

THE MYTH OF THE MEAD:

A Discussion of Immortality  
in the Snorra-Edda

Thesis submitted to the Faculty  
of Graduate Studies, University of Manitoba, as  
partial requirement for the degree Master of Arts

by Keneva Ann Brandson

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To Professor Haraldur Bessason, who has not only been my patient instructor for many years, but has also contributed a great deal of much-needed and constructive criticism to this thesis, I owe many thanks.

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces  
After the frosty silence in the gardens  
After the agony in stony places  
The shouting and the crying  
Prison and palace and reverberation  
Of thunder of spring over distant mountains  
He who was living is now dead  
We who were living are now dying  
With a little patience.

- "The Waste Land", T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909 - 1962 (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 97.

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The general intent of this thesis is to analyse and discuss the myth told in Snorra-Edda about the origins of the "mead" of poetry and of immortality. Myths, part of every culture, represent a special literary genre as formulaic expressions of collective belief. Myth as a general concept is a vague term, which need imply no more than a traditional story. While many myths are associated in some degree with religion, there are instances (e.g. the Homeric poems) where myth can not easily be separated from legends dealing with mortals. One distinction that may conceivably be drawn between myth and legend or even folktales is the connection that exists between myth and ritual, in contrast with the lack of ritual significance of folktales: myth is in essence sacred.

This leads one to the question of how interdependent myth and ritual actually are. The myth of the mead, as it relates the origins of intoxicating drink, and is presented in the ritual situation of an ale-feast, seems to exhibit quite close ties. And if the corresponding ritual, as a communal activity, can be said to make a significant contribution to the understanding of the myth, does this not then in turn support the structuralist's view of myth as a mode of human communication?

As a form of communication myth is subject to

the basic structuralist principle that men allow their subconscious preoccupations to emerge in the way they order their lives, i.e. in demonstrating that "life is not determined by consciousness but consciousness by life". 1. Thus, Lévi-Strauss concludes, "the message conveyed by myth is a product of its overt contents and the relations between them: a structure of particular materials partly determined by them." 2.

In this thesis both the materials and the overall structure will be examined. Various interpretations ranging from the allegorical to the psychological will be posited. The myth as told in Snorra-Edda will be compared with references to this story occurring in other areas of Old Icelandic literature which may support or refute these theories. Finally, the evidence gathered from these investigations will be reviewed in an attempt to reach some conclusion on the value and suitable direction of interpretation for this myth and for myth in general.

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1. Karl Marx, "The German Ideology, Part I", in The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1972), p.119.

2. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth", Journal of American Folklore, vol. LXXVIII, no. 270 (Oct.-Dec. 1955), rpt. in The Structuralists from Marx to Lévi-Strauss, ed. Richard and Fernande De George (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p.174.

II. The myth of the mead occurs in the second second of the Snorra-Edda,<sup>3</sup> "Skáldskaparmál", which, as the name suggests, is concerned with "poetic diction". Although this section contains primarily mythological material, the Edda was designed as a treatise on poetics rather than mythology. The portion on poetic diction was intended to explain kennings and other poetical expressions used by the skalds.

As far as the most recent and hopefully most discriminating researchers have been able to establish, Snorri wrote his Edda around 1223, and with a degree of certainty the "Háttatal" can be dated to 1221-23.<sup>4</sup> Sigurður Nordal has suggested that the two sections preceding the Háttatal were written first and that with the Háttatal Snorri has effectively "slegið

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3. All references are to the 1931 edition of the Snorra-Edda by Finnur Jónsson, Edda Snorra Sturlusonar published in Reykjavík (Prentsmiðja D. Óstlunds) 1907. As the editor explains, like most other editions, this edition is based primarily on the Codex Regius manuscript with the variant readings from the other principal manuscripts, Codex Wormienses, Codex Uppsaliensis, Codex Traiectinus. The text of the myth under discussion shows but insignificant textual variation, therefore the problem of variant texts is of no real concern here.

4. see essay by Konráð Gíslason in Aarböger f. nord. Oldk. 1869, pp. 147-8.

tvær flugur í einu höggi", by adding a third didactic and explanatory chapter to his essay in the form of a poem in honour of King Hákon and Earl Skúli. 5.

An attempt to discuss the Snorra-Edda must include some significant points about the author himself. Börn at Hvammur í Dölum of an excellent family, Snorri was fostered at age two by Jón Loptsson at Oddi. On his father's side Jón was the grandson of Sæmundr inn fróði, who had founded the school at Oddi. On his mother's side he was descended from Magnús berfættr, king of Norway. It is only natural to assume that the young Snorri received his education here at Oddi, "where the European learning of Sæmundr fróði mingled with the native traditions and the proud lineage of the princess". 6.

Besides his Edda, Snorri wrote the Heimskringla, a history of the Norwegian kings, and very possibly Egils saga and Sturlu saga. 7. In addition to his literary work he played a leading role in the notorious political intrigue which plagued Iceland in the thirteenth century. According to some historical accounts,

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5. Sigurður Nordal, Snorri Sturluson (Reykjavík: Ísafoldarprentsmiðja h.f., 1920), p.22.

6. Stefán Einarsson, A History of Icelandic Literature (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1957), p.115.

7. Nordal, op. cit., pp. 23-32.

he had hopes of becoming "Earl of Iceland". In 1241, however, he was killed in Iceland by the functionaries of King Hákon, about whom he had almost twenty years earlier composed the great panegyric *Háttatal*.

As indicated above, Snorri had the good fortune to come into contact with a great deal of learning at an early age. That he made good use of this education is evidenced by the astonishing number and quality of quotations he used for illustrations in his works. Some ninety skalds are referred to in the Edda alone. In addition to this, there are very few verses which are quoted in both the Snorra-Edda and *Heimskringla*. Many of these poets we know nothing of except for "þá mola sem Snorri lætur detta af borðum sínum, um leið og hann færir sönnur á einhverja kenningu." <sup>8</sup>.

Snorri is writing in the thirteenth century, over two hundred years after the legislated acceptance <sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup>. Nordal, op. cit., p.100.

<sup>9</sup>. The words legislated Christianity are used here since around the date 1000 A.D. Christianity became the official religion in Iceland; to what extent many of the old heathen beliefs had disappeared prior to this time, or remained in isolated areas afterwards is impossible to ascertain. *Kristni saga* reports that "allir menn skyldu vera skirðir á Íslandi ok trúa á einn guð, en um barnaútburð ok hrossakjötsát skulu haldast in fornu lög. Menn skyldu blóta á laun ef vildi, en varða fjörbaugsgarði, ef váttum kæmi við." *Kristni saga, Íslendingasögur l. bindi*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1946), p.80.

of Christianity in Iceland. It is due likely to the pervasive and censorious influence of the church at this time in Iceland, as well as to Snorri's own distance from an era when heathen beliefs and customs formed the basis for man's very existence, that the myths as we have them bear the often undisguised stamp of another life, another time. Although Snorri's work is in many ways at variance with the currents of both contemporary ballad-making and church teaching,

Snorre utvilsomt er en god kristen, hans oppfatning af de hedenske guder avviker ikke fra tidens teologi, selve ideen til synkervingen kan han ha fått hos Augustin, (demonlæren) fins også der; den viser seg hos Snorre i at æsene er trollkyndige og at deres gudeverden er (demonisk). 10.

Clear evidence of Snorri's intentions is to be found in Skáldskaparmál itself:

En þetta er nú at segja ungum skáldum, þeim er girnask at nema mál skáldskapar ok heyja sér orðfjölða með fornum heitum eða girnask þeir at kunna skilja þat, er hulið er kveðit, þá skili hann þessa bók til fróðleiks ok skemtunar. En ekki er at gleyma eða ósanna svá þessar frásagnir, at taka ór skáldskapinum fornar kenningar, þær er höfuðskáldin hafa sér líka látit, en eigi skulu kristnir menn trúá á heiðin goð ok eigi á sannyndi þessa sagna annan veg en svá sem hér finnsk í upphafi bókar. (118)

It is naturally quite impossible to establish

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10. Anne Holtsmark, Studier i Snorres Mytologi (Oslo: Universitets forlaget, 1964), p.15.

what part Snorri's own euhemerism played in the creation of the myths in his Edda. 11. His intellectual attitude enables him to integrate existing traditions and thus preserve earlier motifs, while keeping an artistic balance. For example, he introduces the *Æsir* in a quasi-historical setting, with completely fictitious genealogies in his Prologus to Snorra-Edda. Eugen Mogk has referred to it as "eine phantastische Mischung von mittelalterlicher Gelehrsamkeit, biblisch-christlichen Vorstellungen und mythologischen und saggeschichtlichen Reminiszenzen." 12. In *Heimskringla* the gods have been definitely transferred to the realm of historical and mortal kings. "To oppfatninger av antikke guder er her glidd sammen; de var mennesker, gjerne stamfedre, eller de var demoner;" 13.

Comparison of these myths with what might be termed more original sources sheds scant light on the state of corruption or preservation of these myths since these earlier texts as we have them, especially the Eddic poems and the sagas, are under constant

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11. Euhemerism I would define rather narrowly as the manner of interpreting myth attributed to Euhemerus—basically a process of historization and humanization (see Kees W. Bolle, "In Defense of Euhemerus", in Myth and Law among the Indo-Europeans (Los Angeles: UCLAPress, 1970), p.20.

12. Eugen Mogk, *Zur Bewertung der Snorra-Edda als religionsgeschichtliche und mythologische Quelle* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1932), p. 88.

13. Holtsmark, op. cit., p.15.

scrutiny as to dating and authenticity. However, all oral forms of literature are constantly subject to historical causalities and vicissitudes: that the presentation of new material reflects a new orientation does not necessarily imply a radical process of decay.

Without disregarding these questions of historicizing and temporalness, we can still study Snorri's writing as literature, placing the main emphasis on its intrinsic merit. To determine the degree of originality is, however, a difficult question. We know of no comparable work of an earlier date designed to explain the workings of poetry, "þat, er hult er kveðit", except Aristotle's treatise "On Poetics". This work is fundamentally different from Snorri's in that it is purely philosophical in its discussions and investigations, whereas Snorri writes in a very practical, though hardly less refined fashion than his famous predecessor. Snorri's use of the dialectical form in writing "Gylfaginning" deserves particular attention. Also, there is a common trend in European literature in the thirteenth century to base works on a Latin or Greek original. The First Grammatical Treatise, ~~for~~ example, must have been constructed after a classical model.

A survey of the Skáldskaparmál in its entirety indicates that Snorri originally set out to write it

along the same question and answer format as Gylfaginning. Fragmentary source materials may have forced him to abandon this pattern. Much of the Skáldskaparmál consists of sundry bits of information, often collected from a number of poetical fragments. Some of the kennings, like the ones dealing with the poetic mead, had their own stories and would not have been comprehensible without them.

Til þess að geta myndað allar kenningar  
og hafa fult vald á þeim, urðu þá ung  
skáld að leita til sömu linda og eldri  
skáld höfðu gert, læra goðafræði og  
hetjusögur. 14.

The myths not suitable for the narrator Gylfi Snorri has reserved for Skáldskaparmál. Among them is the story of the origins of poetry, though it could be considered a "goðsaga". 15.

The chief point to remember in analyzing this section of the Snorra-Edda is that Skáldskaparmál was intended as part of a textbook, a guide to the would-be skald in understanding the diction of Skaldic poetry, this highly complex form of language use which would provide him with the basic techniques of his trade. Here Snorri was attempting to preserve a dying heritage, the world of Skaldic verse. As such,

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14. Nordal, op. cit., p.95.

15. It is also interesting to note that the myth of the mead is preceded by another story dealing with the lives of gods, the myth telling of the seizure of Iðunn. There are a number of interesting parallels between the two myths, which will be gone into in a later section.

it is altogether different from the Elder or Poetic Edda, which consists of much earlier, anonymous poems, written in a style quite different from that of the skalds, although both genres share much the same tradition. The "Hávamál", for instance, includes a section which relates a version of the myth of the mead of poetry.

In addition, both the Eddic and Skaldic poems have remained a vast repository of myth, legend, and culture. They are one of the few remaining products of an early modern northern civilization, and represent hundreds of years of religious development and literary traditions. As the ideas were formed and spread, they were influenced by other peoples and other creeds. This is particularly easy to understand when one considers that the years from 400 to 800 A.D. were a time of widespread migration throughout Europe. Cultures and beliefs became intermingled, resulting in the colourful, but extremely involved religious conceptions of the medieval northern world.

In the opinion of some scholars, we should not try to infer a great deal about the religious practices of other peoples from mythological record, as the two may represent quite different aspects of culture. We may regard myth as "legomenon", the thing said, and ritual as "dromenon", the thing per-

formed. 16.

Um die Religion der alten Nordgermanen kennenzulernen, müssen wir vor allem scharf zwischen Religion und Mythos scheiden...Die Religion lernen wir kennen aus den Glaubensvorstellungen und Kulthandlungen des Volkes anlehnen, aber sonst frei schalten und walten, und verschiedene Stoffe miteinander verbinden konnte." 17.

Ideas and theories on the psychological, sociological, and anthropological aspects of mythology, and about mythologizing as a creative process will be discussed somewhat more fully below. Suffice it to say at this stage that the religious material we are dealing with here has evolved through a rather complicated genesis as indicated above to the point where it has become the object for discussion by a thirteenth-century rhetorician. As one critic puts it, quite strongly, "What we are confronted with in the surviving form of these myths are the highly literate versions of scribal schools in which there is a great deal of conscious philosophizing in picturesque terms." 18.

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16. These terms are proposed by Kirk in Myth in Ancient and other Cultures (Berkeley: Cambridge Univ. Press/Univ. Cal. Press, 1970), p. 23.

17. Mogk, op. cit., p.4.

18. S.N. Kramer, et. al., "The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man" in Journal of Cuneiform Studies, 1948, pp. 39-47.

III. A brief recapitulation of the myth of the mead serves a valid purpose to introduce the discussion:

There were at one time hostilities between the Æsir and the Vanir; however, they eventually pledged a truce, and as a mark of this each of the two parties spit in a vessel. At their parting, the gods took this, and not wishing to let it perish, shaped a man of it, called Kvasir. This man is so very wise, that there is said to be no question which he cannot resolve. In his subsequent journeying throughout the world, teaching men wisdom, he meets two dwarves and is killed by them. They collect his blood in two bowls and a kettle. Thereupon they proceed to blend honey with the blood and brew from this such a mead that everyone who drinks it becomes a skald or man of learning. They tell the gods that Kvasir has suffocated in wisdom.

