

# Prophecy of the Seeress

## Poetic Edda

*Trans. Irmin Vinson*

*Völuspa*, which opens the Old Norse *Poetic Edda*, was likely composed in Iceland shortly before AD 1000 during a period of transition when Christianity was replacing the traditional beliefs of the North. The poem's anonymous author seems to have conceived *Völuspa* as a literary response to the decline of the old religion, a reassertion of the old gods in the face of their imminent demise as objects of living worship. *Völuspa*'s allusive and often elliptical style implies the poet's expectation that his audience would be intimately familiar with the tales and cosmology of Northern paganism.

Two complete versions of *Völuspa* are extant: The best is in the Codex Regius, which dates to the thirteenth century, and there is another, with some significant variations and four additional strophes, in the Hauksbok manuscript. Extensive quotations also appear in the *Gylfaginning* ("The Deluding of Gylfi") of the Icelandic antiquarian Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241). The translation below is based on Neckel and Kuhn's standard edition of the *Edda* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1983).

In the poem's dramatic context (see sts. 28-29) Odin has just questioned the Seeress (a *völva*, lit. "wand-bearer," a woman who carries a magical staff) about the past and especially the future, and *Völuspa* (the Prophecy or Soothsaying of the *Völva*) is her spoken reply, directed to both gods ("the hallowed kindred") and mankind ("Heimdall's children").



### Strophe 1

Silence I bid of all the hallowed kindred  
And high and low of Heimdall's children:  
At your will, Valfather, I shall relate  
Ancient tales of the world, the oldest I remember.

*Silence I bid*: The Seeress' call for silence suggests that she is acting in a priestly capacity. Tacitus reports that public assemblies among the Germans were presided over by priests, who called for silence at the outset: "When the assembled crowd thinks fit, they take their seats fully

armed. Silence is then commanded by the priests, who on such occasions have power to enforce obedience" (*Germania* 11). Silence during the assembly is thus a religious obligation.

*Heimdall*: watchman of the gods who stands guard at the foot of Bifrost, the flaming rainbow-bridge between Asgard and Midgard, heaven and earth respectively. Himinbjorg, his hall, is beside Bifrost, so that he can guard the bridge against giants. With his horn Gjall, Heimdall will sound the alarm that alerts the gods at the beginning of Ragnarok (str. 46), but in the interim the Gjallarhorn serves as a drinking horn in Mimir's Well (str. 27). Although Heimdall is one of Odin's sons, he is here called the ancestor of humanity ("Heimdall's children"), perhaps ancestor of all the other gods as well. He was mysteriously born of nine sisters at the edge of the world, and he is the "whitest of the gods" and "knows well the future" (*Gylf* [= *Gylfaginning*] 27; *Hyndluliod* 35; *Thrymskvida* 15). Heimdall was born at the beginning (*i ardaga*), and in *Rigsthula* he appears as the literal progenitor of both mankind and the human social order and is identified by the Irish name for king (*Rigr*). All of this suggests an earlier role as a primordial god. Cf. str. 65 below.

*Valfather*: Odin as "father of the slain." Old Norse (ON) *valr* = "slaughter, corpses, those slain in battle," cognate with Old English (OE) *wæl*. "[Odin] is called 'Valfather' because all who fall in battle are his adopted sons; he assigns them places in Valhalla ['Hall of the Slain'] ... and they are then called Einherjar" (*Gylf* 20). (Elsewhere we learn that Freyja receives half of the slain [*Grimnismal* 14], though *Egil's Saga* 78 implies that she receives women.) Since *Völuspa* is addressed to both gods and men, we should perhaps visualize the gods and the Einherjar assembled together in Odin's hall as they await the Seeress' inspired predictions.

## Strophe 2

I remember giants from earliest times,  
They who reared me long ago;  
Nine worlds I remember, nine great abodes,  
Mighty World-Tree deep below the earth.

*giants ... reared me long ago*: i.e. the Seeress is immensely old, her direct knowledge of the cosmos going back almost to its beginning, far back to the era of the primeval giants who raised her, well before the creation of mankind. She is clearly not a mere "witch" or "wise woman" in the normal sense of the terms.

*nine worlds ... nine great abodes*: The nine worlds of Norse mythology,

although they are never fully listed, are Midgard, Asgard, Vanaheim, Jotunheim, Niflheim, Muspellsheim, Alfheim, Svartalfheim, and Utgard. Hel (str. 38) and Gimli (str. 64) could also be included, though the former is often synonymous with Niflheim ("Mist-World"). But these *nine worlds ... nine great abodes* ("nine roots" in the inferior *Hauksbok* recension) are parts of the World-Tree as it reaches beneath the earth, and they existed before the creation of most of the Norse cosmos. They must be nine locations within the underworld -- Niflheim, the land of the dead -- which the Völva has clearly visited and in which, apparently, she now lives (str. 66). Elsewhere the wise giant Vafthrudnir explains that he gained his occult knowledge from visits to the "nine worlds" of Niflheim: "I have traveled through nine worlds down to the Misty Hel [Niflhel]; there men die from Hel" (*Vafthrudnismal* 43). The topography of the Norse afterlife is vague, but the underworld, which existed long before the creation of the earth (*Gylf* 4), seems to contain a series of large rooms or worlds, the deepest and darkest being the ninth: "Evil men go to Hel and thence down to the Misty Hel; that is down in the ninth world" (*Gylf* 3). Passing from Hel to Misty Hel is like a second death, but it appears that the experience also confers special wisdom upon anyone who returns.

*World-Tree*: Yggdrasil, the cosmic ash-tree or pillar whose upper branches reach into the sky and whose roots, nourished by sacred wells, extend deep into the earth. "The Ash is greatest of all trees and best: its limbs spread out over all the world and stand above heaven. Three roots of the tree uphold it and stand exceeding broad: one is among the Aesir; another among the Frost-Giants ... and the third stands over Niflheim" (*Gylf* 15; cf. *Grimnismal* 31). Odin, a magician king, acquired the runes by a ritual self-sacrifice -- "myself to myself" -- on Yggdrasil (*Havamal* 138-141). Thus Yggdrasil = "Odin's horse" because Ygg (= Odin) hung there, as if riding (*drasill* = horse) on a gallows-tree. Around 1070 Adam of Bremen, in his account of the Swedish pagan temple at Uppsala, described a tall evergreen with a fountain or well at its foot, to which worshippers brought offerings. This sacred tree clearly served as a ceremonial counterpart to the World-Tree, the *axis mundi* of Northern religion. Trees were revered in Germanic paganism, and sacred groves were regular centers of worship. Christian missionaries often cut down sacred trees as part of their effort to convert the heathen (e.g. Donar's Oak in Hessen, felled in 725 by St. Boniface.)

### Strophe 3

Years ago, when Ymir lived,

There was no sand, no sea, no cold waves;  
Earth was not, nor heaven above,  
But only a yawning gap, and nowhere grass.

*Ymir*: autochthonous frost-giant, probably hermaphrodite (cf. *Vafthrudnismal* 33). All giants are descended from Ymir. The name Ymir, which can be etymologized as "Twin," links him with other Indo-European (IE) primal twin figures, notably Germanic Tuisto and Vedic Yama. (The latter was the first man to die and thus became the ruler of the realm of the dead, where he presides over an Indo-Aryan paradise together with his twin sister, Yami. Their brother is Manu ["Man"], first father of humanity; *manava* or "descended from Manu" = human.)

*yawning gap*: Ginnungagap, the gaping abyss that stretched between the land of ice and darkness in the north (Niflheim) and the land of fire in the south (Muspelsheim). Ymir, who arose from melted ice in Ginnungagap, was thus formed from a union of opposites. Hesiod's account of creation also begins with a cosmic void, Gk. *chaos*, a vast dark space or chasm between heaven and earth (*Theogony* 116).

