call them the norns. There are yet more norns, those who come to each person at birth to decide the length of one's life, and these are related to the gods. Others are descended from the elves, and a third group comes from the dwarves. (Byock)

⁴⁷ The good norns, the ones who are well born, shape a good life. When people experience misfortune, it is the bad norns who are responsible. (Byock)

⁴⁸ It is also said that those norns who live beside Urd's Well draw water every day from the spring and that they splash this, mixed with the mud that lies beside the well, over the ash so that its branches will not whither or decay. That water is so sacred that all things which come into the spring become as white as the membrane called *skjall* [skin] which lies on the inside of the eggshell. (Byock)

Snorri has drawn from *Völuspá* in his version of the narrative, and he has inherited the cosmological perspective from the earlier poem in an adapted form. The addition found in *Gylfaginning*, that it is the character of each individual Norn, either good or bad, which will determine the course of a human's life, is the only significant factual difference between the two versions. This difference adds an element of randomness or multiplicity to a fatalist interpretation of destiny, for it is not specified whether or not there is intrinsic significance behind whether a good or bad Norn shapes a life, just that it is so.

The world-ash Yggdrasill is present in seed-form before the coming of the Norns (see chapter 1), and it has already been discussed how the world tree is the spatial support of the Norse cosmos (see chapter 3). To further the discussion of this macrocosmic/microcosmic conception in relation to the activities of the Norns this paradigm is again revisited. Spatially, the act of carving the destinies of humans into wood is a microcosmic function of the nourishment that the Norns provide for Yggdrasill. It is a physical act that influences the longevity of life over time. Nourishing the ash is likewise a physical act that prolongs the life of the world ash, which is symbiotically connected with humankind. It may be concluded that the Norns are the most important narrative element concerning the life-force of humankind and the world tree. They are a natural part of the cosmology, which, responding to the existent conditions of the cosmos, perform the required task of setting the length of life, and extending the life of the world tree. They nourish the world ash Yggdrasill, the generative force behind life in the cosmos, and they determine the lifespan of humankind.

Temporally, the fact that the destinies of humans are determined at the time of birth suggests that fatalism may be an important concept in the mythology. The

difference between the microcosmic and macrocosmic planes of the cosmology is that for humans the Norns determine the length of an individual's life, setting a time-span, while in respect to Yggdrasill, the action of providing nourishment to the ash by the Norns is an act of deference, the life of the tree being extended, not determined. There is a narrative instance when Yggdrasill shakes (*Völuspá* 47) at the oncoming of Ragnarøk, before the destruction of the cosmos, but it is never made clear whether or not the ash is destroyed at Ragnarøk and this question of whether or not the world-tree is ever completely destroyed is left open. It is possible to interpret that the longevity of Yggdrasill is thus connected with a more supernatural force than the Norns wield. The world tree is subject to the conditions of the cosmos as a whole.

On the subject of fatalism it may be insightful to consider the mythological narratives analyzed here as constituting part of the worldview of the people who composed and recorded them. This worldview may find expression in the narratives as a result of an attempt to understand the natural courses of events that unfold within a lifetime and across generations. On the subject of fatalism, Eliade writes of humankind that

[h]is very place in the cosmic cycle—whether the cycle be capable of repetition or not—lays upon man a certain historical destiny. We must beware of seeing no more here than a fatalism, whatever meaning we ascribe to the term, that would account for the good and bad fortune of each individual taken separately. These doctrines answer the questions posed by the destiny of contemporary history in its entirety, not only those posed by the individual destiny. (Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* 130-31)

Taking into account that the activities of the Norns correspond to the individual destinies of humans and exert some influence on the collective destiny of the cosmos, Eliade's statement is especially significant as it allows for an interpretation of the myth as a means

used among the people by whom it was composed and recorded as an attempt to explain the concept of life and death in extra-human terms. Death is here seen as a natural part of the cycle of life, as the opening quote of this chapter taken from Jung ascribes to the cyclic nature of time and its relation to the unconscious. Through mythology humankind expresses belief in a narrative that is greater than the individual or the collective, belonging to the “cosmic cycle.”

Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson writes about the specific connection between the concept of fatalism and the Old Norse verse sources. Stating that such an attitude is discernable in the prose sources of the 13th century, such as *Íslendingasögur* and *Sturlunga saga*, the author remarks that it is, however, unclear whether for those sources the incorporation of a fatalist perspective should be attributed to contemporary attitudes or to the survival of older conceptions. Concerning older material, however, Jón Hnefill writes, “[f]atalism is often evident in the verse sources, some of which definitely date from pagan times, some even from as early as the 9th century. For the history of religion it is of importance that in these poems the pagan gods were regarded as at the mercy of fate, whereas Christ was superior to fate” (*Under the Cloak* 137). It is not the object here to discuss the differences between pre-Christian and Christian conceptions of mythological themes, but it is significant that a conflict is recognized between the two belief systems that manifests as a tension in some sources. On the conflict between the two religions, Jón Hnefill continues, “[f]or the history of religion it is of importance that in these poems the pagan gods were regarded as at the mercy of fate, whereas Christ was superior to fate. This advantage of his was bound to be of significance as the conflict grew between the two religions” (137).

A perspective that attributes the outcome of an individual's life to a natural cycle that is both greater and beyond the individual being suggests a conception of fate that is fundamentally multiple. In this sense the characters that are found in the Norse mythological narratives, gods and humans, are an extension of a predestined intention that is not necessarily carried out with purpose. Deleuze and Guattari refer to a similar concept in regards to the theatre, where an actor is likened to a marionette, controlled by strings and rods. Here they cite Ernst Jünger (1895-1998), who writes:

[c]all the strings or rods that move the puppet the weave. It might be objected that *its multiplicity* resides in the person of the actor, who projects it into the text. Granted; but the actor's nerve fibers in turn form a weave. And they fall through the gray matter, the grid, into the undifferentiated....The interplay approximates the pure activity of weavers attributed in myth to the Fates or Norns. (qtd. in Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 8)

This fragment acknowledges fatalism as an element in the activities of the actor, as it is someone other than the actor pulling the strings, but furthers that it is also the individual, with individual sensibilities and a unique genetic makeup that forms a multiple combination with the intentions or the actions of those pulling the strings. Much is left to the individual sensibilities of the actor, or, to re-extend the metaphor back to the puppet or marionette, the object made of wood. When this is considered alongside Eliade's notion of fatalism, it may be drawn that the fates in the Norse mythological texts, while in fact determining the destinies of individuals, do not determine everything, for the individual will die a death that is in accordance with their chosen path in life, with his or her individual sensibilities playing just as important a role as the Norns. Although the Norns determine the date of one's death, they do not determine its cause. The Norns, living as they do near a tree, represent the basic connection to the material of creation, and the destiny of an individual is ultimately connected to that substance.

Fate, as it is determined by the Norns, may then be as Margaret Clunies Ross describes it, “a kind of judicial sentence of death or a *hólmgangr* for the individual, but it is also a collective misfortune for gods and humans” (Clunies Ross 247). Fate determines the immanence of death, but not how death will come about, thus leaving the individual in a kind of limbo until the decisive date arrives. Clunies Ross’ choice of the term *hólmgangr* is interesting in this context, for it suggests a battle between the individual and fate; however, as is known, the individual will always be on the losing end of the battle with fate, and ultimately succumb to death. Here, Clunies Ross also suggests a “collective misfortune” referring to gods and humans, returning us to our opening point at the beginning of this chapter, and a primary thread that travels through the collective weave of the argument being presented here, which suggests that the gods are essentially human in nature.

Time is decidedly the primary factor in the workings of fate, and wood the primary substance. It is with the introduction of time during the creation of the cosmos that leads to the arrival of the Norns, and the giving of human life to two pieces of wood that finalizes the preparation of the necessary conditions for fate to be implemented. Clunies Ross further outlines the different relations of time to the vertical and horizontal spatial axes, noting that much criticism has focused on time being irreversible on the vertical axis, and, accordingly, reversible on the horizontal axis. Such is demonstrated by the Norns, who determine an irreversible time of death and dwell underneath Yggdrasill, a vertical concept. The author continues, outlining five horizontal phases of mythic time from the beginning, through the creation period, the mythic present, the events leading up to and including Ragnarøk, and finally the distant future, at the time of the rebirth of the

