

## Fooling Gylfi: Who Tricks Who?

In this paper I should like to raise two questions: first, whether *Gylfaginning*, the title of the second part of Snorri's *Prose Edda*, can have the meaning "the tricking *by* Gylfi (of the Æsir)" in addition to the meaning it has traditionally been thought to have, i.e., "the tricking *of* Gylfi (by the Æsir)"; and second, whether the framing story of *Gylfaginning*, Gylfi's visit to the Æsir, may be viewed as a paganized version of a Christian pilgrimage, and hence as an example of the "contrastive association" of paganism with Christianity of which Anne Holtmark (1964, 24, 30, 46, 63, 71) has found so many other examples in the first part of the *Prose Edda* (the Prologue) and *Gylfaginning*.<sup>1</sup>

Most references to the first two parts of the *Prose Edda* in this paper will be to the edition of Anthony Faulkes (1982), which is based on the manuscript known as R, the Codex Regius (Gks 2367 4°), of the first half of the fourteenth century. It should be noted, however, that it is only in the U manuscript (Codex Upsaliensis, Uppsala University Library, De la Gardie 11), which is probably the oldest manuscript (though also from the fourteenth century), that the title *Gylfaginning* for the part of the *Prose Edda* now known by it is given medieval authority; and that U lacks the story of Gylfi's fooling by Gefjun, with which

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1. The potentially ambiguous translation, "Fooling Gylfi," of the title *Gylfaginning* is borrowed from Page 1990, 17. The present paper was delivered at a meeting in Copenhagen of those involved in the project "Eddornas sinnebildsspråk" in August 1993. I am grateful to Lars Lönnroth and Mats Malm for inviting me to attend the meeting, and to all those who commented on the paper just after its delivery. Among these, Margaret Clunies Ross was sceptical as to the first part of the paper in particular, maintaining that the information in the Prologue to Snorri's *Edda* about the migration of the human Æsir to Scandinavia tended to militate against my argument. I can only reply that I have not ignored the Prologue in this paper, and that acknowledgement of the Prologue's genuineness need not preclude the acknowledgement of a degree of inconsistency between it and *Gylfaginning* (cf. Lorenz 1984, 24–28, 59). Bjarne Fidjestøl, while not accepting my specific argument that the genitive *Gylfa-* in *Gylfaginning* is ambiguous, suggested that support for the first part of the paper might be found in a comparison of the framing story of *Gylfaginning* with the story of Þórr and Útgardaloki (see Faulkes 1982, 37–44), in which, it may be said, Þórr both defeats and is defeated by the giants. With regard to

that part begins in R, as it also does in the two other main manuscripts of the *Prose Edda*: W (Codex Wormianus, AM 242 fol.; mid-fourteenth century) and T (Codex Trajectinus, Utrecht University Library MS no. 1374; circa 1600, but believed to be a copy of a lost thirteenth-century exemplar). This will not prevent me from using the story of Gylfi and Gefjun as part of the basis of my argument; all the indications are that it formed part of the *Prose Edda*, if not from the very beginning, then at least from a stage of its composition at which Snorri was himself involved. (See Ross 1978, 151; cf. Faulkes 1982, xxxi.)

In attempting to answer the first of the two questions raised above I should like, at the risk of seeming to quote excessively, to begin by comparing the concluding lines of *Gylfaginning* as preserved in R with the concluding paragraphs of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. In the *Gylfaginning* passage, which may be quoted first, the "Gangleri" referred to is of course Gylfi himself, "Gangleri" being the name he assumes in visiting the Æsir in disguise. The passage in question is as follows:

Hár segir: ". . . En nú ef þú kant lengra fram at spyrja þá veit ek eigi hvaðan þér kemr þat, fyrir því at øngan mann heyrða ek lengra segja fram aldarfarit. Ok njóttu nú sem þú namt."

Því næst heyrði Gangleri dyni mikla hvern veg frá sér, ok leit út á hlið sér. Ok þá er hann sésk meir um þá stendr hann úti á sléttum velli, sér þá ønga holl ok ønga borg. Gengr hann þá leið sína braut ok kemr heim í ríki sitt ok segir þau tíðindi er hann hefir sét ok heyrtr. Ok eptir honum sagði hvern maðr qðrum þessar søgur.

En Æsir setjask þá á tal ok ráða ráðum sínum ok minnask á þessar frásagnir allar er honum váru sagðar, ok gefa nqfn þessi hin sømu er áðr eru nefnd mōnnum ok stqðum þeim er þá váru, til þess at þá er langar stundir liði at menn skyldu ekki ifask í at allir væri einir, þeir Æsir er nú var frá sagt ok þessir er þá váru þau sømu nqfn gefin. Þar var þá Þórr kallaðr — ok er sá Ásaþórr hinn gamli, sá er Qkuþórr — ok honum eru kend þau stórvirki er Þórr (Ector) gerði í Troju. En þat hyggja menn at Tyrkir hafi sagt frá Ulixes ok hafi þeir hann kallat Loka, þvíat Tyrkir váru hans hinir mestu óvinir. (Faulkes 1982, 53–54)

[High said: ". . . And now if you know any more questions to ask further into the future, I do not know where you will find answers, for I have heard no one relate the history of the world any further on in time. And may the knowledge you have gained do you good."]