#### Strophe 4

Until Burr's sons raised the lands,  
Shaped magnificent Midgard.  
Sun shone from the south on halls of stone;  
On the ground then grew green herbs.

*Burr's sons*: namely Odin, Vili and Ve. Their mother is Bestla, daughter of the giant Bolthorn. Buri, Burr's father and the progenitor of the gods, was licked out of the primeval frost by the cow Audhumla, who also nurtured Ymir in his infancy (*Gylf* 6).

*raised the lands*: Odin and his brothers kill Ymir and drag his body across Ginnungagap, thus "rais[ing] the lands" and shaping the world. Ymir's flesh becomes land, his blood fills the abyss and becomes seas, his bones become mountains, and his skull becomes the sky (*Grimnismal* 40-41; *Vafthrudnismal* 21). The creation of the world through the killing and dismemberment of a primal anthropomorphic figure, with the victim's body furnishing the material for creation, reflects an ancient Aryan creation myth. In *Rig Veda* 10.90, the famous *Parusasukta* ("Hymn of Man"), the Vedic gods dismember the giant Parusa (sometimes identified with the creator god Prajapati), his eyes becoming the sun, his head the sky, his breath the wind, and so forth.

*Midgard*: middle-earth, formed from Ymir's eyelashes. Midgard is the center of the earth where men live, located between Niflheim and

Muspellsheim. It is also often simply the world as a whole. Originally Midgard was likely thought of as a wall or fence enclosing mankind's living space from the hostile, non-human world beyond.

*Sun shone ... on halls of stone:* The sun warms and vivifies the stony earth. In this we can perhaps glimpse a reflection of the oldest Aryan creation myth -- the marriage of Sky and Earth (Dyau and Prithivi in the *Rig Veda*).

*green herbs:* lit. "green leeks," here a synecdoche for luxuriant verdure, contrasting with the stark absence of vegetation ("nowhere grass") in the preceding strophe. Leeks had magical properties in Norse religion. The *l*-rune can be interpreted as *laukaz*, leek.

### Strophe 5

Sun turned from the south together with Moon  
Until her right arm rested over heaven's rim.  
Sun knew not where her own hall was;  
The stars knew not their own places;  
Moon knew not his own power.

*her right arm rested over heaven's rim:* so that she could turn the sky, thereby setting time in motion. The gods will assemble to demarcate the times (Night's children) in the next strophe.



Chariot of the Sun (ca. 1400 BC), recovered in 1902 from Trundholm Marsh in

Denmark. The Sun is a bronze disk covered with gold leaf, drawn on wheels by a horse.

The gods Sun (Sol) and Moon (Mani) are the offspring of the obscure Mundilfari (*Vafthrudnismal* 23); his name suggests time (ON *mund* = "time, moment"). Sol is called "the bride of the sky" (*Grimnismal* 39), across which she journeys daily in a chariot drawn by the horses Arvak and Alsvid, the chariot itself fashioned by the gods from a spark that flew out of Muspellsheim (*Grimnismal* 37; *Gylf* 11). The Bronze Age Trundholm sun-chariot indicates that the daily journey of Sun's horse-drawn chariot was an important component in Northern Europe's ancient sun-cult. Julius Caesar, in his simplified account of Germanic religion, reports that the Germans worshipped fire (or Vulcan), together with the sun and the moon (*De Bello Gallico* 6.21), an indication (among many others) that solar religion must have been more significant in earlier periods. Sol will be swallowed at Ragnarok by the wolf Skoll/Fenrir (*Grimnismal* 39; *Gylf* 12; *Vafthrudnismal* 46), but her daughter will eventually take her place in the reordered world (*Vafthrudnismal* 47). In the language of men the sun is called Sol; in the language of the gods she is called Sunna (*Alvissmal* 16), which is also her name in the Second Merseburg Charm.

### Strophe 6

Then went all the powers to their fate-chairs,  
The holy gods gathered in council:  
Night and her children were given names;  
They named them Morning and Midday,  
Afternoon and Evening, for the reckoning of time.

*powers*: ON *regin*, an old name for the Norse gods. It occurs most notably in *ragnarok*, the fateful doom of the gods, the great eschatological battle on the massive field of Vigrid, fought between the divine powers and their enemies. *ragna* = of the powers, gods; *rok* = judgment, fate.

*fate-chairs*: the *rokstolar*, the thrones on which the Norse gods sit in judgment. They were among the gods' first creations: "It was their first work to make that court in which their twelve seats stand, and another, the high-seat which Allfather [Odin] himself has. That house is the best-made of any on earth, and the greatest; without and within, it is all like one piece of gold; men call it Gladsheim" (*Gylf* 14).

*Night*: Like other Teutons, the Norse counted the passage of time in nights, not days. Night (Nott) therefore subsumes smaller units like morning, midday, etc., which are times of night rather than times of day.

Accordingly Day's mother is Night (*Gylf* 10). "They do not reckon time by days, as we [Romans] do, but by nights. All their engagements and appointments are made on this system. Night is regarded as ushering in the day" (*Germania* 11). Day was also a child of Night among the Greeks (*Theogony* 124).

#### Strophe 7

The Aesir met on the shining Ida-plain  
Where altar and temple they timbered high.  
They built forges, smithied treasure;  
Tongs they shaped and tools they wrought.

*Aesir*: Most of the major Norse gods belong to the Aesir, the gods of war and power, Odin and Thor being their most prominent members; the Vanir are the gods of wealth and fertility. Their rivalry will be described in subsequent strophes, where the Vanir, despite their normally unwarlike activities as gods, are not notably peaceful. *Aesir* can also be a generic term for all gods. Singular *as* = god, and the word itself is cognate with Hittite *hassus* ("king") and with Vedic *asura* (*asu* = "vital breath, creative force").

*altar and temple: horg oc hof*. A Germanic altar (ON *horgr*) could be merely a pile of stones (e.g. *Hyndluliod* 10) located in a sacred grove or some holy place where a god was thought to reside. OE *hearg* = altar, temple; grove. So Tacitus, *Germania* 9: "their holy places are woods and groves." But the Aesir's high-timbered temple (*hof*) suggests a large sacral building, perhaps resembling the Norwegian stave churches of the post-pagan era. There is a detailed description of an Icelandic temple, a *hof* dedicated to Thor, in *Eyrbyggja Saga* 4.

*Ida-plain*: meeting-place in Asgard, apparently in the center of the Aesir's city. After Ragnarok the surviving gods will assemble there (str. 60).

#### Strophe 8

Joyfully they played at tables in the meadow;  
Gold they lacked not,  
Until there came three thurs-maidens  
Full of might from Jotunheim.

*played at tables*: some board game played on golden tables, which will be rediscovered after Ragnarok (str. 61).

*three thurs-maidens*: the Norns, the Nordic Fates whose names are listed in strophe 20. ON *thurs* is a pejorative for "giant" (*jotun*), perhaps used here metaphorically. OE *thyrs* = giant, monster (e.g. *Beowulf* 426, referring to Grendel, and *Maxims* 2.42: "the *thyrs* must dwell in the fen"). Norns are also linked with giants in *Vafthrudnismal* 49, as if they were their offspring. But "there are also other norns who visit everyone when they are born to shape their lives," and these lesser norns descend from gods, elves and dwarves (*Gylf* 15). In *Völuspá* the arrival of the three principal Norns signals the end of a golden age, perhaps because the gods have now become subject to destiny, incapable of evading certain ominous events. The existence of a threatening, self-determined fate is an important theme in Northern literature. Cf. *Beowulf* 455: "Wyrd always goes as she must."

*Jotunheim*: Land of the Giants east of Midgard, separated from the world of men by several rivers and the forest Jarnvid (str. 40). Thor regularly journeys east in his expeditions against giants.