The dwarves subsequently invite the giant Gilling and his wife over. They propose a short scull out on the ocean with him, capsize the boat, and the giant, not knowing how to swim, drowns. The dwarves, however, right the boat and return to land to tell his wife what has happened. She is stricken with grief for her husband and begins to cry very loudly. On the pretext of showing her the spot at sea which is his last resting place, the dwarves coax her outside, and promptly drop a millstone on her head from above the doorway as she passes out.

When the news comes to the giant Suttung, son of Gilling, he sets the dwarves in exile on a tidal shoal. They plead with him for their lives, and offer him the mead in exchange, a bargain which the giant accepts. The mead is then carefully guarded by the giant's daughter, Gunnlôð.

The scene then shifts to where Óðinn, wandering as usual, comes upon nine thralls cutting hay. He offers to sharpen their scythes, and afterwards each of the nine, marvelling at the improvement, wishes to buy the whetstone. Óðinn casts it up into the air, whereupon the thralls slay one another with their scythes in their eagerness to obtain this marvellous tool. That night Óðinn spends at the house of the giant Baugi, brother of Suttung, who complains of his wretched lot now that his nine thralls are dead. Óðinn offers to do the work of nine, demanding as his wages a drink of Suttung's mead. Baugi knows nothing of this mead, but agrees to try and get it for Óðinn.

After Óðinn has worked the summer, the two travel to the home of Suttung; however, he flatly refuses them even a single drop. Óðinn then proposes that Baugi bore a hole in through the side of the mountain with his (Óðinn's) auger. This Baugi does, and soon announces that he is through, however, the wary Óðinn on blowing into the hole, is not tricked, and Baugi completes the drilling.

Óðinn then changes to the shape of a serpent, and slithers through the hole. Baugi stabs at him with the auger but misses. Óðinn now lies three nights with Gunnlöß and she promises him three drinks of the mead. He empties all three vessels, turns himself into an eagle and flies off at top speed. But Suttung also changes to an eagle and pursues him. The Æsir see Óðinn coming and set out a tub, Óðinn arrives and spews forth the mead. Suttung was so close to him, though, that some of the mead missed the kettle, thereafter to be known as the foolish skalds' portion. Óðinn gives the mead to the Æsir and to those men who know how to compose poetry.<sup>19</sup>

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19. Sincerest apologies must be offered for maligning Snorri's artistic narrative; this is intended only as a summary outline in an attempt to keep the order of events straight, which may become somewhat confused in the ensuing pages.

This, very briefly, is the skeleton of the story which Snorri tells. Of course, what is not evident here is the deceptive simplicity and classic style of the passage. The story is seemingly quite straightforward, but can be interpreted at various levels of meaning. To begin with, the myths in the Snorra-Edda are generally voiced through the mouths of various figures from the world of the gods. It is, therefore, completely in keeping with the nature of the material that the lion's share of this myth is related by the god Bragi, whose special province is poetry. Bragi is often confused with (and may even be an apotheosis of)<sup>20</sup>, a Norwegian poet of the ninth century, Bragi Boddason the Old, said to have been the first man to compose poetry in skaldic form.<sup>21</sup> This myth, the second one told by Bragi is in answer to the question, "Hvaðan af

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20. "Gudene var mennesker som enten selv hadde utgitt seg for å være guder og (krevet å dyrkes som sadanne, eller) ble dyrket som guder etter sin død." Holtsmark, op. cit., p.9.

21. see Finnur Jónsson, Den oldnorsk og oldislandske literaturs historie, ed. 2 (Copenhagen: 1920-24), p.414.

hefir hafizk sú íþrótt, er þér kallið skáldskap?"(113)

A point to note here is the use of the term "íþrótt" for "skáldskapur". In the saga of King Haraldur Hard-ruler, for instance, we have this verse:

Íþrottir kann ek atta  
ygs fet ek líp at smíða  
fórr em ek hvast a hesti  
hefi ek svnd numit stvndum:  
scriða kann ek a scípom  
scyt ek ok rög sva at nytir  
hvarveggia kann ek hyggia  
harpslott ok bragbatto. 22.

The term "íþrótt" is usually defined as a skill or an accomplishment. While we would hardly define both sports and the composing of poetry as skills, it can be seen from this verse that an ability to compose poetry was considered an accomplishment in the same way as riding, swimming, etc., and the hero would be considered incomplete were he lacking in any of these accomplishments.

Whence, then, did this art of composing arise? According to Snorri, it originated with the accordance of a truce in the hostilities between the Æsir and the Vanir. The Æsir and the Vanir represent a division into two groups of the leading roles of the divine hierarchy. 23. Nowhere are they

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22. Saga Haralds Hardráða in Morkinskinna, ed. C. R. Unger (Christiania: B.M. Bentzen, 1867), p.15.

23. Note, however, that Snorri refers to the Vanir as "fólk".

clearly characterized as groups, but are usually discussed with reference to the chief figures on both sides, Óðinn and Þórr, and Freyr and Freyja. The conflict mentioned above is referred to in four stanzas of Völuspá:

Þat man hon folkvíg  
fyrst í heimi,  
es Gullveigu  
geirum studdu  
ok í höll Háars  
hána brendu,  
þrysvar brendu  
þrysvar borna,  
(opt ósjaldan,  
þó hon enn lifir).

Heiði hétu,  
hvars til húsa kom,  
völu velspáa,  
vitti hon ganda;  
seið, hvars kunni,  
seið hug leikinn;  
æ vas hon angan  
illrar brúðar.

Þá gengu regin öll  
á rökstóla,  
ginnheilög goð,  
ok gættusk of þat,  
hvárt skyldi æsir  
afráð gjalda,  
eða skyldi goð öll  
gildi eiga.

Fleygði Óðinn  
ok í folk of skaut;  
þas vas enn folkvíg  
fyrst í heimi;  
brotinn vas borðveggr  
borgar ása,  
knáttu vanir vígspá  
völlu sporna.

24.

The description here is at best allusive -

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24. "Völuspá", in Sæmundar-Edda, Finnur Jónsson (Reyk: Prentsmiðja D. Óstlund's, 1905), p.6-7.

"Gullveig" can quite feasibly be connected with the Vanir as a symbol of riches. Turville-Petre holds that,

Gullveig can hardly be other than Freyja ... It is not told how Freyja came to Ásgarð (sic) or the hall of Óðinn, but if we can identify her with Gullveig, it was because of her that the war of the gods broke out. It could be suggested that Gullveig (Freyja) had been sent to Ásgarð by the Vanir in order to corrupt the Ásir with greed, lust and witchcraft. Attempts by the Ásir to destroy her were in vain and she still lives. 25.

Óðinn is said to have learned the secrets of "seiðr" from Freyja. We are told that Freyja is a goddess of gold (she wept tears of gold),<sup>26</sup> an amorous figure, and a sorceress, "fordæða". 27.

However the war began, it eventually ends in a truce, with a fusing of the two cults, which Dumézil describes as:

...two complementary terms in a unitary religious and ideological

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25. E.O.G. Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1964), p.159.

26. Among the kennings for gold in Snorra-Edda are listed "grátr Freyju", the weeping of Freyja, and "skúr augna Freyju", the shower of Freyja's eyes. p. 166.

27. "Lokasenna", in Sæmundar-Edda, op. cit., p.128.

structure ... The initial war between the Æsir and the Vanir is only a spectacular manifestation, as is the function of myth, in the form of a violent conflict, of the distinction, the conceptual opposition, which justifies their coexistence. 28.

Einar Haugen takes this statement one step further:

The truce between them is a mythical way of describing that higher unity into which they have entered, in which the opposition (between the two groups) is neutralized. The symbol of the neutralization is the man Kvasir, who came into being from the combined spittle of the Æsir and Vanir and who is therefore neither one nor the other, but something of both. 29.

The neutralization he mentions arising from the end of the war marks the beginning of poetry. The mixture of spittle, a "truce-mark", symbolizes the union of the cults. A distinction is made here with the use of the word "griðamark". There is no permanent peace, but an indication of tensions unresolved.

Spittle was an accepted agent of fermentation.

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28. Einar Haugen, trans., Gods of the Ancient Northmen, by Georges Dumézil (Berkeley, Univ. of Calif. Press, 1973), p.12.

29. Einar Haugen, "The Mythical Structure of the Ancient Scandinavians - some thoughts on reading Dumézil", Festschrift Roman Jakobson (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), p. 9.

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Plant material was first thoroughly chewed,

und den mit Speichel gemischten  
Brei in ein Gefäss speit. Dabei  
verwandelt der Speichel durch das  
in ihm enthaltene ptyalin den  
Stärkegehalt von Pflanzen in  
Traubenzucker. Wird diese Masse  
aufbewahrt, so tritt Gärung ein,  
bei der der Traubenzucker zer-  
fällt. Eines seiner Zerfalls-  
produkte ist Alkohol. 30.

There is another instance of respect for the  
almost magical power of spittle in fermenting to  
be found in *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*. King Alrekr,  
who is married to a woman called Signý, becomes  
infatuated with another, Geirgildr. The two women,  
however, are constantly at one another's throats  
and the King decides he will keep the one who pre-  
pares him the best beer. Signý prays to Freyr for  
assistance, while Geirgildr asks aid of Óðinn, who  
appears in disguise and spits in her mixture.

Hann lagði fyrir dregg hráka sinn  
ok kveðst vilja fyrir tilkvámu  
þat, er var milli kersins ok hennar.  
En þat reyndist gott öl. 31.

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30. R. Stube, "Kvasir und der magische Gebrauch des Speichels", in Festschrift Eugen Mogk (Halle: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1924), p.500.

31. "Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka", in Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda, II. Bindi (Reykjavík: Edda, 1950), p.95.

Naturally this proves to be the better.

Primitive peoples found something almost supernatural in the workings of fermentation. The end product, alcohol, was even more revered:

Die Herstellung alkoholischer Getränke wird bis heute bei den Primitiven stets als eine genau geordnete soziale Angelegenheit geübt. Damit liegt die Vermutung nahe, dass diese Production wie alle wirtschaftliche Gemeinarbeit mit religiösen Vorstellungen verflochten ist.

32.

Alcohol was not simply considered to be a "pick-me-up" after a hard day's work, or as a bit of excitement in the boring round of everyday routine, as we have it today. For the simpler man, alcohol gave strength and courage, and therefore must itself contain power. A state of drunkenness was even felt to bring one into closer contact with the world of the gods.

Wir bewegen uns hier noch in ganz primitiven Gedankenbahnen, wonach Rauch und Ekstase verwechselt werden und als verwandte Erregungszustände in eine Existenzsphäre hinaufführen, wo man über die Schranken gehoben den Mächten nahekommmt, ihre Kraft erlangt, sich mit ihnen vereinigt.

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32. Stübe, op. cit., p.500.

33. Georg Johan Sverdrup, Rauschtrank und Labetrunk im Glauben und Kultus unserer Vorfahren in Norsk Videnskaps-akademi, Historisk filosofisk klasse (Oslo: J. Dybwad, 1941), p.6.

To return to the course of events in the story, we recall that this symbol of the truce (and tensions) is formed in the shape of a man, and thus personified:

En at skilnaði þá tóku goðin ok  
vildu eigi láta tynask þat grida-  
mark ok sköpuðu þar ór mann; sá  
heitir Kvasir (113)

Here the image becomes much more tangible - out of mere spittle, composed of the elements of water and air, it takes the gods to create a human figure, thus they have given life force to what was mere matter. At the same time we have moved from the realm of the gods into a mortal sphere.

Kvasir is no ordinary human, but incredibly wise. There is no question which he cannot resolve. He travels around spreading learning. This description is an interesting comment on the value of poetry as a means of communication. It might be noted, as well, that a fair number of the Eddukvæði are formed as riddle-type questions and answers, the victor being the one who can answer all the questions, usually Óðinn. This is also another indication of the extremely important position occupied by poetry in this pagan culture.

Kvasir, however, being mortal, was not immune to treachery and is slain by the dwarves Fjalarr and Galarr as he is attempting to spread wisdom. The

dwarves are creatures of the earth, or even of the netherworld. They are often identified as the "Dökkálfar", dark-elves, and usually figure in stories as craftsmen of magical or wondrous articles. Numerous treasures mentioned in the Eddic lays are the work of dwarves (Sif's hair, the Brising necklace, the hammer Mjöllnir). <sup>34</sup>. The myth of the mead proves to be no exception. From the blood of Kvasir which the dwarves collected in two tubs and a kettle they brewed an amazing mead.

þeir blendu hunangi við blóðit,  
ok varð þar af mjöðr sá, er  
hverr, er af drekkur, verðr skáld  
eða fræðamaðr. (113-114)

The honey adds a treasured ingredient from the world of nature to be combined with the blood, which now represents the life-giving and sustaining force, wisdom, and the divine tension of the world of the gods which had been personified in Kvasir. The dwarves, then, used their magical skills to create a concrete reality out of what was previously a somewhat intangible or inutile, though inherently valuable substance, i.e. the blood of Kvasir. We might here recall the words of Ægir referring to

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<sup>34</sup>. For a more detailed analysis of the characteristics of dwarves, see Turville-Petre, op. cit., Ch. XI.

poetry as "íþrótt". 35.

The action, having moved from the human sphere, now continues in the world of the dwarves. In succeeding scenes the mead travels yet further, to the world of the giants. Thence it is to be regained by Óðinn and becomes the permanent possession of the gods, and is also partaken of by those of the race of "mennskir menn" fortunate enough to be favoured by the gods, poets and men of learning. Stage by stage, the mead of poetry thus acquires a part of its character or substance from many different areas.

Here one also observes with interest how the dwarves manage to obtain Kvasir's wisdom.

Þá er hann kom at heimboði til  
dverga nokkurra, Fjalars ok Galars,  
þá kölluðu þeir hann með sér á ein-  
mæli ok drápu hann, létu renna blóð  
hans í tvau ker ok einn ketil, ok  
heitir sá Óðrerir, en kerin heita  
Són ok Boðn; (113)

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35. If one considers this life force of the gods to be an important element in the mead, and the mead necessary to the gods (since Óðinn goes to such lengths to get it back), this story can form an interesting parallel with the myth of the rape of Iðunn. Here a god, again in the form of a bird, rescues another life-force, in this case the apples which the gods need to be eternally young, from the hands of the giants, and is hotly pursued by a giant, also in the form of a bird. That this myth directly precedes the one dealing with poetry is in itself interesting, and hardly a coincidence.

