Introduction

The *Poetic Edda* is a collection of ancient stories of the Norse people, written down in Scandinavia in the thirteenth century but reflecting an oral tradition that most scholars agree is much, much older (though they do disagree on exactly how much older). The *Völuspá*, the piece of the *Poetic Edda* represented in this sample, is possibly the greatest resource that moderns have for reconstructing ancient Norse folklore, religious belief, and religious practice from the Bronze Age to the full Christianization of the Norse world. This poem narrates one of the most vital and necessarily fraught corners of any religious tradition – the beginnings and endings of things. From the creation of Ash and Elm (*Ask* and *Emblu* in Old Norse), the first humans, to *ragna rök*, the "fate of the gods", *Völuspá* narrates the stories that make up the theological backbone of Norse religion.

The earliest full versions of the *Völuspá* come in the Codex Regius and the Hauksbók manuscripts. I worked from the Codex Regius for this translation, using the 1867 edition transcribed by Sophus Bugge. I consulted this edition of the Codex Regius via the internet database Heimskringla, where it is free to access and where one can compare various manuscript versions and different editions of the text.[1] Generally, the Codex Regius and the Hauksbók match, but there are the kinds of manuscript variations that one expects – differences in orderings of stanzas, pieces missing in one manuscript or the other, and sometimes inconsistency in pronoun usage, especially for the Völva herself. I have translated these pronouns literally, as they appear in the Codex Regius manuscript, and have provided commentary where the inconsistencies may become confusing.

Another issue that naturally arises when creating a modern, typed version of a medieval handwritten text is how to break up the text in order to number it. I have chosen, in lieu of numbering individual lines, to break up the text into stanzas. The numbering of these stanzas is inauthentic – the Codex Regius is not broken up in this way (nor is the Hauksbók, for that matter). However, I think breaking the text into stanzas lends it a natural flow and digestibility, and have worked from the numbering used by Sophus Bugge in his 1867 edition of the Codex Regius version.

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[1] "Völuspá II (Bugge)," *Heimskringla*, 2020, https://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/V%C3%B6lusp%C3%A1_II_(Bugge)

In general, I have done what I can in this translation to preserve the *feeling* of both reading and hearing Old Norse poetry in its original context – in other words, to remain faithful to Eddic oral tradition. For one thing, I have done this by, where possible, preserving the alliterative conventions – however, I have not forced or pushed this alliteration where it makes the modern English sound contrived or overly manufactured. The effect I am going for is one that allows the modern reader to enter the mead hall of medieval Scandinavia, with all of the spontaneity and intimacy of the oral tradition – therefore alliteration is only helpful when it serves to evoke the oral tradition and not merely for "accuracy"'s sake. I am inspired in this approach by Seamus Heaney, in that I "prefer to let the natural 'sound of sense' prevail over the demands of convention" and that I "have been reluctant to force an artificial shape or an unusual word choice just for the sake of correctness."[2]

I have also attempted, once again only where this does not create an overly stiff style, to maintain use of words with Germanic roots in order to allow readers to draw their own connections between Old Norse and modern English. Where possible, I have used words that directly descend from the Old Norse words used in the original text. One of the most satisfying things about studying ancient Germanic languages, in my opinion, is the opportunity it offers to see a sort of distorted mirror image of modern English, teaching us more about the history of our own beautifully strange and wacky language; therefore, I have done everything in my power to allow readers to see for themselves how *allar helgar kindir* becomes "all holy kinds".

I have tried to translate names in ways that make sense and feel natural, but where a translation is either not obviously available or would too greatly break up the flow of the text, I have left names untranslated. Anywhere that I have provided a (quite literal) translation of the names of characters or important objects (such as the *gjallarhorn*) I have also made sure to include the original Old Norse name, for the sake of recognizability and plot cohesion. I have done the same with epithets (at the risk of at times creating fairly long lists of titles). The Valföðr is also the "father of the slain" who is also Oðin, so I have tried to include, in the case of epithets, all of these meanings. This is important, in my opinion, because any contemporary listener of the *Völuspá* (or any of the other poems in the *Poetic Edda*) would have immediately understood the diverse meanings of these names and titles, and I want modern readers to get the same privilege,

[2]Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), xxix

rather than merely getting lost in long Old Norse names (especially in places where names contain jokes or wisdom, like in the list of dwarves in stanzas 11-16).