#### Strophe 9

Then went all the powers to their fate-chairs,  
The holy gods gathered in council:  
Who should make the dwarves' lord  
From Brimir's blood and Blain's limbs?

*make the dwarves' lord*: The Aesir decide to create the first dwarf, hence dwarves as a race. As in Tolkien, the creation of dwarves precedes the creation of men.

*Brimir's blood and Blain's limbs*: i.e. from the remains of Ymir (str. 4), like the rest of the world (*Grimnismal* 40-41; *Vafthrudnismal* 21). Specifically, dwarves were formed from the sea (Ymir's blood) and from stone (Ymir's limbs), the latter accounting for the dwarves' preferred residences today -- inside mountains and behind rocks (e.g. str. 48). According to the interpolated *Dvergatal* ("Catalogue of Dwarves"), of which this is the introductory strophe, the first two dwarves created others by shaping their bodies from the earth. Snorri's *Prose Edda* gives a much different account: "The dwarves had first received shape and life in the flesh of Ymir, and were then maggots; but by decree of the Aesir had become conscious with the intelligence of men, and had human shape. And nevertheless they dwell in the earth and in stones. Modsognir was the first, and Durin the second" (*Gylf* 14).

The remainder of the *Dvergatal* (omitted here) follows in strophes 10-16.

### Strophe 17

Then three gods went out from the throng,  
Powerful and merciful Aesir from the gods' home.  
They found on the land, of little might,  
Ash and Elm, fateless yet.

*three gods*: namely Odin, Hoenir and Lodur. Hoenir will play a prominent role after Ragnarok (str. 63). The obscure Lodur may be Loki, the trickster god, here playing a positive role, as he sometimes does.

*Ash and Elm*: Ask and Embla are two tree trunks that the gods find washed up on the shore, from which they will form man and woman respectively, as described in the next strophe. The origin of men from ash-trees is an ancient European belief, recorded in Hesiod (*Works & Days* 145) and alluded to elsewhere, sometimes with the oak as humanity's raw material (e.g. *Iliad* 22.126; *Odyssey* 19.162-163; *Aeneid* 8.315; Juvenal 6.12). The early Saxon kings of Kent (the Aescingas) traced their line back to an Asc ("Ash-Tree"), the son of the legendary twin-figure Hengest (Bede, *Hist. Eccles.* 2.5), which suggests that versions of the Norse story of Ash and Elm were once widespread in the Germanic world. Lifthrasir and Lif, a man and woman who during Ragnarok find shelter inside the trunk of the World-Tree (Hoddmimir's Holt) and subsist on its dew, will survive the conflagration and eventually repopulate the earth, thus reenacting the original creation of mankind from trees (*Gylf* 53; *Vafthrudnismal* 45).

*fateless yet*: Ash and Elm are as yet without *orlog*, fate or destiny, the absence of which is almost tantamount to nonexistence. To be human is to be the incarnation of a specific fate.

### Strophe 18

They had no breath, no reason, no warmth,  
Neither voice nor beauty.  
Odin gave them breath, Hoenir gave reason,  
Lodur gave warmth and beauty.

*Odin ... beauty*: Cf. *Gylf* 9, where the creator gods are Odin, Vili and Ve: "When the sons of Borr [i.e. Burr] were walking along the sea-strand, they found two trees, and took up the trees and shaped men of them: the first gave them breath and life; the second, understanding and power of movement; the third, form, speech, hearing, and sight. They gave them clothing and names: the male was called Ask, and the female Embla, and

of them was mankind begotten."

*Odin gave them breath:* breath (*ond*) as life-giving and life-sustaining, thus roughly "soul."

#### Strophe 19

An Ash I know called Yggdrasil,  
A tall tree sprinkled with white waters:  
Thence come the dews that fall in the dales.  
Evergreen it always stands above Urd's Well.

*dews that fall:* i.e. the World-Tree provides precious moisture -- perhaps a mead -- that nourishes the earth. "The dew which falls from it to the earth is called honey-dew by men, and the bees feed on it" (*Gylf 16*).

*Urd's Well:* a sacred fountain of wisdom, beside which the gods assemble daily for their court of law. ON *urdr* = fate, cognate with OE *wyrd* and Old Saxon *wurd*. The Well of Fate (Urdarbrunn) is located in Asgard beneath a root of the World-Tree, and nearby the Norns have their hall. "The Norns who dwell by Urd's Well take water from the Well every day, and with it that clay which lies about the Well, and they sprinkle it over the Ash, to the end that its limbs shall not wither nor rot; for that water is so holy that all things which come there into the Well become as white as the film which lies within the egg-shell" (*Gylf 16*). But the next strophe indicates that the Norns live *in* the Well, from which they emerge to perform their daily libations to Yggdrasil.

#### Strophe 20

Thence come three wise maidens  
From the pool beneath the Tree:  
One is named Urd, another Verdandi, Skuld the third.  
They scored the runes, laid down laws, allotted lives;  
Of the children of men they set their fates.

*Urd, Verdandi, & Skuld:* Past (or Fate), Present and Future. Collectively the Norns determine human destiny. Hence the aptness of the story of Ash and Elm, formed from trees. As runes are carved on wood, so the Norns inscribe *orlog* on men. It is possible that Verdandi and Skuld are poetic elaborations of an earlier Norse conception in which Urd as Fate alone resided in (or near) Urd's Well. Skuld appears as the name of a valkyrie in strophe 30.

### Strophe 21

I remember the first war in the world,  
When the Aesir had thrust Gullveig with spears  
And burned her in one-eyed Odin's hall.  
Thrice burned, thrice reborn again --  
Oft not seldom, yet still she lives.

*I remember:* lit. "she remembers," as elsewhere below. The Seeress often describes her vision in the third person.

*first war in the world:* the war between Aesir and Vanir. The most prominent Vanir gods are the sea-god Njord and his son Frey and daughter Freyja. The Vanir represent the Norse version of the third function of Indo-European mythology. They are the patrons of wealth and fecundity, as well as beauty and sensuality. The Aesir represent the first two functions: (1) magical and juridical sovereignty (Odin and Tyr); (2) physical force (Thor). In IE myth the first two functions often stand in opposition to the third, as in strophes 21-24. In Indo-Aryan social terms, brahmins (priests) and kshatriyas (warriors) come into conflict with vaisyas (herders, cultivators). The need for the harmonious coexistence of all three complementary functions is the central lesson of IE mythology. The Swedish pagan temple at Uppsala, as described around 1070 by Adam of Bremen, was reportedly adorned with gold and housed cult statues of Wodan (Odin), Thor, and Fricco (Frey), gods representing the three IE functions, namely sovereignty, force and fecundity. The corresponding functional triad in early Rome, before Etruscan intrusion, was Jupiter, Mars and Quirinus. In Vedic India it was Mitra-Varuna, Indra and the Nasatya twins, the Asvins.

*Gullveig:* Vanir seeress or witch, practitioner of *seid*, perhaps an aspect of Freyja. According to Snorri Sturluson, the Vanir goddess Freyja first brought magic and sorcery (*seid*) to the Aesir: "It was she who first taught the Aesir magic such as was practiced among the Vanir" (*Ynglinga Saga* 4). *Seid* is, nevertheless, a low magic, often feared and reviled, in contrast to the noble magic of Odin (but see *Lokasenna* 24). Gullveig is probably not the Seeress who speaks *Völuspá*, though some scholars (Grimm among them) have argued that the two are the same. Gullveig = "gold (*gull*) drunkenness," hence "power of gold (to intoxicate the mind)," and she was apparently sent by the Vanir, dispensers of riches, to corrupt the Aesir, who unmask her. The Aesir's unsuccessful attempts to destroy Gullveig prompt the war between the two rival families of gods, which will eventually conclude with their union in a single pantheon. There is a much different version of this story in Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta*

*Danorum* (1.7.1), where Gullveig appears as a golden statue which corrupts Odin's wife.