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the second part of the paper (which drew a sceptical response from Lars Lönnroth), Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen referred to the account by Saxo in his *Gesta Danorum* (Book 8) of the journeys of Thorkillus (one of them, indeed, to the abode of Vgarthilocus [= Útgarðaloki, presented by Saxo as an object of pagan propitiation]), which may be seen as pilgrimage-like journeys of initiation into the evils and limitations of paganism, undertaken shortly before the introduction of Christianity to Denmark. An argument to this effect is offered by Malm (1990), who does not, however (as far as I can discover), specifically mention pilgrimages in this context. I am most grateful to Mats Malm for sending me a copy of his paper, of which (to my discredit) I was not previously aware. I am also grateful to Thomas Krömmelbein for his interest in the present paper, and for encouraging me to prepare it for publication. Other acknowledgements will be made, as appropriate, in the footnotes below; any errors (needless to say) are entirely my own.

Next Gangleri heard great noises in every direction from him, and he looked out to one side. And when he looked around further he found he was standing out on open ground, could see no hall and no castle. Then he went off on his way and came back to his kingdom and told of the events he had seen and heard about. And from his account these stories passed from one person to another.

But the Æsir sat down to discuss and hold a conference and went over all these stories that had been told him, and assigned those same names that were mentioned above to the people and places that were there (in Sweden), so that when long periods of time had passed men should not doubt that they were all the same, those Æsir about whom stories were told above and those who were now given the same names. So someone there was given the name Thor — and this means the ancient Thor of the Æsir, that is Oku-Thor — and to him are attributed the exploits which Thor (Hec-tor) performed in Troy. And it is believed that the Turks told tales about Ulysses and that they gave him the name Loki, for the Turks were especially hostile to him.] (Faulkes 1987, 56–58)

The *Alice* passage may be quoted as follows:

“Off with her head!” the Queen shouted at the top of her voice. Nobody moved.

“Who cares for you?” said Alice, (she had grown to her full size by this time.) “You’re nothing but a pack of cards!”

At this the whole pack rose up into the air, and came flying down upon her: she gave a little scream, half of fright and half of anger, and tried to beat them off, and found herself lying on the bank, with her head in the lap of her sister, who was gently brushing away some dead leaves that had fluttered down from the trees upon her face.

“Wake up, Alice dear!” said her sister. “Why, what a long sleep you’ve had!”

“Oh, I’ve had such a curious dream!” said Alice, and she told her sister, as well as she could remember them, all these strange Adventures of hers that you have just been reading about; and when she had finished, her sister kissed her, and said “It *was* a curious dream, dear, certainly: but now run in to your tea; it’s getting late.” So Alice got up and ran off, thinking while she ran, as well she might, what a wonderful dream it had been.

But her sister sat still just as she had left her, leaning her head on her hand, watching the setting sun, and thinking of little Alice and all her wonderful Adventures, till she too began dreaming after a fashion, and this was her dream: —

First, she dreamed of little Alice herself, and once again the tiny hands were clasped upon her knee, and the bright eager eyes were looking up into hers — she could hear the very tones of her voice, and see that queer little toss of her head to keep back the wandering hair that *would* always get into her eyes — and still as she listened, or seemed to listen, the whole place around her became alive with the strange creatures of her little sister’s dream.

The long grass rustled at her feet as the White Rabbit hurried by — the frightened Mouse splashed his way through the neighbouring pool — she could hear the rattle of the teacups as the March Hare and his friends shared their never-ending meal, and the shrill voice of the Queen ordering off her unfortunate guests to execution — once more the pig-baby was sneezing on the Duchess’ knee, while plates and dishes crashed around it — once more the shriek of the Gryphon, the squeaking of the Lizard’s slate-pencil, and the choking of the suppressed guinea-pigs, filled the air, mixed up with the distant sobs of the miserable Mock Turtle.

So she sat on with closed eyes, and half believed herself in Wonderland, though she knew she had but to open them again, and all would change to dull reality — the grass would be only rustling in the wind, and the pool rippling to the waving of the reeds — the rattling teacups would change to the tinkling sheep-bells, and the Queen’s shrill cries to the voice of the shepherd boy — and the sneeze of the baby, the shriek of the Gryphon, and all the other queer noises, would change (she knew) to the confused clamour of the busy farm-yard — while the lowing of the cattle would take the place of the Mock Turtle’s heavy sobs.

Lastly, she pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood: and how she would gather about her other little children, and make *their* eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago: and how she would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days. (Carroll 1948, 170–74)

Taking the title *Gylfaginning* in the sense traditionally applied to it for the moment, we may ask in what, exactly, does the tricking of Gylfi consist? In the first place, Gylfi is tricked by Gefjun into giving up a large part of his kingdom; as a reward for her favours he grants her as much land as four oxen can plough up in a day and night, and the four oxen she uses are the offspring of herself and a giant. These oxen proceed to form what becomes the island of Sjælland by ploughing up a sufficient quantity of Gylfi’s kingdom, and the gap left by the land they have thus removed is filled by Lake Mälär. Gefjun is here described as being of the race of the Æsir, and, as Faulkes points out (1982, 57), it is reasonable to regard this Gefjun, the one who tricks Gylfi, as one of the human Æsir who, according to the Prologue to Snorri’s *Edda*, came to Scandinavia from the northeastern region of the world known as Asia during the reign of Gylfi, and as different, therefore, from the goddess Gefjun (“a virgin, attended by all who die virgins,” cf. Faulkes 1982, 29.21 [meaning page 29, line 21]), of whom these people subsequently inform Gylfi in describing their pantheon to him.