world. This five-part conception of time is structurally linear, rather than cyclical, and Clunies Ross takes this to mean that the Old Norse idea of time is not one that is strongly cyclic, for based on the conception of these five phases, which proceed, each one from the former, the progression of events in both the mythological narrative and the corresponding outlook on life, is demonstrative of a sequence that is progressive and evolving, rather than pre-determined and fatalist. She writes,

it seems to me that there are traces of the cyclic conception of time and events in Old Norse myth [...] and the fact that the World Tree and the earth itself are said to be eternally green (*Völuspá* 19, 7; 59, 4). However, these traces are poorly developed and are outweighed by an overwhelmingly linear concept of time, whose ending is not conceptualised at all, just as the moment of its beginning is not. (241-42)

It is possible to surmise from Clunies Ross' arguments that although the grand narrative of Norse mythology may in fact be linear, and fit better to the horizontal axis, the concepts related to the world tree are in the domain of the vertical axis: once the Norns have spoken, time is fixed and irreversible. The motif of fate, the Norns carving into wood, is a micro cycle, a part of the linear progression.

Anthony Winterbourne supports the notion of time as belonging to the vertical axis in the Eddic sources, and centers his argument on the world-ash Yggdrasill, a vertical concept. He writes,

[t]he Norns sustain the tree, and decide what is to happen both to men and gods. Time is irreversible. For some, the irreversibility of time, and the inexorability of fate, are related necessarily. It is the very fact that fate is operating that leads to the conclusion that once fixed, the future as decreed by the Norns is unchangeable. Time cannot run backward. (Winterbourne 62-3)

When we consider this general conclusion in relation to the opening quotation of this chapter by Jung, which places the concept of time in relation to natural cycles and the persistence of the unconscious, we may find that although time is irreversible in that the

future cannot be changed in regards to length, there is a daily renewal, a cosmic cycle of day and night. The idea of rebirth as such is strongly connected to the figure of the mother in the work of Jung, and, further, the libido is a driving force connected to the mother, and to other phenomena that elicit desire. Both the Norns who shape time and the *völva* who speaks in *Völuspá* are women, and as such may be considered in relation to the figure of the mother.⁴⁹

If the conception of time in the Norse mythic cosmos is fundamentally a conception of time as related to the mother and a natural cycle, then it may be helpful to consider briefly, as this project nears its close, the concept of a female sensibility in regards to time as it applies to the texts under consideration. Julia Kristeva has written importantly on the concept of “women’s time,” suggesting that “[a]s for time, female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains *repetition* and *eternity* from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations” (Kristeva 191). The consistent element noted here by Kristeva is the tendency for a cyclic conception in regards to repetition and eternity as a predominant aspect of the feminine conception of time. It may be further suggested that perhaps rather than trying to conceive of time in Norse mythology as conforming to one or another interpretive model, it may be the case that it is essentially multiple in nature. Paul Bauschatz suggests that mythic time in the Norse sources “is not a static circle but a cycle of changes ever growing and accumulating through the process of change” (Bauschatz 148). The concept of transformation returns us to Jung, and his development of the

⁴⁹ Jenny Jochens discusses the significance of the Norns in relation to time: “Whether the Norns in general are to be seen as directly or indirectly responsible for the unfolding of destiny, the significant feature remains that both the *völur* and the *nornir* were conceived as female beings endowed with ultimate wisdom” (41).

concept of archetypes of transformation. The archetypes housed in the collective unconscious transform as the perception of the people to which the archetypes belong necessitate the transformation. As the outer world changes, so does the inner conception of the cosmos.

In returning to the tree it is important to note that each year it goes through a renewal, growing new foliage, gaining a new life. In Norse mythology, Yggdrasill is evergreen, and therefore always repeating this natural cycle on a daily basis. It may be concluded from this that the natural world is one that is cyclic while the human world is linear. Our final stop along this journey will discuss the concept of rebirth, which will recognize the granting to humans of a cyclical dimension, and will recognize, accordingly, the part played by the tree in this transformation after Ragnarøk.