The dwarves kill Kvasir and collect his blood in a manner almost identical to the one observed in the offering of heathen sacrifice. In the latter instance, an animal was slain and its blood collected. Boars, for instance, were a frequent sacrifice for fertility. Since the boar was a prolific animal, people related it to the powers that controlled fertility, and felt that the sacrifice would thus bestow fertile animals and good crops. If we superimpose the sacrificial pattern upon the slaying of Kvasir, this symbol of extreme wisdom becomes the sacrificial concept. Accordingly, one would assume that the dwarves' labour found favour with the granters of knowledge and received the stamp of Kvasir's intelligence. In fact the following words support this line of reasoning:

... mjöðr sá, er hvern, er af drekk,  
verðr skáld eða fræðamaðr. (113-14)

This statement encourages the assumption that the nouns "skáld", poet, and "fræðamaðr", learned man or wise man, were considered to be almost synonymous. In Snorri's time the makers of verse were among the most honoured and respected of men, and in the pre-Christian era they may have been accorded yet a higher distinction. Egill Skallagrímsson is not without reason the greatest hero of the Icelanders. In addition to his extraordinary physical strength

and courage he was endowed with the gift that made him an outstanding poet.

Elsewhere in his Edda, Snorri describes the mechanical elements or components of "poetic diction" as two-fold, "mál ok hættir", language and form. The two vessels which hold the mead could be seen as representing these two features combined in the "ever-stirring kettle" to symbolize the material of poetry.

Kvasir, representing the wisdom of the gods, meets with the two dwarves, who are obviously figures of evil and cunning, as evidenced by their numerous unprovoked slayings. And it is this which proves eventually to be their undoing. They drown the giant Gilling<sup>36</sup> and kill his wife to silence her rather vociferous grief at his death by dropping a "kvernsteinn", or mill stone, on her head. These dwarves are then imprisoned on a "flæðarsker", a skerry flooded at high tide, by the giant's brother Suttung. They ransom their lives by giving the mead to him.

The mill stone is the central image of the

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<sup>36</sup>. Giants seem, in general, to fare rather poorly at sea, c.f. the giant Hymir in the boat with Þórr. Here the giant, not knowing how to swim, drowns, while the dwarves manage to return to shore. This is possibly an indication of the fact that the homeland of the giants lay in the remote mountain fastnesses, and they had little contact with the sea.

Eddic poem "Gróttasöngur", where the two thralls, who are described as "frammvísar", work the millstone Grótti, grinding out peace and prosperity:

Auð mölum Fróða,  
mölum alsælan,  
mölum fjöld féar  
á feginslúðri;

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Hér skyli engi  
öðrum granda,  
til böls búa  
né til bana orka,  
né höggva því  
hvössu sverði,  
þott bana bróður  
bundin finni.

The connection of the sisters' milling with the course of fate becomes more clearly drawn towards the end of the poem, as the following verse shows:

Mól míns föður  
mæð rammliga,  
þvítt hon feigð fira  
fjölmargra sá;            37.

On the whole the poem has a prophetic tone, similar to that of the "Völuspá". In both "Gróttasöngur" and the myth of the mead, the millstones represent the machinery of fate, though in slightly different contexts. The "wheel-of-fortune" which terminated the howling of the giantess has turned against the dwarves. With the ransom of the dwarves, the mead

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37. These quotes are taken from "Gróttasöngur" in Sæmundar-Edda, ed. Finnur Jónsson, op. cit., pp. 200-205.

has passed into the hands of the giants. In addition, the scene has moved from land to sea, and thence shifts to the underground mountain home of Suttung, "Hnitbjörg".

Since the precious mead is now the property of the giants, forces of evil who are generally in opposition to the forces of good as realized in the figures of the gods, it is only to be expected that the gods should reenter the story. This, however, has to be achieved through an indirect series of manoeuvres, many of which seem to lack any credible causation until the story concludes.

Óðinn, is the instrument of recovery. He very ingeniously tricks nine slaves by throwing his hone into the air, and in their efforts to obtain this treasure the thralls kill each other. This scene is strikingly similar to an incident recorded in Celtic mythology, the "Battle of the Sheaves":

A number of men were mowing  
oats and the devil came towards  
them and said that he himself  
should keep up mowing with them  
if they would go binding. The  
devil kept up mowing with them all  
the time, and they failed to keep  
up binding with him. Then they  
started insulting one another,  
and some of them said that upon  
the binding of the others there  
was no blessing. But at length  
they began to throw sheaves at  
each other. They killed each other

completely. 38.

A similar legend was probably known throughout northern Europe. There are at least variants in both Esthonian and Finnish folklore, where the devil comes armed with a magic sickle. 39. If we can assume a connection between this legend and Óðinn's slaying of the nine thralls, then the identification of Óðinn with the devil in the Battle of the Sheaves is a foregone conclusion. In Snorri's myth, Óðinn names himself "Bölverkr", evil-worker. The instigating of trouble amongst one's opponents is a generally accepted characteristic of Óðinn, and the tradition is perpetrated by those men whom we can describe as "Óðinn heroes". 40.

In both stories there is the occurrence of the deaths at harvest time, as is represented by the sheaves of wheat and mown hay. The "death in autumn" tradition echoes ancient fertility rites, and is a conception which has lasted until the present day in

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38. The name "Battle of the Sheaves", and the text are taken from an article by A.G. van Hamel, "The Mastering of the Mead", in Studia Germanica tillägnade Ernst Albin Kock (Lund:C.W.K. Gleerup, 1934), p.83.

39. *ibid.*, p.84.

40. see below, section dealing with the material of the myth as it appears in other sources, especially Egils saga.

our vision of death as the "grim reaper", with scythe in hand.

Discussion of the subject of death and/or rebirth in this tale of the "immortal drink" would, in itself, be a fitting topic for a separate thesis. The theme of death seems to work on both a conscious and unconscious level: at some points it can be felt that Snorri, as a conscious artist uses death or death symbolism to indicate a special point of emphasis in the story; at other times it seems to be merely a convenient source of motivation to join loose threads of narrative. In some instances as well, a death seems to have derived from an earlier tradition, i.e. the connections of autumnal death with fertility ritual. For Óðinn, who is the god of the dead, these deaths may even be said to simulate offerings. <sup>41</sup>.

At this point, it might prove interesting to examine a theory recently proposed by Donald C. Ward on the "threefold death" as a form of ritual sacrifice. <sup>42</sup>. Here the author maintains, following a

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<sup>41</sup>. for a discussion of human offerings and the worship of Óðinn, see Jan de Vries, Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1950), p.95.

<sup>42</sup>. Donald J. Ward, "The Threefold Death", in Myth and Law Among the Indo-Europeans (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1970), p. 12 ff.

direction suggested by Dumézil, that:

Among Germanic peoples there were essentially three methods of offering a human victim to the divinities: noose, water, and weapon, 43.

and, more significantly, that in these three methods of execution can be seen correspondences with the three social classes and functional classes of the gods as proposed by followers of the school of Indo-European tripartism. 44. In other words, with each of the three slayings the victim was dedicated to one particular "function". Ward cites numerous examples from Tacitus, Snorri, and Saxo to illustrate such means of sacrifice as he describes, allowing for a certain amount of local and cultural variation.

Some of Ward's conclusions can quite feasibly be applied in a discussion of the myth of the mead, if only to investigate the possibility of older religious materials and practices preserved in the background. For instance, the Danish archaeologist, P. V. Glob, in his book entitled The Bog People, reports on his discoveries regarding the amazingly well-preserved corpses, which archaeologists date to

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43. Ward, op.cit., p.131.

44. A discussion of Dumézil and Dumézilian mythology will follow in a later section of this paper dealing more specifically with theory of mythical interpretation.

the Iron Age, in the marshlands of Denmark and northern Germany. The evidence points to the conclusion that these were sacrificial victims - a number have the remains of a noose around their necks, indicating that they may have first been hanged, then submerged in the bogs, the peculiar chemical composition of which has resulted in their preservation. <sup>45</sup>.

The evidence that Ward submits to show that this threefold sacrifice did have a special significance in heathen practices seems quite conclusive. He even discusses its continuation in folklore, where the ritualistic significance has been forgotten. Viewed from this context, it would seem that with Snorri we have reached an intermediate stage, where it is difficult to determine the extent to which we have been removed from heathen belief.

Suppose one were to hold the myth of the mead up to this pattern of triple death as an offering to the gods, to examine the correspondences. The first death is that of Kvasir. Quite obviously he is sacrificed, *vís-a-vís* the manner in which his blood is collected. It is not illogical to assume that he must have been slain with some kind of weapon. The next death is a drowning, that of the giant Gilling.

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<sup>45</sup>. P.V. Glob, The Bog People : Iron Age Man Preserved (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1969), p.68.

This killing seems strangely unmotivated and almost without significance in the context of the story, unless it is considered as a part of this scheme. The third death is, more correctly, a multiple death, that of the nine thralls. Strictly speaking, this should be a hanging (which would be hallowed to Óðinn, as lord of the gallows), but instead we have a slightly different form of sacrifice, which is both caused by and intended for Óðinn. It recalls the description of religious proceedings at Uppsala by Adam of Bremen:

It is the practice, every nine years, to hold a communal festival at Uppsala... The sacrifice is performed thus, nine heads of every living male creature are offered, and it is the custom to placate the gods with the blood of these. The bodies are hung in a grove which stands beside the temple... There is also a well there where heathen sacrifices are commonly performed... 46.

In the myth of the mead Óðinn receives, if not nine hanged victims, at least nine heads, as Snorri specifically says,

þá skiptusk þeir svá við, að hverr  
brá ljánum á háls öðrum. (115)

In addition, he was the instigator of the conflict, when he hurled the hone over their heads (which serves the same purpose as the ceremony of spear-hallowing

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<sup>46</sup>. Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, ed. B. Schneider, Book IV, 1917, XXVI ff. (Copenhagen: Roskilde & Bagger, 1948).

before battle <sup>47.</sup>). Óðinn has taken possession of all of them.

If these episodes in the myth can be viewed as having parallels in, or even as having been derived from rituals of a sacrificial nature, how does this affect possible interpretations of the story? What deeper significance does this reveal in the myth? First, there is inherent in any type of sanctified offering the acknowledgement of death as inevitable. In the myth, that which remains after each sacrifice (or arises out of each) provides the chief elements for the mead of poetry, which is symbolic of immortality and is therefore a triumph over death. <sup>48.</sup> The connections with religious practices serve to elevate the myth to a more impressive and symbolic level than that of a mere narrative.

The religious institution of human sacrifice pursued the model of the godly archetype (i.e. the sacrifice of Óðinn) as the supreme sacrificial mystery which mobilized the maximum possible magical propensities of the offering. <sup>49.</sup>

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<sup>47.</sup> "Spear-hallowing" consisted of the ceremonial throwing of a spear out over the enemy, and was apparently a way of dedicating your opponents in battle as a sacrifice to Óðinn, in the hope than he would reward you with the victory. See Turville-Petre, p.47

<sup>48.</sup> The idea of a triumph over death can also be seen in the sacrifice of Óðinn, where he secures supremacy over the world of the dead.

<sup>49.</sup> James L. Sauvé, "The Divine Victim", in Myth and Law Among the Indo-Europeans, op. cit., p.191.

However, the myth of the mead does not end with these slayings. The numerous actions and contrivings which Óðinn must carry through in order to obtain the mead are suggestive of the trials of Hercules, or of any testing sequence where the protagonist must prove himself worthy (c.f. Sigurðr, who must ride through a wall of fire which surrounds the hall of Brynhild). As in many a more romantic tale, the hero, after successfully completing his tasks, does get his reward, and in this case gets the girl, too.

Óðinn's journey through the hole in the mountain and his sojourn with Gunnlöð represent the attainment of harmony between the opposite extremes of the mythological cosmos (i.e. the worlds of gods and giants) and might even be taken to suggest the integration of the opposite poles of masculine and feminine energies which universally underlies conceptions of the perfect being. 49.

This consummation is part of Óðinn's victory in obtaining the mead:

Fór Bölverkr þar til, sem Gunnlöð  
var, ok lá hjá henni III nætr, ok  
þá lofaði hon honum að drekka af  
miðinum III drykki. Í enum fyrsta  
drykk drakk hann alt ór Óðreri, en  
í öðrum ór Boðn, í enum þriðja ór  
Són, ok hafði hann þá allan mjöðinn. (117)

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49. Haraldur Bessason, "Mythological Overlays in the Icelandic Sagas", unpubl. (1975), p.7.

This same mead has therefore become the product of this divine union and harmony.

When Óðinn has drunk all the mead, he changes to the shape of an eagle, and, pursued by Suttung, barely manages to disgorge the mead in Ásgarðr. The connection of Óðinn with an eagle is by no means as clearly defined as is his kinship with ravens. 50. Mention of an eagle occurs in this verse which is describing Valhöll, alongside a wolf which must certainly be considered an animal connected with Óðinn:

Mjök 's auðkent  
þeims til Óðins koma  
salkynni at séa,  
vargr hangir  
fyr vestan dyrr  
ok drúpir örn yfir. 51.

Evidence of the respect for the majesty and power of the eagle is to be found in other references, for example, in this verse:

Hræsvelgr heitr  
er sitr á himins enda  
iotun iarnar ham  
af hans vængjum  
kveða vind koma

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50. According to Snorri, "Hrafnar II sitja á öxlum honum ok segja í eyru honum öll tíðendi, þau er þeir sjá eða heyra;... Þá sendir hann í dagan at fljúga um heim allan ok koma þeir aptr at dögurðarmáli; þar af verður hann margra tíðenda viss; því kalla menn hann Hrafnaguð; (61)

51. "Grímnismál", in Sæmundar-Edda, ed. Finnur Jónsson, op. cit., p. 76.

alla menn yfir. 52.

Both of these animals represent a guise or alternate realization of Óðinn. The capability of shape-shifting is characteristic of most mythological versions of a "trickster-figure" and quite possibly reflects the divine-animal nature of the shape-changer. At this stage it at least strengthens the portrayal of Óðinn as the magical-sorcerer god.

Das Motiv von einem zaubermächtigen Wesen, das sich seinen Verfolgen durch neue Verwandlungen zu entziehen sucht, ist ein altes Lieblingsmotiv in Zaubersagen. 53.

Shape-changing by Óðinn is symbolic of the succession of changes in form undergone by the poetic mead and its possessors. From a truce-symbol, the mead has become a token of wisdom, then a dwarves' ransom, the reward of Óðinn, etc. This forms a very beautiful parallel with the very nature of Old Icelandic verse which relies quite heavily on allegory and other forms of transposed meaning. The most obvious examples of this are to be found in kennings, the special type of metaphor which is the central building block of skaldic verse.