In the second place, it is clear that the human Æsir intend some further “tricking of Gylfi” in preparing “deceptive appearances” [sjónhverfingar] (Faulkes 1982, 7.27) for him when, after being tricked by Gefjun, he sets out to visit them in Ásgarðr (which it must be assumed is their Scandinavian headquarters, built on the model of their former home, Old Ásgarðr or Troy) in order to find out whether their supernatural ability derives from their own nature, or from the divine powers they worship. It is not entirely clear, however, until the very end of the *Gylfaginning* narrative, i.e., until the passage quoted above, in what this second tricking of Gylfi is supposed to consist. What seems to emerge in this passage is that the human Æsir had intended to trick him into believing that they and the divine Æsir, the gods they worship and about whom they had been telling him, were identical; but that his departure, precipitated by their disappearance, which was in turn prompted by his exhausting their store of knowledge with his questions, has prevented them from carrying out this deception. This,

surely, is the deception they had intended from the start. It is not so much that, as Holtsmark stresses (1964, 15), they are lying to Gylfi in telling him about their gods — for all that they may have invented the latter by adapting the careers of Greek and Trojan heroes, as suggested in the passage quoted above (and also, at greater length, in *Skáldskaparmál*, the third of the *Prose Edda*'s four parts; see Jónsson 1931, 86–88; cf. also the Prologue, Faulkes 1982, 4.27–5.9). Their intended “tricking of Gylfi” consists rather in their aim of making him believe that they and the gods are identical. This seems to be the purpose of the “sjónhverfingar” described at the beginning of *Gylfaginning*. It can hardly be the case that, as Holtsmark suggests (1964, 55), the human Æsir prevent Gylfi by their “sjónhverfingar” from ever reaching the Scandinavian Ásgarðr; the narrator's use of the clause “En er hann kom inn í borgina” (Faulkes 1982, 7.27) surely suggests that he does reach it (for all that the “borg” in question eventually vanishes from his sight, as shown in the passage quoted above, cf. Breiteig 1964, 130–31). It is rather that they use their “sjónhverfingar” to make the Scandinavian Ásgarðr resemble as much as possible the place where their gods, about whom they are going to tell Gylfi, have their abode, i.e., the mythical or divine Ásgarðr, which is identical neither with the Scandinavian Ásgarðr nor with Old Ásgarðr, or Troy. This, surely, is why, when Gylfi enters their palace, he sees many rooms, and people playing games, drinking, and fighting (Faulkes 1982, 8.5–8). The human Æsir are clearly trying to make their palace in the Scandinavian Ásgarðr look as much as possible like Valhöll, the mythical palace of their gods in the divine Ásgarðr, as they subsequently describe it to him (Faulkes 1982, 21.27–29, 30.21–33, 33.4–15, 33.27–39, 34.3–13). The purpose of this deception, as I believe may be deduced from the final chapter of *Gylfaginning*, quoted above, is that they want Gylfi to believe that they are gods, and to proclaim them as such to the peoples of Scandinavia.

The human Æsir are not as clever as they think they are, however; they go about this second tricking of Gylfi in a somewhat ham-fisted way, though we as readers do not become fully aware of this until the end of *Gylfaginning*. In the first place, they seem to underestimate his intelligence. When Gylfi indicates that he wishes to put their knowledge to the test by asking if there is any learned person in the palace (Faulkes 1982, 8.16–22), their main spokesman, Hár (whose name, incidentally, like those of their other two spokesmen, Jafnhár and Þriði, later emerges as one of the many names of the god Óðinn and as part, consequently, of the intended deception, see 21.35, 21.37, 22.8), tells him that he, Gylfi, will not get out of the palace unscathed unless he turns out to be wiser than they (8.21–23). If the interpretation of *Gylfaginning* I am offering here is correct, this threat cannot be meant in earnest unless, possibly, it is a defensive threat made by the Æsir in order to discourage Gylfi from subjecting them to a test of knowledge which they fear they may fail. It is much more likely, in my view, to be a provocative threat made by the Æsir to challenge Gylfi to start

asking them questions to which they are confident of knowing the answers. As it turns out, however, their confidence is misplaced; he exhausts their store of knowledge with his questions, bringing them to the point where they cannot answer any more. In the second place, their approach to the deception I believe they intend has something plodding and over-methodical about it. They adopt a “one-thing-at-a-time” approach, first of all telling Gylfi about the gods they worship and, as it turns out, postponing the actual deception until it is too late.<sup>2</sup> It is true that they prepare the way for this deception, partly, as already indicated, by setting the scene in such a way as to suggest that they and the divine Æsir are the same, and by allowing themselves to be known by names which are identical with some of the many names of Óðinn; and partly also by indicating from time to time that the gods they are describing had careers as human beings themselves, and were indeed their ancestors (see Faulkes 1982, 13.9–17, and cf. 8.28–29 and 15.23). In general, however, they concentrate so intensely on answering Gylfi’s questions (evidently finding them unexpectedly penetrating and difficult, as emerges in their conversation with Gylfi just prior to Þriði’s narration of the story of Þórr and Útgarðaloki, see Faulkes 1982, 36.24–37.2)<sup>3</sup> that they neglect to keep up the momentum of the “sjónhverfingar,” so that the impression gradually emerges that they are at least as much tricked by Gylfi as he by them. All they can do in the end is disappear, leaving Gylfi cheated of his prize-winner’s trophy.

