

Some Controversial Aspects of the Myth of Baldr

Es wird hier der versuch gemacht werden, die ursprüngliche gestalt des Baldrmythus durch eine vergleichung seiner verschiedenen fassungen zu reconstruieren.

—Ferdinand Detter (1894, 495)

1. Introduction

Most students of Scandinavian mythology have ambitions similar to those of Detter, but after two centuries of research they are so far from the desired solution that walking round the mountain of previous scholarship appears to hold out greater promise than adding another stone to it. John Lindow, the author of the most recent book on Baldr, says the following: “My own interest, at least in the present work, has nothing to do with Germanic culture or Germanic religion . . . but rather with the myth in the forms in which we have it and the meaning it might have borne for those who knew it in those forms” (1997, 28). It is not obvious that the most important part of the colossal Baldr wedge is its visible thin edge. Unlike Lindow, I am interested in both the genesis of the myth and its function.

All, rather than some, aspects of the Baldr myth are controversial, but I will address only those central to it, whence the title of my paper. Our view of the development of this myth has been seriously obscured by recourse to comparative religion and the ever-growing indifference to internal reconstruction. The broader the background of a myth, the more similarities present themselves, and the path is lost in the wilderness. Frazer’s, F. R. Schröder’s, and Dumézil’s works are especially characteristic in this respect; Kauffmann and Neckel belong to the same group of scholars. One or two examples will suffice. The burning of the ring Draupnir on Baldr’s funeral pyre has an analog in Ossetian epic poetry (Dumézil 1964, 67–68). Since this observation leads nowhere, it matters little whether we register it or not. Likewise, F. R. Schröder (1941, 8–11) notes that in Slavic fertility cults a barefooted girl was disguised as Iarilo, an event reminiscent of Skaði’s wooing. But does it follow that Skaði, who hoped to marry Baldr but got Njörðr, is a character in a ritual drama on the themes of fertility? Schröder does not say so. What then is the point of his digression? Neckel’s comparison of Baldr with Tammuz, Adonis, and Attis is also of limited importance (1920). Baldr emerges as part of a sizable group

of dying gods, but his death needs no proof from other religions, while our understanding of the origin of the Scandinavian myth is not advanced by this comparison, for despite Neckel's analysis there is no certainty that the story of Baldr reached northern Europe from the East: perhaps we are dealing with a typological parallel. The repertoire of motifs in Eurasian mythology is not too extensive, and the structure of many myths is the same everywhere from Iceland to Ancient Egypt and Babylonia. It may therefore be useful to stay at home and find out what we really know about Baldr, what we can reconstruct with authority, and what riddles only Óðinn can solve.

2. The Myth

(a) Saxo's Version (*Gesta Danorum* liber tertius, 3.1.0–3.3.7; Olrik and Ræder 1931, 63.2–69.26; only the episodes that have a direct bearing on the myth will be recounted briefly)

Balder, Odin's son by a mortal woman, sees Nanna and lusts after her. (Names from *Gesta Danorum* are used here in the form adopted in Davidson and Fisher 1979–80: *Odin*, *Balder*, and *Høther* rather than *Odinus*, *Balderus*, and *Høtherus*.) His courtship is going to be stormy, because Nanna's foster brother Høther, a splendid warrior and a man of exceptional eloquence, also wants to marry her. Høther meets forest maidens guiding the course of battles (valkyries?). They inform him of Balder's plans and advise him against attacking a demigod. Even Nanna's father Gevar is afraid to displease Balder (who, in the meantime, has presented himself as Nanna's suitor), for Balder is invulnerable and cannot be overpowered. However, as Gevar tells Høther, there is a satyr called Miming, the owner of a sword that can kill Balder and a bracelet that increases the wealth of him who bears it. To reach Miming, one must cross a land of perpetual frost. Høther overcomes all obstacles, gets the better of Miming, and obtains the treasures.

While Høther is away, Balder invades Gevar's country and sues for Nanna, who rejects him on the grounds that she is no match for a demigod but apparently because she prefers Høther. Balder, in league with Odin and Thor, equips a fleet and attacks Gevar. To everybody's surprise (including Saxo's), they are defeated and flee. Much later we find out that the forest maidens once gave Høther a coat of invulnerability. Høther marries Nanna, and they leave for Sweden. Balder, although taunted by his enemies, has lost none of his fighting spirit. He returns, and this time Høther loses. But love proves to be more effective than swords, and now that Balder has gained the upper hand of his opponent, he begins to pine away, tormented in his sleep by images of Nanna.

Saxo's account is confusing, for at this juncture we are told of earlier dynastic wars between Sweden and Denmark and about the treacherous Danes' decision to elect Balder their king. A third battle between Balder and Høther ensues in which Høther is defeated. He retires to the wilderness and is, rather unaccountably, cen-

sured by his subjects for hiding himself. Once again the story seems to have come to an end, but, to use Saxo's style, often does a reader of a medieval tale expect the denouement at a wrong moment and is pleasantly disappointed. It turns out that on his way to the wilderness Høther met a group of forest maidens, seemingly different from those mentioned earlier. They assure Høther that all is not lost and that if he succeeds in partaking of Balder's magic food, the victory will be his. However, he is unable to touch this food. He gets from the fairies only a belt of perfect sheen and a girdle that bring victory. The opponents meet again. Høther inflicts a mortal wound on Balder, who dies three days later and is given a royal funeral. Balder is later avenged by Bous, a son of Odin and Rinda.

(b) Snorri's Version (*Snorra Edda, Gylfaginning* chaps. 22 and 49; Holtsmark and Helgason [1962], 27, 62–66)

Baldr, the son of Oðinn and Frigg, is plagued by bad dreams foreboding his death. On Frigg's request, fire, water, iron, and all objects, animals, and birds swear that they will not harm Baldr. Only the mistletoe seemed too young to her, and no promise was exacted from it. The gods' favorite pastime was to meet at the assembly and throw stones or shoot at Baldr. Baldr remained unhurt. His invulnerability irritated Loki, who disguised himself as a woman and went to Fensalir, Frigg's abode. Frigg asked her guest whether she (Loki) knew what the gods were doing at the assembly. Informed of their games, Frigg said that nothing would injure Baldr but, in answer to Loki's leading question, added that only a bush called mistletoe had been passed over in the ceremony of swearing, whereupon Loki tore it out and talked Høðr, a blind god, into throwing it at Baldr. The bush pierced Baldr, and he fell dead.

He was given a splendid ship burial, but the gods could not launch the ship and invited a giantess named Hyrrokkin to perform this deed. Had there been no safe conduct, which guaranteed that Pórr would not mind her presence, he would have broken her skull. However, her unmanageable "steed" (a wolf; the reins were snakes) was probably killed. So was Litr, a dwarf, who happened to be running around: Pórr kicked him into the flames and consecrated the pyre with his hammer. The ring Draupnir was also thrown into the fire. Nanna, Baldr's wife, died of grief, and her corpse was burned with that of her husband.

The gods sent Hermóðr to Hel. She promised to release Baldr if all things on earth wept for him. They did. Only a giantess (Þokk), believed by some to be Loki in disguise, "cried dry tears" (that is, did not cry), and Baldr remained in the realm of the dead. From the eddic lays *Völuspá* 32.5–33.4, *Baldur's draumar* 11, and *Hyndliðar* 29 (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 8, 278–79, 293) we learn that the giantess Rindr bore a son, Váli, to Óðinn. He became a warrior when he was one day old and would neither wash his hands nor comb his hair until he killed his half brother's slayer.

3. Baldr and His Opponent

Baldr's fate is to be killed, lamented, buried, and stay in the kingdom of the dead. A sense of doom hangs even over his ability to pronounce judgments that cannot be altered. He is inseparable from his opponent. According to Snorri, Baldr has a son *Forseti* (literally 'fore-sitter', that is, 'one who presides'), the best judge in the universe. We will disregard the hypothesis about *Forseti*'s being an ancient Phrygian god (Jostes 1930, 29). Since the days of Jacob Grimm he has been identified with the Frisian deity *Fos(e)te*, and Holtsmark (1970, 138) shares the view that *Fosete* is an Old Saxon name. It is not unimaginable that Old Icelandic (OI) *Forseti* is a folk-etymological reshaping of some continental name, but no connection between *Forseti* and *Fosete* (and their bearers) can be established, and Siebs was probably right in denying it (1909, 546–47). *Forseti* must have been proclaimed Baldr's son after the myth of Baldr had acquired its canonical form, since Baldr in his capacity as father does nothing and because no one expected *Forseti* to avenge his parent. Óðinn had to produce Váli, Baldr's half brother, to do the job, and, according to Saxo, Rinda was anything but sympathetic to his plan. *Forseti* is not even mentioned among those present at Baldr's funeral. Meyer observes that Baldr is too young to have a grown son (1910, 332). This witty remark is not fully convincing, for gods and epic characters are timeless: Giselher, for example, is unmarried and consequently always "young," while Guðrún and Kriemhild are women, like Cleopatra, whom age does not wither.

According to Saxo, Baldr was a doughty warrior. Frigg, obliged to listen to Loki's insults, grieves that Baldr is not with the company, for he would have defended her (*Lokasenna* 27), and there are some kennings testifying to Baldr's valor. These facts were noted by the first students of Scandinavian mythology. We can assume that Snorri ignored the evidence of the kennings because his sources told him nothing about Baldr's battles: they praised his strength (if they did even this: a god's name as the base of a kenning carries almost no information) but did not provide him with plots, and the reason for this discrepancy is not far to seek. He is a real warrior who kills his enemies. Chthonic monsters, dragons, and giants (titans) are the usual prey of the conquering gods; heroes are also allowed to kill other famous heroes. The important thing is not to fight well but to triumph over an opponent. No such myth of Baldr exists, and he was not destined to take part in Ragnarök. Consequently, references to his prowess can be dismissed as formulaic praise due every able-bodied man (see esp. Mogk 1905, 192; Kroes 1951, 204–5). Even in Saxo's narrative the nearly invulnerable demigod Baldr is unable to kill his mortal rival. Schier's surprise at the mention of Baldr as the defender of Hrólfr kraki in *Bjarkamál* is fully justified (1995, 130–31). Jan de Vries did not mind translating the name *Baldr* 'der Tapfere' [the bold one]. However, this gloss has little credence, and equally unconvincing is therefore the etymology connecting Baldr with OI *baldr/ballr* 'bold'.

Baldr's role and character can be understood only in connection with those of his murderer, that is, Høðr. In my analysis of Loki's place in the Scandinavian pantheon (Liberman 1992, reprinted in Liberman 1994, 176–234), I found Mogk's arguments irrefutable: Baldr was killed by Høðr, while Loki, whatever his role in the most ancient version of the myth, became Høðr's accomplice only in the (Norwegian-) Icelandic tradition (Mogk 1925). I doubt that Loki mythology owes anything to Ossetian oral tradition (as Abaev thought [1965, 98–109]) and see little similarity between Loki and Syrdon (all the details are in my 1992 paper). Lindow (1997, 52) says the following about me: "the linguist Anatoly Liberman (1992) finds that Loki has to do with beginnings and endings." I said nothing like this, nor am I sure what it means.