In simplest terms, a kenning is an image meta-

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52. "Vafprúðnismál", in Sæmundar-Edda, op.cit., p.67.

53. Fr. v. der Leyen, Die Götter und Göttersagen der Germanen, 3. Aufl. (München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 1924), p.247.

morphosed by its context, almost the same sort of adaption which can be seen in Óðinn's changes in the myth. In both cases the path leading from one phase to another is often devious and sometimes temporarily obscured. Seldom is the end to be anticipated from the beginning. Thus, it is the "wages of a thrall" which becomes the precious drink of the gods. The following strophe illustrates this progression:

Síþogla gaf sǫglum  
 sárgagls þrjá Agli  
 herðimeior við hróðri  
 hagr brimrótar gagra,  
 ok bekkþiðurs blakka  
 borðvallar gaf fjorða  
 kennimeior, sás kunni,  
 kórbeð, Egil gleðja. 54.

There are four sequences of kennings here: the first contains the word "sárgagl", where the word "gagl" which would normally mean "wild goose", is changed by the addition of "sár-" and the connection with "herðimeior", to mean a weapon. A similar transformation occurs with "brimrótar gagra", where "gagarr", normally used as a word for dog here represents the clams or oysters. The process may become even more complex, as the third example may serve to illustrate, "borðvallar blakka kennimeior". "Borð"

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54. The verse is taken from Egils saga, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk Fornrit (Reykjavík, 1933), p.82. The interpretations are also suggested by Nordal.

is a *pars pro toto*, which refers to an entire ship; "borðvöllr", plain of the ship, is therefore the sea, "blakkr sjávar", the horse of the sea, is a ship, the "kennimeiðr" of a ship is the sailor (in this case Yngvarr, to whom the verse is addressed). This is a complicated sequence and shows how the final image may become quite distant from and even seemingly unrelated to the initial concept, as is the case with the complex succession of transformations of the mead.

Snorri, in explaining kennings in this expertly crafted passage has revealed the important qualities, the essence of poetry as he sees it. The end product contains elements which derive from (and therefore may appeal to) each of man's senses: it was visible as a truce symbol, audible through the lament of the giant's wife, and tangible in the person of Kvasir. Like the mead, poetry can lead one through the doors of reality into the realm of semi-oblivious rapture, where the heathens considered one to be in close contact with the gods. Nor does this presentation ignore the the negative qualities of the intoxicant, be it poetry or drink, as is witnessed by the numerous animosities and slayings which occur in the story. This concentrated

mythological narrative is intended to represent these characteristic features of poetry, its origin, craft, sensuality and allegory.

IV. In the preceeding section of this paper I have attempted to survey the myth of the mead as it appears in the Snorra-Edda as *sui generis*. In some instances suggestion has been made of a possible allegorical interpretation of certain individual features, and such an approach might well yield many rewarding results were it to be applied to the myth as a whole.

However, it was my intention, during this preliminary discussion, to avoid approaching the myth armed with any single theory and so proceed to interpret, or dissect, the story, "à la Eliade", for example. The primary reason for this was that this literary text deserves to be recognized as a valuable piece of historical documentation, as well as a very skilfully conceived and presented narrative. The other main reason for this rejection of any hard and fast formula, which could be superimposed upon the material to yield an eminently scientific and possibly startling conclusion, <sup>55</sup> is that at the present no proposed theory has been adequately developed. The absolute adoption of any

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<sup>55</sup>. I refer especially to men such as G. Dumézil, who, having conceived a clever hypothesis, proceeded to then apply it indiscriminately, as I will attempt to show somewhat later.

such treatment would necessitate the exclusion of any factors which did not fit into the framework of the theory, with disastrous results.

However, there is much to be gained from an investigation which would make use of several of the anthropological, psychological, and sociological theories of mythology, if care is taken in each case to ensure that any possibly enlightening insights arrived at from other directions are acknowledged.

In mythology we must inquire into the nature of that formal unity through which the infinitely multi-form world of myth ceases to be a mere conglomerate of arbitrary representations and unrelated notions and constitutes a characteristic spiritual whole. 56.

"Multiform" describes this myth very appropriately; accordingly, the interpretation will proceed with an investigation of various theories and apply them to the narrative. The end result should then be a synthesis of the understanding gained in each case.

During the nineteenth century the rise of the science of anthropology resulted in an upsurge of interest in the mind of "primitive man", and , naturally, in his mythology. Many of the prominent

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56. Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Vol. II, Mythical Thought, trans. C.W. Hendel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), p.21.

anthropologists of the period, basing their work for the most part on second-hand reports, developed various "naturalistic" theories on native beliefs, which they then attempted to apply to religion in general. For example, this statement by Comte:

"Fetishism, the worship of inanimate things and of animals, developed into polytheism, and polytheism into monotheism," was accepted for decades as an absolute. 57. Comte was one of the exponents of the "nature-myth" school. These scholars declared that gods at any place or of any time were nothing more than personified natural phenomena. The limitations of such theories and the faultiness of their thought in general, make naturalism of little use in a study of northern mythology. Indeed, it is difficult to see how anyone could advance such simplistic views had he even considered the extreme complexities of the mythical deities revealed in a poem such as the "Völuspá", or an epic such as the "Mahabharata".

Comte was succeeded by Max Müller, who becomes somewhat subtler in his reasoning that:

things which are intangible, like the sun and the sky, gave men the idea of the infinite and also furnished the material for deities. 58.

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57. Auguste Comte, quoted by E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Theories of Primitive Religion (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 20.

58. Max Müller, in Evans-Pritchard, op. cit., p.22.

This suggestion has some possibilities, for instance, in dealing with some of the myths regarded as being of very original form, such as the fertility myth of sun-worship preserved in *Skírnismál*.<sup>59</sup> If we include the evidence of the Bronze Age rock-carvings<sup>60</sup> to be found throughout Scandinavia, the evidence indicating sun- and nature-veneration becomes very convincing.

There subsequently arose the principally psychological theories referred to as "intellectualist", as expounded primarily by Tylor, who proposed that the "soul" of man could be conceived as independent of the physical world and that this concept of "soul" eventually became metamorphosed into superior beings or gods. In reaction to intellectualism came the "emotionalist" school. First Frazer, with his magico-religious formulae, followed by Freud, who attempted to identify in psychological terms the rites and superstitions of primitive man with the mental and behavioural patterns he observed in neurotics.<sup>61</sup> Both because of his own individual genius

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<sup>59</sup>. "*Skírnismál*" preserves at least parts of an earleir fertility ritual, see Bertha Philpotts, *Edda and Saga*, and H. Bessason, "Mythological Overlays in the Icelandic Sagas".

<sup>60</sup>. P. Gelling and H. Davidson, *The Chariot of the Sun* (New York: Praeger, 1969).

<sup>61</sup>. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. A.A. Brill (New York: New Republic, 1931).

and the special view he takes of mythologizing, Freud's work is of considerable interest. For instance, he develops a purely hypothetical reconstruction of the cosmogony myth of father-slaying, and the conclusion that religion, which he classes with all other conscious and unconscious desires that motivate man, is primarily an objective illusion maintained by feelings of guilt. Original and peculiarly Freudian as it is, his theory has little to contribute to such a general discussion as this. Were one, however, to accept it as valid for the myth under discussion, he would doubtless reach interesting conclusions, at least in instances bearing upon the sexual activities of Óðinn.

The primary motivation of these theories, and even of the later, sociological investigations of Durkheim and Lévy-Bruhl, is to uncover a primordium in any religious sentiment, an aim which is of questionable value. The two most recent and controversial theories, the tripartite comparativism of Georges Dumézil and his followers, and the structuralist method advanced by Lévi-Strauss, are concerned with the interrelation of the system and the structure, the extent to which each dictates the make-up of the other.

At best it would be difficult and, at worst,

disastrous to attempt to discuss mythology and mythological theory without including a treatment of the "new comparativist" school lead by Dumézil. The characterization of his theories as "new" comparativism serves to distinguish them from the nineteenth century attempts at comparative mythology. As developed by Dumézil, comparativism involves a:

systematic comparison of myths and mythic themes drawn from a wide variety of cultures and involves attempts to abstract common underlying themes, to relate these things to a common symbolic representation, and to reconstruct one or more proto-mythologies. 62.

Probably the most exciting and controversial figure in the area of Germanic mythology in the twentieth century, Dumézil in his writings aroused an immediate and angry response from most scholars. In part this was due to his remarkable originality and lack of respect for traditionalism. He has been defended as well as criticized, though, and that by such prominent figures as Jan de Vries and Edgar Polomé. These men had spoken out against the insularity of research on Germanic and Scandinavian mythology, claiming that it was meaningless methodologically to attempt

"die germanische Glaubensformen

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62. C. Scott Littleton, The New Comparative Mythology (Berkeley: Univ. of Cal. Press, 1973), p.32.

nur aus sich selbst heraus erklären zu wollen; es ist ja immer möglich, dass eben die wichtigen Einzelzüge fehlen oder aus ihrer Vereinzelung heraus nicht verstanden werden können. 63.

Yet early attempts at comparative mythology (e.g. Max Müller, Adalbert Kuhn) met with little success. 64. Where Dumézil differs and thus succeeds where these early efforts failed is in his approach: he combines a Durkheimian sociological interpretation of mythological material with a concern for structure and system derived from new developments in structural linguistics. Durkheim's conclusion that "the source and object of religion is the collective life; the sacred is at bottom society personified," 65. seems to summarize Dumézil's basic premise. He does not investigate isolated events or individual episodes but the overt or covert scheme behind them. His three basic conclusions, as presented by Littleton are: 66.

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63. Jan de Vries, "Der heutige Stand der germanischen Religionsforschung", GRM, 1951, p.10.

64. Littleton, op. cit., p.35.

65. Nicholas S. Timasheff, Sociological Theory: Its nature and growth (New York: Doubleday, 1955), p.113.

66. Littleton, op. cit., p.6.

1. that the parent or proto-Indo-European society was characterized by a tripartite ideology,

2. that elements of this ideology were transported by the inheritors of that society across the length and breadth of what was to become the historical Indo-European domain, and,

3. that these elements can be discovered in most, but by no means all, of the early Indo-European mythical and epic literature, from the Vedas of ancient India to the Eddas of pre-Christian Iceland.

The term "tripartite ideology" refers to the threefold set of social functions, i.e. those of priest, warrior, and farmer, collectively represented by a triad of gods. It is to be noted that these gods, then, do not only reflect these classes in society,

but are actually the embodiments of the functions served by these strata, i.e. respectively, maintenance of a harmonious relationship between the social and supernatural worlds and the exercise of moral sovereignty, physical protection of society, and provision of nourishment and maintenance of physical well-being. 67.

It must be emphasized, however, that Dumézil is primarily concerned with the comparison of common ground in Indo-European cultures, arising from their genetic relationship, and is not concerned with comparisons on a universal scale. His stated aim is to

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67. Littleton, op. cit., p.60.

trace the route of development backwards from each genotype to arrive at the phenotype of some five thousand years ago:

es hat um das dritte Jahrtausend  
v. Christus ein indo-europäisches  
Denken gegeben und vor allem dieses  
so wichtige Teilgebiet des Denkens  
und der Kultur, nämlich die Religion. 68.

Yet at times, in his exposition of a semi-structuralist view, Dumézil can sound a great deal like Lévi-Strauss: 69.

So primitiv der Mensch sein mag, in  
dem Augenblick da er denkt, denkt  
er in Zusammenhängen...Vor allem ist  
jede Religion zunächst ein Organismus,  
in den Vorstellungen und Handlungen  
nicht nur nebeneinanderstehen, sondern  
sich angleichen und gegenseitig stützen.  
Um eine Religion zu verstehen, gilt es  
also, die grundlegenden Verbindungs-  
glieder zu verstehen; 70.

The difference between the two lies in their direction: Lévi-Strauss is searching for the key to understanding the species man as contained in and revealed through the structure of his social behaviour (myths, customs, organization, etc.) whereas Dumézil makes no attempt to arrive at such a penetrating or far-reaching conclusion. He is merely intent on

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68. Georges Dumézil, "Stoff, Gegenstand und Mittel der Forschung" in Der Modernen Strukturbegriff, (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft: Darmstadt, 1973).

69. See following section on Lévi-Strauss and Structuralism.

70. Dumézil, op. cit., p.98.

investigating the - undeniably substantial - relations that obtain among various Indo-European religions.

Some of the underlying principles of Dumézilian interpretation can be found in his doctoral dissertation of 1924, entitled, "Le Festin d'Immortalité, esquisse d'une étude de mythologie comparée indo-européenne". This work represents an early stage in Dumézil's development of his ideas, especially of his tripartite theory, and a good deal of that which he proposes here was later retracted, yet much of the underlying theory does remain consistent throughout his subsequent writings. Since he is dealing in his thesis with material and ideas which relate very closely to this thesis, the work will be treated in some depth, to see what conclusions the early comparative method of Dumézil reaches on the question of immortality.

In his introduction to "Le Festin", Dumézil introduces the two main points on which his discussion will centre. The first of these is the use of immortality as the primary indicator of the status of god in contrast with that of the mere human, and the second is to point out the basic opposition of these two types.

Parmi les termes dont se servent les langues indo-européennes pour désigner "l'homme", il y en a deux que procèdent d'une même pensée : l'homme est appelé "le terrestre" ou "le mortel", évidemment par

à des êtres conçus comme non-terrestres ou non-mortels, c'est-à-dire, pour abréger, et sans rien préjuger des autres qualités de ces êtres, à des dieux. [xv] 71.

Dumézil goes on to explain how many of the gods of the various Indo-European religions possessed a special drink: the Hindu "amrita", Greek "ambrosia", even the Irish "Tuatha De Danaan" had an immortal brew. 72. However, no one is really certain as to the exact qualities of this drink, and just what its connections with immortality are. Is it the drink itself which obtains immortality for its user, or is it instead merely a privilege, indicative of a category of beings set apart from mortal, however remarkable, men?

To judge from Óðinn's efforts to gain (or regain) possession of the mead, it appears to be of prime importance to the Æsir. In the closely-related story of Iðunn and the apples of eternal youth, the disappearance of the life-giving treasure results in the dramatic aging of the gods. It seems safe to assume that in this version the mead is itself the giver of immortality. At the very least it is the

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71. Pagination in [ ] refers to Georges Dumézil, "Le Festin d'Immortalité" (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1924)

72. It must be explained here that at this time Dumézil had very little knowledge of northern mythology, and never mentions the myth of the mead, although it fits in almost perfectly with his general

drink and their relationship to it which sets apart and delineates these groups - mortals, demons, and gods. With the nectar the gods have acquired another nature, above and beyond their own power. According to Dumézil, it was the possibilities for various types of oppositions and even philosophical speculation (on a collective scale) that resulted in the Indo-European myth being so well developed and preserved in almost all of the daughter mythologies.