In a sense, though, Gylfi has the last laugh, since, as we learn from the passage quoted above, he goes back to his kingdom and tells people what he has seen and heard, including presumably — since the second tricking of Gylfi, as we have seen, has never really got off the ground — the fact that the gods in the stories he has been told, the divine Æsir, are not identical with the human Æsir, who had told the stories; whereas the human Æsir, as emerges after Gylfi has left, wish it to be thought that they are identical. After his departure they hold what we may assume is a rather hurried, panicky conference, assigning the names of personages and places in the stories “to men of their own company and to the localities in their new homeland,” as Faulkes has put it (1982, 72), in the hope that, in spite of what Gylfi is telling people, they may still be able to put it around that they and the gods are identical. Gylfi’s position at the end of *Gylfaginning* is comparable to that of Alice at the end of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, as quoted above; he is convinced of the otherness of the gods, just as

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2. It is noteworthy that Hár, Jafnhár, and Þriði consistently refer to the divine Æsir in the third person (as opposed to the first), as indeed does Gylfi (though he naturally addresses the human Æsir in the second person). From their dialogue as such, indeed, it in no way emerges that Gylfi regards his interlocutors as the divine Æsir, or that they are yet concerned to present themselves as such.

3. It is only fair to suggest — since Þriði proceeds to give such a full and memorable account of Þórr’s visit to Útgarðaloki — that the reason why the human Æsir are reluctant to tell the story is not that they are ignorant of it, but that they do not wish to tell a story in which Þórr is presented as being tricked by the giants. Such an attitude is, however, just as consistent with their being worshippers of Þórr as with their regarding him as one of their number.

Alice is convinced of the otherness of the dream world she has just experienced; and Gylfi, it may be assumed, conveys a sense of otherness in passing on the stories of the gods to his people and to posterity, just as Alice, as the passage quoted seems to suggest, will continue to convey such a sense in telling people about her dream — not only when she goes in to tea, but also in adult life, when she will retain, her sister believes, a childlike sense of the marvellous, particularly in her capacity as a storyteller. The position of the human Æsir at the end of *Gylfaginning*, on the other hand, may be compared with that of Alice’s sister in the passage quoted; rather as they sit down to a conference (“setjask . . . á tal”) after Gylfi has left them, she sits still after Alice has left her, reflecting on the implications of Alice’s account of her dream; and just as the human Æsir attempt to identify themselves with the gods in the stories they have been telling Gylfi, Alice’s sister proceeds to make connections between the dream world Alice has been describing to her, and reality. There is no suggestion in the *Alice* account, as there is in *Gylfaginning*, that either the storytelling or the listening party is *tricking* the other, but it is interesting in the present context to note that Alice leaves the company of her sister before the latter can in any way disabuse her of the idea that the dream world is quite other than reality, just as Gylfi gets away before the human Æsir can convince him by deception that they and the gods are identical.<sup>4</sup>

Gylfi, I believe, *has* tricked the human Æsir, if not altogether consciously, in a number of ways: by exhausting their store of knowledge in the question-and-answer sequence; by returning to his own kingdom before they have recovered from their discomfiture or had a chance to convince him by deception that they are identical with the divine Æsir; and by passing on their stories about the latter in such a way as to give no hint that the two groups of Æsir are identical. There is of course no denying that, as has always been believed, the human Æsir have tricked Gylfi, but the tricking of Gylfi by Gefjun, it may now be suggested, is very much more successful than the one attempted by Hár, Jafnhár, and Þriði; and by his tricking of them Gylfi not only reduces the extent to which he is tricked himself, but also prevents them from carrying out their plan of tricking the people of Scandinavia, through him, into believing that they, the human

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4. I am grateful to Dr. Peter R. Orton, who has kindly read this paper since it was delivered at the meeting referred to in footnote 1 (at which he was not present), for pointing out to me that, in the *Alice* passage, Alice’s sister *sends* her in to tea. This seems to me on balance more of a difference than a similarity between the *Alice* and *Gylfaginning* passages, since I can find no evidence in the latter of the Æsir sending Gylfi home, unless Hár’s phrase “Ok njóttu nú sem þú namt” [May what you have learnt do you good] can be thought to bear such an interpretation. In my view the human Æsir would have kept Gylfi with them, if he had not prompted their disappearance by exhausting their store of knowledge, until they had convinced him that they were identical with the divine Æsir. An alternative view, however, might be that the human Æsir want Gylfi to work out the identification for himself, and effectively, therefore, *send* him back to his kingdom by their disappearance. This latter view, suggested to me as a possibility by Dr. Orton’s comments, should not necessarily be regarded as one that he holds.