#### Strophe 22

Heid she was named when houses she visited,  
A good prophesying seeress skilled in sorcery.  
Spells she cast and minds she bewitched,  
And always she was the delight of wicked women.

*Heid*: Gullveig's new name after her successive rebirths, which may have increased her magical powers. ON *heidr* = "bright (one)" but can also serve as an epithet for a witch. Thus "Heid she was named" could simply mean "she was (now) called Witch."

*houses she visited*: Cf. *Flateyjarbok*, 1. 346: "At that time wise women used to go about the land. They were called 'spae-wives' [i.e. seeresses] and they foretold people's futures. For this reason folk used to invite them to their houses and give them hospitality, and bestow gifts on them at parting." In Germanic paganism women were believed to have a special affinity for magic and divination, and prophecy was largely female terrain. Tacitus reports: "They believe that there resides in women an element of holiness and a gift of prophecy; and so they do not scorn to ask their advice, or lightly disregard their replies" (*Germania* 8). The famous first-century seeress Veleda "dwelt in a lofty tower, and one of her relatives, chosen for the purpose, conveyed, like the messenger of a divinity, the questions and answers" (Tacitus, *Historiae* 4.65). There is a detailed account of the practices of a Scandinavian seeress in *Eirik's Saga* 4.

*wicked women*: This must be read in social terms. The cult of the Vanir, with Heid as its indestructible priestess, finds many female adherents, thus dangerously dividing human society. The "wickedness" of the Vanir's followers reflects, of course, the perspective of the Aesir.

#### Strophe 23

Then went all the powers to their fate-chairs,  
The holy gods gathered in council:  
Should the Aesir repair the wrong with tribute,  
And should all the gods receive worship?

*should all the gods receive worship?*: i.e. "should the Vanir acquire equal divine rank with their rivals?," which they have apparently demanded as

reparation for the Aesir's crimes against Gullveig. The Aesir initially choose war, as the next strophe recounts.

#### Strophe 24

Odin hurled his spear among the host;  
Thus came the world's first war.  
Broken were the ramparts of the Aesir's fortress;  
By their battle-magic victorious Vanir trod the field.

*Odin hurled his spear*: dedicating the fallen to himself, an act of sovereign magic. Casting a spear over the enemy was a common Norse practice, here performed for the first time (the Seeress tells us) by Odin himself. But clearly Odin's magic does not produce the expected result, as the next lines indicate.

*battle-magic*: From the example of Gullveig we can plausibly infer that the Vanir, gods of magic and sorcery, have made themselves impervious to injury.

*victorious Vanir trod the field*: thus enabling divine reconciliation. "Odin went out with a great army against the Vanaland people [i.e. the Vanir]; but they were well prepared, and defended their land; so that victory was changeable, and they ravaged the lands of each other, and did great damage. They tired of this at last, and on both sides appointed a meeting for establishing peace, made a truce, and exchanged hostages" (*Ynglinga Saga* 4). Among the Vanir's hostages are Njord, Frey and (apparently) Freyja, though she is not specifically listed. In the next strophe we find her living among the Aesir, an indication of the union of the two divine families. As Georges Dumézil has copiously documented, the fusion and symbiosis of two contrasted sets of gods, following a series of conflicts, is a common Indo-European theme, dating back to earlier traditions of Aryan antiquity and appearing in homologous forms in different Indo-European cultures. The eventual union of all the gods demonstrates that the initial opposition that divided them was also an essential complementarity. The combined pantheon represents a necessary completion of the divine world, rectifying a deficiency. See esp. Dumézil, "The Gods: Aesir and Vanir," in *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, ed. Einar Haugen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 3-25.

#### Strophe 25

Then went all the powers to their fate-chairs,

The holy gods gathered in council:  
Who had tainted the air with treachery,  
And offered Od's wife to the giants?

*tainted the air with treachery*: as though *treachery* had permeated and corrupted the atmosphere.

*Od's wife*: namely Freyja, who weeps golden tears over her husband Od's mysterious disappearance (*Gylf* 35). The gods, at Loki's suggestion, offered Freyja (together with the sun and the moon) to a giant "master-builder" in exchange for constructing a stone fortification in Asgard, evidently to replace the walls damaged by the Vanir in strophe 24, and by a stratagem they reneged on their agreement. Thor then killed the giant (*Gylf* 42) -- the fateful violation of a solemn compact, as the next strophe suggests.

#### Strophe 26

Thor alone fought there, filled with swelling anger --  
Seldom he sits quiet when such he hears.  
Sworn oaths and pledges were broken,  
The binding compact made between them.

*oaths ... broken*: by violating their agreement, the gods incur the hatred of the giants, who will be among their many enemies at Ragnarok. In the poet's vision the folkloric story of the master-builder becomes the gods' original sin, a moral failure lying behind subsequent events.

#### Strophe 27

I know where Heimdall's horn is hidden:  
Under the sky-reaching holy Tree;  
Upon it I see a stream flowing from Valfather's pledge.  
Would you know yet more? And what?

*where Heimdall's horn is hidden*: namely in Mimir's Well, a fountain located in the realm of the frost-giants beneath a root of the World-Tree. The Aesir god Mimir, already noted for his wisdom, was decapitated by the Vanir, but Odin preserved his head "and spoke charms over it, giving it magic power so that it would answer him and tell him many hidden things" (*Ynglinga Saga* 4). Now ensconced in the Well, Mimir's head "drinks from the fountain out of [Heimdall's] horn Gjall" and is therefore "full of ancient lore" (*Gylf* 15). An alternative interpretation would have Heimdall placing one of his ears, instead of the Gjallarhorn, in Mimir's

Well in order to acquire his excellent hearing: He can hear wool growing on a sheep. The ON word here translated as *horn (hljod)* can also mean "hearing," hence (perhaps) "ear."

*Valfather's pledge:* Odin (as recounted in the next strophe) placed one of his eyes in Mimir's Well in exchange for a drink from its magical waters. "The loss of a bodily eye was the means by which the magician-god acquired in exchange a spirit eye, the power of second sight, and all the supernatural powers that its possession brings" (Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuna*, trans. Derek Coltman [New York: Zone Books, 1988], 140.) In strophe 46 Odin will confer with Mimir's head.

### Strophe 28

Alone I sat outside when the Old One came;  
The Aesir's dread lord gazed into my eyes.  
I said: "What do you ask me? Why do you come?  
I know, Odin, where your eye is hidden:  
In the famed Well of Mimir.  
Each morning Mimir drinks mead from Valfather's pledge."  
Would you know yet more? And what?

*Alone I sat outside:* With strophe 28 we arrive at the dramatic context for the Seeress' prophecy. There is no evidence in the poem that Odin has magically raised the Seeress from the dead, as in *Balder's Dreams*, where a reluctant seeress tells Odin of Balder's impending death. He has, rather, sought her out for her knowledge of Ragnarok, and he has discovered her "sitting out," as though she were awaiting his arrival. Norse seeresses often sat in open-air seance (*utisetá*) to commune with the spirit world and acquire their supernatural visions. We should perhaps imagine the Seeress clad in a dark-blue cloak and seated in some secluded location, like a crossroads or a graveyard. She is then brought before the gods and men assembled in Odin's hall, as strophe 1 implies.

### Strophe 29

War-Father Odin gave me rings and necklaces  
To gain my lore and my prophecy.  
For I see far and wide over all the worlds.