In the main corpus of his thesis, Dumézil proceeds to investigate some of the numerous individual developments of the tradition of the immortal drink. He gathers from Greek, Latin, Celtic, and Germanic sources, for instance, the common factor of:

un génie forgeron (sans doute  
plutôt démon que dieu) participait  
à la préparation de l'ambrosie et essayait  
essayait peut-être ensuite dérober  
la liqueur [224]

This agrees with the situation in the myth of the mead, where the dwarves, often connected with the forging of treasures are the brewers of the mead.

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thesis and would support most of his conclusions. Instead, he makes numerous references to ale, "öl", especially where it appears in "Lokasenna", "Hymiskviða", and "Prymskviða". This oversight Dumézil later remedies and his remarks on the myth of the mead are treated towards the end of this section. For details of the respective positions of "bjórr", "öl", and "mjöðr", see the section of this paper dealing with the traditions of the mead in Old Icelandic works.

Their demoniacal nature is attested to by their apparently unprovoked murderlust.

Another common motif is a contest or struggle, "une lutte entre le possesseur de la Cuve et le dieu chargé de conquérir cette cuve." In the myth of the mead we have, quite naturally, where Óðinn is concerned, a struggle of wits. He must outsmart both giants to obtain the mead which is in their safekeeping. According to Dumézil, this was originally symbolic of a change in nature: "Primitivement, cette lutte était sans doute une lutte à métamorphoses." [223]

As might only be expected, in the hands of the various Indo-European peoples the tradition has been modified and the characters adapted according to the dictates of both area and period. Nevertheless, the central theme of the nectar has not been altered to any great degree - cutting across the variety of trappings we can distinguish in all the versions of the myths which Dumézil uses a number of principal points common to all, which leads the mythologist to the following conclusions:

1. l'ambrosie est restée ce qu'elle était chez les Indo-Européens, un breuvage affranchissant de la mort.

2. l'ambrosie n'apparaît que comme une boisson plus agréable, ... mais non essentiellement différent des autres. Les êtres qui boivent l'ambrosie et ceux qui en sont privés ne s'opposent plus

comme "affranchis de la mort" mais, avec les nuances diverses, comme "bien nourris": c'est peut-être déjà le cas de l'ambros homérique, dont il n'est dit nulle part expressement qu'elle procure l'immortalité.

Here Dumézil's failure to consider the myth of the mead becomes obvious; in this myth the mead does have many special attributes which would only characterize an immortal drink. For instance, it was brewed from the blood of Kvasir. Human blood was held in great respect - it was the life force of man, and here the power of intoxicating drink is closely allied to it:

In dem Glauben an seine lebenspendende Kraft hielt man es sogar für den Erzeuger des Blutes und damit des Lebens. 73.

3. l'ambrosie, a rencontré une religion organisée, une théologie, elle a pris, tot ou tard, sous les formes diverses, une valeur morale qui semble étrangère à la conception primitive: les êtres qui jouissent de l'ambrosie et ceux qui sont privés s'opposent alors à la manière de "purs" et d'"impurs", de "saints" et de "pêcheurs".

As examples, Dumézil cites the Brahmans, who have the exclusive rights to Soma, and the ceremony of the Holy Grail, the spiritual repast which distinguishes saints from sinners. Thus the drink exchanges its magical properties for a moral significance. It remains, however, as an indicator of immortality, since a sinner is denied everlasting life. X repeated first line, to form page

73. G. Sverdrup, op. cit., p.4.

tality, since a sinner is denied everlasting life.<sup>74</sup>

All this speculation presupposes, however, a close connection between the legend and the actual rite of eternal life which must have accompanied it. There is no lack of evidence that many early cultures viewed intoxication as a form of ritual which brought man into communion with the gods. In most cases of pre-Christian religions where there is some information on the nature and character of the rituals, the rites may take either of two forms:

exoteric; in celebrations openly and publicly performed, in which all adherents of that particular cult could join freely, the object of such public rites being to obtain some external and material benefit. ...esoteric; rites open only to a favoured few, the initiates, the object of which appears to have been individual rather than social, and non-material. In some cases, certainly, the object aimed at was attainment of a conscious, ecstatic union with the god and the definite assurance of a future life. <sup>75</sup>

The latter formula could certainly be applied in the case of the myth. Intoxication and ecstasy are regarded as clearly related states of arousal, leading man to a plane of existence approaching the realm and power of the "Great Ones".

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<sup>74</sup>. The connections and significance of the Grail traditions will be discussed more fully later.

<sup>75</sup>. Jessie L. Weston, From Ritual to Romance (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957), p.140.

Wir haben jetzt Soma getrunken,  
 wir sind Unsterbliche geworden.  
 Wir sind zum Lichte gelangte, wir  
 haben die Götter gefunden. 76.

From Dumézil's detailed analysis of the various depictions of the immortal mead, one is forced to agree with him that in this instance at least the younger mythologies evidently have preserved the essential motif of an earlier Indo-European belief, i.e. the existence of this immortal drink and its special qualities. Snorri's narrative, together with the references which occur in other places in the literature, serve to reinforce Dumézil's views on the common underlying fundamentals, covered over with the individual character of the various mythological systems which Indo-European myths acquire through subsequent development.

Somewhat later in his career, Dumézil has made a much more detailed study of northern mythology, much of which appears in his books Loki and, later, Dieux des Germains. His comparative method is by now a highly developed instrument, adapted to enable him to study the nature of a myth or an individual deity, first independently of the system within which it occurs, then as part of that system, and, subsequently, to compare this with instances or figures from other Indo-European religions (with the emphasis on the latter step).

<sup>76</sup>. Sverdrup, op.cit., p.6.

In Loki, Dumézil enters upon a comparison of the personification of drunkenness, "Mada", in an Indian myth, with the figure of Kvasir. After analyzing both stories he concludes that despite the fact that the stories are told in vastly different areas of the world, sociologically and geographically,

There exists nonetheless a common pattern. It is at the moment when divine society is with difficulty but definitively joined by the adjunction of the representatives of fecundity and prosperity (i.e. the Vanir) to those of sovereignty and force (i.e. the Æsir), it is at the moment when the two hostile groups make their peace, that the character is artificially created incarnating the force of intoxicating drink... 77.

Dumézil is, in his usual expansive style, interpreting the union between the functions which Kvasir represents. He continues:

Intoxication under various names and shapes would have been of use to all three functions. On the one hand, it is one of the fundamental stimuli in the life of a sorcerer-priest and of a hunter-warrior in this culture, and on the other hand, it is procured through plants that the farmer must cultivate and prepare. It is thus natural that the "birth" of intoxication... should be situated at that moment of mythical history when society is formed through a reconciliation and the union of priests and warriors on

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77. G. Dumézil, Loki (Paris: G.P. Maisonneuve, 1948), p. 103.

the one hand with farmers and all  
the powers of fecundity and nourishment  
on the other. 78.

At the mention of the inclusion of the farming class, we are again reminded of the strong overtones of fertility rituals, and the very strong earthy basis of existence which is reflected in mythologies. Is it not, then, most natural, that in the infant and developing years of the vast and varied civilization we refer to as Indo-European, the idea of eternal life became actualized in the form of a drink? This is a simple and certainly understandable linking in the minds of the people; not only was water a necessary part of their own survival, but without rain nothing would grow, and life, plainly speaking, would cease. Hence water became a symbol of life and rebirth.

There is some evidence in the myth of the mead to support this idea:

Der Mythos vom Mete Suttungs, den Odin stiehlt, ist nur eine einzelne Variante der osteuropäischen Dichtung vom Raube des Lebenswassers. Die ursprüngliche Fassung erzählte vom Wasser, das dem Menschen gebracht wurde, dass ein Riese und seine Tochter in Töpfen und in einem Berge in Gewahrsam hielten, und dass der in einen Vogel verwandelte Held verschluckte, davon trug und wieder ausspie." 79.

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78. Dumézil, op.cit., p.104.

79. Sverdrup, op. cit., p.11.

While this primitive myth deals with the origins of the waters of the earth, the much later northern myth represents a more sophisticated stage of development. Here Suttung's mead has become a valuable drink of the gods:

Das Wasser verwandelte sich in das  
Wasser des Lebens, in den Göttertrank,  
in den Dichtertrank, die Dichtung ins  
Märchen, ins Heroische und Tragische,  
wieder in buntes, wirres Märchentreiben,  
und endlich in Poetik, in eine tiefsinnige  
Fabel über Wesen, Werden und Wirkung  
der Poesie. 80.

Axel Olrik (and many others since) discussed the similarities between the myth of the mead and a comparable myth in the Vedic hymns. Most of Dumézil's contentions about Indo-European comparative mythology rely quite heavily on Indian and Iranian myths. 81. Indeed, many researchers feel that by comparing Sanskrit and Old Icelandic texts they are bringing together two of the most geographically, and to a certain extent, culturally diverse areas of Indo-European civilization. Therefore, mythological similarities which exist despite this considerable disparity are especially significant.

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80. von der Leyen, op. cit., p.208. Von der Leyen also points out the dualism present between light and dark, simple and difficult, soft and hard, even in names.

81. Dumézil, Les Dieux des Indo-Européens (Paris: P.L. Couchoud, 1952).

There are a number of myths dealing with a drink of immortality in Indian mythology, and generally several versions of each exist. The corpus of mythological documents stretches from the "Rig Veda" (usually dated from 1800 B.C.) to some of the later Puranas (considered seventeenth century A.D.). Yet they form a fairly coherent body of literature concerning an interrelated group of figures who fill the major roles in this system, and sometimes even exchange roles.

The sea is regarded as the womb of the Hindu universe and to return to the womb was to die. The cosmic waters are the ultimate undifferentiated form of order, death. But when the ocean is churned into chaos, the life forces - good and evil, ambrosia and poison - undergo their sea-change and are set free. 82.

The ambrosia is drunk by the gods so that they might become immortal. It is called Soma, or amrita. It is an elixir, the expressed liquid from the soma plant, offered during the Vedic sacrifice, likely an hallucinogenic drink. To obtain the ambrosia, the gods are originally supposed to have churned the ocean. Other myths relate the attempts of a single god to obtain the mead from the demons.

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82. W.D. O'Flaherty, A Sourcebook Translated from the Sanskrit (Penguin, 1975), p.14.

One version deals with the king of the birds, Garuda. He sought to ransom his mother by obtaining a cup of the god's ambrosia. After journeying to the celestial mountain, he had to pass a series of trials to gain entrance. When he flies away with the drink he is pursued. He reaches the domain of the serpents and his mother is accordingly released. However, Garuda then snatches back the cup and the serpents get only a few drops which spilled on the grass.

The myths of Indra mention several episodes resembling the myth of the mead. The often cryptic Rig Veda mentions that "Rejoicing in his virility like a bull, he (Indra) chose the Soma and drank the extract from the three bowls".<sup>83</sup> This sounds very much like the situation in the myth of the mead, where Óðinn, having slept with Gunnlöð, proceeds to empty the three containers of mead. Another myth tells how Indra turned into a falcon and stole the ambrosia, having first been swallowed by a demon. Thus the episode in which the mead is procured is represented not as a battle, but instead as an initiation rite (rite de passage).

The initiate obtains immortality by being swallowed, returning to the womb, gaining the secret of immortality (or the substance, ambrosia) and then being reborn from the mouth of his mother.

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<sup>83</sup>. O'Flaherty, op. cit., p.

enemy. 84.

Dumézil's interpretations and hypotheses are often illuminating, sometimes confusing, and occasionally lack a rational or defensible basis. Although Dumézil has often defended Snorri's versions of the myths, he lays a rather unjustified criticism on this myth, saying,

However well Snorri in his various treatises portrays the differing characters of Óðin, Thor, Frey (sic), he surely does not understand the reconciliation of the Æsir and the Vanir as a myth concerning the origins of harmony and collaboration of the diverse social functions. 85.

Quite the contrary - Snorri has made this very harmony represented by the union of the gods as the basic ingredient in the mead of immortality, which displays the beneficial results of this collaboration.

Dumézil's comparativism permits him to investigate purposefully and elucidate much important information. Yet the comparativist is all too susceptible, as even Dumézil himself will admit, to the temptation to reconstruct too much from too little, as one can often see evidence of in writings by disciples of the Dumézilian school. In addition, their primary interest lies with the Indo-European myth,

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84. This idea of the relationship between conceptions of immortality and rebirth will be discussed below, see p. 69f.

85. Dumézil, Loki, op. cit., p.105.

and the light thrown on daughter mythologies is merely an interesting by-product.

Die vergleichende Erforschung religiöser oder institutionelle Belange in I-E hat zwei Angelegenheiten zur Aufgabe zu machen:

1. Sie muss einerseits versuchen, die Entsprechungen, beispielsweise zwischen indischen oder iranischen und römischen Tatbeständen, so genau und systematisch wie möglich herauszustellen.
2. Sie muss andererseits ... klar und genau auf das Vorgeschichtliche projizierten Ansatz die divergierenden Entwicklungen charakterisieren.

86.

While comparing various versions of the story of the mead, Dumézil briefly mentioned the tradition of the Holy Grail. The dominating characteristic of the legend in its Christian form is, as he suggests, its incorporation of a sense of moral value derived from principles of Christian ethics.

In what appears to be the earliest preserved version of the Quest, the Gawain form, the hero setting out on his journey knows little or nothing of the tasks which await him, and is unsure of his direction. Successful completion of the tasks, however, will lead to the restoration of a waste land. In the Perceval, versions, it is the sick or enfeebled king who will be restored to health and youth:

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<sup>86</sup>. G. Dumézil, "Stoff, Gegenstand,..."op. cit., p.94.

There is a general consensus of evidence to the effect that the main object of the Quest is the restoration to health and vigour of a king suffering from infirmity, and whose infirmity, for some mysterious and unexplained reason reacts disastrously upon his kingdom. 87.

These features of the Grail provide and interesting comparison with the tradition of an Immortal Drink. First, they emphasize the importance of the fertility aspects of the story, represented in the myth of the mead by the "sacred marriage" of Óðinn and Gunnlöð, as well as the close parallel with the myth of Iðunn and the apples. In various versions of the Grail story, fertility symbolism is prominent, both in the method(s) through which the Quest is achieved (which often results in the marriage of the hero), and in the results forthcoming, e.g. the restoration of fruitfulness.