Æsir, are gods. I would suggest, then, that the first element in the noun *Gylfaginning*, *Gylfa-*, is not only an *objective* genitive, implying (as it has traditionally been thought to do) that Gylfi is the object, or victim, of the tricking; but also a *subjective* genitive, implying that Gylfi is its subject, or perpetrator.<sup>5</sup> The difference between the two types of genitive is well brought out by Nygaard (1905, 130–35), and attention has recently been drawn to it again by Preben Meulengracht Sørensen in his book *Fortælling og ære*, where he points out that the expression *saga hans* [his story] can mean either “the story about him” or “the story he tells” (1993, 34). I would further suggest that both ways of interpreting the expression *Gylfaginning* may have been intended by Snorri. In the U manuscript, which it may be repeated differs from the three other main manuscripts in not containing the story of Gylfi’s tricking by Gefjun, the title, as reproduced in Finnur Jónsson’s edition (1931, 8), reads “her hefr Gylva ginning fra því er Gylfi sotti heim Alfaþr i Asgarþ með fiolkvngi. ok fra villo asa. ok fra spvrningo Gylva.” Unless we have here another example of an ambiguous genitive in the expression *villa Ása* (not to mention *spurning Gylfa!*), it seems likely that the title as given here is meant to refer to Gylfi’s deception by the human Æsir at the beginning and end of his visit to the Scandinavian Ásgarðr, as Faulkes indeed suggests (1982, xviii); however, as we have seen, this deception, at least as described in the R text, is not particularly effective — the Æsir seem to be as much deceived by Gylfi as they deceive him, which might suggest an interpretation of the title *Gylfaginning* in terms of the subjective as opposed to the objective genitive. Is it possible that Snorri recognized this and introduced the story of Gefjun and Gylfi, in which Gylfi is well and truly tricked, in order to give due weight to the objective genitive interpretation of the title? This would be consistent with the view, regarded by Faulkes as “attractive” (1982, xxxi), that U represents an early, relatively tentative draft by Snorri of the *Prose Edda*, and that R, T, and W reflect a revised version, also by Snorri. The question cannot be answered, however, without a much fuller investigation of the different versions than has been possible here.

If it may be accepted that the term *Gylfaginning* is ambiguous in the way suggested here, and that Gylfi has, in the end, tricked the Æsir, we may ask: what is the significance of this? What has Gylfi achieved by tricking them? From the end of *Gylfaginning* as quoted above, it would seem that, as a result of Gylfi’s interview with the human Æsir, two views of these people came to circulate in Scandinavia. On the one hand there was Gylfi’s view, according to which these people, who had come from Troy, were not gods, but told him stories about

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5. I am grateful to two Icelanders present at the meeting referred to in footnote 1 (Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir and Sverrir Tómasson), as well to two who were not (Guðni Elísson and Vésteinn Ólason), for assuring me that such a double interpretation of the expression *Gylfaginning* is *theoretically* possible. This does not mean, of course, that any of the Icelanders in question necessarily agrees with me that it *should* be so interpreted.

the gods they worshipped. These gods, if they had indeed lived on earth as human beings, as was indicated to Gylfi in the stories, had done so in Troy, and in the past: they were the *ancestors* of the people that Gylfi met. Thus the stories told to Gylfi by these people, and passed on by him to others, are the sacred traditions of a foreign and antiquated religion that does not belong in Scandinavia in Gylfi's time, however fascinating the stories may be in themselves; Gylfi's message to his people, it may be assumed, is that anyone claiming to be one of the divine Æsir is an impostor, and anyone preaching the religion of these Æsir as the true one is a false prophet. On the other hand, there is the view promulgated by the human Æsir after their attempt to infiltrate it through Gylfi has failed, as argued above; according to this view, the religion of the divine Æsir is indeed the true one, and the human Æsir who have brought news of it to Scandinavia are its gods; they and the divine Æsir are identical. Whether or not the first element in this view is sincerely held by the human Æsir (whose pantheon may itself have been a fabrication of their own devising, as indicated above), the second is false, even from their point of view; it is based on a deliberate policy of deception. Gylfi's achievement is that he has got in first with his own view, so that his people will be on their guard against the one promulgated by the human Æsir. In this way Gylfi, who of course lives in pre-Christian Scandinavia, has prepared the way for Scandinavia's conversion.

It is against this background that I should like to consider the second of the two questions raised at the beginning of this paper, i.e., whether Gylfi's visit to the Æsir as described in *Gylfaginning* may be seen as a paganized version of a Christian pilgrimage. As is well known, Holtsmark (1964) has argued that in the Prologue and *Gylfaginning* Snorri "describes the heathen religion partly as an inverted Christianity" (Turville-Petre 1965, 373), so that the scaldic poets for whom Snorri seems mainly to have written the *Prose Edda* may, by taking note of his "contrastive association" of paganism with Christianity, be reminded of the essentially pagan nature of the mythological material from which so much of their imagery derives (see Holtsmark 1964, 24, 14–15). Thus Gylfi's three interlocutors, Hár, Jafnhár, and Þriði, whose names turn out, as we have seen, to belong also to the god Óðinn, are meant to suggest the Holy Trinity; the viceroys of Óðinn with their twelve thrones are reminiscent of the twelve apostles; and so on (see Holtsmark 1964, 22–26, 58–59; cf. Faulkes 1982, 4.30–32, 6.12–15, 15.21–23, 21.11–13). Gylfi's visit to the Æsir, if it could be shown to be a pagan inversion of a Christian pilgrimage, would fit well into this pattern of contrastive association.

Holtsmark in fact shows the way towards viewing Gylfi's visit in this light, though she does not, as far as I can discover, actually mention pilgrimage in precisely this context. On the second page of her book (1964, 6) she does however mention, among works of ecclesiastical literature with which Snorri was in all probability acquainted, the pilgrim itinerary by Abbot Nikulás of Þverá known

as *Leiðarvísir* and written probably in the late eleven-fifties (see Hill 1983, 175–77), and the Icelandic translation of the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great (pope 590–604), made at the end of the twelfth century (see Boyer 1993). Both these works are in different ways relevant to the present discussion.