In Snorri's, but not in Saxo's, version Baldr and Høðr are brothers, but their kinship rests on a flimsy foundation, for in the *Younger Edda* almost every male god turns out to be Óðinn's son. Hæðcyn and Herebeald, mentioned in *Beowulf* 2426–72, were indeed brothers (their father was Hrēðel), but this circumstance is of questionable value for assessing the Scandinavian myth. We learn that Herebeald was shot during a hunt by Hæðcyn. Nerman (1915) traced Snorri's version of Baldr's death to a mythologized account of a real event; fortunately, a more sober judgment prevailed. Thus, in Olsen's opinion (1924, 164–68), the tragic ends of Baldr and Herebeald are quite different. Neckel's exposition (1920, 141–42) shows how difficult it is to reconcile two statements: (1) the tale of Baldr is a myth, (2) the episode in *Beowulf* reflects a historical occurrence, but it is still the same tale. Neckel has to suggest that the myth is primary, while the names of Hrēðel's sons were borrowed from it to lend glamour to the story. Such a zigzag of historical tradition is hard to believe. Klaeber (1950, xli), whose conclusion is close to Olsen's, says, however, that the story told in *Beowulf* "rather impresses us as a report of an ordinary incident that could easily happen in those Scandinavian communities and probably happened more than once. Maybe the motive was associated at an early date with names suggesting a warlike occupation, like *Here-beald* and *Hæð-cyn* (*Baldr, Høðr*)."¹ He need not have tried to meet Neckel halfway. Although the names are similar, the situations are not. Saxo's and Snorri's versions of the myth share more (much more) than names, but what does a hunt and an accidental death, despite an association with the myth of Adonis, have in common with Loki's or Høðr's hatred of Baldr (endowed with magical invulnerability) and premeditated murder (Snorri) or the defeat of a bitter enemy in battle (Saxo)?

Whether in the oldest version of the myth Baldr and Høðr were divine twins like the Dioscuri cannot be decided with the facts at our disposal, and in this case we should do without the overwhelming but inconclusive evidence of comparative mythology. The most durable interpretation of Baldr and Høðr has been that they are protectors of light and darkness respectively. Opposites acquire their meaning from the nature of the opposition. The bond between them is apparent, and, when they are personified as siblings (parent and child, brother and sister, two brothers,

two sisters, husband and wife), they are always drawn into tales of love and jealousy, the latter involving the death of the more attractive character. Döhring (1902, 51) noted that, since Skaði thought she had chosen Baldr but married Njörðr, there might have been a myth about the rivalry between these two gods. However, only Hóðr is Baldr's murderer in our sources; originally they were opponents and possibly, though not necessarily, brothers.

If scholarship had remained true to its broad idea (Baldr is light, Hóðr is darkness), it would have outlived the exegesis of nature and solar/lunar mythology with its dependence on storms, frost, thaw, sunsets, and the like, and perhaps have formulated a persuasive theory of the Baldr myth. But this did not happen because Baldr was identified too directly with the dying vegetation deities of the East (and ancient Greece), most famously so in Neckel's 1920 book. The affinity between Baldr and, for example, Osiris cannot be called into question. Yet the Baldr of the Eddas is not an immediately recognizable counterpart of the Egyptian god. His attributes are light and beauty (even his residence is called *Breiðablik* 'broad sheen'); the others, as we will see below, have to be reconstructed and can be disputed. In Saxo's version, Høther has all the virtues with which Snorri endows Baldr (cf., among others, Dumézil 1961, 261–66), but the antagonists in his tale are not too different, which deprives it of drama: many battles, inconstant luck, and endless moralizing. The inner logic of the myth supports Snorri's evidence, for when, in a tragedy, one character is lovable and the other loathsome, the first must perish as a matter of course. At some remoter time, Baldr and Hóðr seem to have been worshipped as a sky god and a god of the underworld (calling them demons, rather than gods [Meyer 1910, 325], does not change anything). Many important conclusions follow from this thesis.

A sky god can be the master of the sun, light, rain, thunder, lightning, and vegetation. A chthonic deity is the ruler of the dead, darkness, mantic wisdom, and, like his celestial counterpart, of vegetation, because plants need both light and rain from above and rich soil from beneath. A male deity making the earth green is equally useful in the sky and in the ground, and, wherever he resides, he needs a wife, for what is an unmarried god of vegetation? Vegetation is not all fertility, but it is its integral part. The function of the likes of Baldr and Hóðr partly overlap. They are not only antagonists but also rivals (they fight for the command of the same "turf"), and the idea that they try to win the favors of the same beautiful woman would occur to many.

If Hóðr started his career as a chthonic deity, his blindness is that of the mole, of an enemy of light. For nature mythologists the antiquity of this detail needed no proof, for they equated Hóðr with night or winter (so in Rupp 1866, 424, and Vetter 1874, 197–98, with references to older literature from Rasmus Nyerup and Uhland onward). Comparativists, who approached the problem from a different angle, came to the same conclusion because blind shots turn up in myths all over the world (see especially Schröder 1924, 85–86; 1941, 145–48). However, several

arguments have been advanced to show that Baldr's opponent was not originally blind. *Hqðr* is the base word of four kennings for 'warrior' (see them in Jónsson 1913–16, s.v. "Hqðr"), and Høther is indeed a warrior in Saxo. Snorri knew nothing about Hqðr's prowess, but, perhaps inspired by the kennings, he says that Hqðr was immensely strong. Saxo's characters are heroicized ("faded") gods. In *Gesta Danorum*, Høther, an active and glamorous fighter, could not be represented as blind.

With regard to kennings, Høther's case stands better than Baldr's, for Høther did kill his opponent. However, the following should be taken into account. Some mythic characters are handicapped without being inconvenienced by their defects. For example, Saxo's Ugartha-Locus spends his life in chains, but, unlike Loki and Prometheus, he experiences no discomfort. The same must have been true of blind gods, as opposed to those who were blinded: in the mythic world, the lack of sight did not incapacitate them. Niedner remarks that if Hqðr were conceived as a blind god, Baldr would not have needed a mighty avenger: anyone could have killed a defenseless opponent (1897, 315). He did not take into consideration the special nature of mythological deformities and overestimated the importance of revenge in this tale.

Then there is the name *Hqðr*, which seems to mean 'fight' or 'struggle' or 'battle'. Such a name must have been given to a militant man. In his most important work on the Baldr myth, de Vries explains *Hqðr* as 'der Krieger' [the warrior] (1955, 49), and we return to the idea that a 'blind warrior' is an incongruous appellation. In the context of a myth it may not be so incongruous, but more importantly, the traditional gloss connecting Hqðr's name with battle need not be taken as fully proven. Outside the myth, *Hqðr* as a personal name does not occur in any old Germanic language. It was probably a coinage based on OI *hqð* 'struggle', a word recorded only in poetry, where it was also extremely rare (see Jónsson 1913–16, s.v. "hqð" and "geirahqð"). The evidence of personal and place-names beginning with *Hadu-* and *Hader-* (Neckel 1920, 233–38) is insufficient proof that the male name **Haður* ever existed.

We do not know the exact meaning of *hqð*, but it is characteristic that its modern German cognate *Hader* means 'discontent, discord'. A rather safe Old Slavic cognate of *hqð* and *Hader* is *kotora* 'quarrel' (its modern reflexes also mean 'quarrel, feud, insult; pugnacious', etc.); less reliable is Sanskrit *sátru* 'enemy' (Trubachev 1984, 200–201, with numerous references). OI *hqðr* is an archaic word whose semantic range is beyond reconstruction, but when it was in active use, it may, like *Hader* and *kotora*, have referred more to enmity than to struggle, so that *Hqðr* may have been understood as 'the contentious one', with negative rather than heroic connotations. After surveying the origin of three Vedic divine names, Polomé concluded that "etymology provides the historian of religion precious little help" (1985, 385). Etymology can certainly not tip the scale in solving any problem in the history of religion, but it is useful to know that a possibility exists to interpret the name of the sky god *Baldr* as 'shining', while *Hqðr* may have meant

'bully', regardless of whether the bearer of this name was blind or not. In any case, an eyeless bully sounds more realistic than a blind warrior, whatever the context.

Perhaps the most often repeated objection to Hǫðr's original blindness is that two blind gods—Óðinn and Hǫðr—are unthinkable in one religious system (so also de Vries 1955, 48–49, whose more cautious opinion [1957, 218 n. 3] was that Hǫðr's blindness did not go back to late mythographers but is somehow connected with Óðinn's defect). It is certainly reasonable to expect complementarity rather than a doubling of features in such a system: for instance, Óðinn has lost an eye, while Týr has lost a hand. However, Óðinn's and Hǫðr's defects are incompatible. Óðinn's loss of an eye is a typical case of ritual mutilation, the price a god or a hero pays for acquiring knowledge or a sign of special distinction, the seal of destiny, as it were. Such signs go all the way from giving up or maiming a limb to a semblance of damage (such as the loss of a sandal by Jason). By contrast, Hǫðr is blind by nature. He did not sacrifice his eyesight; he never had it. He is isolated and helpless in Snorri's tale, but we can be sure that in the crude atmosphere of the primitive myth he did not need his eyes to find his way around. Although Óðinn is *hár*, and *hár* is a cognate of Lat. *caecus* 'blind', his faculties seem to be intact. He covers half of his forehead with a hat and is perfectly well at ease. Here is indeed a case in which etymology provides the historian of religion precious little help! The unwillingness to have two visually impaired gods in one family resulted in the bizarre theory that Hǫðr is a hypostasis of Óðinn. This will be discussed in section 5, "Father and Son" (37–38).

Those who insist that Hǫðr in the ancient myth was not blind treat his defect symbolically. Their interpretation is that Hǫðr became a blind force in Loki's hands, that fate is blind, and so forth (Meyer 1910, 323; Krappe 1923, 203; and in many other works). Neckel (1920, 232 n. 1) had great trouble finding an analog of Hǫðr's shot (though he did not doubt that it, too, stems from the Near-Eastern tradition) and believed that Hǫðr was depicted blind to underscore the unintentional character of the murder and Hǫðr's innocence (232–33). But myths are straightforward tales, and it is better not to mine them for allegories and symbols. The same consideration can be directed against Mosher's work (1983). He argues that Hǫðr's role in Baldr's death is incontestable but suggests that Hǫðr's blindness "reminds one instantly of the possibility of deception" and that the scene of Baldr's murder is reminiscent of other scenes of aberration of vision: thus Hǫðr is blind, and Gylfi is shown to be blinded by the magical power of the Æsir. He even draws a parallel between Hǫðr's blindness and the Jewish nation portrayed in the High Middle Ages as the figure Synagogue, whose eyes are blindfolded to indicate her failure to recognize the Messiah (Mosher 1983, 310–13). This is comparative religion, with its penchant for uncontrollable associations, at its weakest. Nor is there any structural similarity between Gylfi's deception and Hǫðr's shot. In the Icelandic stories that both Snorri and Saxo knew, when the aberration of vision is practiced, all the characters except the duped one disappear. Nothing similar happens at the assembly.

It seems that of the arguments against Hǫðr's original blindness only two are worthy of mention: a blind warrior is an improbable figure, while a blind murderer of Baldr would usurp the function of Óðinn. Neither is irrefutable, though we will have to return to the relations between Óðinn and Hǫðr. However, the main difficulty, if we assume that Hǫðr's blindness is a trait of later transmission, is to explain why he was made blind. Not a single reason has been offered except for recourse to symbols. My further investigation will be based on the premise that the kernel of the myth is the enmity between a god (or demon) of light, a supernatural being living in the sky and called Baldr 'the shining one', and a god (or demon) of darkness, a blind chthonic being called Hǫðr 'the contentious one'. Their enmity was ontological, but every myth needs a plot, and to account for Hǫðr's hatred of Baldr, a woman whom both courted was added to the story.

According to Snorri, Nanna is Baldr's wife and Forseti's mother. When Baldr dies, her heart breaks. This could be a romanticized version of a tale in which a woman (like Brynhildr) commits suicide after the death of her beloved, ultimately, a possible echo of suttee. Saxo's Nanna prefers Høther and eventually marries him. It would be tempting to reconstruct a myth in which Nanna, Demeter-like, spends half a year in the underworld and half a year in the sky (see Schier's remarks on this subject [1995, 143]), but in doing so, we would have to go outside the Scandinavian myth, which is not our purpose at the moment. *Nanna* is a near-universal sound complex designating woman (Henning 1908, 477–80—an excellent survey; see also Döhring 1902, 53 n. 1).