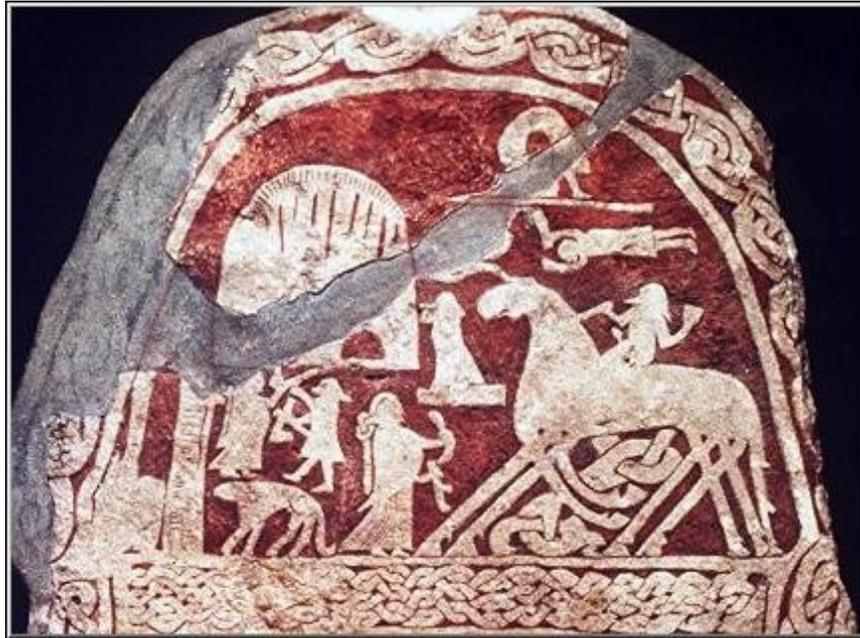
*see ... over all the worlds:* The Seeress is here audaciously claiming an all-seeing power exercised by Odin himself, who from his towering throne Hlidskjalf can survey all the worlds (*Gylf* 17) and whose ravens Hugin

(Thought) and Munin (Memory) whisper "into his ear all the tidings which they see or hear" (*Gylf* 38).

### Strophe 30

I saw valkyries coming from afar,  
Eagerly riding toward the gods:  
Skuld bore a shield, Skogul another,  
Gunn, Hild, Gondul and Geirskogul.  
For thus are named Herjan's maidens  
Who ride over the earth, valkyries.

*valkyries*: Odin's maidens, who summon men killed in battle to Valhalla, the hall for slain heroes, where they serve the warriors beer and mead. *Grimnismal* 36 gives an alternate list of their names. Here they are riding toward the home of the gods for Balder's funeral feast. Balder's death will be described in the next strophes, but in the Seeress' supernatural vision the aftermath of the event precedes its occurrence. *Valkyrjur* = "those who choose the slain." They were originally corpse goddesses, to whom the dead belonged in the same sense (as Tolkien pointed out) that the human carrion on the battlefield is the property of the ravens, Odin's birds. In the remarkable *Darradarljod* ("Dorrud's Lay," extant only in *Njal's Saga* 157) the valkyries' prerogative of choosing the slain includes the power to "weave the web of battle," thereby determining the outcome. *Herjan*: "leader of the host," Odin as lord or commander of the Einherjar.



Ninth-century picture stone from the island of Gotland, Sweden: A valkyrie with a drinking-horn greets Odin as he arrives at Valhalla astride Sleipnir, his eight-legged horse, on which he will fight at Ragnarok.

### Strophe 31

I saw Balder, the blood-stained god,  
Saw the hidden fate of Odin's son.  
High above fields there grew a plant  
Slender and most fair, mistletoe.

*Balder*: son of Odin and Frigg. "He is best and all praise him; he is so fair of feature and so bright that light shines from him. A certain plant [the ox-eye daisy] is so white that it is called after Balder's eyelash. It is the whitest of all plants, and from this you can tell his beauty both of hair and body. He is the wisest of the Aesir, and the fairest-spoken and most merciful; but that quality attends him, that none of his decisions can be fulfilled. He dwells in the place called Breidablik ["Broad-Gleaming"], which is in heaven; in that place may nothing unclean be" (*Gylf* 22). Dumézil interprets Balder as the Norse counterpart of the Vedic sovereign gods Aryaman and Bhaga, both listed among the *adityas*; the former is the deified personification of the Arya, the Indo-Aryan people.

*blood-stained god ... hidden fate*: The Seeress sees Balder as predestined to die. Balder's fate was to become "the blood-stained god." This fate (*orlog*) was hidden and unpredictable, though it was visible to the Seeress. "Blood-stained god" (*blodgum tivur*) may suggest a necessary

divine death; OE *tifer* = sacrifice.

*mistletoe*: difficult to classify, therefore dangerous. Frigg extracted oaths from all things not to harm Balder, but neglected to ask the mistletoe, thinking it too insignificant. Loki, discovering her omission, maliciously directed the blind god Hod to hurl a spear cut from a mistletoe-sprout at Balder, killing him. "That was the greatest mischance that has ever befallen among gods and men.... Odin bore that misfortune by so much the worst, as he had most perception of how great harm and loss for the Aesir were in the death of Balder" (*Gylf* 49). Since mistletoe is neither coniferous nor deciduous, it escapes normal systems of classification, much as dawn and dusk are neither day nor night. It grows on deciduous trees and looks like an evergreen, but it is neither. Mistletoe challenges boundaries and categories. Hence its liberating role in Christmas traditions, and here its fatal role as Balder's bane. But like the mistletoe, which survives death in winter, Balder will return to a reborn earth (str. 62).

#### Strophe 32

From that slender sprig which seemed so fair  
Came the fatal shaft that Hod flung.  
Balder's brother, Odin's son, was born soon after,  
And killed him, though only one night old.

*Balder's brother*: namely Vali, son of Odin and the giantess Rind, born to take vengeance on Hod (*Balder's Dreams* 11; *Gesta Danorum* 3.4.1; *Hyndluliod* 29). Since Hod was the *handbani* ("killer by hand," i.e. the actual killer) of Balder, he was technically guilty of the crime. Vali will survive Ragnarok (*Vafthrudnismal* 51).

#### Strophe 33

He neither washed his hands nor combed his hair  
Until Balder's killer was borne to the funeral-fire.  
But in her Fen-Halls Frigg wept Valhalla's woe.  
Would you know yet more? And what?

*neither washed ... nor combed*: i.e. Vali does not enter into the world of the gods and its normal social practices until he has accomplished his mission, killing Hod, the purpose for which he was born. Cf. *Germania* 31: "There is one custom -- sometimes practiced by other German tribes, though rarely, and only as an exhibition of individual daring -- that has

become a general rule among the Chatti. As soon as they reach manhood they let their hair and beard grow as they will. This fashion of covering the face is assumed in accordance with a vow pledging them to the service of Valor; and only when they have slain an enemy do they lay it aside. Standing over the bloody corpse they have despoiled, they reveal their faces to the world once more, and proclaim that they have at last repaid the debt they owe for being brought into the world and have proved themselves worthy of their native land and parents. The coward who will not fight must stay unshorn."

*Fen-Halls*: Fensalir. Why Frigg would choose a marsh for her hall is unclear.

*Valhalla's woe*: Balder's death, by bringing mortality into the world of the gods, begins the process that will end in the destruction of the present order.

#### Strophe 34

Then did Vali twist mighty bonds,  
Strong fetters made of guts.

*Then ... guts*: a short account of Vali's binding of Loki. Strophe 34 is probably an interpolation, and it requires an emendation to make Vali the subject of the sentence. The binding of Loki is described much differently, and at greater length, in *Gylf* 50.

#### Strophe 35

I saw bound in a grove under boiling springs  
A captive like loathsome Loki in looks;  
There sits unhappy Sigyn by her mate.  
Would you know yet more? And what?

*unhappy Sigyn*: Loki's wife. In punishment Loki is bound, with the intestines of his son Narfi, and a poisonous snake is fastened over him. Sigyn catches in a bowl the poison that drips down on her husband. "When the basin becomes full she goes away to empty it, but in the meantime the venom drips on to his face and then he shudders so violently that the whole earth shakes -- you call that an earthquake. There he will lie in bonds until Ragnarok" (*Gylf* 50). In the prose epilogue to *Lokasenna*, as well as *Gylf* 50, it is Skadi, Njord's wife, who fastens the snake over Loki. There is a different account of Loki's imprisonment in Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* 8.15.8.