Finally, I have provided a commentary on the stanzas here in which the narrative is not immediately clear. As the *Völuspá* is a work of poetry, and a very old work of poetry at that, it is sometimes easy to get so lost in the language and artistry that one loses track of the plot, and no amount of clever translational maneuverings can provide a cure for this. However, I believe that a clearer understanding of the story of *Völuspá* will lend readers a clearer understanding of the theology of *Völuspá* – which is, ultimately, my main aim in retranslating a text like this. Therefore, I have provided commentary which allows readers to follow the vital characters and plot points, and hopefully to draw their own conclusions about the religious meaning behind these tales. I cannot see into the minds of the early medieval Scandinavians who created these stories, nor can I surmise, in any real way, what was happening in their internal lives. All I can do, as a translator, is to give the readers all the information possible, so that they can bring their own personal histories, opinions, feelings and perspectives to what is on the page – and to give the reader enough information to come up with their own questions, and to go out into the world in search of more.

So: what would you yet know?

Translation

1) I pray for hearing
Of all holy kinds,
Of things great and small,
Of the man-children of the One Who Illuminates Home (we call him Heimdallr);
You wish me, God of the Slain, Valföðr, Oðin,
To tell well before you
A folktale of men of old,
They that are furthest from us.

2) I remember the giants,
Children of years ago,
The ones that formerly

Brought food to me;
Nine homes I remember,
Nine giantesses,
Among the magnificent tree measured rightly
For far beneath the mold.

3) It was the time of old
When Ymir the Giant was;
At that time there was not sand nor sea
Nor snow on the waves;
Earth had never been seen
Nor heaven,
And there was a gap gaping
In a place with no grass.

4) Ere Bur's sons
Bade Mið Garð come up,
And they were the ones who shaped that magnificent
Middle Place;
The sun sparkled from the south
Over the stones,
There was ground then
Growing a green leek.

5) The sun threw from the south,
Sister of the moon,
Holding in her right hand
Heaven's brim;
That sun did not know
Where her settling place was,
Those stars did not know

Where they were situated.

6) Then all of the gods
Went to the great throne of judgement,
Glorified gods
And they gave great care;
To night and the things beneath night
They gave names:
Morning they named
And middle day,
Midafternoon and evening –
They reckoned the years.

7) The gods met
At that plan which we call Iðavöllr;
There sanctuaries and temples
Highly they timbered,
Hearths they appointed,
Rich things they constructed,
Tongs they created
And tools they invented.

8) They played chess in the meadow
And they were merry,
Those winter-warders did not know
Want of gold,
Until three giant
Maids came,
Very loathsome,
From the land of giants.

9) Then all of the gods
Went to the great throne of judgement,
Glorified gods
And they gave great care;
Who should shape
The race of dwarves
From Brimir's blood
And from Bairn establish them.

10) There was Mighty Drinker (we call him Móðsognir),
Who became master
Of all the dwarves,
And Durinn the Sleepy was another;
In the likeness of man
They made many
Dwarves on the Earth,
Just as Durinn said to.

11) New Moon, No Moon,
Northern, Southern,
Eastern, Western,
Thief of Everything, Drooping One,
Corpse and Almost-Corpse,
Got-Your-Nose and Amost-Dead,
Beaver and Bávurr,
This One and That One,
Little Shaver and The Big Fat One,
The Scared One, and Mead-Wolf.

12) Wedge, Magic Elf,
Wind Elf, One-Who's-Magnificent,

Belligerent and Almost Belligerent,
Bearer of Knowledge, The One Who's Red and Brains-In-His-Head,
New One, Nonplussed One,
Now I have reckoned these dwarves,
Full of Power and Forest of Wisdom,
Now I have named them in full.