It is significant that Loki, who in Saxo stays away from Baldr's drama, has no reason to hate Baldr even in Snorri's account. He is merely jealous of Baldr's popularity, though jealousy is not among his prominent traits. Scandinavians must have revered several chthonic deities. If my reconstruction of the myth of Útgarða-Loki is correct, in the remotest past Loki also was such a deity (Liberman 1992). Later his figure split into an underworld giant (Útgarða-Loki) and a god (Loki). There were several sky gods as well. From the Indo-European pantheon Scandinavians inherited Týr. Likewise, Pórr, a thunder god, had everything to do with the sky. Consequently, love triangles could have had various male participants, but as Týr lost his original function, so did Loki. We have no means of ascertaining whether at one time Loki confronted a sky god and conquered him and whether if such is the case, the Icelandic version of his crime (the instigation of Hǫðr to shoot at Baldr) is traceable to a more ancient myth. All we know is that on Scandinavian soil Baldr's opponent was Hǫðr. Even in the Eddas, Loki is an evil counselor, not a murderer. He gives trouble to Sif, the wife of a truly dangerous opponent, but never approaches Nanna. She is not mentioned in *Lokasenna*, the best proof that no tales of her had been in circulation for centuries.

4. Baldr and the Mistletoe

(a) A Plant or a Sword?

Saxo's Baldr was killed with the sword Miming. In the Eddas, the deadly weapon is the mistletoe. The component *-teinn* enters into several sword names, the most famous of them being *Lævateinn*. The description in *Vglospá* 32.5–8, amplified by Snorri, is so obscure and the mistletoe so ill-suited for the role of a spear that a reconstructed tale has been offered, according to which a sword called *Mistilteinn* inflicted a mortal wound on Baldr. In MacCulloch's words, “[t]he sword-name might easily be mistaken for that of the plant, which would then be supposed to be the instrument of Balder's death” (1930, 136). Among those who thought so, we find Rydberg (1886–89, 1:592–93), Golther (1895, 379), Niedner (1897, 308–13), and von der Leyen (1938, 162). Mogk voiced the same opinion in 1891 (p. 1064) and never changed it. See brief surveys in Boberg 1943, 103, and Kabell 1965, 7–8. F. R. Schröder dismissed the mistletoe as a migratory motif (1924, 91–94). However, no one except Baldr is known to have been killed with the mistletoe, and a migratory motif need not be spurious in any given tale, for few situations in the oral tradition of the world are unique. According to Höckert (1926, 19–20, 28), who followed Müllenhoff and others, *Vglospá* 32.5–8 and 33.1–4 are an interpolation. His arguments are very weak, but even if he were right, the fact would remain that Snorri knew those lines and did not doubt their authenticity, as even Hvidtfeldt, one of the latest supporters of the theory that Baldr was killed with a sword, had to admit (1941, 173–74). To recognize the primacy of the sword is to destroy the entire Icelandic version of the myth, for an object made of iron would have sworn to Frigg not to hurt Baldr. It is therefore hard to understand Schier's statement that in the extant myth the mistletoe does not have the importance usually ascribed to it (1995, 126–27).

Death from a plant is such a common motif that it cannot be dismissed out of hand, as Boberg observes (1943, 103). Nor should we attempt to do so. A puzzled mythographer like Saxo could have replaced the name of a strange plant with a sword, but the reverse process—substituting a plant for a sword—would be contrary to common sense. If we want to do justice to the myth of Baldr's death, we must understand the role of the mistletoe in it.

(b) The Whereabouts of the Mistletoe, and Why the Mistletoe?

The mistletoe does not grow in Iceland. It is known in a very limited area of Norway (Hanssen 1933, 294–314, see the map on p. 313, and 326–27; von Hofsten 1957, 47), and in Sweden only in the south (von Tubeuf 1923, 111–12). Yet nothing points to Sweden as the place where the Baldr myth originated. Consequently, the *Vglospá* poet probably had no knowledge of the plant, and Snorri certainly did not see the mistletoe at home; the same holds for their audiences. This (very old) conclusion is borne out by the fact that the poem and more explicitly Snorri speak of a mistletoe bush (or sprout?) turning into a spear. The relevant lines in the *Vglospá*

are, as already indicated, 31.5–8:

stóð um vaxinn,	vøllom hæri,
miór oc miqc fagr	mistilteinn.

(Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 7)

[there stood full grown / (?) higher than the fields, / slender and very beautiful, / the mistletoe.]

“Higher than the fields” will be discussed below. A particularly damaging word is *stóð* ‘stood’, because the mistletoe does not “stand.” The epithet “very beautiful” also seems to be exaggerated (note that the word *fagr* is not required by alliteration here), unless we agree that the most handsome of all gods must perish by an exceptionally beautiful weapon. *Mistilteinn* was the word intended to be in the line from the start, as evidenced by *miór* and especially *miqc* to match it.

The use of the mistletoe, about whose properties west Scandinavian mythographers knew only from hearsay, cannot be the original element of a Norwegian or Icelandic myth. But one should beware of hasty conclusions like the one at which Kaarle Krohn arrived (1905, 121–22). He followed Sophus Bugge in all major points and traced the myth of Baldr to Scandinavian settlements in England, a country well acquainted with the mistletoe, where it had allegedly developed from Christian legends and much later reached Sweden (whence Baldr) and Finland (whence Lemminkäinen). Krohn made the same mistake many others made before and after him. He reasoned that if the use of the mistletoe in the scene of Baldr’s death is of non-Scandinavian provenance (I mean continental Scandinavia), the whole myth must have been borrowed. This is a non sequitur. There is still another possibility, namely, that in an older Scandinavian version Baldr was killed with a different plant, but for some reasons (to be investigated) it was replaced with the mistletoe.

Comparison between the deaths of Baldr and of King Víkarr in *Gautreks saga* is commonplace. Víkarr perished from a reed in what was devised as mock sacrifice (a seemingly harmless plant turned into a deadly weapon exactly as the mistletoe did). The reed occurs frequently in the folklore of Scandinavia and some neighboring lands. For example, before his death, the mortally wounded Kalevipoeg, the hero of an Estonian epic, takes a reed into his mouth and chews on it (Oinas 1984, 192). The reed’s competitor in magic is the thistle. In addition to Skírnir’s curse that Gerðr, if she refuses to marry Freyr, will be like a thistle either crushed in threshing or filled with some loathsome stuff and sent to kill, there is a runic curse *pistill-mistill-kistill*. Whatever the meaning of this ominous triad (see Hvidtfeldt 1941, 172; Heizmann 1996; Heizmann 1998, 519), both plants are apparently put into one casket (*kistill*).

I would like to suggest that in an earlier version of the myth Baldr was killed with a thistle or more probably with a reed. The origin of Old English (OE) *mistel(tān)* poses some difficulties. Since close cognates of it exist in Latin and Greek (Kluge and Seebold 1995, s.v. “Mistel”), we may perhaps be dealing with

a migratory word (*Wanderwort*). In Scandinavia, not only the plant but also the word *mistil(teinn)* occurred only in connection with Baldr and as a sword name (Fritzner 1972–73, s.v. “mistilteinn”); apparently, it was not needed in any other situation. The Old English compound *misteltān* must have been coined later than the simplex. Works on early borrowings into Old Icelandic do not mention *mistilteinn*, but it is hardly a native word in the Scandinavian languages. In Norway, *ledved* (*led* ‘limb’ + *ved* ‘wood’) is a popular name of the mistletoe; in Sweden, it is *fogellim* ‘bird lime’, *maretulle*, *flygrön*, etc.; in Denmark, *fuglelim* and *flyverøn* (von Tubeuf 1923, 86; von Hofsten 1957, 47; Falk and Torp 1910–11, s.v. “Mistle”). Rooth (1961, 137) notes that in modern Scandinavian plantlore only the name of the mistletoe ends in *-ten* and that it is rare and seems to belong chiefly “to the learned tradition of the pharmacopoeia. Only exceptionally is *mistelten* a popular plant name and it is then used of other *winter green plants*, as, for example, *the ivy*.” *Mistilteinn* is the only Old Icelandic compound ending in *-teinn* that is not a sword name (Rydberg 1886–89, 1:612; Jónsson 1913–16, s.v. “teinn”). The age of OE *misteltān* cannot be determined; it first surfaced in the year 1000 in Ælfric’s gloss (Murray et al. 1989, s.v. “mistletoe”). Such compounds, as opposed to *mistel/mistil*, coined independently in Old English and Old Icelandic, are almost impossible to imagine, especially in light of the aforementioned fact that no one in Scandinavia needed a new name for *viscum album*. Lid (1942, 94) and Rooth (1961, 138) considered OI *mistilteinn* to be a borrowing from Old English, and they were probably right.

Frazer (1913, 2:76–94) took it for granted that in the original myth Baldr was killed with the mistletoe and built his entire theory on this assumption, but years of research did not uncover Baldr’s cult outside Scandinavia. Even Scandinavia is too broad a concept, though Schier 1992 and 1995 again made the idea of Baldr in Denmark acceptable; with regard to Germany and West Germanic, Helm’s skepticism (1945; 1953, 273–75; on Helm see Kroes 1951, 202) seems to be more realistic than E. Schröder’s positive conclusion (1922), while the Second Merseburg Charm admits of too many interpretations, and *balder* does not look like a name in it. Baldr was a Scandinavian god, and in Scandinavia the mistletoe would not have been chosen as an instrument of his death.

The mistletoe as a deadly weapon also causes surprise, because in superstitions all over the world, this plant promotes fertility, makes one invulnerable, serves as an antidote against poison, etc. Neckel had, therefore, to formulate a hypothesis, according to which killing and bringing to life are two sides of the same function (1920, 175–99). This is true of folklore in a general way, but leaves all questions about Baldr open. Wolf-Rottkay points out that the evil effects of the mistletoe were recorded, even if rarely, in folklore and old literature (1967, 340). Yet neither the good nor the bad qualities of this plant were known in Norway, let alone in Iceland, from direct observation. When its fame reached Scandinavia, the word *mistilteinn*, translated from Old English, was drawn into the semantic field of

-mistr ‘mist’ (in *pokumistr*; in Modern Icelandic, *mistur* exists as an independent word). This is an important field, for the hero of an Icelandic fairy tale loses himself in the mist before some fatal meeting; a curtain of mist separates the realm of human beings from the world of dangerous supernatural creatures. This motif is old, for Saxo’s Høther also chances on the lodge of wood maidens after losing his way in the mist. The valkyrie name *Mistr* shows that the mist was associated with death for Icelanders as well.

Legends of the mistletoe must have reached Scandinavia from England. The borrowing and reshaping of OE *misteltān* resulted in its ousting of the indigenous plant—*pistill* ‘thistle’ or *reyrr* ‘reed’ (*reysproti* is used in *Gautreks saga* in the scene of the king’s death)—from the myth of Baldr’s death. A foreign word with its frightening connotations and sounding like a kenning for a sword must have appealed to poets. Once *mistilteinn* attached itself to the Baldr myth, it became widely known, a sword was named after it, and other sword names with *-teinn* as the second component came into existence, though the plant that killed Baldr turned into a spear or an arrow, not a sword. Neckel’s elaborate construction should be discarded as unrealistic. It could have been saved only if a common European or Eurasian myth of a god killed with the mistletoe existed. But not a trace of it has been found, and it is most unlikely that *mistilteinn* superseded some word like *ledved* or *fogellim* in the original story. On the other hand, part of Bugge’s and Krohn’s idea can be rescued: the Baldr myth is native, but the name of the plant was indeed taken over from abroad (England).