### Strophe 36

From the east there flows,  
Through valleys of venom,  
A cutting river called Slid,  
Full of daggers and swords.

*Slid*: a river in the underworld. It originates from Hvergelmir, the ancient well beneath Yggdrasil in Niflheim. "It was many ages before the earth was shaped that Niflheim was made; and midmost within it lies the well that is called Hvergelmir, from which spring the rivers called Svól, Gunnthra, Fjorm, Fimbulthul, Slid and Hrid, Sylg and Ylg, Vid, Leiptr; Gjoll is hard by Hel-gates" (*Gylf* 4).

### Strophe 37

North in the dark fields of Nidavellir  
Stands the golden hall of Sindri's kin;  
And in uncold Okolnir stands another,  
The giant Brimir's beer-hall.

*Sindri's kin*: i.e. dwarves. Sindri (ON *sindr* = sinders) and his brother Brokk are the dwarvish blacksmiths who forged, among other treasures, Odin's golden arm-ring (Draupnir) and Thor's hammer (Mjollnir).

*uncold Okolnir*: Although both halls in Strophe 37 are located in the cold north, thus close to Hel, they are places of light and warmth, suggesting their future roles in the reborn earth (*Gylf* 52).

*Brimir's beer-hall*: not the Brimir of strophe 9.

### Strophe 38

Another hall I saw standing on the Shore of Death  
Far from the sun, and its doors face north:  
Venom-drops fall down from its roof  
And serpents' spines entwine its walls.

*Shore of Death*: sunless Nastrond, the site of Hel's hall. Hel is both a location, the realm of the dead in Niflheim, and the goddess, Loki's daughter, who presides over it. "Hel he [i.e. Odin] cast into Niflheim, and gave to her power over nine worlds, to apportion all abodes among those

that were sent to her: that is, men dead of sickness or of old age. She has great possessions there; her walls are exceeding high and her gates great. Her hall is called Sleet-Cold; her dish, Hunger; Famine is her knife; Idler, her thrall; Sloven, her maidservant; Pit of Stumbling, her threshold, by which one enters; Disease, her bed; Gleaming Bale, her bed-hangings. She is half blue-black and half flesh-color (by which she is easily recognized), and very lowering and fierce" (*Gylf* 34). Hel the goddess may, however, be a late personification of Hel the place, which is at once an "otherworld" far away in the north and an "underworld" deep below the earth.

*from its roof*: i.e. through the building's smoke-hole.

### Strophe 39

I saw there, wading in heavy streams,  
Oathbreakers, murderous outlaws, and adulterers;  
There the dragon Nidhogg sucks blood from the dead  
And the wolf rends men.  
Would you know yet more? And what?

*I saw there*: i.e. in the weapon-bearing river described in strophe 36. Slid is clearly a place of punishment, to which the worst classes of criminals are consigned after death.

*Nidhogg*: a corpse-tearing dragon or serpent who lives in Hvergelmir and rips at Yggdrasil's roots, causing the World Tree "more anguish than men perceive" (*Grimnismal* 35; *Gylf* 15-16). Nidhogg will survive Ragnarok (str. 66).

*the wolf*: namely Fenrir (= ? "fen-dweller").

### Strophe 40

Eastward in Ironwood an old crone sat  
And fed there Fenrir's brood;  
One from all of these, in troll's skin,  
Will one day swallow the sun.

*Ironwood*: Jarnvid. "To the east of Midgard in a forest called Ironwood lives a giantess. The troll women known as Jarnvidjur live in that forest. The aged giantess gave birth to many giant sons, all of them in the shape of wolves" (*Gylf* 12). This *old crone* is the giantess Angrboda, mother of the wolf Fenrir. Loki is the father. Loki and Angrboda ("Boder of Grief") are also the parents of Hel and the Midgard Serpent.

*in troll's skin*: describing the monstrous shape of a wolf whose mother is a giant and whose father is a god.

*swallow the sun*: ON *tungr* = (some) heavenly body, often the moon, but here it must mean "sun."

#### Strophe 41

He feeds on the flesh of doomed men;  
With their blood he reddens the home of the powers.  
Sunlight in summers shall be black thereafter,  
And all weathers bad.  
Would you know yet more? And what?

*all weathers bad*: the beginning of Fimbulvetr, the Great Winter when the sun becomes black, which presages Ragnarok. "There shall come that winter which is called Fimbulvetr: in that time snow shall drive from all quarters; frosts shall be great then, and winds sharp; there shall be no virtue in the sun. Those winters shall proceed three in succession, and no summer between; but first shall come three other winters, such that over all the world there shall be mighty battles. In that time brothers shall slay each other for greed's sake, and none shall spare father or son in manslaughter and in incest.... Then shall happen what seems great tidings: the Wolf shall swallow the sun; and this shall seem to men a great harm" (*Gylf* 51).

#### Strophe 42

There on a mound, striking his harp,  
Glad Eggther sat, herdsman of the she-giants;  
Above him crowed in the birdwood  
Fjalar, the bright red cock.

*Glad Eggther*: a harp-playing giant who guards the troll women of Ironwood, here called *glad* because he is certain of his side's imminent victory. He is presumably seated on a burial-mound.

*birdwood*: perhaps the haunt of ravens, traditional harbingers of slaughter. The Hauksbok manuscript has "gallows wood," which is more attractive poetically.

*crowed ... Fjalar*: apparently to awaken the giants. Since Fjalar is elsewhere used as a name for various giants, his allegiance is clear.

### Strophe 43

To the gods crowed golden-combed Gullinkambi,  
Wakens War-Father Odin's warriors in Valhalla;  
And another crows beneath the earth,  
A soot-red cock in the halls of Hel.

*Wakens Odin's warriors:* the Seeress' vision is now clearly shifting from mythological geography to Nordic eschatology, for the crowing of the cock Gullinkambi signals the imminent arrival of Ragnarok. Hence Odin's army, the Einherjar in the Hall of the Slain, must prepare to fight the giants and the chaotic forces of the underworld, the purpose for which Odin selected them, though he knew that his defeat was inevitable. This resistance in the face of certain defeat is an example of what Tolkien called the Northern theory of courage. Cf. W.P. Ker, *The Dark Ages* (1904; New York: Mentor, 1958), 44 : "What is distinctly Northern in the myth of the Twilight of the Gods is the strength of its theory of life. It is this intensity of courage that distinguishes the Northern mythology (and Icelandic literature generally) from all others. The last word of the Northmen before their entry into the larger world of Southern culture, their last independent guess at the secret of the Universe, is given in the Twilight of the Gods. As far as it goes, it is absolutely impregnable. It is the assertion of the individual freedom against all the terrors and temptations of the world. It is absolute resistance, perfect because without hope. The Northern gods have an exultant extravagance in their warfare which makes them more like Titans than Olympians; only they are on the right side, though it is not the side that wins. The winning side is Chaos and Unreason; but the gods, who are defeated, think that defeat is not a refutation. The latest mythology of the North is an allegory of the Teutonic self-will, carried to its noblest terms."

### Strophe 44

Garm howls loudly before Gniphellir,  
His fetters will break and the ravener will run free.  
Much more I know, for farther forward I can see  
Ragnarok, doomsday of the victory-gods.

*Garm:* Hel's hound, who will kill (and in turn be killed by) Tyr at Ragnarok (*Gylf* 51). He is probably the same dog that Odin encountered at the outset of his journey into the underworld (*Balder's Dreams* 2-3).

*Gniphellir:* likely a cave at the entrance to Hel, though its exact location is not specified.