13) File, One Who Makes the Wood-Pile,
What Was Found, Needle,
Handle Made In the Olden Style,
Handy One, The One Who Decreases Pain,
Brother, Brown,
Bloodletting-Instrument and Boy,
Fast One, The One Who Bears the Horn,
Famous One and The One Who Stops,
Warrior, Muddy-Field,
The One Who Carries an Oaken Shield.

14) Now all of the dwarves
From the family of Drooped One,
That whole clan of creatures,
I will list until the Stooped One;
They who seek
A hall of stone, a somewhere else –
A seat for Muddy-Field
Until the Field of Battle.

15) There was The Dripper
And Dying-For-A-Fight,
High One, Heaves-Dirt-for-Burial-Mounds,
Heard-A-Joke-Upon-The-Fields, The One Who Nearly Glows,

Iron Bolt, Angry Dolt,
Dips-To-His-Knees, Gentle Breeze,
Herring-Bone Panelling On His Windows, The One Who Dyes Everyone's Clothes,
Hooked Board, Great-Grandfather.
Elf and Young One,
The One Who Carries An Oaken Shield,
Mountain and Snowmound,
He Makes a Discovery and The Trickster;
That one must live forever,
For the time he is kept alive,
So the ones after will keep the tale
Of the descendants of The Stooped One.

16) Until three came
From that band of men
From the strong and lovely
Home of the gods,
And they found ones
Not very grand,
Ash and Elm
Loosed of any fate.
Spirit they did not possess,
Sense they did not have,
Cause nor call
Nor good color;

17) Spirit gave Oðin,
Sense gave Hænir,
Cause gave Lóðurr
And good color.

18) I know an ash that stands
Called Horse Of The Terrible One, and we call it Yggdrasill,
A high tree, doused
In dirt;
From there comes dew,
Which falls on all the dales,
Standing green forever over
The Well of Fate.

19) From it come maids
Knowing many things,
Three of them from the sea
Which stands under the tree:
One was Fate (and we call her Urð),
Another The Happening (and we call her Verðandi),
Breaker of boards –
Debt is the third (and we call her Skuld);

20) They laid the laws,
They chose out lives
For each of the children of men,
The fate of humankind was chosen.

21) She knows about that fight,
The first one in the world,
When Golden-Strength
With spears was hit
And in the hall of the High One
Her hands were burned.

22) Thrice burned,

Thrice born,
Often, repeatedly,
Yet still she lives.

23) She was named Worth
And wanted a home,
The well-speaking witch
Wise in foul spirits;
She charms them, those who hear her cunning –
She charms their minds skillfully;
Ever she was a sweet sight
For evil women.

24) Then all of the gods
Went to the great throne of judgement,
Glorified gods
And they gave great care;
Whether the gods should
Pay tribute
Or whether all priests
Should pay that price.

25) Oðin flung spears
And shot at the folk below;
That was that fight,
The first in the world;
The board-wall was broken
Bordering the city of the gods,
war, the Vanir were able
To make footprints on the wide fields.

26) Then all of the gods
Went to the great throne of judgement,
Glorified gods
And they gave great care:
Who had mixed
All the air with enmity
Or who had given the race of giants
Oðin's maid, The Furious One's girlfriend?

27) Thor rose up there alone
With dismal thought;
Seldom he sits
When he hears such things
As one who walks away from oaths,
Word and swearing,
Speech all strong
As he stalks among them.

28) She knows The One Who Illuminates Home (we call him Heimdallr)
Has hearing hidden
Under the holy tree
Which commands honor,
On which moves
The muddy waterfall
Of the sacrifice of the Slain Ones' Father.
But what would you yet know?

29) Alone she sat outside,
When the old one came,
The Terror of the Young, the God, Oðin.
And he sought her eye.

What are you asking me?
Why do you make trial of me?
I know entirely, Oðin,
Where your eye fell,
Into the margins
Of Mimir's Well.
Mimir drank mead each morning
Out of the sacrifice of the Oðin, Slain Ones' Father.
But what would you yet know?

30) The War Father, Oðin, picked out for her
Rings and a necklace,
She delivered smart sayings
And spoke prophecies with magic objects,
She saw far, and far into
All of the world.