Anthropologists of the "culture and ritual" school of mythological interpretation regard this as indicative of the importance of fertility (and therefore of fertility worship) to early populations who were primarily agricultural. The worship of these communities then endowed the forces of nature each with a distinguishable personality, either a god or

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87. Weston, op.cit., p.20.

a demi-god, and depicted his adventures, symbolic of corresponding ritual events, for the most part in everyday terms.

The progress of the seasons, the birth of vegetation in the spring, the glorious fruition in early summer, its decline and death under the malignant influence of either the scorching sun or the bitter winter cold, were symbolically represented by corresponding stages in the life of this anthropomorphically conceived being, whose annual progress from birth to death to a renewed life, was celebrated with a solemn ritual. 88.

Following this line of interpretation, one can see in the myth of the mead a form of nature drama. With the termination of hostilities (representing the coming of spring) comes the birth of Kvasir; his subsequent spreading of wisdom and knowledge is an indication of fruition, and his slaying by the evil dwarves and the later imprisonment of the mead, the life-force, by the frost giants (an indication of winter) both represent the maleficent influence of natural forces. This is followed by the recapture of the mead and the rebirth of life.

Such an interpretation would regard the union of Óðinn and Gunnlöð as the real climax of this series of events, especially since sexual union in myths is often a feature which signifies a symbolic

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88. Weston, op. cit., p.35.

rebirth. There is certainly a plenitude of fertility imagery here: the entrance through a narrow passageway, the maiden locked away in a hidden fortress, the thrice-repeated ceremony. Even the manifestation of the hero in the form of a snake is a feature found in an early Greek fertility ritual. 89.

Myths of rebirth, in the form with which we are dealing here, often tell of an adventurer, usually a hero or semi-magical being, who undergoes a regeneration through a process referred to as "regressus ad uterum". This involves ,

an initiatory passage through a vagina (dentata), or the dangerous descent into a cave or crevice assimilated to the mouth or uterus of Mother Earth. All these adventures are, in fact, initiatory ordeals, after accomplishing which the victorious hero acquires a new model of being. 90.

This process is so widely known, or even "archetypal" that a very similar doctrine can be found in Taoist belief:

By going back to the base, by returning to the origin, one

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89. see Mannhardt, "Wald und Feld-Kulte", Edda, 1942.

90. Mircea Eliade, Myth and Reality, trans. W.R. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

drives away old age, one returns to the state of a foetus ... That is why the Buddha in his great mercy taught man to reenter the womb in order to reconstitute (his) true nature and (the fullness of) his portion of life. 91.

In the myth, through his symbolic rebirth, Óðinn acquires the mead of immortality, thus obtaining (or reaffirming) supernatural status for all the gods.

Even more important than the return of the mead to the world of the gods, of course, was the significance of the return of fertility to their world, and thus to the world of men as well. One of the functions of the myth (Eliade and others would have it the foremost function) is undoubtedly to serve as a model for human ritual. The ritual is celebrated "to impose a sympathetic compulsion on the event", 92. so that it will be repeated or continue. Thus this myth with its underlying fertility significance can partly explain the ritual significance of the drinking feast, as a celebration of immortality in nature through rebirth.

Another function of the "regressus ad uterum"

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91. Eliade, op. cit., p.83.

92. Kirk, op. cit., p.255.

theme is to emphasize the connection between procreation and immortality. Much of the imagery in the myth, for instance, is suggestive of sexuality and the ties between the act of intercourse (with its subsequent development, the birth of a child or descendant ) which occurs contemporaneously with the acquisition of the material of immortality are too obvious too miss.

Dumézil is concerned with comparative Indo-European considerations, having assumed a common filial relationship, and does not make use of comparative methods to suggest or establish typological or universal considerations. However, people like Carl Jung and Karl Kerényi have been interested in just such general or "archetypal" investigation. Jung constructs an entire theory of mythological interpretation around a very limited number of basic archetypes, based to a large extent upon his own theories concerning the workings of the mind. For instance, he describes the "trickster figure" often occurring in mythologies as a representative of counter-tendencies in the unconscious, a sort of dual-personality of inferior character, which he terms the "shadow".<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>. C.G. Jung, "On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure", in Collected Works, Vol.9, Part1,

To a certain extent, Jung's claims about mythology are justified: most systems of myths exhibit his archetypes, often to an amazing degree. He describes the mythologizing process (in a fashion not so different from that that subsequently advanced by Claude Lévi-Strauss) as an unconscious assimilation of external experience.

Primitive man is not much interested in objective explanations of the obvious, but he has an imperative need, or rather, his unconscious psyche has an irresistible urge to assimilate all outer sense experiences to inner psychic events. It is not enough for the primitive to see the sun rise and set; this external observation must at the same time be a psychic happening: the sun in its course must represent the fate of a god or hero, who, in the last analysis dwells nowhere except in the soul of man. All the mythologized processes of nature, such as summer and winter, the rainy seasons, the phases of the moon, and so forth, are in no sense allegories of these objective occurrences; rather they are symbolic expressions of the inner, unconscious drama of the psyche which becomes accessible to man's consciousness by way of projection, i.e., mirrored in events of nature. 94.

This phenomenon is understood to be "collectively subjective", i.e., it is an inner and essentially unconscious process, yet the product of an entire spiritual community. According to Jung, if the

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94. C.G. Jung, "Über den Archetypen des kollektiven Unbewussten", in Collected Works, Vol.9, (London: Routledge and Paul, 1971), p. 6-7.

course of the sun in the heavens represents the fate of a hero, then it is because the hero was first conceived in the human mind and then somehow became projected upon the natural events, not that in viewing and interpreting natural events man identified them with himself and allegorized them in human terms.

It is definitely possible to identify many of Jung's archetypes in the figures of the Norse gods, the "animus" and "anima", for instance, as personified in the doublet of fertility gods, Freyr and Freyja. The evil (sub-)nature of Loki identifies him as an "umbra" or "shadow" figure. Óðinn exhibits at once many characteristics of the trickster-figure and the traits of the wise-man or magician.

While it is true that in identifying the archetypes visible in these personages one gains an insight into the nature of the psychic conceptions which lie behind them (provided the identifications are correct), it is not enough to limit our understanding of each to its universal or archetypal significance, nor, in the same way, does it suffice to regard the myth of the mead merely as the outward manifestation or representation in mythic language of the philosophical or unconscious speculation of heathen northmen on the nature of gods and immortality.

This is especially important since the myth in this form not only represents a development which began in a primitive culture, but is itself the creation of an extremely literate and artistic civilization.

In other words, one must view the germ of the myth, of which a great deal may stem directly or indirectly from the realm of the unconscious, as a content of meaning encased in the shell of the culture in which it appears. The purpose of the modern theories of interpretation is to allow one to get behind the casing, and to obtain a better understanding of the underlying form. In this respect, no theory has proved as productive and illuminating as the "structuralist" views expounded by Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Through comparative analysis of myths from many different cultures, Levi-Strauss has concluded that the purpose of myth is to prepare a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction realized during the cognitive process which the human mind applies to raw data, a form of resolution by analytical reasoning. The question which presents itself to the person seeking to make use of this theory to interpret myths is whether Lévi-Strauss has discovered this in mythology through a legitimate and objective investigation of data or whether he has assumed

it from the beginning, and examined the data in search of support for this hypothesized order.

Lévi-Strauss' method seems to impose spurious uniformity on the material, spurious because order springs not from the encounter between investigator and data but from the categories of a closed system which cannot admit further possibilities. 95.

To even begin to answer the question posed above, and consider the validity of this criticism, one must first understand both the "method", and the "closed system" of Lévi-Strauss.

In Lévi-Strauss' writings, the basic premise is the idea of "cognitive universality", i.e., he maintains that there is an underlying similarity in the cognition process of every member of the human race. The minds of all men have the same capacity for rational thought (if we allow for a limited, primarily topical variation).

The false antinomy between logical and irrelogical mentality was surmounted at the same time. The Savage Mind is logical in the same sense and the same function as ours, though as our own is only when it is applied to knowledge of a universe in which it recognizes physical and semantic properties simultaneously. 96.

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95. K.O. Burridge, "Lévi-Strauss and Myth", in The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism, ed. Edmund Leach (London: Tavistock Publications, 1967), p.113.

96. Claude Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology (London: Penguin, 1963), p.21.

Under the heading of rational thought, Lévi-Strauss includes what he considers to be the most significant mental process, that of imposing order on the unorganized corpus of raw data which the mind receives through the senses.

... it is not comparison which supports generalization, but the other way around. If, as we believe to be the case, the unconscious activity of the mind consists in imposing forms upon content, and if these forms are fundamentally the same for all minds - ancient and modern... 97.

According to Lévi-Strauss, then, there is a universal cognitive process at work which aims to impose order on our experience; the process is carried out unconsciously (though he mentions that it may become conscious under special conditions). In the course of this ordering process numerous contradictions arise. The connection between the cognitive process and myth is that myths serve to resolve contradictions found or postulated by "logical" thinking. This, he says, is an impossibility if the contradiction actually exists in nature:

Nature is not itself contradictory.  
It can become so only in terms of some specific human activity which takes part in it; and the characteristics of the environment take on a different meaning according to the particular historical and technical form assumed in it by this or that type of activity.

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97. Claude Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology, op. cit., p. 21.

On the other hand even when raised to that human level which alone can make them intelligible man's relations with his natural environment remain objects of thought: man never perceives them passively; having reduced them to concepts he compounds them in order to arrive at a system which is never determined in advance. This mistake... of the Naturalist school was to think that natural phenomenon are what myths seek to explain when they are rather the medium through which myths try to explain facts which are themselves not a natural but a logical order. 98.

Lévi-Strauss maintains these myths have arisen from oppositions realized during the "digesting" process applied by the mind on raw data. It should, therefore, be possible to discover the essence of the myths through interpreting the specific contradictions which they resolve. What, then, does Lévi-Strauss' method produce when applied to the myth of the mead, and, conversely, can these conclusions support his contentions about myth?

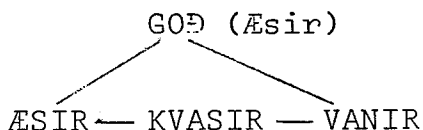
One need not look far to discover a series of oppositions. The myth commences with the antagonism between the Æsir and the Vanir. This division amongst the gods represents a basic duality and opposition in the religious structure. The Æsir are patrons of war, magic, and poetry; gods of noblemen and adventurers, while the Vanir are specialized

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98. Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Savage Mind, op.cit., p.96.

fertility gods, worshipped by farmers and peasants. Yet they are not merely in opposition to one another, but complement each other as well. Both the complementing and contradictory qualities are fused in the person of Kvasir.

This resolution takes place on a higher plane as well, as can be supported by linguistic evidence. Both Æsir and Vanir are referred to, collectively and individually as Æsir, though the reverse is never true. "Thus the distinctive feature marked member becomes submerged in the higher unity of the unmarked." 99.



There are numerous other contrasts in the story. One such instance is the meeting of Kvasir, who represents forces for good, i.e., beneficial to man, with the dwarves, who through their numerous treacheries and magical powers represent an inscrutable supernatural evil, hostile to man. The result is the creation of the mead, which symbolizes both benefit and harm on the human scene.

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99. Einar Haugen, "The Mythical Structure of the ancient Scandinavians: Some thoughts on reading Dumézil." in Festschrift Roman Jakobson (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), p. 5.

The climax of the story lies in the symbolic union of Óðinn and Gunnlöð. This has to be considered the ultimate resolution - here are two opposing races, giants and gods, united in an obviously ceremonial consummation: three nights, three sips of divine nectar. It is the final stage on the journey of the mead.

So it is possible to see evidence of a conceptual resolving process here. Through the contrast of each of the pairs another entity is formed, which is then itself opposed under the influence of a new countering or modifying force. Practically the entire narrative structure could be represented as a succession of opposing, often polar, forces. Schematically, it would look something like Fig. 1. (see following page).

It is this constant restructuring of both the physical nature of poetry and even of Óðinn himself as the guardian of it, that is the most significant feature of the whole story. This structure revealed here parallels the formation of kennings. For what is a kenning but a depiction of metamorphosis through contrast?

A kenning is always made up of two elements - a prop word and a definer (there may be more than one); the prop word will not yield the meaning desired except when characterized

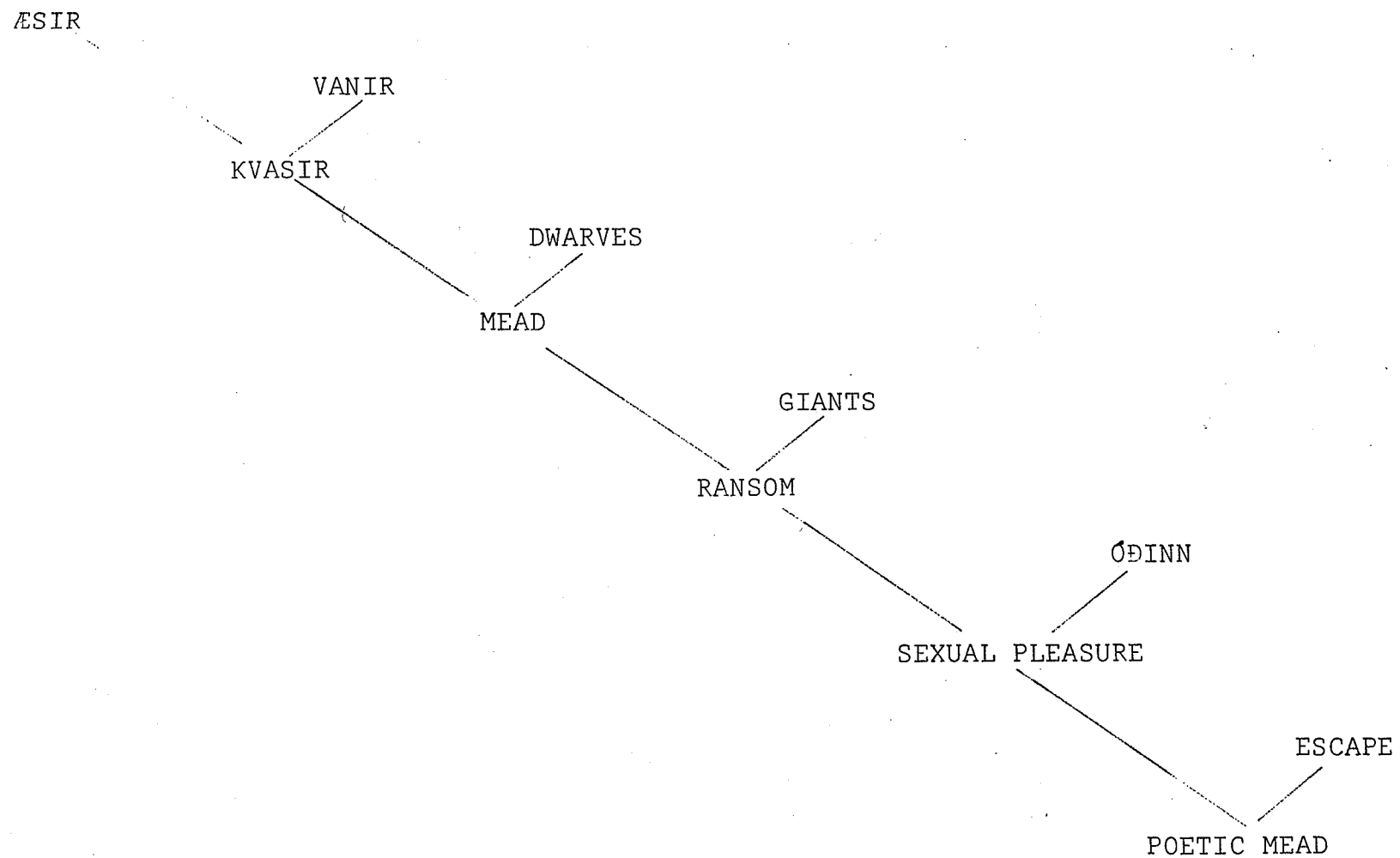


Fig. 1.

by the definer. 1.