#### Strophe 45

Brothers will fight and slay each other,  
Sisters' sons will betray their kin;  
Hard it is on earth, great whoredom,  
Axe-age, sword-age, shields are cloven,  
Wind-age, wolf-age, until the world perishes;  
No man will then spare another.

*Sisters' sons:* Throughout the Germanic world there was a strong relationship between an uncle and his sister's son, first noted by Tacitus: "The sons of sisters are as highly honored by their uncles as by their own fathers. Some tribes even consider the former tie the closer and more sacred of the two, and in demanding hostages prefer nephews to sons, thinking that this gives them a firmer grip on men's hearts and a wider hold on the family" (*Germania* 20). The violation of bonds of kinship by *sisters' sons* is therefore an especially disturbing example of the social anarchy (a criminal *wolf-age*) that the Seeress predicts.

#### Strophe 46

Mimir's sons dance and destiny kindles  
When old Gjallarhorn sounds;  
Loud blows Heimdall, raises his horn aloft.  
Odin speaks with Mimir's head.

*Mimir's sons:* The names of these sons of Mimir are unknown. They evidently look forward to the coming conflagration. They may be giants, reflecting an alternate account of Mimir's ancestry. Mimir, though counted among the Aesir, may be the giantess Bestla's brother, from whom Odin (his sister's son) acquired magical lore (*Havamal* 140). *Mimir's sons* would then be giants, enemies of the gods.

*Loud blows Heimdall:* to summon the gods to council (*Gylf* 51), an immediate result of "destiny's kindling."

#### Strophe 47

Towering Yggdrasil trembles,  
The ancient Ash groans as the giant breaks loose;  
All shudder on Hel's Road,  
Until black Surt's flames engulf it.

*the giant breaks loose*: perhaps Loki, but more likely the wolf Fenrir, hitherto bound by a magical fetter manufactured by the dwarves. Fenrir will swallow Odin (*Vafthrudnismal* 53).

*Surt's flames*: lit. "Surt's kin." Surt is a fire-giant from the south. He will kill Frey and his fire will burn heaven and earth. "The first world to exist ... was Muspell in the southern hemisphere; it is light and hot and that region flames and burns so that those who do not belong to it and whose native land it is not, cannot endure it. The one who sits there at land's end to guard it is called Surt; he has a flaming sword, and at the end of the world he will come and harry and will vanquish all the gods and burn the whole world with fire" (*Gylf* 4). It is not clear what *Surt's flames* are here consuming. Hel's Road or Hel itself seem most likely, but Yggdrasil is another possibility.

#### Strophe 48

How fare the Aesir? How fare the elves?  
All Jotunheim resounds; Aesir meet in council;  
Wise dwarves groan before their doors of stone,  
Masters of the mountains.  
Would you know yet more? And what?

*elves*: here good creatures associated with the gods, as they often are. In the *Prose Edda* the home of the Light-Elves is in the heavens in Alfheim (Elf-Home), where Balder's hall is located (*Gylf* 17). Elves are noted for their beauty. Icelanders spoke of an attractive woman as *Frid sem alkona*, "as fair as an elf," and in Old English the adjective *aelfscyne* = elf-beautiful. But elves can be hostile as well: Among the malign descendants of Cain in *Beowulf* are *eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas*, "ogres and elves and orcs" (*Beowulf* 112), and the heathen Anglo-Saxons believed in "elf-shots," invisible darts shot by elves that caused various ailments. Snorri, however, distinguishes light-elves from dark elves: "[in] Alfheim ... dwell the folk called Light-Elves; but the Dark-Elves [perhaps dwarves] dwell down in the earth, and they are unlike them in appearance, but by far more unlike them in nature. The Light-Elves are fairer to look upon than the sun, but the Dark-Elves are blacker than pitch" (*Gylf* 17).

*dwarves groan*: as subterranean creatures, the dwarves can sense reverberations on the ground above.

#### Strophe 50

From the east comes Hrym  
And lifts up his linden-shield.  
Huge Jormungand writhes in giant-rage;  
The Serpent churns the waves.  
A pale eagle screeches with joy,  
Whose beak will rend the dead.  
Naglfar is loose.

*Jormungand*: the Midgard serpent that inhabits the ocean surrounding the earth, which it envelops with its coils. "[Odin] cast the Serpent into the deep sea, where he lies about all the land; and this Serpent grew so greatly that he lies in the midst of the ocean encompassing all the land, and bites upon his own tail" (*Gylf* 34). Thor will, at the cost of his own life, vanquish Jormungand at the end of this world; near its beginning his Indo-Aryan counterpart Indra, also a thunder god, killed the drought serpent Vritra. There can be no doubt that these are both reflexes of a common Aryan proto-myth.

*Naglfar*: the largest of all ships (*Gylf* 43), here helmed by Loki (str. 51), in the *Prose Edda* by the giant Hrym. "It is made of dead men's nails; wherefore a warning is desirable, that if a man die with unshorn nails, that man adds much material to the ship Naglfar, which gods and men were fain to have finished late" (*Gylf* 51). The corpse-ship Naglfar will be released by Jormungand's churning of the waves, which will flood the earth.

#### Strophe 51

The ship sails from the east;  
Over the sea Loki steers Muspell's people,  
Sons of fiends who follow the ravening Wolf,  
Byleist's brother with them.

*Muspell's people*: Muspell is a Germanic term for the conflagration that will destroy the earth. Old High German *muspilli* = doomsday. Here it must be understood as the name of a fire-giant from Muspellsheim.

*Byleist's brother*: namely Loki.

#### Strophe 52

Black Surt fares from the south,  
Brings the destroyer of branches;  
His sword shines like the sun.

Rocky crags crash down, troll-wives fall,  
Warriors tread Hel's Road, heaven is cloven.

*destroyer of branches*: kenning for fire.

*heaven is cloven*: "In this din shall the heaven be cloven, and the Sons of Muspell ride thence: Surt shall ride first, and both before him and after him burning fire; his sword is exceeding good: from it radiance shines brighter than from the sun; when they ride over Bifrost, then the bridge shall break.... The Sons of Muspell shall go forth to that field which is called Vigrid, thither shall come Fenris-Wolf also and the Midgard Serpent; then Loki and Hrym shall come there also, and with him all the Frost-Giants. All the champions of Hel follow Loki; and the Sons of Muspell shall have a company by themselves, and it shall be very bright. The field Vigrid is a hundred leagues wide each way" (*Gylf* 51).

### Strophe 53

Then comes Hlin's second sorrow  
When Odin fares forth to fight the Wolf  
And bright Frey, Beli's bane, fares against Surt.  
Now must fall Frigg's delight.

*Hlin*: Frigg as protectress. Hlin mistakenly appears in the *Prose Edda* as a separate goddess under Frigg's control: "She is established as keeper over those men whom Frigg desires to preserve from any danger" (*Gylf* 35).

*second sorrow*: Odin's death while fighting Fenrir, Frigg's first sorrow being the death of Balder.

*Beli's bane*: namely Frey. Beli was a giant, perhaps Gerd's brother (cf. *Skirnismal* 16), killed by Frey with a stag's antler (*Gylf* 37). At Ragnarok Frey is without his sword, which he lent to his servant Skirnir for his wooing-by-proxy of Gerd, so he must fight Surt without a weapon (*Lokasenna* 42; *Skirnismal* 8-9).

*Frigg's delight*: namely Odin.

### Strophe 55

Then comes tall Vidar, the Victory-Father's son,  
Fights Fenrir, the corpse-scavenger.  
With his hand he strikes his sword  
Into the heart of roaring Loki's son.

Thus Vidar's father is avenged.