31) Widely she saw
The Valkyries coming over,
Ready to ride
To the Nation of Gods.
Skuld holds a shield
And Skogul another,
War-Wager, Battler, Wand-Wielder,
And Spear's-Point.
Now have been considered
The women of Raider, the Valkyries
Ready to ride over
Rich fields.

32) I saw Baldr,

And the blood of that god,
Oðin's son,
And his fate concealed;
It stood, having grown
Out of the ground, ever taller,
Slender and quite fair
Mistletoe.

33) An arrow was made from the gallows tree,
That which seemed so soft,
Harm-flying, high-risk,
What Hoðr was to shoot;
Baldr's brother
Having been born soon after,
That one, Oðin's son,
Was to start fighting at only one night old.

34) He never washed his hands
Nor combed his hair,
Ere he bore a blaze to
Baldr's opponent.
But Frigg wept
In Fen's Halls
For the violence in Valhalla.
But what would you yet know?

35) She saw the one who had to lie
Under the Sodden Grove,
A lover of iron, in likeness
Of Loki;
There sits Sigyn

Though not wholly
Glad at her husband.

36) On the east and
Over the poison-valleys
Swords and sabres
Fell on the river called Punishment, the one we call Slið.
North of there,
In Deep-Field (the one we call Niðavöllum)
Stood a hall made of gold,
For Sindra's kindred;
And another one stood
In The Not-Cold (a place we call Ókólni),
She saw there a giant's hall fit for bears,
And that one was for Brimir.

37) She saw a hall standing
Far off from the sun,
In the Corpse-Shore (that place we call Náströndu),
Its doorway looks north;
Poison-drops fall
In through the hole in the roof,
She saw a serpent's spine
Wound about the hall.

38) She sees there wading
Through the wild streams
Men who answer malice with malice
And murderers, men like wolves
And doers of every other secret evil
Which ears have heard whisper of;

There Bites-With-Malice (the one we call Niðhöggr)
Sucks upon what comes out of corpses,
The wolf laid waste to men.
But what would you yet know?

39) She sat in the east in olden times
At the Iron Wood
Where also was fed
Fenrir's kin;
Of them all
That one was to be
The moon's unmaker,
One in the mask of a monster.

40) Full of the flesh
Of men fated to die,
He reddens the seat of the gods
With red blood;
Sunshine becomes black
For summers after,
Weather all strange.
But what would you yet know?

41) He sat at the burial mound
And struck his harp,
The giantess' herdsman,
Joyful Eggþér;
Above him howled
In the hanging-wood
A fair-red cock,
In the place called Fjallar.

42) Above him Combed Screamer
Screamed to the gods,
That one who wakes those dwelling
In the home of the War Father, Oðin;
And another one crows
Below the earth,
A cock red as soot
At the room of Hel.

43) Now Garmr growls much
In memory of Gnipahelli, the Stone-Cave;
What binds must break,
And the wolf must run;
I know an abundance of knowledge,
Further I see and longer,
Of the grim fate of the gods,
Great victory of the gods.

44) Brothers will battle
And this will be their bane,
Sister's sons will
Make sisterhood spoil;
It is hard at home,
There is much whoredom,
Axe-time, sword-time,
All shields are cleaved,
Wind-time, wolf-time,
Another world is founded;
No man will show mercy to another.

45) The sons of Mimir play,
And the meting out of destinies is heard
In the gasp
Of *gjallarhorn*, the Screaming-Horn;
High blows The One Who Illuminates Home, the one we call Heimdallr,
His horn is aloft,
Oðin makes talk
With Mimir's head.
The ancient branches groan,
And the giants are loose;
Yggrasill shakes, The Horse of the Terrible One,
That ash shakes where it stands.

46) Now Garmr growls much
In memory of Gnipahelli, the Stone-Cave;
What binds must break,
And the wolf must run;
I know an abundance of knowledge,
Further I see and longer,
Of the grim fate of the gods,
Great victory of the gods.

47) Now The Decrepit One (the one we call Hrymr) comes out of the East,
He heaves a linden shield above him,
The Mold-Belt, the one we call Jörmungandr, creeps through the opening
With the rage of a giant.
That serpent is struggling against the waves
While an eagle screams,
Slitting colorless corpses apart –
The nail-journeying ship, *naglfar,* breaks loose.