7. The Mythological Book

There is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made. Therefore a book also has no object. As an assemblage, a book has only itself, in connection with other assemblages and in relation to other bodies without organs
-Deleuze and Guattari⁵⁰

The particular grouping of Old Norse texts that have been referred to in this thesis, and specifically the arrangement of selected fragments considered in relation to each other, brings us to a point where the tree and book separate. The concept of the book that has been developed in connection to the tree in the preceding chapters is not that of a concrete object, such as a manuscript or volume, but of an abstract machine or, more precisely, an assemblage. Our abstract book forms a rhizome with the tree and with the human psyche, it is the meeting place where ancient, mythological manifestations of the tree as a symbol interact and play with the human spirit, bringing the old symbolic transformations into the present. The three realms most traversed with such an approach are accordingly the concept of the book, stemming from Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, the human psyche in relation to Jung's collective unconscious and the mythological symbol of the tree as found in the Eddic texts, which are all three plugged in to one another. If the analysis were to be abstractly considered as a book, it might be further observed that it is the tree that forms the binding which holds the pages together: the spine of the book where all of the pages, the thousands of words meet and interact with one another, away from the careful eye of the reader. It is indeed possible to imagine a book that is more active when closed than it is when open, when the pages are pressed more closely together. Once a book is opened, lines of flight travel inward and outward,

⁵⁰ *A Thousand Plateaus* 4.

however, and points of entry into the text and points of departure out of the text multiply exponentially. Where the tree and the book separate is, however, with the decisive recognition that the book, which, although forming a rhizome with the tree, and thus granting entrance into the world of the symbol, will ultimately remain a representation of such natural forces as the regenerative force of the tree. A book can activate the forces but never precisely replicate the intricate weave of the cosmic cycle as perceived by humans from nature. The book is similar to humans in many ways, however, a most important and obvious association being the common material coming from the tree: the original material of wood for the first humans and the pulp of paper which forms the pages of the book. Another important connection, as discussed above, which brings into action with one another all three—book, tree and human—is certainly the notable likeness in appearance between the shape of the tree and the human frame.

The thread has taken the project through the fields of philosophy, philology, psychology, comparative studies and literary criticism, and the picture of the tree that is gathered along such a path is that it is universally symbolic, but not symbolic universally, demonstrated by the varying associations made for the symbol from different perspectives. The tree has a multitude of connections and connotations within a group of texts, and common significance across texts, yet there are variations, which have been illustrated by the enunciation of the themes and motifs in *Gylfaginning*, for example, the themes of which have most probably been drawn from versions of the poetic sources. The book, the human psyche and the tree may all be considered as assemblages, with variant lines of flight within and without each assemblage. The tree does not perish at the end of the Norse mythic-cosmic narrative, but survives, or, as is most likely the case, is reborn,

giving life to the creatures that will inhabit the world after the destruction of Ragnarøk. The highest of the gods, Óðinn, as he often does, seeks out answers about the future, and in the hall of the great Vafþrúðnir, where the two converse, he asks about who among the humans inhabiting the world will survive Ragnarøk. The answer in *Vafþrúðnismál* 45 is as follows:

Líf ok Lífþrasir,
 en þau leynask munu
 í holti Hoddmímis;
 morgindöggar
 þau sér at mat hafa;
 þaðan af aldir alask. (Finnur Jónsson)⁵¹

Gylfaginning 53 provides an almost identical account of the rebirth of humans from the trunk of the tree:

En þar sem heitir Hoddmímis hollt leynaz menn ii. i Svrtaloga, er sva heita, Líf ok Leifþrasir, ok hafa morgindaggar fyrir mat, en af þessum monnum kemr sva mikil kynslóð, at bygviz heimr allr. (Finnur Jónsson)⁵²

In both the poetic and prose accounts it is said that the pair Líf and Lífþrasir will find refuge in the trunk, *holt*, of Hoddmímir, which has been interpreted as the world-ash Yggdrasill, for *Mímis brunnr* lies underneath one of the roots branching off of the tree, and the connection has been drawn from this juxtaposition.⁵³ This is, however, questionable, as there is no direct indication that Hoddmímir is the ash Yggdrasill, and it may be more probable that it is a new incarnation of the World tree in the cosmos that is