*Vidar*: the silent god, perhaps Odin's successor, having avenged his death. He will survive Ragnarok and live in "the temples of the gods" of the new world (*Vafthrudnismal* 51). In *Vafthrudnismal* 53 and *Gylf* 51 Vidar tears the Wolf's jaws apart, which must reflect an earlier version of his feat. Cf. Jaan Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1987), 56, 204-205: "In the *Rig-Veda* [the Indic kshatriya god] Vishnu is repeatedly praised as the 'three-stepper,' or 'wide-strider,' for taking his crucial primordial three strides that somehow measured out and affirmed the habitable universe for gods and men alike.... There is a remarkable onomastic parallel to Vishnu in the Norse god Vidar, whose very name contains the exhortation 'wider!', even as Vishnu is plausibly analyzable simply as 'Wide'..."; "Vishnu's specific Norse comparand is the 'silent god' Vidar, who according to Snorri's *Gylfaginning* 'has a stout shoe and is almost as strong as Thor. The gods rely on him in all difficult situations.' Of the latter kind is Ragnarok itself: when Fenrir has swallowed and killed Odin, Vidar will stride forth, plant his well-shod foot on the wolf's lower jaw, and with his hand force the upper jaw open until the beast's throat is torn asunder. This is the ultimate mythological exhortation "Wider!" which inheres in Vidar's name as well as Vishnu's, only here it is carried out eschatologically and in retribution rather than primordially in mapping out the universe. Typically much of Norse myth gravitates away from creation and toward Ragnarok: Thor's showdown with the serpent, Vidar's exploit of the wide step."

*Victory-Father*: one of Odin's many names. *Sigfodr* specifies his role in apportioning victory; it is presumably used in this context with some irony.

#### Strophe 56

Then comes Thor, Earth's renowned offspring;  
Odin's son advances to fight the Serpent.  
In his rage Midgard's Protector strikes;  
All men will abandon their homes.  
Back nine footsteps from the Dragon falls Thor  
Dying, yet fearing not dishonor.

*Earth's renowned offspring*: Thor's parents are Odin and Jorth (= Earth), identified here by her alternate name Fjorgyn.

*Back nine footsteps*: i.e. into the nine abodes of the underworld.

*Dying*: from the Dragon's breath, which is poisonous, a traditional element in dragon lore. "Thor shall put to death the Midgard Serpent,

and shall stride away nine paces from that spot; then shall he fall dead to the earth, because of the venom which the Snake has blown at him" (*Gylf* 51).

#### Strophe 57

Sun blackens, earth sinks into the sea,  
Bright stars fall from the sky,  
Smoke and fire surge against Life's Sustainer,  
Tall flames play against heaven itself.

*Life's Sustainer*: Yggdrasil. It is not clear whether the World-Tree survives Ragnarok, though the story of Lifthrasir and Lif suggests that it does.

#### Strophe 59

Yet I see emerging from the ocean  
Another earth, once more growing green.  
Over cascading waterfalls the eagle flies,  
And hunts for fish in the fells.

*hunts for fish*: i.e. returns to its normal peacetime pursuits, no longer searching for battle carrion, as in strophe 50. The eagle, the raven and the wolf are the traditional "beasts of battle" of Northern literature.

#### Strophe 60

On shining Ida-plain the Aesir meet  
And talk of the great earth-encircling Serpent.  
They call to mind their former might  
And Fimbultyr's old runes.

*the Aesir meet*: "Vidar and Vali shall be living, inasmuch as neither sea nor the fire of Surt shall have harmed them; and they shall dwell at Ida-plain, where Asgard was before. And then the sons of Thor, Modi and Magni, shall come there, and they shall have Mjollnir there. After that Balder shall come thither, and Hod, from Hel; then all shall sit down together and hold speech with one another, and call to mind their secret wisdom, and speak of those happenings which have been before: of the Midgard Serpent and of Fenris Wolf. Then they shall find in the grass those golden playing pieces that had belonged to the Aesir" (*Gylf* 53).

*Fimbultyr's old runes*: i.e. the secret wisdom of Odin, acquired in the preceding age. Fimbultyr = "the mighty god," an epithet for Odin.

#### Strophe 61

There on the grass they will find again  
Wondrous tables of gold,  
Which they had owned in yore-days.

*tables of gold*: The significance of these tables is unclear, but their reappearance recalls the idyllic early days of the elder world and suggests a cyclical progression of time back to an earlier stage, beginning a regenerated version of the old golden age. Throughout the concluding strophes of *Völuspá* there is a strong sense not only of change but also of continuity between the old world and the new.

#### Strophe 62

Harvests will grow on unsown acres;  
All ills will be amended; Balder will return.  
He will dwell with Hod in Hropt's Victory-Hall,  
Shrine of the battle-gods.  
Would you know yet more? And what?

*unsown acres*: "In that time the earth shall emerge out of the sea, and shall then be green and fair; then shall the fruits of it be brought forth unsown" (*Gylf* 53).

*Hropt's Victory-Hall*: Valhalla. Hropt = Odin. We should recall a curious detail in the *Prose Edda's* description of Balder: "that quality attends him, that none of his decisions can be fulfilled" (*Gylf* 22). This odd trait evidently anticipates a future time, with Balder reborn and living in Valhalla, when his decisions will finally be fulfilled.

#### Strophe 63

Then can Hoenir choose blood-wood,  
And the sons of two brothers live in wide Vindheim.  
Would you know yet more? And what?

*choose blood-wood*: cast rune lots for prophecy; runes used in divination were often hallowed by sacrificial blood. Hoenir is a god of careful deliberation and therefore prudently consults the oracles. Casting lots

was an ancient Germanic practice: "For omens and the casting of lots they have the highest regard. Their procedure in casting lots is always the same. They cut off a branch of a nut-bearing tree and slice it into strips; these they mark with different signs [i.e. divinatory symbols, runes] and throw them completely at random onto a white cloth. Then the priest of the state, if the consultation is a public one, or the father of the family if it is private, offers a prayer to the gods, and looking up at the sky picks up three strips, one at a time [i.e. three different runes from among those spread on the white cloth], and reads their meaning from the signs previously scored on them [i.e. combines the three into a single meaning]. If the lots forbid an enterprise, there is no deliberation that day on the matter in question; if they allow it, confirmation by the taking of auspices is required" (*Germania* 10).

*the sons of two brothers*: the sons of Balder and Hod. Significantly, Forseti, son of Balder and his wife Nanna, is a god of law and justice.

*Vindheim*: Wind Home, i.e. the heavens.

#### Strophe 64

I see a hall more fair than the sun,  
Thatched with gold in Gimli.  
Therein noble rulers shall dwell  
And evermore delights enjoy.

*Gimli*: currently occupied by the Light-Elves. "At the southern end of heaven is that hall which is fairest of all, and brighter than the sun; it is called Gimli. It shall stand when both heaven and earth have departed; and good and righteous people shall dwell therein" (*Gylf* 17). The name Gimli may mean "fire shelter," which could indicate that the new order after Ragnarok will be immune from the chaotic forces that destroyed the old.

#### Strophe 65

Then comes the Powerful One:  
He who governs everything  
Comes from above to the divine judgment.

*the Powerful One*: perhaps Heimdall, though this strophe, which does not appear in the Codex Regius, is generally regarded as a Christian interpolation, and Snorri has Heimdall and Loki killing each other at Ragnarok (*Gylf* 51). On the other hand, since Heimdall has nine mothers,

he may also, as Turville-Petre suggests, have nine lives.

### Strophe 66

There comes the dark dragon:  
The shining serpent flies up from Dark Mountains;  
Flying over the field Nidhogg bears corpses on his wings.  
Now I must descend.

*Dark Mountains:* Nidafjoll, probably not the Nidavellir of strophe 37, though in the *Prose Edda* they are treated as the same location.

*Nidhogg bears corpses:* i.e. carries the corpses back to the underworld, where he will consume them. The poem thus ends on a note of balanced optimism: The world has been reborn and regenerated, but the dragon Nidhogg survives, though living in Nidafjoll, his proper place.

*I must descend:* back into the underworld.