A question of no small importance is where Loki found the fatal plant. According to an emended line in *Völuspá*, it grew *völlom hæri*. The *Younger Edda* contains Frigg’s answer to Loki: “Vex viðarteinungr einn fyrir vestan Valhöll, sá er mistilteinn kallaðr” [There grows a seedling west of Valhöll that is called mistletoe] (*Gylfaginning* chap. 49; Holtsmark and Helgason [1962], 63). This sentence is one of several in which alliteration points to a versified source, lost to us but known to Snorri (for a full list of such lines see Lorenz 1984, 559–60 n. 13). The phrase *völlom hæri* has been discussed many times. Fritzner says “it grows in a high place” (1972–73, s.v. “*mistilteinn*”). The question is why this detail was mentioned and what is meant by a high place. As noted above, the *Völuspá* poet seems to have thought that the mistletoe is a tree. Strophe 32 opens with the words:

Varð af þeim meiði,	er mær sýndiz,
harmflaug hættlig,	Höðr nam scióta.

This is the text in Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 8. “Er mær sýndiz” is Karl Hildebrand’s reading (assuming *mær* to be an obscure variant of *miór*), and the meaning then comes out as “The tree that looked slender turned into a dangerous weapon bringing grief.” (Rasmus Rask in fact emended to *miór*.) The Codex regius has “mer” (*m* with the Tironian note for *er*), while the 1787–1828 Copenhagen edition gives “er mér sýndiz” [as it seems to me]. This reading is arguably the worst and the least reliable: who would expect a polite disclaimer in such a passage?

Kabell (1965, 8–10) argued that *mistilteinn* is a *heiti* for Hǫðr, preferred *vollo hæri* of the Codex regius to *vollom hæri*, and took *vollo* for the dative of *völva* ‘seeress’. His translation is: “There stood full-grown, (already) higher than I (the *völva*) do, slender and very beautiful, a doomed youth.” He regarded *meiðr* as another *heiti* for ‘man’. Given this interpretation, the mistletoe disappears from the myth, and Snorri is said to have misunderstood *Vølospá*. Edzardi remarked that Bugge’s derivations of eddic names are “indisputably resourceful, like everything Bugge has to offer, but are they really more than a wasteful exercise of brilliant ingenuity?” (Edzardi 1882b, 5, my translation). This is also the impression Kabell’s work leaves. *Mistilteinn* was, in all likelihood, a calque of OE *misteltān*, the name of a plant celebrated in magic. The chance of its use as a *heiti* for ‘man’, especially considering its later use as a sword name, is vanishingly small.

Another interpretation is Neckel’s (1920, 40–41). In his opinion, the mistletoe was “higher than the field(s)” because either nothing at all or very low grass grew around it (Neckel accepted the fact that both the *Vølospá* poet and Snorri were unaware of the properties of the mistletoe). He thought that the wasteland suggested by the poet accords well with the location west of Valhöll since Valhöll is situated in the far west, beyond Bifröst: “Paulus Diaconus already knows that Wodan and Frea have their residence west of heaven, because, when Wodan looks out of the window, he faces east. It follows that the region west of Valhöll is completely outside of this world—reason enough to represent it as desolate and barren” (my translation). Neckel also quotes Sigrún’s words from *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana qnnor* 49 that it is time for her to ride “fyr vestan vindhláms brúar” [west of the bridge of the wind helmet (= sky)]. It is probable that in the eddic context “west of” really suggests “far from,” but under no circumstances can OI *völlr* ‘field, plain’ mean ‘wasteland’, as Olsen pointed out (1924, 175 n. 1), and the question about *vollom hæri* remains unanswered.

We read in Snorri that “Loki tók mistiltein ok sleit upp ok gekk til þings” (*Gylfaginning* chap. 49; Holtsmark and Helgason [1962], 63). It is not clear whether he tore out the mistletoe (that is, tore it out of the ground) or tore it off (that is, from the tree on which it grew). See the short summary in Lorenz (1984, 562 n. 15), who says that an exact gloss is unimportant, for only the result of Loki’s action counts. However, a good deal depends on this gloss. Detter (1894, 496) considered *vollum hæri* incompatible with tearing out the mistletoe and with its location in the vicinity of Valhöll. He thought of a plant growing on a tree over the field (the same in Gras 1932, 293–94). Incidentally, he too was prone to exercises of brilliant ingenuity and suggested that *Beowulf* 2439—the Herebeald-Hæðcyn episode—“miste mercleses ond his mæg ofscēt” [missed his mark and shot his sibling] is a corruption of “*misteltāne his mæg ofscēt” [(he) shot his sibling with the mistletoe] (499); he offered a similar reconstruction of a line in *Ynglinga saga* (501–2).

Kauffmann (1902, 253–54) says that the eddic mistletoe grew on an extraordinarily tall and old tree; approximately the same statement can be found in Gering

1927, 44, note on *Vøluspá* 32.3. Much spoke of a branch (1923, 104), while Lincoln (1982, 81–83) and Dieterle (1986, 303–4 n. 13) returned to Kauffmann’s idea. Dieterle even suggested that “Loki, who has shoes that enable him to walk in the air, could certainly pull up the mistletoe even from a branch far above the ground.” This is true enough. He could also have turned into a huge bird and broken off the bough with his beak; he was a god of many tricks and rare capabilities. De Vries remarks that a death caused by a parasitic plant must have made an especially strong impression on people (1957, 224). He, like Kauffmann, Much, and several others, evidently believed that the Norwegian poet (Kauffmann insisted on the non-Icelandic origin of the scene) knew exactly what he was talking about. But this, as I have tried to show, is unlikely. Wolf-Rottkay (1967, 342–43) compared the phrase *vøllum hæri* with Guðrún’s often-cited simile: “Svá var minn Sigurðr hiá sonum Giúca, sem væri geirlaucr ór grasi vaxinn” (*Guðrúnarqviða in fyrsta* 18.1–4) and “Svá var Sigurðr uf sonom Giúca, sem væri grønn laucr ór grasi vaxinn” (*Guðrúnarqviða qnnor* 2.1–4) [My Sigurðr was to Giúki’s sons as garlic (green leek) towering over grass] (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 204, 224). Olsen compared the same passages (1924, 175 n. 1), but he did not go as far as Wolf-Rottkay, who suggested that the mistletoe was not higher than the field but only more visible, more perfect, than the surrounding plants. However the half-line in *Vøluspá* makes the impression that *vøllom hæri* was used in its literal sense. Also, the garlic (or green leek) in Guðrún’s lament is really taller than the grass around it.

There may be some obscure allusion to the magic properties of the “high” mistletoe in the verse. In a legend Müllenhoff included in his collection of folklore from Schleswig-Holstein and Lauenburg (1845, 378–79, no. 509), it is said that when a lilac (or elder) bush east of the Nortorf church becomes so tall that it will be possible to tie a horse under it, the whole world will be plunged into war. Weinhold (1849, 65–66) refers to this legend in connection with *ragnarök* and the prophecy that the temporary conqueror of all lands will eventually be vanquished by a white-haired king, a counterpart of Baldr, but we should rather pay attention to the size of the bush. Was there an age-old superstition that a bush (shrub, tree) of tremendous height did not augur well for peace? And did the audience of *Vøluspá* react to a detail we would have overlooked, were it not connected with the hapless mistletoe? It is preferable to avoid such flights of imagination, not only because Snorri did not mention the height of the tree, but because the practice of reconstruction requires self-discipline: there is no use multiplying unverifiable and unfalsifiable hypotheses.

The best way is to take both texts literally and come up with the following result. West of Valhöll, a young, slender tree of great beauty stood high above the field; it was called mistletoe. Loki pulled up the tree by the roots, went to the place where the gods were throwing all kinds of objects at Baldr, gave the tree to Höðr, and directed his hand. The tall, slender tree made an excellent spear. It flew through the air, pierced Baldr, and Baldr fell dead. This is a perfectly clear picture,

from which it follows that neither the poet nor Snorri had an idea of how the mistletoe grows and what it looks like. Their ignorance was the price they paid for using the word *mistilteinn* whose exact meaning they did not know.

However, Snorri's report raises numerous questions. Some of them have been addressed, but their discussion was overshadowed by the role and characteristics of the mistletoe. One can agree that the gods enjoyed watching sharp and heavy things bounce off Baldr's body, but it is less obvious why he did not object to becoming a live target. (It is customary to underscore Baldr's passivity, and Baldr has often been likened to Christ. Despite everything Bugge said on this subject [1889], there is hardly any similarity between the two. Christ was not passive and did not bear a charmed life. He sacrificed himself for a purpose of which he was fully aware.) Loki had never shown ill will toward Baldr (see above [25] that jealousy was not among his vices). It is therefore hard to understand why he disguised himself on his visit to Frigg's abode. Unless the fact of Baldr's partial invulnerability was common knowledge, such an idea would not have occurred to Loki. In any case, he could not expect that Frigg would reveal her secret to a perfect stranger. Kauffmann (1902, 136–69) compared the myth of Baldr's life (as he called it) and the fairy tale of death hidden in some secret place (of the type "shoot the duck, in the duck you'll find an egg, in the egg you'll find a needle; break the tip of the needle, and I'll die"). These plots have nothing in common, because Baldr's life is not hidden in the mistletoe (see Mogk 1905, 191–92, and Much 1908, 363–66) and because the person who informs his enemy of the only way to kill him is inevitably the villain himself. The argument that *fólgin* in *Vøluspá* 31.4 ("Ec sá Baldri, blóðgom tívor, Óðins barni, ørlög fólgin") means 'hidden' is untenable. The seeress says: "I saw Baldr's destiny." But even if the gloss 'hidden' were justified, her message would be: "I saw Baldr's destiny still hidden from others" (rather than "... predetermined for him").

De Vries (1955, 57) believed that Frigg as a woman was not allowed to witness the initiation (in his opinion, the Baldr myth reflects an initiation procedure), which explains her astounding question about what the gods were doing at the assembly. But the stranger is also a woman (or looks like a woman) and would have been no better informed than Frigg, who for some reason guessed that the visitor had arrived from the place of action. Frigg does not seem to have been excluded from the entertainment; she is simply at home. (And is it not more natural for men to hurl rocks and shoot spears?) Also, this entertainment was a daily occurrence, and initiation is a one-time event, even if protracted. Surprisingly, Frigg's "female visitor" gave "her" hostess a full account of the game, and, even more surprisingly, Frigg, obedient to the Proppian function "the hero/heroin unwittingly supplies the villain with the information he/she seeks," immediately divulged the secret of Baldr's near invulnerability. If this secret was so easy to obtain, one wonders why the whole world had not known it before Loki's expedition. His aim fulfilled, Loki approaches Høðr, a blind man, and asks innocently why he is not participating in

the sport! When Baldr fell, the gods did not punish the murderer, allegedly because the use of weapons was prohibited at the assembly. But it could not be too difficult to catch someone who stood at a distance of a spear throw from his victim. Loki would not have escaped either: when the gods decided to get hold of him, none of his ruses worked.