In the former work, as Holtsmark points out (1964, 57), Abbot Nikulás mentions that the centre of the world (“miðr heimr”) is located at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the end point of the pilgrim route he describes. Now Snorri, as Holtsmark also indicates (1964, 57), twice locates Troy at the centre of the world, once in the Prologue and once in *Gylfaginning* (Faulkes 1982, 4.27–28, 13.9–10); and in the latter instance he clearly identifies Troy with Ásgarðr, by which he must mean Old Ásgarðr (“Ásgarðr hinn forni,” cf. 8.28), i.e., where the human Æsir came from to Scandinavia, as opposed to what has here been called the Scandinavian Ásgarðr, where Gylfi meets them. (Of the references to Troy as such, only those in the Prologue, it may here be noted, are found in the U manuscript, see Faulkes 1982, 174–75, under “Troja”.) According to Holtsmark, Snorri’s location of Troy at the centre of the world is unique in Old Norse–Icelandic literature (1964, 58). If Snorri did indeed know Abbot Nikulás’s *Leiðarvísir*, it seems very likely that, as Holtsmark suggests (1964, 55–60), his intention in the *Prose Edda* is to present Old Ásgarðr, or Troy, as a pagan counterpart to Jerusalem, the Holy City. Since Jerusalem is the oldest-established and chief place of Christian pilgrimage, however, and since Ásgarðr is the name of the place to which Gylfi sets out to meet the Æsir, why should Holtsmark’s suggestion not be developed in such a way as to include the idea that Gylfi’s visit to the Æsir is a kind of pagan pilgrimage? It is true that Gylfi’s destination, the Scandinavian Ásgarðr, is not identical with Old Ásgarðr, or Troy, the one that Snorri locates at the centre of the world, but this need not discourage the viewing of Gylfi’s visit as a pilgrimage, since, as was pointed out earlier, the human Æsir are at pains to make the Scandinavian Ásgarðr look as much as possible like the mythical Ásgarðr, which is identical with neither the old nor the Scandinavian one, and which, if it has a counterpart in Christian mythology, presumably corresponds to the new or heavenly Jerusalem, itself the final goal of the spiritual pilgrimage through life in this world on which, according to the tenets of their faith, all Christians are travelling, as Chaucer’s Parson reminds us in the Prologue to his tale in *The Canterbury Tales* (Benson 1988, p. 287, lines 48–51). Alternatively, or additionally, the presence of a “new” Jerusalem in Scandinavia could be explained in a rather more down-to-earth way by reference to the medieval Christian tendency, described by Victor and Edith Turner (1978, 168–71, cf. 175), to “reduplicate” the Palestinian shrines in European countries, “either by imitation or through claim to a direct, supernatural translation of material relics from Palestine to Europe” (Turner and Turner 1978, 168–69), originally as a response to the blocking of access to the holy places by Islam.

The Turners make the important point early in their book that “All sites of pilgrimage have this in common: they are believed to be places where miracles once happened, still happen, and may happen again” (1978, 6). It is noteworthy that Gylfi is stimulated to visit the Æsir by an interest in their magical powers, which may be seen as a pagan counterpart to the miracle-working powers of Christ and many of his followers; Gylfi himself is skilled in magic (“fjólkunnigr”), and he marvels at the ability of the Æsir to make everything go in accordance with their will (Faulkes 1982, 7.20–23). In the R, W, and T texts of *Gylfaginning*, moreover, it is a specific pagan miracle that primarily motivates his visit, and for which Gefjun, one of the human Æsir, is responsible: the removal of a large part of his kingdom by four oxen, the offspring of Gefjun and a giant, with the result that Sjælland and Lake Mälär come into being. Snorri’s main source for this account, as indicated in the texts of *Gylfaginning* where it occurs (i.e., R, W, and T), is the scaldic strophe he quotes on completing the account and attributes to Bragi the Old (Faulkes 1982, 7.11–19); this strophe is believed to form part of Bragi’s poem *Ragnarsdrápa*, dated most often to the ninth century, though more recently (by Edith Marold [1986]) to circa 1000. It is possible, however, that he also had in mind here one of the miracles attributed to Nonnosus, the prior of the monastery on Mount Soracte, in chapter 7 of the first of Gregory the Great’s *Dialogues*:

Quia uero eius monasterium in summo montis cacumine situm est, ad quamlibet paruorum hortum fratribus excolendum nulla planities patebat: unus autem breuissimus locus in latere montis excreuerat, quem ingentis saxi naturaliter egrediens moles occupabat. Quadam die dum Nonnosus uir uenerabilis cogitaret, quod saltem ad condimenta holerum nutrienda locus isdem aptus potuisset existere, si hunc moles saxi illius non teneret, occurrit animo quia eandem molem quinquaginta bouum paria mouere non possent. Cumque de humano labore esset facta desperatio, ad diuinum se solacium contulit, seque illic nocturno silentio in orationem dedit. Cum mane factum ad eundem locum fratres uenerunt atque inuenerunt molem tantae magnitudinis ab eodem loco longius recessisse, suoque recessu largum fratribus spatium dedisse. (Vogüé 1979, 66–68)