48) A ship moves from the East
Muspell's men are coming,
From conflict fleeing
With Loki steering,
Weird creatures a long way marching,
With all the wolves following,
And with them too, one being,
The brother of Byleist, along for their journey.

49) What happened to the gods now?
What happened to the elves; and how?
Everyone roars in the Home of Giants,
The gods are in council,
The dwarves groan
By the stone doors,
The guardians of the cliff-walls.
But what would you yet know?

50) Surtr travelled from the south
With switch-bane
Sparkling upon his sword
The sun of the gods;
Cliffs of stone clash,
And creatures collapse,
Humans tread Hel's path
And heaven has been cleaved.

51) Then comes to Hlín
Another harm, further on,
When Oðin goes
To slay the wolf,

And the bane of
bright Bellower;
Thus must fall
The love of Frigg.

52) Then comes in the sturdy
Son of Sigfoðr, the Victory Father, Oðin;
His son is the Woody One, and he is to lay waste to
The wolf.
The son of the Roarer
Must stick
His sword into the center
Thus to satisfy his father's grudge.

53) Then comes in the young
Son of Hlóðynjar,
Oðin's son goes
To fight with the wolf,
He smites with gallantry
Miðgard's temple-defender;
All humans must
From the homestead run;

54) The sun stops shining,
Earth sinks gently down into the sea,
The stars are not at home in heaven
But are down upon the heaths;
Fire rages
And that nourisher of men
Plays games
With himself.

55) Now Garmr growls much
In memory of Gnipahelli, the Stone-Cave;
What binds must break,
And the wolf must run;
I know an abundance of knowledge,
Further I see and longer,
Of the grim fate of the gods,
Great victory of the gods.

56) Now she sees coming up
Another Earth again
From out of the sea,
Evergreen;
Waters flow and fall,
An eagle has flown over,
He fusses under the mountain
To catch a fish.

57) The gods are found
At Iðavelli
And they condemn the mighty
Mold-Belt, Jörmungandr,
And they call to mind
Their masterful maneuvers
And Oðin's
Old runes.

58) After these things
So strange by nature
Gold game pieces

In the grass will be found,
The ones that in days long ago
The gods had owned.

59) Unsown,
The fields will grow,
Bad fortunes will all be made better,
Baldr will come;
Then Höðr and Baldr live
In Oðin's glorious home,
A sanctuary for the gods of the slain.
So: what would you yet know?

60) Hænir can
Choose the allocated wood
And Buri builds another
Place for two brothers
In the wide wind-home.
But what would you yet know?

61) She sees a hall standing
More fair than the sun,
Gimli: Protected-from-Fire,
Thatched with gold;
There shall the loyal
Lords live
And it will be those fabled days
When they live in delight.

61.5) Then a power came in
To the court of the gods

Something strong from above
Which rules over everything.

62) There comes in from the darkness
The dragon flying,
A gleaming serpent, coming up
From the Under-Mountain (the place we call Niðafjöll);
She sees that it has feathers,
And it is flying over fields,
Bites-with-Hatred (the one we call Niðhöggr).
Now she must sink.

Commentary

1) The speaker here is the Völva, for whom the *Völuspá* takes its name – a female seer and practitioner of magic who delivers the prophecy, a prophecy about both the creation of the world and humanity and about the great heat-death end of things, *ragna rök*.

This introduction provides an invocation common to the genre of oral epic, reminiscent of an Old English *hwæt* or a Greek *O Mousai*. The invocation here is a method of rhetorical framing that tells us what kind of story we are about to listen to – one that requires attentive and dutiful listening, and listening that will repay the listener with important and vital information. This prayer for listening is twinned: it is both a prayer for the Völva herself, that she will be able to hear and understand the holy message being given to her and a prayer for and to the audience, that they will be able to attentively and dutifully listen to the deeply vital and holy knowledge they are about to receive.