The funeral scene also poses several problems. Hermóðr agrees to go and negotiate with Hel, but the gods make the pyre without waiting for the outcome of his mission. Although the ship Hringhorni must have been used more than once in the past, this time the gods were unable to launch it. A giantess, it would seem, would have been the last person they would have invited to assist them. Höfler (1951, 351 n. 35) is right in pointing out that the eddic giants were not thought to be larger than the gods, as evidenced by the many unions among them. The same holds for dwarves, who are tiny creatures only in later romances and folklore. Surely Gerðr was not taller than Freyr. In similar fashion, Alvíss could not have been so diminutive if he hoped to marry Pórr's daughter. But even a giantess of fabulous strength (exceeding that of all the male gods) would have had to push the ship from behind (cf. "guman ūt scufon . . . wudu bundenne" [the men shoved out the well-braced vessel] [*Beowulf* 215–16; Klaeber 1950, 9]). She, however, "gekk . . . á framstafn nōkkvans ok hratt fram í fyrsta viðbragði" [went to the stem (prow) of the ship and launched it at the first shove] (*Gylfaginning* chap. 49; Holtsmark and Helgason [1962], 64). Neckel comments on the archaic words in this passage (1920, 242), but not on the strange procedure of pulling rather than pushing Hringhorni (assuming that *hratt* means 'pulled').

Pórr's intention to kill Hyrrokkin has no justification. The same holds for the dwarf Litr. He has done no one any harm, but Pórr kicks him into the fire. If the gods were present at the scene all the time, it is unclear why they had to arrive at the funeral again and in state. Some time seems to have passed between Hermóðr's departure and the funeral. Hyrrokkin's role has not been prepared for by anything in Snorri's narrative, but a massive turnout of mountain and frost giants at the ceremony is downright puzzling. The identity of Pókk is another great puzzle (Loki in disguise? Hel in disguise? [This is de Vries's suggestion (1955, 45).] Or simply a hostile giantess?).

Snorri is such a wonderful storyteller and the picture he paints is so gripping that loose ends in his tale are hard to notice. Yet there they are, and it is important that he was not bothered by them. Scholars tried to rationalize the account given in the *Younger Edda*, and Snorri's reputation suffered in the attempt. The first thunderous Snorri basher was Viktor Rydberg (for a detailed analysis of the scene of Baldr's death see Rydberg 1886–89, 2:285–91), who did not mince words ("absurdity," "grotesque," "burlesque") in tearing Snorri to pieces. In his opinion, Snorri took the deeply symbolic and allegorical strophes of *Húsdrápa* literally. Whether Rydberg, steeped in the ideas of romanticism, understood Úlfr Uggason (the author of *Húsdrápa*, containing a description of Baldr's funeral as it was

represented in the carvings in Óláfr pá's hall) better than Snorri did is open to doubt.

The next severe critic was Eugen Mogk (1923). His idea that Snorri reshaped his material into “novellas” exercised a profound influence on students of Scandinavian mythology. It became permissible to ascribe any deviation in Snorri's tales from the extant poetic sources to his irresponsible treatment of skaldic and eddic tradition. Mogk's followers never asked whether Snorri, a medieval author, was free to rewrite the myths at will and whether he ever went beyond conflating different versions, embellishing a description, clarifying a detail, and so forth, that is, whether he overstepped the laws of oral tradition. In defending Snorri, Dumézil cited analogs of his tales from various cultures, but Mogk did not doubt the authenticity of Snorri's plots; he questioned his editorial practice. A similar case is the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*: they too are authentic, but most texts that served as the Grimms' originals were altered before publication. Yet it seems that Snorri was unlike the Grimms, and his treatment of the Baldr myth provides the most convincing refutation of Mogk's thesis.

With his genius for story telling and instinct for business, Snorri could not be so naïve as to overlook at least some of the oddities in his tale. Apparently, it did not occur to him to straighten the curves in the poems he used. He had before him the condensed strophes of *Húsdrápa* and verses like “Hǫðr nam at scióta” [Hǫðr made a shot], and by combining them he told the story as best he could. There is no evidence that he saw the carvings immortalized in *Húsdrápa*. Höfler did not exclude such a possibility (1951). His hypothesis that the style of the carvings was largely the same as that of rock drawings is hard to prove for chronological reasons, as he well knew, but this does not invalidate some of his suggestions.

Among the many strange events related by Snorri of special importance is Loki's trip to Fensalir. Less dangerous than Hermóðr's or any of Þórr's, it was not much shorter, for Frigg's residence *Fensalir* ‘Fen Hall(s)’ must have been situated under water, that is, in the underworld (see Edzardi's excellent work on this subject [1882a] and cf. Sága's residence Søkkvabekkr and the wolf's name *Fenrir*). Loki's inquiry was certainly connected with the plant, but his easy victory over Frigg shows that some myths pertaining to the betrayal and death of Baldr had been forgotten by the thirteenth century. A link is missing, and without it even Snorri failed to turn an accidental cohesion of details (encoded in kennings and verses) into a fully convincing whole. I will attempt to supply this link and thereby join the host of those who have made it their business to reconstruct the Baldr myth.

According to Snorri, Frigg did not exact an oath from the mistletoe because she considered it to be too young. This explanation makes little sense: a plant is young today and mature tomorrow. (However, it can be argued that in mythology and epic poetry nothing ages: if Guðrún remains a blooming bride as long as she lives, the mistletoe, once young, is always young.) Lincoln (1982, 82–83) analyzed the oath in light of the fairy tale plot in which the central character is asked to

perform a seemingly impossible task like “come to my place not by day and not at night, not on foot and not on horseback, not dressed and not naked.” Frigg, as Lincoln explains, demanded allegiance to her son from things organic and inorganic, but the mistletoe, which retains its color and leafage through the winter, when its host organism has been stripped bare, is neither deciduous nor evergreen. He says (82):

It is thus seen to be yet another interstitial entity, falling outside the categories of such a classificatory system, and it is for this reason, I submit, that the mistletoe laid Baldr low. Seemingly protected by binding oaths from all dangers—organic and inorganic; plants and animals; apeds, bipeds, and quadrupeds; evergreen and deciduous—Baldr proved vulnerable to an apparently harmless object which escaped a neat and logical system of categorization. It is not the inherent properties of the mistletoe which make it dangerous, but the inability of the taxonomic structure and classifying mind to deal with its peculiarities. Moreover, it is this same interstitial position which accounts for the veneration of *Viscum album* among the Celts as a sacred plant and panacea, as well as its use in Christmas celebrations as that object whose presence obliterates all rules of propriety.

Lincoln’s reasoning presupposes that the original plant in the Scandinavian myth of Baldr’s death was the mistletoe, but it was most probably not. Outside Scandinavia, the mistletoe is not known as a tool of death either. Evergreens typically accompany fertility rites. Such are ivy, holly, and the fir tree. There is nothing special in the mistletoe. Rebuses of the type composed and solved by Lincoln have their place in Lévi-Strauss’s studies, not in folklore. Those who believed in the tale of Baldr’s death would not have produced or deciphered the code of such a mythologeme.

Yet it cannot be doubted that in the ancient myth the plant which killed Baldr looked harmless. At an early stage in the development of Baldr mythology, a certain plant, for instance, the reed, was probably sacred to Baldr, as the myrtle was sacred to Aphrodite. The authors of two main works on *baldrsbrá* arrived at irreconcilable conclusions (Palmér 1918; Flodström 1932). An association between Baldr and a beautiful white flower came about late and is due to folk etymology (Holtsmark 1964b, 78), but the idea that Baldr is connected with some plant may rest on ancient memories (John Stanley Martin held a similar opinion [1974, 30–31], though he did not go beyond the subject of *baldrsbrá*). Whatever the age of the motif of all things swearing not to hurt Baldr, this plant was passed over as loyal to Baldr by definition. As usual, a god or a hero endowed with supernatural strength can be killed only with his own sword. In Baldr’s case it was his special plant that had the power to kill him. A hypothesis along these lines has been advanced only once and in passing (“... ein Gott fällt eben durch den Zweig, der ihm heilig sein soll? Wie andre nordische Götter das leuchtende Schwert niederstreckt, das ihre geweihte Waffe war?” [von der Leyen 1938, 162]).

Baldr’s plant grows west of Valhöll. In Snorri’s account, events develop too quickly: Loki discovers Frigg’s secret, “takes” the mistletoe, tears it off, goes to the assembly, and meets Hóðr. But he had to cross the whole world from Fensalir to

Valhöll, find the plant somewhere west of it, and move with “the bush” to Ásgarðr, where the gods were entertaining themselves. Neckel need not have conjured up a piece of wasteland west of Valhöll, but the place was indeed situated at the farthest end of the eddic universe. The phrase *fyr vestan* occurs in the Codex Upsaliensis and in two other manuscripts. Its variant is *firir austan* (see the apparatus in Sigurðsson et al. 1848, 173 n. 16). Since the words *vex*, *viðarteinungr*, and *Valhöll* alliterate regardless of the adverb standing before *Valhöll*, the best variant cannot be reconstructed, and the fact that *vest* begins with *v* cannot be used as proof of its authenticity. *Vestan* may have been substituted for *austan* to make the alliteration more noticeable (such a device is rather common in *Beowulf*, for example).

Many translators and students of the *Younger Edda* prefer ‘east of’, and the only arguments in support of ‘west of’ came from the nature mythologists, who associated the west with the sunset (= Baldr’s death; so Mogk 1879, 496) or with the crescent moon (Jostes 1930, 441; cf. similar lunar fantasies in Döhring 1902, 98–101). (Is it worth noting that, since evil, terrifying, and hostile places in the eddic myths are usually located on the eastern or northern edge of the world [Steblin-Kamenskij 1982, 53–54], a plant having its home west of Valhöll would look less dangerous than if it struck roots east of this place?) Wherever Baldr’s plant really grew, it was far from the gods’ assembly. Saxo’s Høther also had to go to the extreme north to obtain Miming’s sword, with which he wounded his opponent. Both Fensalir and Valhöll make one think of the dead, and only in the kingdom of the dead could the secret of Baldr’s death be obtained. This idea has often been advanced.

The secret must have pertained to the exact location of the plant. We will never know how Loki duped Frigg. In fairy tales, the villain often pretends to be the victim’s best friend, and Loki may have said something like this: “I fear for the safety of the plant. I’ve heard that frost giants are searching for it. You need someone whom you will trust and who will guard it day and night. If I knew where it grows, I would keep an eye on it and defend it against the giants.” The earliest name of the villain in the ancient myth is lost. Loki was originally a chthonic deity, and there were others, such as Hel. Still another one may have been Høðr. The name varied from community to community, and by the end of the first millennium A.D. no one knew for sure who killed Baldr. This is a more natural hypothesis than Schück’s (1904, 28) that two different stories merged into one: the story was the same, but the name of the murderer depended on local tradition. In *Völuspá* and the *Younger Edda*, Loki and Høðr are already Æsir, and the guilt is divided between them, though the murderer is Høðr. If Pókk is Hel rather than Loki, she too is privy to the tragedy. The mistletoe superseded the reed (let us call it this for the sake of the argument) at the time of intense Scandinavian-British contacts, that is, at the height of the Viking Age when English legends and superstitions became popular in Norway and Iceland. The plant’s characteristics, whether botanical or taxonomic, have nothing to do with the original myth.

5. Father and Son

The first to have proposed that Hóðr is a hypostasis of Óðinn was probably Detter, who refused to allow two blind gods to exist in one pantheon. Since fratricide is an ancient and widespread motif in all Eurasia, he suggested that in the earliest version of the myth Baldr was killed by Váli (Detter 1894, 508–9). Originally, he says, the instigator was Óðinn, not Loki; Þókk is also Óðinn (!). At some time in the past, Óðinn had thrown his spear at a tree, and it became indistinguishable from other branches. When trees swore not to harm Baldr, nobody thought of exacting an oath from this fake branch, and at the right moment it regained its genuine form. The mistletoe usually grows on the sides and underside of branches, so that the disguise was complete (505; also Detter and Heinzel 1903, 44, note on stanza 33.1, a case is made for the *Vglospá* poet's knowledge of how the mistletoe grows). Kauffmann (1902, 250) insisted that Baldr was sacrificed to Loki, not to Óðinn, yet he shared Detter's idea that the deed was done with Óðinn's weapon. Höfler arrived at a similar conclusion (1934, 236–37; 1952, 28–30).