Just as in the myth the path from one point to another is often devious and obscure (e.g. it is the wages of a thrall which becomes the immortal drink of the gods), so in verse may the end result become completely different from the starting point.

However, Lévi-Strauss' method does not stop at merely recognizing and analyzing oppositions - the contrasts must fit into a more comprehensive structural system. In "The Structural Study of Myth" 2, he insists that there is an underlying antinomy present in myth:

On the one hand it would seem that in the course of a myth anything is likely to happen. There is no logic, no continuity... But this apparent arbitrariness is belied by the astounding similarity between myths collected in widely differing regions. 3.

This apparent paradox he explains with an analogy to a similar situation in terms of language. Language exhibits the same contradictions. In a given language certain sequences of sounds are

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1. Stefán Einarsson, op. cit., p. 53.

2. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth", in Structural Anthropology, op. cit.,

3. *ibid*, p. 208.

associated with certain meanings while these same sounds may also be present in other languages but with totally different meanings. The key to understanding both problems, therefore, is the realization that it is the combination of the individual elements which is significant.

If there is a meaning to be found in mythology, this cannot reside in the isolated elements which enter into the composition of a myth, but only in the way these elements are combined. 4.

The method which Lévi-Strauss uses to investigate the structural make-up of a myth consists of analyzing the myth and dividing it into single events, then organizing these into what he terms "relations". Here follows a depiction of his method applied to the myth of the mead (Fig. 2.). The diachronic sequence of events proceeds from left to right, top to bottom: 5.

Lévi-Strauss then continues, "All the relations belonging to the same column exhibit one common feature which it is our task to discover." 6.

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<sup>4</sup>·Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth", op. cit., p. 220.

<sup>5</sup>·ibid, esp. the analysis of the Oedipus myth.

<sup>6</sup>·ibid, p. 228.

## Figure 2

1	2	3	4
Spittle truce- symbol of Æsir and Vanir			
Kvasir created from spittle	Kvasir killed		
Mead created from Kvasir		three vessels	
	Gillingr killed		
	Gillingr's wife killed		
	Suttungr sets the dwarves on skerry		
Mead dwarves' ransom			
	Óðinn kills nine thralls		enters fortress as snake
		three nights with Gunnlöð	
		three drinks of mead	
			Flys away in eagle-form
			Suttungr chases him in bird-form
Óðinn regurgitates mead to become drink of gods			

The common feature of the first column is the presence of a life-force, represented first by the spittle which later becomes the mead. For instance, in the beginning of the myth it is the symbol of the end of hostilities and killing between the Æsir and the Vanir and the return of life. At another point the dwarves ransom their lives with the mead. This life force is then opposed by the forces of death represented by the second column. Here are all the killings (or threats of killings) which appear in the story.

The obvious link between the events of the third column is the number three, the dominant number in Northern mythology. Important events are often emphasized by some form of triplication, e.g. Skírnir's thrice repeated enchantment of Gerðr. The significance of this bundle of relations is to emphasize the ritual, magic, and religious side of man's existence, his spiritual existence. This, accordingly, is countered by the fourth column, where protagonists assume animal shapes.

We are then left with two oppositions: life-death, spiritual- animal. Since the myth concludes with a victory in the first column, one might conclude that this myth represents the triumph of spiritual immortality over physical mortality.

It has been argued that Lévi-Strauss' method requires a selective analysis, where one must pick out the points which fit into the structure, leaving aberrations out, or even bend the tale to accommodate structural analysis. This can be a problem, yet Lévi-Strauss emphasises the need to be conscious of the context when analysing a myth, and to examine and interpret from the prospect of the original material. It is also undeniably true that there are myths which do not lend themselves readily to structural analysis.

Lévi-Strauss' own extremely ingenious mind is able to detect similarities of structure embedded in the most unlikely contrasted materials. Once he has demonstrated the existence of these structures, it is undeniable that the structures are there. But is it equally undeniable that the structures are significant? 7.

An answer, in part, to these criticisms, is provided by the following quotation:

It is easy to find a superficial analogy which really expresses nothing. But to discover some essential feature hidden beneath a surface of external differences and to form on this basis a new successful theory, is a typical example of the achievement of a successful theory by means of a deep and fortunate analogy. 8.

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7. Edmund Leach, The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism, op. cit. p. 778.

8. Albert Einstein, The Evolution of Physics (New York, 1938), p. 291.

In Snorri's version of the myth of the mead there seems to be a very significant relationship on the level of structural investigation between the construction of the story and its substance, between form and content. This myth demonstrates that there do exist formal patterns in myth which operate through the narrative on a semantic level. In addition, the insights which have been realized in the course of examining this myth are derived through assuming a structuralist view - á la Lévi-Strauss.

The varying types of interpretations which have been discussed show the wide range of attempts to derive the essence of mythology. In some cases, i.e., Dumézil, Lévi-Strauss, the interpretation becomes systematic, almost formulaic. It develops its own independent structure which can be applied extensively, though not indiscriminately, to a large number of myths of many different types. Some interpretations (e.g. Naturalists) stress special objects or motives, while others examine the sources of expression and forms of consciousness which generate myths (e.g. Cassirer, Lévy-Bruhl). Are the myths tautegorical? or allegorical? Do they arise out of a need for identity

with the environment or a wish to control?

These are the questions the specialists argue over and speculate about, seemingly without end, for many of the problems they are struggling with have no real solutions. At most we can agree that myth is a peculiarly human mode of expression which fulfills a uniquely human need:

To the factual world which surrounds and dominates it the spirit opposes an independent image world of its own - it confronts the force of the "impression" with an active force - "expression". 9.

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9.

Cassirer, op.cit., p.25.

V. If it is conceivable that the conceptions of death and immortality were a natural and integral part of religion, as might be reinforced by our discussion of the myth of the mead, one may assume that they have a definite significance for the understanding of Germanic mythology. It follows that upon examining the early literature of this area dealing with similar subjects, one should find evidence to support the claims which have previously been made about religious thought.

However, many critical authorities reject the myths of Snorra-Edda as complete rationalizations of tradition; they maintain that Snorri has made use of the old materials too freely:

Juist een mythencomplex, als dat der skaldenmede, waarin naar het schijnt parallelle tradities zijn verwerkt, jonge stoffen zijn toegevegd, andere verhalen ter afronding zijn opgenomen, bewijst ons, hoe dere jongere mythenkenners te werk zijn gegaan. 10.

In an effort to determine whether statements like this one are justified, one can examine some of the references made to the myth of the mead to be found in the skaldic and eddic poetry, and in the sagas as well, though the latter are of a somewhat later

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10. Jan de Vries, Die Skaldenkenningen met mythologische inhoud (Haarlem: H.D. Tjeenk, Willink & Zoon, 1934), p.35.

origin.

It is highly probable that one of the sources used by Snorri was the text of Hávamál. A goodly portion of the myth as he tells it is mentioned in no other sources in the poetry that we know of. The following are the pertinent strophes: 11.

Óminnishegri heitir,  
sás of öldrum þrumir,  
hann stelr geði guma;  
þess fogs fjöðrum  
ek fjötraðr vask  
í garði Gunnlaðar.

Ölr ek varð,  
varð ofrölvi,  
at ens fróða Fjalars;  
því es öldr bazt,  
at aptr of heimtí  
hverr sitt geð gumi.

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Enn aldna jötun sóttak,  
nú emk aptr of kominn;  
fátt gat þegjandi þar;  
mörgum orðum  
mæltak í minn frama  
í Suttungs söllum.

Gunnlöð mér of gaf  
gollnum stóli á  
drykk ens dýra mjaðar;  
ill iðgjöld  
létk hana eptir hafa  
síns ens heila hugar.  
(síns ens svára sefa).

Rata munn  
létumk rúms of fáa  
ok of grjót gnaga;  
yfir ok undir  
stóðumk jötna vegir,  
svá hættak höfði til.

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11. All these quotes are from the edition of Sæmundar Edda by Finnur Jónsson, 1905.

Vel keypts hlutar  
 hefk vel notit;  
 fás es fróðum vant;  
 Óðrerir  
 es nú upp kominn  
 á alda vé jaðars.

Ifi es mér á,  
 at værak enn kominn  
 jötna görðum ór,  
 ef Gunnlaðar né nytak,  
 ennar góðu konu,  
 es lögðumk arm yfir.

Ens hindra dags  
 gengu hrímbursar  
 Háva ráðs at fregna  
 (Háva höllu í),  
 at Bölverki spurðu,  
 ef væri með böndum kominn  
 eða hefði hánur Suttungr of sóit.

Baugeið Óðinn  
 hygg ek at unnit hafi,  
 hvat skal hans tryggðum trúá?  
 Suttung svikvinn  
 hann lét sumbli frá  
 ok grætta Gunnlöðu.

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... ok ek drykk of gat  
 ens dýra mjaðar  
 ausinn Óðreri.

The first two verses are a brief reference  
 to the mead which follows a cautionary verse on the  
 effects of excess drinking,

þvíat færa veit,  
 es fleira drekkur,  
 síns til geðs gumi.

The bird of drunkenness is personified as "Óminnishegri"  
 and Óðinn speaks of himself as "drunken" in the hall  
 of Gunnlöð. He also mentions that "þess fugls  
 fjöðrum / ek fjötraðr vask." So far everything

agrees with Snorri's description, even to the transformation of Óðinn into bird form. However, the line, "at ens fróða Fjalars" is the only instance where the father of Gunnlöð is referred to as Fjalarr. It is possible that the name Fjalarr is intended here as a general term for giant.

The second set of seven verses is taken from sections of Hávamál describing the various exploits of Óðinn. Again, all the main details agree - "Gunnlöð mér of gaf ... drykk ens dýra mjaðar"; the mention of Rati; "Óðrerir es nú kominn / á alda vé jaðars"; the use of the name Bölverkr. The verses from Hávamál, however, support only a part of the story. Evidence for the other sections comes primarily from kennings in skaldic poetry, reinforcing various incidents, kennings like "Kvasis dreyri" / 122, "Gillings gjöld" / 68, "Dvalins veigar" / 556, and "full Hrafnásar" / 319. 12.

There is an interesting reference to be found in Alvíssmál:

Seg mér þat Alvíss,  
Öll of rök fira  
vörumk dvergr að vitir,  
hvé þat öl heitir,  
es drekka alda synir,  
heimi hverjum í?

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12. The number following the kenning represents pagination in Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning, ed. Finnur Jónsson, (København: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1912).

Öl heitir með mönnum,  
 en með ásum bjórr,  
 kalla veig vanir,  
 hreinalög jötnar,  
 en í helju mjöð,  
 kalla sumbl Suttungs synir. 13.

There was no great distinction made between various sorts of alcoholic beverages. It was the potential for intoxication that mattered. 14. This means that one can assume that the various references made in the Edda to "bjórr", "öl", or "mjöðr" to be much more closely related than they appear to be when translated into our own culture.

The references made to alcoholic beverages in the Edda generally lend support to the theory that intoxicating drink was held in special regard by heathen northern peoples. In *Grimnismál*, in the descriptions of Valhöll, it is said that Óðinn lives on wine alone. There is also a description of the goat Heiðrún:

Heiðrún heitir (geit),  
 es stendr höllu á  
 ok bítr af Láraðs limum,  
 skapker fylla  
 hon skal ens skíra mjaðar,  
 knáat sú veig vanask. 15.

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13. "Alvíssmál", in *Sæmundar-Edda*, op. cit., p.168.

14. Dumézil makes a similar point while discussing Greek versions of the myth, "Les Grecs ont nommé toute boisson fermentée".

15. "Grimnismál", in *Sæmundar-Edda*, op. cit., p. 79.

Mention is also made of this goat in "Hyndluljóð", where she is described as "running after billy-goats",

... hleypr þú Óðs vina  
úti á nóttum,  
sem með höfrum  
Heiðrún fari. 16.

The characterization of this rather promiscuous beast (to whom Freyja is likened) as providing the mead for the warriors in Valhöll links the mead with ideas of fertility or life-giving potions. 17.

In "Lokasenna" we are told of an ale feast, "Ægir, er, öðru nafni hét Gymir, hann hafði búið ásum öl, þá er hann hafði fengit ketil inn mikla..." Sjálfst barst þar öl." 18. The reference to Ægir, god of the sea, as the brewer of ale, is echoed in Dumézil's description of "un genie (marin), possesseur de la Cuve". 19. Note, as well, that the vessel is described as "ketill inn mikli", as if there were a definite kettle in mind. In the myth

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16. "Hyndluljóð", in Sæmundar-Edda, op.cit., p.177.

17. In addition the goat is described as eating from "Láraðs limur". The tree Láraðr may possibly be another name for the evergreen world-tree, Yggdrasill.

18. "Lokasenna", in Sæmundar-Edda, op. cit., p.120.

19. Georges Dumézil, "Le Festin d'Immortalité", op. cit., p.225.

too, the mead comes into contact with water, as part of a string of symbolic representation of various elements. In the Hindu versions, it is the ocean which is churned to produce the mead.