2) The "magnificent tree" here is Yggdrasill, the world-tree of Norse heathen cosmology and which Oðin hangs on to gain knowledge of runes and magic in a variety of Old Norse mythological and religious texts. Yggdrasill, "Horse of the Terrible One", is apparently called this because Oðin (often called by his epithet *Yggr*, "frightening" or "terrible") hangs upon it for

knowledge of runes and magic, metaphorically "riding" it as his horse. This hanging is attested in *Gylfaginning* 25, among other places.

Grimnismál, another poem in the *Poetic Edda*, lays out a more detailed description of Yggdrasill's physical structure and how this structure relates to the larger world in Norse heathen cosmology.

4) "Bur's sons" are Oðin, Vili and Vé, the gods who are here creating *Miðgarð*, the middle-place where humans are to dwell.

5) The word *himinjöður* is a contested one, as it is an obscure compound word not found elsewhere in Old Norse literature. Here I am following in the school of Cleasby and Vigfusson, who see the compound to mean the corner or edge (*jöðurr*) of the heavens (*himin*).[3] However, there is an alternate possible reading which asserts that *jö* and *ður* are different words, making the compound something like the horse (*jö*) animals (*dýr*) or the horse (*jö*) door (*dyrr)* of *himin*. While many canonical translations choose to read *jöður* as *jö-dýr* and wind up with a translation like "heavenly horses" (as in Thorpe's edition and, most recently, Jackson Crawford's), I have chosen "heaven's brim" because I find the awkwardness of *jö-dýr* as "horse-beasts" unlikely in Old Norse language.[4]

8) What I have translated here as "played chess" is really *tefldu*, a verb that indicates playing at "tables" in general, a variety of kinds of game that are categorized under the generic term *tafl*, coming ultimately from Latin *tabula*, meaning "table". Generally, these are just "tabletop" games as we would use the word today, so it could be referring to any board game – however, I use "chess" here because it is immediately recognizable and emphasizes the strategic nature of the game, which parallels the "playing board" of *ragna rök* with all its complex and measured strategy and trickery.

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[3]Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 1874), "*Himin-jöður"*.

[4]Benjamin Thorpe, *The Poetic Edda: Northvegr Edition* (The Northvegr Foundation Press, 2004).
Jackson Crawford, *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes* (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2015).
For more translations as "heaven's rim" or "edge of heaven", see also: Henry Adams Bellows, *The Poetic Edda: Translated from the Icelandic with an Introduction and Notes* (The American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1926); Patricia Terry, *Poems of the Vikings: The Elder Edda* (The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1969); and Carolyne Larrington, *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

The "three giant maids" here are the *nornir*, the Norns, the dealers out of fates, coming to inform the gods about the coming of *ragna rök*.

9) Brimir here may be another word for Ymir (the giant from which the universe was made), or perhaps one of his descendants – though the only solid reasons for this assumption exist within the *Völuspá* itself, so this could be referring to a wholly different character. Brimir is mentioned again in stanza 37, where he is said to have a hall "fit for bears", a *bjórsalr*, literally a "bear-hall", and his hall here is referred to as a *jötuns* hall, a giant's hall, connecting Brimir with giants and loosely with the connection of the creation of nature and humanity from the body of a giant, found in *Gylfaginning* 8.

16) The "three" here are Oðin, Hænir and Lóðurr, the gods who gave understanding and consciousness to the first two humans, Ash and Elm. Interestingly, the *Völuspá* does not say that these three gods or any other god actually made humans – only that the gods gave humans the senses and knowledge required to actually be human. Ash and Elm were not made – they were found, *fundu*.

19) These "three" are again the Norns that we met earlier.

20) What is the role of a god in the face of a world that now contains humans and other creatures, and in which the Vanir, a wholly new pantheon, are about to be integrated as gods? This passage allows us to see a glimpse of a moment not often narrated in religious literature: the moment at which the gods decided what the responsibilities of a god would be in the new world they were creating.

The gods here are creating their own roles, emphasizing the role of creation in the ascent to godhood. The gods are using their godly powers to make themselves gods in an infinite loop reminiscent of Oðin's "sacrifice of himself to himself." (Hávamál 138) The creation of the self by the self (using uniquely godly powers of creation to create a uniquely godly form and role) naturally lends itself to comparison with the sacrifice of the self to the self (using godly powers of sacrifice to sacrifice to a god – the one doing the sacrificing and being sacrificed to).