[Since the monastery was built on top of a mountain, there was not enough level ground for planting even a small garden. The only possible place was a ledge running along the mountainside, but this was occupied by a huge rock protruding from the ground. One day it occurred to Nonnosus that this area might suffice for raising at least a few vegetables, if only the rock were taken away. Yet he realized that even fifty pair of oxen could not move so huge a mass. Despairing of human efforts, he turned to God for help. Accordingly, he went there during the night and prayed fervently. In the morning, when his brother monks came to the place, they saw that the massive rock had been removed, leaving ample room for a garden.] (Zimmerman 1959, 29)

This story has not, as far as I know, been discussed before in relation to *Gylfaginning*. One story in Gregory’s *Dialogues* which has been discussed in relation to Old Norse–Icelandic literature, however, is the one in chapters 14–15

of the “Second Dialogue” in which Totila, king of the Goths, hearing of St. Benedict’s gift of prophecy and wishing to put it to the test, sends one of his servants disguised in royal robes to visit the saint, whereupon the latter, seeing through the disguise, tells the servant to divest himself of the garments that do not belong to him. When Totila then openly visits St. Benedict, the saint accurately foretells the subsequent course of the king’s career, including his death in ten years’ time (cf. Zimmerman 1959, 79–80). In the Old Norse–Icelandic context this story has been discussed mainly, and with good reason, as a likely model for stories preserved in the saga literature and elsewhere about Óláfr Tryggvason and St. Óláfr (cf. Turville-Petre 1953, 136). It may be suggested, however, that with its motif of a king making use of disguise in approaching an apparent source of supernatural power in order to find out more about it, the story may also have influenced the framing story of *Gylfaginning* (in which, of course, the disguise is also seen through, cf. Faulkes 1982, 7.23–27).

The fact that Gylfi undertakes his journey in disguise, and on his own, may seem an obstacle to the interpretation of it being offered here, since pilgrimages are normally undertaken openly, and in groups. It should be remembered, however, that what is being argued for here is an *inversion* of a Christian pilgrimage, and that contrasts found between Gylfi’s situation and a typical such pilgrimage need not upset the argument, provided that there are enough similarities as well to maintain the effect of contrastive association. It may also be pointed out that, in his *Leiðarvísir*, Abbot Nikulás makes no mention of pilgrims travelling specifically with him on his own pilgrimage to the Holy Land (cf. Kålund 1908, xxii and 12.26–23.21), which, as Hill has recently shown (1993), contrasts in its piety with pilgrimages as described in the kings’ sagas in particular, where they tend to be seen as contributing to the social prestige of those who undertake them, a relevant factor often being the numbers of followers. For all he tells us, Nikulás could have made his pilgrimage alone. The motif of the king in disguise, moreover, could be seen in the context of the social levelling that is often a characteristic of pilgrimage, as in a modern example from Mexico referred to by the Turners: “The industrialist, the merchant, the professional man, beside the Indian, next to the worker. On the road, they walk, suffer, and pray together. In the inns, they throw themselves down side by side on the same piece of ground. And even their dress is the same” (Turner and Turner 1978, 97).

What the Turners are mainly arguing, however, is that a pilgrimage conforms typically to the characteristic pattern of a rite of passage, or transition ritual, as broken down by van Gennep ([1909] 1960) into three main phases, namely “separation, limen or margin, and aggregation” (Turner and Turner 1978, 2). The first phase, as described by the Turners, “comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group, either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or from a relatively stable set of cultural conditions” (1978, 2). If Gylfi’s visit to the Æsir is viewed in the light of this

pattern, which if the Turners are right is consistent with that of a typical pilgrimage, Gylfi's disguise and his travelling alone may easily be seen as symbolic of his "separation" or "detachment" from the state of being a king, the "earlier fixed point in the social structure" from which, in setting out on his journey, he temporarily departs.

In the second phase of the pattern, the liminal or marginal phase, as the Turners describe it, "the state of the ritual subject (the 'passenger' or 'liminar') becomes ambiguous, he passes through a realm or dimension that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state, he is betwixt and between all familiar lines of classification" (1978, 2). La Fontaine further describes this phase as "characterized by danger and ambiguity, symbolized, for example, by being blindfolded or removed into the bush or forest away from normal life, or by having to undergo various unpleasant trials" (1985, 25). Aspects of this second phase in Gylfi's case surely include the "sjónhverfingar," the deceptive appearances discussed above, which may be said to correspond to the blindfolding mentioned by La Fontaine, and which may also be compared to the difficulties experienced by sinners, according to legend, in completing penitential pilgrimages; the Turners refer to stories of how the knights who martyred St. Thomas Becket were prevented by offshore gales from setting foot on the Holy Land (1978, 7). While from one point of view Gylfi's visit to the Æsir might be said to constitute an act of faith on his part in the possibilities of their religion, from another point of view (which is presumably that of the Æsir, since they are ready for him with the "sjónhverfingar") he is undertaking it in a spirit of rivalry and injured pride, anxious to check that their supernatural powers do not seriously threaten his own; his position in relation to their religion is thus comparable to that of a sinner in the Christian context. While Gylfi's life is probably not really in danger during his question-and-answer session with the Æsir, as we have seen, this is not revealed, either to him or to us, until the end of *Gylfaginning*; in the meantime, there is more than enough ambiguity and apparent danger in his situation for the relevance to it of the liminal phase in the rite of passage pattern to be clear. One aspect of this phase in the pilgrimage context, according to the Turners, is the gradual circumscribing of the pilgrim's new-found freedom (an aspect of the first phase) by sacred symbols as he approaches his destination, symbols which are "often described and defined in sacred tales and legend" (1978, 10). Although these symbols are often visual, taking the form of images, icons, and paintings, there is no reason why they should not be auditory, taking the form of sacred narratives (cf. Turner and Turner 1978, 241). The relevance of this to Gylfi's encounter with the Æsir is obvious; no sooner has he reached his destination than he finds himself in a situation where he has to listen carefully to stories about the divine Æsir. Yet another aspect of the liminal phase discussed by the Turners is the ludic element in pilgrimage, the element of play, which may involve, inter alia, fairground activities, the striking of bargains, and "the telling