When Loki enters the hall of Ægir in "Lokasenna", he says:

Þyrstr ek kom  
þessar hallar til  
Loptr of langan veg,  
ásu at biðja,  
at mér einn gefi  
mæran drykk mjaðar. 20.

This verse of course provides further evidence of the lack of distinction made between "öl", "mjöðr", etc. It also shows that this was not simply any ordinary drink which was being consumed here (mæran drykk mjaðar) but the mead of the Æsir, which was part of a ritual drinking celebration of the gods.

The suggestion has been made by some that the attachment of myths to narratives, or the borrowing of material from myth, provides the work in question with a "cosmic scope", or indicates a new dimension, that of divine provenance, at work here. Thus the use of mythological motives has value as a rhetorical device. This is most often visible in later works such as the Family Sagas, although there is evidence of such usage to be found even in the Eddic poems. The closing verses of "Atlakviða",

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20. "Lokasenna" in Sæmundar-Edda, op.cit., p.122.

after Guðrún has wreaked her revenge, contain in all likelihood an allusion to the final doom of the gods:

In this way limitations of appeal vanish and the event itself acquires cosmic scope...using the mythical idea of Ragnarök to convey the magnitude and finality of Guðrún's revenge. 21.

The mythological references lend the same sort of impressiveness to Egil's saga.

The Egil's saga is the biography of a poet whose skill in the poetic art is, among other things, attested to by his use of kennings and it is of interest that many of Egill's Kennings denote the art of poetry itself. Egill's verse is, indeed, very firmly rooted in Snorra-Edda's story about Óðinn's conquest of the poetic mead. 22.

What is more, Egil's saga is a celebration of immortality. It features the fusion of the characteristics of the divine poet and the poetic god into one and the same figure - if poetry is the immortal drink of Óðinn it is the immortal soul of Egill.

The saga begins, as does the myth, without the presence of the principal protagonist. However, with the appearance of Egill into the story the plot soon develops a number of interesting parallels to the myth of the mead. The most obvious of these

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21. Bessason, op. cit., p.2.

22. *ibid*, p.6.

is the use, in both cases, of the precious drink as a ransom: in the case of the dwarves, they offer the mead to the giant who has them at his mercy (they killed his father) in exchange for their lives,

Beir biðja Suttung sér lífs-  
griða ok bjóða honum til  
sættar í föðurgjöld mjöðinn  
dýra, ok þat verður at sætt  
með þeim. (114)

In Egill's case, he offers his mead of poetry to the king who has him at his mercy (he killed his son) in return for his life. In this instance the title, "Höfuðlausn" (head-ransom) is particularly apt, in that it is by using his mental skill to compose the twenty verses, he saves his head. <sup>23</sup>. The poem is with a definite feeling of tension - Egill and King Eiríkr are mortal enemies, and here is the skáld to compose a "lófdrápa" (panegyric) about his hated opponent which must be good enough to save his life.

Höfuðlausn is studded with kennings which refer to the myth of the mead. Note especially that Egill begins the poem by comparing his journey westward to the court of the king with the poem with

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<sup>23</sup>. There is admittedly a certain amount of discussion regarding the questionable authenticity of the "Höfuðlausn" as preserved in Egils saga (see Jón Helgason, "Höfuðlausnarhjal", in Einarsbók (Reykjavík: 1969), pp. 156-176). However the saga itself testifies to the existence of a Höfuðlausn.

Óinn's journey carrying the poetic mead to the home of the gods:

Vestr fórk of ver,  
en ek Viðris ber  
munstrandar mar, 24.

Jónas Kristjánsson explains the kenning thusly:

Viðrir er heiti Óðins, munströnd  
er brjóst (strönd hugans), en mar  
er sjór. Viðris munstrandar mar  
er þá brjóstsjór Óðins, skálda-  
mjöðurinn, sem Óðinn flutti í  
sjálfum sér til Ásgarðs, sem segir  
í Snorra-Eddu; hér er kenning  
skáldadrykkjarins látin tákna  
kvæðið sjálft, sem Egill flytur  
konungi. 25.

The verse in Höfuðlausn is deceptively simple; all the imagery is concerned with ships and the sea (e.g. vestr of ver, munstrandar mar, eik á flot, mæðar hlut, míns knarrar ). The transportation of "skáldskapur" is treated like any shipment of goods (c.f. kenning "farmr Óðins"). The poem continues with carefully crafted, although not very involved, kennings. In the fourth verse, for example, the sounds of battle are described, however there is no mention of the king's brave conduct, only in the stef are we told:

orðstír of gat  
Eiríkr at þat 26.

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24. Egils saga, Sigurður Nordal gaf út (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska Fornritafélag, 1933), p. 185.

25. Jónas Kristjánsson, Kvæðakver Egils Skallagrímssonar (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1964), p. 66.

26. Egils saga, op. cit., p. 187.

Prominent images are wolves and carrion-birds, the "hræðýr", companions of Óðinn.

Full of depictions of battle, of "sound and fury", the poem only loosely identifies the king with this, and ends with Egill's usual humble statement regarding his own skill at verse-making.

Perhaps the final measure of Egill's victory over King Eiríkr can best be realized by examining Höfuðlausn, for it tells us but little of the greatness of the king and much of the skill of the poet.

It cannot be merely by accident that the kennings of the poem which refer to myth deal almost exclusively with the myth of the mead, and that Óðinn is mentioned so often. It must be because Egill, as the skáld and possessor of this immortal mead of poetry, is always conscious of his role as Óðinn in this situation, always aware that he is immortalizing the king. "Heroic poetry, let us remember, ensured the kind of "orðstírr" which the Hávamál equates with immortality". 27. As a result of the encounter, Egill is granted "grið", not a permanent peace settlement, "En ek gef þér nú höfuð þitt at sinni;" 28.

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27. Bessason, op. cit., p. 8.

28. Egils saga, op. cit., p. 193.

Somewhat later in the saga Egill loses two of his sons, Gunnarr and Böðvarr. After the drowning of Böðvarr, Egill composes the poem "Sonatorrek", looking out over the sea where he drowned. <sup>29</sup>. We can see the highest point in Egill's career in the very poignant expression of his sorrows in the poem. At the end of the poem, when he has recovered his balance somewhat, he states his gift of "skáldskapur" expressly to have come from Óðinn:

Gofumk íprótt  
ulfs of bági  
vígi vanr  
vammi firrða  
ok þat geð,  
es ek gerða mér  
vísa fjandr  
af vélondum. <sup>30</sup>.

Egill also speaks of poetry as "unblemished skill". He feels that such a supreme divine gift is more than sufficient exchange for the loss of kinsmen's lives as he has received the power to make them immortal.

An incident occurring towards the end of the saga also throws an interesting side-light on Egill and perhaps reveals the saga-author's intent to connect him with Óðinn. especially in his aspect as

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<sup>29</sup>. There may be a slight echo here of the lament of the giant's wife as she stares out at the spot where her husband drowned.

<sup>30</sup>. Egils saga, op. cit., p.256.

"Bölverkr". In the myth of the mead Óðinn kills nine thralls when he casts a bone into the air over their heads. The thralls, each desirous of acquiring this tool, end by killing each other off.

(hann) kastaði heininni í loft  
upp; en er allir vildu henda,  
þá skiptusk þeir svá við, at  
hverr brá ljánum á háls öðrum. (115)

Egill on the other hand plans to deliberately create an uproar at the Alþing by throwing silver up over the heads of the crowd:

Ætla ek at láta bera kisturnar  
til Lögbergs, þá er þar er fjölmennast;  
siðan ætla ek at sá silfrinu,  
ok þykki mér undarligt, ef allir skipta vel sín á milli;  
ætla, ek at þar myndi vera þá hrundningar  
eða pústrar, eða þærisk at um siðir,  
at allr þingheimrinn berðisk. 31.

Yet another use of this same motif occurs in Snorra-Edda, in the description of the battle between Hrólfr Kraki and King Aðils of Sweden. Here Hrólfr "sows" gold on the plains of Fyri, wreaking havoc among the enemy host, and expressing his utter disdain for both them and their values.

Þá tók Hrólfr kraki hægri hendi  
gullit ofan í hornit ok sori alt um götuna...  
þá mælti hann: "svínbeygt hefi ek nú þann er ríkastr er með Svíum". (200)

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31. Egils saga, op. cit., p. 296-7.

Both these instances reinforce the presentation of the characters Egill and Hrólfr as true heroes in the tradition of the strife-promoting Óðinn.

The saga concludes with the episode where the skull of Egill is rediscovered, having lain buried in consecrated ground. Its exceptional strength and state of preservation can be seen as a symbol of the literary continuity of the traditions from Iceland's heroic and heathen period, which survived despite the very powerful influence of the Christian church.

VI. In the previous sections I have attempted to deal with the myth of the mead primarily as a mythological document, and to investigate some of its symbolic and explicative meanings, in an effort to understand better the position of this myth in its cultural setting.

Standard views of myth are generally vague, often implying no more than a traditional story. In this case, however, one is dealing with much more; myths, though they be created by humans and centre on concerns peculiar to humans, often focus on oppositions either implicit or explicit between instincts and desires of a conscious level portrayed against the background of an intransigent, often harsh reality - the natural environment. As Kirk puts it, they attempt to "elicit conclusions about natural and human fertility, nature and culture, life and death, by the juxtaposition of separate mythical episodes". 32.

The myth of the mead is no exception to this statement. It is typically composed of a series of episodes, each containing different motifs, revealing their ultimate significance through the underlying structure and content of the entire story.

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32. Kirk, op. cit., p. 252.

In the above treatment of the myth both structure and details have been investigated, especially with regard to the manner in which they affect the central theme of this paper, the question of immortality. The main conclusion to be drawn from the discussion, and which is apparently supported by the evidence both comparative and deductive presented in the various sections of this thesis, is that the mead, as described by Snorri, does actually represent a drink of immortality.

This conclusion is based on five main points. First there is the close resemblance between the myth of the mead and the myth of the rape of Iðunn. Turville-Petre emphasizes the fertility aspects of the Iðunn myth and of similar Irish traditions. He refers to the common occurrence of numbers of apples in graves, and the description of the goddess Iðunn, together with Freyja, as the most erotic of goddesses. 33. The parallels between the two stories have already been discussed.

The second and central point is the conception of the drink in the form of poetry, which then becomes the real source of immortality and the connecting point between myth and ritual. The poetic celebration of immortality became a northern tradi-

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33. Turville-Petre, op. cit., p. 186.

tion; court poets from England to Iceland commemorated their liegelords with verse. In Egils saga, especially in Höfuðlausn, can be seen a consciousness of this purpose in the mind of the poet (and, of course, of the saga-author). This is the northern form of intoxication with immortality.

Third, this theory can be supported with other kinds of evidence from Old Icelandic literature, in the sagas, both "Konungasögur" and "Íslendingasögur", in the poetry, both Eddic and Skaldic. Nowhere do even very early or fragmentary sources present strongly conflicting versions of this myth. All these materials can prove helpful in determining a more general view of this drink in the world of the gods.

Were this not enough, there is the evidence from other Indo-European mythologies regarding the "cup of immortality", stretching from India to Greece to Ireland. The extremely high proportion of concurring details rules out almost any possibility of coincidence; we have here a common tradition surviving in its derivative forms.

Lastly, there is the evidence presented by structural analysis of the opposition of mortal-animal to immortal-spiritual.

In itself, the existence of a myth dealing with immortality and its rather conservative state of preservation is not surprising, nor is the fact that similar myths have survived with their most essential details readily recognizable in most societies which we can say to have developed from an Indo-European ancestor. Myths treating the subject of immortality rate high on the priorities list of any ideology,<sup>34</sup> as Malinowski confirms from his study of modern "primitive" religion:

Myth warranting the belief in immortality, in eternal youth, in life beyond the grave, is not an intellectual reaction upon a puzzle, but an explicit act of faith born from the innermost instinctive and emotional reaction to the most formidable and haunting idea. 34.

Jan de Vries, one of the foremost authorities of our time on northern mythology, cautions that one cannot even begin to consider this intricate and involved religious system in a vacuum, and that it must be viewed as a partial offshoot of a more extensive system. In Snorra-Edda the myth has two differing contexts. Viewed one way, it is an example of religious "legomenon", a fragment of an enormous and varied mythological scene which could be said at one time to have reached from India to Greenland.

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<sup>34</sup>. Bronislaw Malinowski, Myth in Primitive Psychology (London: 1926), p. 43.

At the same time, however, this myth is a literary work, again a single branch on the rapidly developing tree of Old Icelandic literature, and an important member of this body.

There is a great deal more than the concept of tripartite functionalism to be gained from the study of Norse mythology as a sub-grouping under Indo-European myth. Whether one deals with Greek, Roman, Iranian, or Indian myth (naturally, allowing for variations in culture, sources, etc.) the more and varied the myths one encounters, the more one finds reiteration and reinforcement of the same basic themes.

One such underlying theme could possibly be called "dualism on a grand scale". It is the tension (Lévi-Strauss: opposition) which obtains between variety and pattern: the resolving of chaos into order, and contrariwise, the dissolution of that order back into chaos. Although some would represent this tension as a universal cognitive process, Indo-European mythologies all seem to deal with it in a remarkably similar way, although the degree of contrast may vary. In the extreme dualism of Zoroastrianism, for instance, one cannot avoid the striking opposition of dark and light forces, while that same contrast is manifested with equal intensity, yet perhaps more subtly, in *Völuspá*. The same struggle

between Appolonian and Dionysian currents can be seen in Greek mythology. 35.

The myth of the creation of the mead obviously exhibits both of these conflicting tendencies. It begins with the resolution of the chaos of war into order and wisdom, personified in Kvasir. He is then destroyed, or, more correctly, "rearranged", recreated in another form; the disintegration into various (primal) elements which appears to signify death is in fact the first step of the life-transformation. As the story progresses, we alternate from creation to destruction. Nothing can be created "ex nihilo" but things are constantly re-ordered, i.e., put in a proper, if only temporary, place. This tension of living creatures in conflict, of powers of evil rising up against powers of good demonstrates the essential qualities of the myth, the "Weltanschauung" that only when death exists to threaten life can life realize its full value.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the symbolic representation of a life-force as a drink occurs in the Middle East, around 70 A.D.:

And he took a cup and when he  
had given thanks he gave it to

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35. One might also include Freud's discussion of Eros and Thanatos.

them, saying, "Drink of it, all  
of you; for this is my blood of  
the covenant, which is poured  
out for many for the forgiveness  
of sins and everlasting life. 36.

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<sup>36</sup>. Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, Matthew  
26: 28.

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