The proposal that the real murderer of Baldr is Óðinn militates against everything related in the Eddas. Baldr's dreams forebode a catastrophe, Frigg tries to avert it; through an oversight she fails; Baldr dies; Óðinn realizes that this death will have fatal consequences; the gods grieve as never before and make a desperate attempt to buy out Baldr from the underworld; their attempt is thwarted, and *ragnarök* follows Baldr's death. Given this background, it is impossible to believe that Baldr was killed by or sacrificed to Óðinn because Óðinn is an evil god (*Bólverkr*) or because he needs the choicest warriors in Valhöll (so Turville-Petre 1964, 115, 119), or because there is a story in which a father kills his son. Meyer (1910, 323) also wondered why Óðinn should have assassinated Baldr, but his objections are not very strong, for he thought that Detter's idea was obvious nonsense and did not deserve elaborate refutation. In this he was mistaken.

Herebeald's accidental death and Christ's passion can be cited as analogs of the Baldr myth only if disparate motifs rather than entire structures are compared, but here even the motifs are not similar. The tale of a father fighting and killing his son has a strict morphology: (1) while traveling in distant lands, the hero meets a woman whom he leaves before their son is born, (2) he gives her a treasure, a keepsake by which the child can be recognized in the future, (3) the child grows supernaturally fast and embarks on a search for his father, (4) he meets him but refuses to reveal his name, (5) he perishes in single combat (the literature on this subject need not be surveyed here; I borrowed the five-point scheme from Hoffmann 1970, 29). The Baldr myth contains none of these elements, while the death of a young man by his father's hand is precisely what needs proof. Strangely de Vries, although he realized that the duel between father and son is the culmination of a sequence of events always told in the same order, incorporated the Óðinn-Baldr episode into his analysis of *Hildebrandslied* (1953, 273).

Later de Vries changed his mind and explained the tale of Baldr's murder within the framework of the initiation rite. F. R. Schröder (1962, 332–34) half-heartedly supported de Vries 1955, whereas Fromm (1963, 294–98) accepted his idea without reservations. However, few features of initiation are recognizable in the Scandinavian myth, and, most importantly, Baldr's death is not followed by his rebirth. This is true even if the end of *Vgospá* is old and owes nothing to the story of Christ's resurrection and if we declare Váli Baldr reborn. Baldr does not return as initiates should: he reemerges in the new world with Hóðr (to be killed again?) and under his own name. Nor does Hermóðr's visit to Hel or Óðinn's journey to meet a seeress in *Baldrs draumar* bear any resemblance to the harrowing of hell.

In one work after another it is emphasized that throwing objects at Baldr is reminiscent of stoning an effigy in seasonal rituals (sometimes throwing stones at the place of a person's death would be a sign of respect for the deceased [Kauffmann 1902, 257–60]) or that initiates undergo a similar trial. Stoning, we are told, used to be a bloody affair at the dawn of paganism before it acquired its ludic character and turned into a game, but the mock sacrifice of King Víkarr shows how serious at one time such games were meant to be. Again it would pay to avoid the lures of comparative mythology. The gods needed Baldr, for his violent death would have caused the breakdown of their universe, and regularly tested his invulnerability. The results of the test made them happy. Quite naturally, Baldr shared the gods' concerns and willingly participated in what everybody came to regard as entertainment. He was not passive: he was "it" in this game.

No doubt over the centuries the Baldr myth absorbed motifs from other tales, popular and sacral, lost its original simplicity, and acquired new motivations. A comparison of Saxo's and Snorri's versions shows how fluid this plot was: suffice it to say that in *Gesta Danorum* the gods fight on Høther's side against Balder (Kauffmann 1902, 244, 256). Merging eddic characters and looking for hypostases is an unprofitable occupation. It allows any god (giant, dwarf) to become anybody else, as happened under Rydberg's pen. Hóðr should remain Hóðr, a blind god distinct from the one-eyed All-Father Óðinn, and there is no justification in the idea of Baldr's being sacrificed to Loki or Óðinn, for he was murdered, not sacrificed.

6. Baldr's Death and the Gods' Grief. Baldr and Fertility (Vegetation)

When the gods saw Baldr fall dead, they were dismayed and broke into tears. Later Hel promised to let Baldr return if he were wept out by everybody in the world. Only Þókk did not weep, and Baldr stayed among the dead. Tears occupy a prominent place in this myth. Although lamentation typically follows the death of a god in Near Eastern rituals and is even "prescribed under heavy penalties" (Phillpotts 1920, 129–30), in old Germanic literature men never cry (see especially Pàroli 1990, 240, and 1992, 142–43, on tears in Old Icelandic poetry). Consequently, the reac-

tion of those who witnessed Baldr's death and Hel's demand are unusual. Even if Neckel's idea on the importation of the Baldr myth from the East were sustainable, the ethos of medieval Scandinavia could have been expected to suppress such a demeaning detail as men in tears. Yet Snorri allowed the gods to weep. See Lindow's attempt to interpret this episode (2002). Frigg's tears are not emphasized in the *Younger Edda*, and there is no need to compare Frigg and *mater dolorosa*, as is done in Näsström 1995, 112, who may have followed Bugge's lead.

However insignificant analogs from other religions may be in this case, it is a fact that in the mythology of many nations a weeping deity controls rain. Such is the Greek cloud goddess Nephele, the mother of Phrixos and Helle (their flight on a ram is the beginning of the story of the golden fleece). Tears are a constant attribute of a rain god in myths from intertropical America. Firstborns were sacrificed to this divinity, and it was considered to be a good omen if on their way to the altar they cried, though usually the god himself was represented as weeping (Joyce 1913, 367). In the beliefs described by Joyce, thunder, lightning, rain, and the wind are interwoven. In Saxo's account, Baldr, in order to quench his soldiers' thirst, pierced the earth, whereupon a spring gushed forth. This place, Saxo says, was named after him (*Gesta Danorum* 3.2.12; Olrik and Ræder 1931, 67, lines 8–13, note on line 11). Like *Baldersbrá*, *Baldersbrynd* was connected with Baldr later (Knudsen 1928), but an association between Baldr and water in different forms may be old. According to Saxo, when Balder's burial mound was broken into, a wall of water (usually it is fire) stopped the thieves (*Gesta Danorum* 3.3.8).

In some form the idea that Baldr is a sky god, sun god, or fertility god has existed in Old Norse scholarship since the end of the seventeenth century. Kauffmann's opening chapter makes new surveys unnecessary (1902, 1–18, see 1–13 for early theories). In Gering 1927, 43, note on stanza 32.1, the thesis that Baldr is a god of light is presented as uncontested truth. Motz (1991, 101–2) wonders why, if Osiris, Tammuz, Baldr, and others are really vegetation gods, their death is represented as accidental and why they lack specific attributes of their function. However, neither Osiris nor Baldr perishes accidentally. The myth of Adonis has come down to us as a pretty tale, far removed from its archaic sources. More important is the question about attributes, especially Baldr's. They may have existed but appear before us in semiobliterated form. It would make the case easier if Baldr emerged in art and poetry wearing a wreath of leaves or if details of his cult were known. But then there would have been no problem. Admittedly, the evidence of Baldr's ties with vegetation is slight. However, universal weeping, not just lamentation but actual tears, may indicate his ancient control of clouds. Nor should his death from a plant (sacred to him?) be ignored. Baldr's parents are Frigg and Óðinn. This couple is hard to distinguish from Freyja and Óðr, and Freyja's tears of gold are famous, though she weeps for her absent husband, rather than a slain child.

The ship Hringhorni, which belongs to Baldr, is mentioned only in connection with his funeral. Unlike Freyr's ship Skíðblaðnir and Muspell's ship Naglfar, it does

not seem to have had any practical purpose. In case Baldr in his capacity as sky god was at some remote time supposed to travel on a ship, *hringr* ‘ring’ would be an appropriate sign of the circle he made in the heavens. Höfler identified the ring with the sun (1951, 354). However, *hringr*, habitually associated with ships, is never used as a *heiti* for ‘sun’ or in kennings describing any celestial body, and no evidence indicates that a Scandinavian god was believed to traverse the sky in a boat or steer a ship. In a drawing, a circle representing the sun would make sense, but nothing justifies the *name* of Baldr’s ship. If the existence of Hringhorni furnishes a clue to Baldr’s ancient role, we are unable to profit by it.

Baldr also has a horse, but the value of this attribute is unclear. Snorri says twice that Baldr’s horse was burned with him (*Gylfaginning* chaps. 15, 49; Holtsmark and Helgason [1962], 18, 65). However, he did not know the horse’s name, a detail that stands out sharply in a catalog of twelve horses, eleven of which are named (chap. 15; on heroes and the names of their horses see Olrik 1903, 204–5). Something is wrong with Baldr’s horse if its name never occurred in ancient poetry; Lorenz notes this fact but does not comment on it (1984, 252–53 n. 31). For a short time, the subject of the white stag enjoyed some popularity among solar mythologists. A celestial stag, which a hunter wounds or tries to catch, is a character in a widespread Eurasian myth, and its identification with the sun is unquestionable (Kuhn 1869 [106–8, 118–19 are on Germanic]). Losch collected numerous tales loosely related to this subject (1892); see also Gjessing 1943, 41–42. In eddic mythology, Eikþyrnir is a celestial stag, a companion of the goat Heiðrún (Majut 1963; Liberman 1988 [rpt. Liberman 1994, 237–52]; Osier 1979 [on “a reindeer in the sky” in Saami beliefs]). Losch’s argument depends on the equation Baldr = the sun for Hǫðr’s shot to fall into place without effort (1892, 146–57, esp. 151–57).

This type of reasoning makes little impression today, but Sarrazin’s remarks on Heorot are astute (1897, 372–73). He called attention to the religious importance of the name *Heorot* ‘hart’ and compared *Beowulf* 1018–19: “nalles fācenstafas Pēod-Scyldingas þenden fremedon” [no baleful runes (=crimes) did the Scyldings commit (there)] (Klaeber 1950, 38), and *Grímnismál* 12.5–6, in which it is said that Baldr’s Breiðablik is in a land free from the selfsame baleful runes [er ec liggia veit fæsta feicnstafi] (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 59). *Fācenstafas* is a hapax in Old English; *feicnstafir* occurs three times in Old Norse poetry, but only here in the Edda. It won’t do to say that the poets knew a formulaic phrase for describing a great palace. Both Heorot and Breiðablik appear to be sanctuaries, and, since *Breiðablik* means ‘broad sheen’, it may perhaps be concluded that Hrōðgār’s and Baldr’s residences had something to do with the cult of a hart deity and thereby of the sun. If Baldr was ever worshipped as a sun god, he may have been thought of as theriomorphic or as a god with a chariot driven by a deer. And if a deer was ousted by a horse late, we can have a reason for the absence of its name in eddic and skaldic poetry. A horse (merely a horse with four, rather than eight, legs and a saddle, without wings or magical hooves) is a nonspecific attribute. The names in

the Second Merseburg Charm are partly impenetrable, and a myth in which Baldr's horse (deer?) was wounded cannot be reconstructed. Among the evidence at our disposal, the plant is the most secure feature of Baldr as a god of vegetation; next come tears. The ship and the horse can be interpreted in more ways than one.