⁵¹ ‘Life and Lifthrasir, and they will hide in Hoddmimir’s wood; they will have the morning dew for food; from them the generations will spring.’ (Larrington, *Vafthrudnir’s Sayings* 45)

⁵² In the place called Hoddmimir’s Wood, two people will have hidden themselves from Surt’s fire. Called Líf [Life] and Leifthrasir [Life Yearner], they have the morning dew for their food. From these will come so many descendants that the whole world will be inhabited. (Byock)

⁵³ See Simek 154; Larrington, 269.

reborn after Ragnarøk. The paramount vision of the tree as life-giving force may be this fragment, for it is able to secure the future of humankind while the destruction of the cosmos swallows all else. With the world that is re-born in the new age, the tree continues to give life. As was introduced in chapter 1, when the vǫlva remembers the tree as a seed in the ground, this fragment from *Vafþrúðnismál*, which is also cited in *Gylfaginning*, foresees that the tree will deliver to the new world that is reborn the seeds of the future human race, Líf and Lífþrasir, the couple who will repopulate the earth with humans. This myth, furthermore, repeats the myth of the two original humans, *Ask* and *Embla*, who were created from two pieces of wood, and is symbolic of the initiation of a new cosmic cycle. We see, therefore, a multiple of the world tree and the creation myth in the new cosmic cycle that initiates after the destruction of the gods.

This returns us to the discussion of Jung, for through our survey and analyses it has been illustrated that the tree is present at the beginning of time, forms the structure of the mythic cosmos, is the material of both creation and death, and at the end of time provides salvation and rebirth for humankind, opening a new age, constituting a second creation myth, one that may be interpreted as a reincarnation for humans. The tree is symbolic of life generally, and this is accordingly why it is referred to as the World Tree, or the tree of life. Without the tree there would be no future for humankind, or, in fact, no present, and it is a wonder why in the present age, as well as in the past, great amounts of human energy focus on destroying the tree. The mythological narratives demonstrate an overall awareness of the fragility of the life-force of the tree, a fragility that is, however, contested by the perseverance of the same force, which is reflected in the narrative account of the trembling of Yggdrasill in the lead up to Ragnarøk. The tree will be able to

overcome destruction at that time, either in itself or in a new manifestation, although this is never specifically stated. Without the survival of the tree, the gift of rebirth to Líf and Lífþrasír, and the humans who will descend from them, would not be possible. The life force of the mother, as conceptualized by Jung, is present at the end of an age, and brings about the new age.

The point where the tree and the book separate is moreover a result of the manifestly similar relationship between the two. Language, as discussed in chapter 2 is often considered in binary terms, and schematized with a tree or root system. This is precisely why it is fruitful to approach the symbol of the tree and the function of the book with a rhizome method. Such an approach unlocks the language within the mythological book we have been analyzing, a book we have arranged and selected, and consequently opens the tree. This is progressive—by analyzing the tree not with another tree or root system, but with a structure-less structure, a system with no systematics, a rhizome, true contrast appears. Deleuze and Guattari write, “[t]here is always something genealogical about a tree. It is not a method for the people. A method of the rhizome type, on the contrary, can analyze language only by decentering it onto other dimensions and other registers. A language is never closed upon itself, except as a function of impotence” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 8). In comparison to the other analytical methods consulted above, it may be found that rhizome analyses are complimentary to the task of the literary critic through the opening up of the field; it is not possible to extract meaning with rhizome analysis, and therefore multiple meanings are set in motion. We have arrived at this possibility primarily as a result of the analyses of Jung, who separated the libido from the sexual definition of Freud. By doing so he enabled an investigation into the

transformation of mythological symbols which incorporates all of the faces and masks of the symbol: the mother, the father, the force of life and of death. With Jung, we approach the concrete, but do not reach it; with Deleuze and Guattari we are taken swiftly away from anything solid, and thrust into a multi-planar web that is soft and gives way to the touch. This final note from Jung does not seek to conclude, but to once again open up the multiplicity of language to discourse as it refracts through the individual and the collective. “Thus, language, in its origin and essence, is simply a system of signs or symbols that denote real occurrences or their echo in the human soul” (*Symbols of Transformation* 12). Language is to be found on one side of the human soul and the tree on the other. The expression of this relationship finds its place in the pages of books.

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