23) The text that makes up lines 3 and 4 in my edition is obscure, and there are various interpretations of it. Here, again, I follow Bugge's edition in my translation, but it should be kept in mind that this is only one interpretation among many.

Some interpreters (Bugge foremost among them) see the *völu* here as the Völva herself. I have left this up to individual reader interpretation (though I do think it is an interesting and fruitful way to read the text).[5]

25) Here the speaker does another swift and abrupt pivot – this time to the war between the Æsir and the Vanir, the newer pantheon of gods and the older pantheon of gods, for authority over the new world being created. This is a fairly common motif in world myths and religions; it is easy to draw connections between the war between the Titans and the Olympian gods, or between the Tuatha dé Danann and the Fir Bolg.

29) There is variation among manuscripts about the pronouns here; however, it is clear that Oðin is seeking out his eye, asking the Völva for advice about finding it, and the Völva is responding directly to him in the first person: "what are you asking me?"

32) This stanza relates the death of Baldr, one of the sons of Oðin, who is slain by his twin brother Hoðr after Hoðr is tricked into doing so by Loki in the Prose Edda. In the Prose Edda, Hoðr stabs Baldr with a stick of mistletoe after Loki notices that mistletoe is the only plant that has not been forced to make a vow never to hurt Baldr – a classic "Achilles' heel" type myth, in which the hero is protected from everything but the thing that is considered most harmless and negligible, and this very thing winds up leading to the downfall of the hero.

This is another example of a place where the *Poetic Edda* casually and enigmatically refers to a place in myth that the contemporary audience would apparently already be aware of but which takes a bit more searching for modern audiences – as is often the case, the *Prose Edda* is a good place to start with this search.

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[5]Henry Adams Bellows, *The Poetic Edda: Translated from the Icelandic with an Introduction and Notes* (The American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1926), 10-11.

35) The “lover of iron” here is Sigyn, the wife of Loki, apparently fed up with her husband’s constant trickery.

36) This is another appearance of the giant Brimir from stanza 9, from whom dwarves were apparently made.

38) Niðhöggr is the serpent who lives beneath Yggdrasill – here apparently an eater of corpses.

The wolf is apparently Fenrir, the wolf whom Týr sacrifices his hand to bind but who gets loose from his fetters at *ragna rök* and wreaks havoc, eventually killing Oðin. Týr’s sacrifice is more fully narrated in *Gylfaginning* 25.

Fenrir is only ever mentioned in *Völuspá* marginally and by reference – apparently, his myth is either considered not central to the story or so central that laying out the story in explicit detail would seem redundant, as all the listeners already know it. The second interpretive option seems more likely, given the number of times that Fenrir is alluded to in *Völuspá*, and given the amount of marginal references to mythological and religious figures and stories that are meant to be immediately recognized by the audience throughout the *Völuspá.*

39) “Fenrir’s kin” here are the wolves Sköll and Hati, who chase and eat the sun and moon.

40) There has been a recent movement in scholarship to view this description of strange weather as a description of the volcanic eruptions that regularly wreaked destruction on medieval Iceland (and continue to do so in Iceland today). Andrew Dugmore and Orri Vésteinsson most recently argued this in their groundbreaking article “Black Sun, High Flame, and Flood: Volcanic Hazards in Iceland”, in which they connect the dates of composition for the *Poetic Edda* with dates of particularly desctructive volcanic eruptions.[6] Given the similarity of this description of environmental destruction to the real-life aftermath of volcanic eruptions, the comparison is relevant and worth further scholarship.

[6]Andrew Dugmore and Orri Vésteinsson, “Black Sun, High Flame, and Flood: Volcanic Hazards in Iceland,” in *Surviving Sudden Environmental Change: Answers from Archaeology*, ed. Jago Cooper and Payson Sheets (University Press of Colorado, 2013), 67-90.