Although the powers of fertility are usually chthonic, as has been pointed out above, plants in myth need divine support both from above (light and rain), with sunlight, rain, and thunder (lightning) being inseparable in the functions of celestial divinities, and from below (good soil). The most common argument against Baldr as a vegetation god is that he is an Áss. This argument has no value. Any Scandinavian god about whom we know enough stories can be shown to have some connection with fertility. Pórr, a great Áss, is a son of Mother Earth (Jörð, Fjörgyn), and his hammer (a thunderbolt) was used to consecrate marriage. Loki, another Áss, rose from the lowest depths, a cave in which Saxo's Ugartha-Locus sits chained to the wall. Óðr, this enigmatic double of Óðinn, is in the habit of leaving his home for long periods of time, a classic feature of a vegetation god (however, opinions on Óðr's perigrinations differ: Helm 1946, 69–70).

Baldr will be avenged by Váli. Sievers's derivation of *Váli* from **Wanula*, **Wanila* (1894, 583) is not worse than Nordenstreng's (1924): *Váli* from **Waihala*, **Waihula* 'little warrior'. Of course, Sievers knew that his reconstructed form **Wanila* means 'little Van' (cf. Schück 1904, 237). But he went one step further and noted that on the strength of an Old Saxon cognate the root of **Wan-ila* can perhaps be understood as 'shining'. Detter's gloss 'little Van' misled several scholars into believing that it was he who came up with the explanation offered by Sievers. Even 'shining' would be a good name for someone who neither washed nor combed his hair (a case of inverse magic common in name giving) and killed the murderer of a sun god. 'Little Van' would fit an avenger of a vegetation god, and 'little warrior' is a perfect soubriquet for all situations. *Váli* is an old name, and its connection with Baldr's half brother is fortuitous (in Saxo, the avenger is called Bous). The origin of Váli or Bous has no bearing on Baldr's ancient role, but at least it does not invalidate the idea of Baldr as a onetime vegetation god. When he died, he was an Áss, but the division of the Scandinavian gods into Æsir and Vanir was superimposed on a much earlier religious system.

It is hard to tell when Baldr acquired the epithet *hinn góði*. Since the crops flourish and the people prosper under a good king's rule, this epithet has been taken as evidence that Baldr could control fertility. Even Turville-Petre (1964, 117), who did not share the view of Baldr as vegetation god, accepted the traditional interpretation of *hinn góði*. There is no need to do so. Goodness is too broad a concept. Baldr is not a king, not even a "lord," as Hans Kuhn showed (1951; the doubts and counterarguments of Helm 1953, 274–75 and n. 213, and Green 1965, 5–9, are not strong enough to topple Kuhn's idea); he is *hinn góði* because he is perfect. At a remote epoch, Baldr probably had something to do with vegetation, but this is not why he is called good in the extant myths.

Mogk (1905, 193) already wondered why (*h*)*inn góði* cannot be taken literally and mentioned several Scandinavian kings known for their goodness and, quite appropriately, called good. It is typical of mythological studies to see a hidden meaning in every word. Chapter 22 of *Gylfaginning* begins so: “Annarr son Óðins er Baldr, ok er frá honum gott at segja. Hann er beztr, ok hann lofa allir” [Another son of Óðinn’s is Baldr, and (only) good things can be told of him. He is the best (of the sons), and everybody praises him] (Holtsmark and Helgason [1962], 27). One may imagine that Snorri was unaware of the ancient significance of Baldr’s epithet and spun one word into a whole passage, as was his wont, but more probably, modern scholars read too much into it. Neckel pointed out that *Baldr* and *beztr* look like parts of an alliterating formula (1920, 103–4). If he was right, attempts to interpret *inn góði* as “promoting well-being and fertility” lose the little appeal they may otherwise have.

The terms fertility and vegetation, as they are applied to the higher powers, have often been criticized, and for a good reason. Schier (1995, 127–29) notes that vegetation is too broad a concept, for it presupposes fertility, regeneration of life, and so forth. Lotte Motz has shown in a series of works that fertility has been pressed into covering procreation, maternity, and the sexual urge, all of which are related but different things. Yet deities of vegetation exist. Such were Flora, an Italian goddess of flowering and blossoming plants, and Ceres, an ancient Italian goddess of earth, grain, and fruitfulness. The line between vegetation and the regeneration of life is imperceptible, while fruitfulness of the earth and human fertility were celebrated together for millennia.

By the epoch of the first skalds, the Scandinavian gods had lost or changed their original functions, and numerous tales had been forgotten or become food for entertainment, devoid of the sacral element. Freyr still had a telling name, but only the story of his wooing was remembered. Týr (once a counterpart of Zeus), Heimdallr, and Njörðr, along with practically all goddesses, had receded into the background. Þórr upholds law and order with main force, but he is no longer a thunder god, and his very name became opaque. Vague memories tied Loki to some misdeed that incurred a terrible punishment, and his evil nature overshadowed his membership in the family of the Æsir, but he is predominantly the hero of anecdotes. Only Óðinn remained a god of war and death, the embodiment of capricious luck in battle, and a culture hero (the mead of poetry, runes, the military formation). Many myths of Baldr may not have existed at any time (cf. the scanty mythology of Demeter and Persephone). For the medieval Scandinavians who lived several generations before the conversion he was only the victim of an evil plot. Although we can reconstruct, from the dubious debris, his previous domains, sunlight and vegetation being among them, we do it no better than an etymologist who reconstructs the old meanings of a familiar word.

Myths are stories told to hallow existing customs (“charters,” as Bronislaw Malinowski called them) or explain the origin of natural phenomena. If the Baldr

myth, as it has come down to us, was a “charter” or an etiological tale, in the ninth or the tenth century, it obviously had nothing to do with fertility, plants, eclipses, the coming of winter, and the like. But its message was clear: an unforgivable crime leads to the collapse of stability, and Óðinn heard this message as well as did Snorri, who happened to live at a time when law and order broke down and the societal chaos was too deep even for Pórr. Once Baldr fell, the gods did not succeed in any of their ventures. They could not launch the ship Hringhorni; even Hyrrokkin’s “horse,” a creature akin to Fenrir, overpowered Óðinn’s berserks; Hermóðr’s mission failed; Baldr remained with Hel, and, emboldened by the gods’ impotence, the giants, previously kept at bay, attacked and destroyed Ásgarðr. In the past, the gods’ defeats had always been temporary. Baldr’s death was not the first in the eddic universe, but it was the first irreparable loss.

One note is in order here. Lorenz (1984, 318, 320) speaks with approval of Dumézil’s idea that Baldr, with his Christ-like perfection, stands in opposition to the corrupt world of the Æsir and Vanir. This idea is unacceptable. Criteria of human morality, which, as is well known, change from epoch to epoch, cannot be applied to pagan gods. Their behavior, like that of the dwarves and giants, is guided only by law and expedience. Everybody does what is necessary or good for him or her: crime calls for retribution, murder is followed by compensation or revenge, deceit is justified if it brings success, a treasure is worth the most demeaning price (and what “friendship” does Frigg promise him who will go to the underworld to plead for Baldr?), and so forth. But in the eddic world the gods fight chaos, and therefore their collective cause is noble. Baldr is so good because (in the *Younger Edda*) he does nothing, and it is easy to lavish praise on him. However, he is Frigg and Óðinn’s son, happily married and well integrated into his family, not a saint living among corrupt sinners.

7. Baldr’s Funeral and the Insoluble Riddle. The Revenge

The Æsir were unable to launch the ship with Baldr’s body and needed the help of a giantess. Hyrrokkin astride a wolf, with snakes serving as reins, is reminiscent of Helgi Hjörvarðsson’s *fylgja*, and Motz’s conclusion that at the funeral we see Baldr’s *fylgja* who renders him the last act of assistance rings true (1991, 111), but it is strange that this giantess has a name. Other than that, the coincidence is undeniable: “sú [trollkona] reið vargi oc hafði orma at taumom” (in the lay; Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 147, lines 8–9) and “hon [gýgr] . . . reið vargi ok hafði hoggorm at taumum” (Snorri; *Gylfaginning* chap. 49). In the extant poetic sources, Hyrrokkin turns up only once: according to Þorbjörn dísarskáld, she was killed by Pórr before some other event (*ragnarök?*). This is probably why Herrmann took her for one of the demons and the wolf for a storm fanning the fire (1903, 389).

According to Neckel (1920, 117–18), Hyrrokkin was, in an earlier version of the myth, the slayer of Baldr, because it is customary for a giantess “to send a

vegetation god to Hel.” Neckel’s alleged analogs bear no resemblance to Baldr’s funeral, and it is unthinkable that at any stage in the development of Scandinavian mythology a giant(ess) should have been allowed to triumph over the gods and kill one of them before the final battle. Lindow’s remark, “She [Hyrrokkin] is an out of place, hierarchically inferior being, doing the work of the æsir . . . and thus helping them to conduct the ritual properly” (1997, 88), contains no explanation at all. Despite the problem of the name, Hyrrokkin is probably Baldr’s *fylgja*, and this is why she, more probably, pulls rather than pushes the ship: she will disappear in the sea together with the god she failed to protect.

One can perhaps recognize a formulaic theme in the episode of ship launching. When the gods failed to lift Hrungnir’s leg that pressed down Pórr’s neck, Magni, Pórr’s son by a giantess, was summoned and performed the deed at once. The grateful Pórr gave Magni Hrungnir’s horse, and this show of generosity displeased Óðinn. The theme seems to be “a giant(ess) renders a unique service to the physically inferior gods, which results in the loss of his/her horse.” The master builder tale shares even more features with the ship launching episode, and the role of the horse is particularly prominent there. If this comparison is correct, it is more likely that Hyrrokkin’s mount was killed rather than struck down, for no one except a *gýgr* from Jötunheimr would be able to use such a horse, and Hyrrokkin did not need a ride back.

Baldr could not have two *fylgjur*, but in some sense Litr was his emanation. Since *litr* means ‘color’, he fits the role of a sky god’s servant. This interpretation of *Litr* was a commonplace of nature mythology from Finn Magnusen and Uhland onward (see Vetter 1874, 197; Kauffmann 1902, 7; Kragerud 1974, 123). It seems to be the best one. Motz called Litr a guide to the Beyond (1991, 111–12), a statement of no great value. Later Motz identified *litr* and *líf*, with reference to *lito góða* of *Völuspá* 18.4, allegedly ‘good hue’, and explained *Litr* as ‘life soul’ (2000).

In some earlier myth, Litr, a being expressing Baldr’s essence, probably died with Baldr. Snorri hardly knew more about him than we do; Litr and Vitr turn up in a catalog of dwarves in *Völuspá* and in the *Younger Edda* (see Neckel and Kuhn 1983, p. 3, stanza 12.4, and p. 16, line 16). Although dwarves are not described as diminutive creatures in the Edda, Snorri, it appears, viewed them as such; otherwise, Pórr would not have been able to kick Litr into the fire. Bertha Phillpotts may have been right when she traced the especially graphic description in the *Younger Edda* to performances Snorri knew or knew about. She observes that in Snorri’s accounts tragedy and comedy are mixed (Phillpotts 1920, 24), and indeed the same feeling for comic relief can be found in Snorri as in Shakespeare.

Snorri tells us that there is a great ship-funeral. All the gods are present, with the motley collection of their steeds—cats and a boar and horses. Odin has his ravens: there is a giantess on a wolf whose beast is so restive that when she dismounts four berserks have to fell it before they can manage to hold it. There is an officious dwarf, and mountain-giants—uncouth figures, no doubt—attend the ceremony. Balder’s wife Nanna dies of grief during the proceedings, and her body is flung on the funeral pyre. As

we read Snorri's words, the whole proceeding seems rather like a game which Snorri had either seen himself or had described to him—for the dialogic poem could hardly have described all the spectators at the funeral. (Phillpotts 1920, 129)

Phillpotts and Höfler had a similar approach to Baldr's funeral: both recognized a visual image behind Snorri's description. Litr seems to be a genuine part of the myth, but his incongruous death may owe its origin to the way the ritual drama was enacted in Iceland.