of myths about the sometimes obscene and often tricky behavior of gods and founding ancestors” (1978, 35; cf. 37). Thus Gylfi finds in the doorway of the palace he enters a man juggling with knives, keeping seven in the air at a time (Faulkes 1982, 7.35–36), just as the Turners found near the portal of the church at a pilgrimage site they were investigating on the outskirts of Mexico City some brightly feathered dancers miming fights between Aztec warriors and French troops, and a skull-headed Death clowning wildly for the amusement of the pilgrims (1978, 36). The arrangement (if such it can be called) whereby Gylfi must prove himself wiser than Hár, Jafnhár, and Þriði may be compared with the bargain made by the pilgrims on the initiative of the Host of the Tabard Inn in the General Prologue to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* to the effect that whoever tells the best tale on the pilgrimage will win a free supper at the inn on the return journey (Benson 1988, pp. 35–36, lines 747–821). Although the stories of the gods in *Gylfaginning* (as opposed to *Skáldskaparmál*) are not particularly obscene, the trickery of the god Loki in particular is sufficiently well illustrated in, for example, the stories of Svaðilfari and of Baldr’s death to make quite clear the relevance of the ludic aspect of the liminal phase in the rite of passage, as discussed by the Turners in the context of pilgrimage, to Gylfi’s visit to the Æsir.

In the third phase of the rite, finally, the aggregative or integrative phase, “the passage is consummated, and the subject returns to classified secular or mundane social life” (Turner and Turner 1978, 2). Gylfi, as the passage quoted at the beginning of this paper indicates, returns from his interview with the Æsir to his own kingdom, where he passes on what he has seen and heard. While the interview, as already suggested, may be assumed to have taken place at the Scandinavian Ásgarðr, it is by no means clear where that is; though the phrase “kemr heim í ríki sitt” [comes back to his kingdom] seems to suggest that Gylfi has had to cross at least one state boundary to get there. His visit to the Æsir thus conforms to the pilgrimage pattern in yet another respect, since, as the Turners make clear, “The pilgrim trails cut across the boundaries of provinces, realms, and even empires” (1978, 6).

Rites of passage are invariably rituals of initiation, in a broad sense of the term; by creating with their three-part structure a margin or boundary (in this case Gylfi’s visit to the Scandinavian Ásgarðr) between an old and a new state of existence, they mark the initiation of an individual (in this case Gylfi) and/or group (Gylfi’s subjects, possibly) into the new state. In the context of Christian pilgrimage, according to the Turners, initiation is conceived of as leading “to a deeper level of religious participation” (1978, 15). Although, as I believe I have demonstrated, Gylfi’s visit to the Æsir conforms to the three-part pattern of a rite of passage with striking neatness, and although, as I believe I have also shown, a case can be made for seeing the visit as an inverted Christian pilgrimage, it is difficult to deduce from the end of *Gylfaginning* just what sort of initiation, if any, has been involved, either from Gylfi’s point of view or from that of the

human Æsir. Gylfi's purpose in visiting the latter, as we have seen, had been to inquire into the divine powers they worshipped, in the hope, we may assume, of thereby increasing his magical skills; for him, therefore, the visit was potentially a rite of initiation into the possession of increased magical powers. There is however no evidence that on his return he is any more of a magician than when he set out; indeed, although, as I have argued, he has in fact tricked the Æsir by getting away from them before they have completed their intended deception of him into believing they are gods, he can hardly be aware of this himself, for all that he has stumped them with his questions; he probably thinks, when their palace and stronghold vanish and he finds himself on a level plain, that their magical powers are indeed superior to his own, and that he cannot hope to surpass them. All he has gained from the visit, we may imagine him thinking, is a fund of entertaining stories. From the point of view of the human Æsir, on the other hand, Gylfi's visit had presumably been intended as a ritual of initiation into their religion, to which they had hoped to make him a convert by convincing him that they and their gods were identical; by this means they would bring about, through Gylfi, the further initiation of Gylfi's people into their faith. In neither of these aims, however, as I have argued here, are they successful.

The initiatory element in Gylfi's visit is to be found, I believe, neither in his point of view nor in that of the Æsir (human or divine), but in the larger perspective of *Gylfaginning's* narrator, which has its background in post-conversion Scandinavia. From this point of view, Gylfi is, without knowing it, a Christian pilgrim ahead of his time. In setting out on a pagan pilgrimage to find out more about a pagan religion, and in returning with nothing more than a fund of stories which emphasize the otherness of that religion and its inappropriateness to his people, Gylfi has led the latter on the first step of their pilgrimage of initiation into the new religion, Christianity, to which Scandinavia is now ready for conversion.

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