Before the ship was launched, Óðinn allegedly whispered something to Baldr, and his favorite trick was to ask those who, like Vafþrúðnir, matched their wisdom against his to repeat his words. Naturally, no one succeeded. Although Snorri borrowed many verses from *Vafþrúðnismál*, he made no mention of Óðinn's message. Perhaps the whole affair is a bad joke: Óðinn did not whisper anything to his dead son, which would explain why no one knows what it was. Such riddles circulate at all times. Why do cows (horses) on a meadow always look in one direction? (Answer: they don't!) What is the third common English word ending in *-ry*, the first two being *angry* and *hungry*? (Answer: it does not exist.) Anne Holtsmark points out that life and literature are different things (1964a, 104). The sources do not contain the words Óðinn whispered to Baldr, and the impossibility of knowing them became proverbial when Old Icelandic literature flourished. Consequently, she writes, trying to guess Óðinn's riddle is not only a waste of time but also a methodologically futile enterprise, like psychoanalyzing Ibsen's characters. This is not necessarily so.

Regardless of what happened at the funeral, a myth existed (assuming, of course, that the whole thing was not a joke, and, judging by the finale of *Vafþrúðnismál*, it was not), according to which Óðinn did say something to Baldr. No one heard the exact words pronounced before Baldr was burned (and this is why no one could repeat them), but we may perhaps reconstruct the content of that communication. Compare the prologue of *Grímnismál*. Óðinn says something "privately"—*mælti . . . einmæli*—to Geirroðr, and the youngster must have profited by Óðinn's advice when he jumped out of the ship and pronounced the incantation: "Farðu, þar er smyl hafi þic," that is, "Go where the devils take you" (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 56, line 11). The ship disappeared. It may not be due to chance that *smyl* is a hapax; it was probably a magic word for 'supernatural forces'.

Nilsson provides a detailed survey of hypotheses concerning Óðinn's riddle (1935, 305–8). According to the oldest of them, Óðinn promised Baldr that he would return (Bugge 1889, 67, with references; Niedner 1897, 331). However, neither Baldr nor the dying gods of Eastern religions come back to earth (Nilsson 1935, 296). Attempts by the survivors to undo the tragic event, far from contradicting the idea of myths like those of Osiris and Baldr, reinforce it: people have to resign themselves to the fact that neither Hel nor the master of Valhöll will release their dead. The gods will keep existing in a different world and achieve (like Osiris) the height of their power there, and the living will reap benefits from their protec-

tion (Motz 1991, 103–4, 108–10; Schier 1995, 143–48). Baldr and Nanna send back the gifts burned with their corpses on the pyre (so that Hermóðr's journey was not quite useless), and this may be an archaic detail: Baldr is no longer a sky god, but in his new capacity he will continue to take care of Ásgarðr's well-being. Draupnir ensures fertility. The ring and the headdress may be related to weddings and thereby also to fertility (Neckel held a similar view [1920, 54]).

In Olsen's opinion (1929, 171), Óðinn whispered to Baldr that an avenger would soon be born. He hardly guessed well. The impossibility of revenge in the family is the cause of the father's grief in the Herebeald-Hæðcyn episode, but not in the Baldr myth. F. R. Schröder (1962, 334) pointed out that in the tales of a dying god the usual triangle is the victim, his grieving mother (or consort), and the murderer, while the victim's male parent plays no role. This is true. Such tales probably go back to the time before fatherhood had been realized as a biological and social factor. Husbandless mothers are common in ancient myths (cf. the case of Demeter and Persephone). In the Baldr myth, Óðinn is a passive observer (unless Høðr is taken for his hypostasis!), and the birth of an avenger appears to be a last-minute addition to the story (see, among many others, Neckel 1920, 24; Clemen 1934, 69). At no moment in the history of the myth could the revenge be viewed as its central theme. If the punishment of Høðr and Loki was legitimate, there would have been no need to say so to Baldr. If, however, it violated the laws of society, such a promise would have brought no joy to someone famous for unerring counseling. Since Váli/Bous is a latecomer to the myth, he is superfluous in it. Baldr has more than enough half brothers already, and Pórr (another half brother?) need not have waited for the birth of Rind(a)'s son. For rather wild fantasies on the motif of revenge in the Baldr myth see Schück 1904, 189–90.

Jostes (1930, 124–25) suggested that Óðinn told Baldr his real name (?), and with its help he would be able to start a new life. According to Kauffmann (1902, 272), who treated Baldr as a euhemerized, heroicized king sacrificed for the prosperity of his land, Óðinn whispered the holiest rune to Baldr. This rune would guarantee the dead god (Kauffmann puts *dead* and *death* in quotation marks) a higher destiny, the power to achieve his greatest deeds and overcome death. For Kauffmann the transfiguration of the sacrificed Baldr is the crowning moment of his life. This is all very interesting, but what is a holy rune and the holiest rune? In 1924, F. R. Schröder shared Kauffmann's opinion: "This is the holy Logos that allows Odin to direct and rule the fortunes of the world. Only to his dead son will he whisper this most potent of all magic words that people will never come to know but that gives Baldr the power to master the new world in the future as Odin mastered the old world before him" (Schröder 1924, 151, my translation). In 1953, Høðr/Óðinn is said to have killed his son, pronounced an inspiring word [das "beseelende" Wort], and revived Baldr for a new life (Schröder 1953, 182–83). (I am leaving out his far-fetched comparison between the whispered word and the honey used for the lips of newborn infants in India.) Surprisingly, in 1962 (p. 334)

he stressed the prospect of Baldr's return and believed that this is the content of Óðinn's message.

Finally, there is Rosén 1918, 110–27. His work was known to both F. R. Schröder (1924, 149–50) and Nilsson (1935, 306). Rosén lists three types of conversations with the corpse, recorded in the most diverse cultures: the dead may be questioned about their murderer, they may be implored to return, and they may be requested not to come back. He concludes (and in support of his conclusion he refers to customs from Sörmland and Värend) that Óðinn's message was of the third type. This solution is the least convincing of all. Why should Óðinn, who, we assume, participated in the universal weeping in order to get Baldr back, and who lent Hermóðr his horse Sleipnir for his journey to the underworld, have done such a strange thing as advise Baldr to stay with Hel? The custom mentioned by Rosén has a practical goal: people were afraid of revenants. Those who after their death appeared among the living were destructive *draugar*. The gods hoped that Baldr might return as he had been, rather than a Glámr-like monster.

We have no way of guessing what Óðinn whispered to Baldr (apparently, he shared part of his mantic wisdom with his son, as he did with Geirroðr), but we can understand why the riddle is insoluble: the living are not supposed to know the secrets of the dead.

8. Conclusion: The Development of the Baldr Myth

At some remote time, the Germanic or at least the north Germanic pantheon had two deities: a sky god called Baldr, whose name meant 'shining', and his brother Hóðr 'a (contentious) fighter', the ruler of the underworld. Hóðr was blind. As sky god, Baldr had various functions, coming alternately to the fore in different communities at different epochs. Protecting light, rain, and vegetation were among them. A plant, possibly the reed, was sacred to him. Both Baldr and Hóðr wooed a goddess identified as Woman (Nanna). She preferred Baldr. Baldr was invulnerable to all weapons and objects except the sacred reed. Only his mother knew where it grew. Hóðr visited her and by cunning and deceit wormed the plant's location out of her. He went across the whole world to get the reed and pierced Baldr with it. Baldr was lamented by his mother, who made an attempt to return him from the kingdom of the dead, but her attempt failed, and Baldr remained in the underworld, where he still protected crops and other plants.

In the form summarized here, the story of Baldr is a version of a widespread myth of a dying god. As time went on, this myth interacted with the rest of oral tradition, sacral, heroic, and popular. Scandinavians worshipped several chthonic deities, and it is possible that the god who killed Baldr was in some versions called Hóðr and in others Loki, but in any given case there could be only one murderer, unassisted by an evil counselor. Saxo was not aware of Loki's participation in Baldr's death, while Snorri's sources emphasized the "division of labor" between

Loki and Hǫðr (the result of an imperfect merger of two traditions). Snorri did not invent anything: he combined, as best he could, the conflicting evidence of the lays, skaldic poetry, and the ritual drama.

The Elder Edda also bears witness to the lack of consistency with regard to Loki. It was remembered that Loki was chained and would eventually break loose; to account for his enchainment, a crime of cosmic dimensions was laid to his charge. However, the person guilty of Baldr's murder had to be killed (as Hǫðr/Høther was), not "punished." In *Lokasenna*, Loki boasts that, but for him, Baldr would have been around; yet he leaves the hall unscathed. The pictures of Sigyn faithful to Loki in adversity and of Nanna dying of grief at the sight of her dead husband came to the myth from late romances. Baldr's dreams are like all the other dreams in early Germanic literature. The age of such a cliché cannot be determined.

Both Saxo and Snorri had to perform an impossible task. Each myth is a more or less independent story, and it makes no sense to reconstruct the chronology of mythic events. As long as certain tales coexist in the community, they are "synchronic." For example, we need not conclude that Óðinn visited Vafþrúðnir after Baldr's death because the insoluble riddle is mentioned in *Vafþrúðnismál*. Snorri tries to provide some of Þórr's exploits with time depth (Þórr was humiliated in *Útgardar* and took revenge on the giants the next time he went east, and so forth), but a time line of this type is unnecessary. Except for the creation of the world (the beginning) and *ragnarök* (the end), everything happened "one day." Snorri's report of Baldr's death is full of loose ends. Saxo, who was writing what he and his audience took for history, had to overcome especially great difficulties. Unlike Snorri, he was usually unwilling to choose one version over the others. For example, we hear that the forest maidens gave Høther a belt and a girdle which ensured victory and also that only a special sword could kill Baldr. Two tales were sewn together, and the seam is clearly visible (Kauffmann 1902, 103; Herrmann 1922, 220). The fact that in one battle Høther and in another Balder is defeated and "flees" (when does a Germanic hero flee?) also looks like an attempt to weld conflicting interpretations. Saxo's exposition suffers, but we are allowed to witness the development of the myth.

Baldr's mother exacting an oath from all things not to harm her son may have been part of the most ancient myth, for Baldr's invulnerability had to be explained. Whatever plant served as Baldr's original attribute, it was not the mistletoe. The best candidates are the reed and the thistle, and we know from *Gautreks saga* that a reed, activated by magic, could turn into a spear. The mistletoe is too insignificant in Norway to have been given such prominence. Norwegians and later Icelanders learned about its miraculous powers from Britain. They borrowed the Old English word *misteltān* and "calqued" it as *mistilteinn*. This plant possessed two features ideal for mythology: hardly anyone had seen it (so that any properties could be ascribed to it), and its name suggested death (*mist-*) and a deadly weapon

(*-teinn*). Thus did the mistletoe supersede the homey reed (thistle) in the story of Baldr's death. It was unavoidable that sooner or later *mistilteinn* should have been understood as a sword name, and this is what happened. In Iceland, Baldr still dies from a wound inflicted by *mistilteinn*, while in Saxo's tale no trace of the mistletoe or any other plant remains, but a sword called *mistilteinn* became part of Icelandic tradition as well. The existence of *baldrsbrá* reminds us of a plant sacred to Baldr, though a connection between a shining flower and a shining god is late. Baldr does not return before *ragnarök*, which means that, as far as the eddic world is concerned, he stays with Hel forever. There will be no Second Coming.

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