42) Eggþér is one of the giants, here making noise along with the cock *Gullinkambi*, literally "screaming-comb", to herald the coming of *ragna rök.*

44) Garmr is the canine guardian of Hel and another important herald of *ragna rök* – an easy connection can here be drawn with Cerberus.

The wolf referenced in this stanza is once again Fenrir, running wild on the world and wreaking havoc upon humans, dwarves and gods alike in one of the most destructive acts of *ragna rök.*

45) The *gjallarhorn*, the "screaming horn", is the horn blown by the god Heimdallr to announce the official beginning of the fated *ragna rök.*

47) Jörmungandr here is the world-serpent, a giant dragon who encircles the entire earth from under the sea and comes out at *ragna rök* to create mass chaos and generally wreak destruction. The following stanzas are a general recounting of all the figures traveling to either partake in or witness the carnage about to happen at *ragna rök*, apparently drawn by the sound of the *gjallarhorn*.

52-53) The wolf here is once again Fenrir – Oðin is about to die fighting him, one of the final acts of *ragna rök.* "Bellower", *Beli* in Old Norse, is a giant slain by Freyr, as attested in Snorri's retelling of Skírnismál – therefore, the "bane of bright Bellower" is Freyr, who Oðin is about to take on in battle. Hlín is apparently either another god associated with Frigg or an epithet for Frigg herself.

54) The "nourisher of men" here is a poetic term for the earth itself, which has been left alone with no life upon it.

56) Pétur Pétursson, among others, has made the connection between the revelatory and apocalyptic language used here and that used in Christian apocalyptic texts. Pétur argues that the Christian imagery in passages such as these is due to the Christian thinking that is central to the text itself, rather than merely being "added on" as Christian decoration on top of a fundamentally

heathen text, as other scholars have at times been tempted to describe it. (Pétur Pétursson 2013, 185-201.)

However we choose to interpret the markedly apocalyptic language here, we must acknowledge that the language is *also* markedly and fundamentally heathen; the gods ended stanza 58 and they begin stanza 60, sandwiching this "rising world" between the solid foundations that are the gods. This interplay of heathen and Christian imagery and theology allows us to get a glimpse of the religious world of late medieval northern Europe – a place where heathenism and Christianity were so vitally and necessarily interconnected that imagery like this is impossible to cleanly slice into Christian and heathen halves.

57-58) Here the narrator begins to tell of the world after *ragna rök*: which gods will survive it, where they will live, and how they will cope with the massive death and destruction of *ragna rök* and their ensuing grief. The Völva describes a post-*ragna rök* vision that is markedly hopeful, though bittersweet: the gods will play *tafl*-games, spend time together in their halls, and tell stories about their experiences at *ragna rök,* coping with the chaos by naming it, putting it into words, and explaining to themselves what exactly has taken place and why.

61.5) This reference to the "power" is one of the most enigmatic parts of the *Völuspá.* It is not found in the Codex Regius version at all, which is why I have included it as an extra stanza – however, it is so important in terms of the history of the *Poetic Edda* that it felt irresponsible to not include it at all. All manuscripts of the Hauksbók version include this passage, and later paper manuscripts add extra lines:

"Rule he orders,
And rights he fixes,
Laws he ordains
That ever shall live."[7]

The possible reference to Christianity here is impossible to ignore and is, in fact, a site of much scholarship. Many scholars interpret this as the scribe who wrote down the stories of the *Poetic Edda* attempting to reconcile the heathen faith of his sources with the increasingly

[7]Henry Adams Bellows, *The Poetic Edda: Translated from the Icelandic with an Introduction and Notes* (The American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1926), 26.

Christian faith of the contemporary world surrounding him; though it may be more fruitful to see this as the result of a scribe who was fully immersed in the combined traditions of Christianity and heathenism writing down stories by performers who were fully immersed in both traditions as well. These faiths and cultures are so completely interconnected that it is impossible to tell where Christianity ends, and heathenism begins. If the reference is truly to Christianity, there is also a high possibility that this passage was added after the poem was originally composed, though it is impossible to surmise the motivations for adding it.

This being said, it is entirely possible and natural to interpret this passage as a narration of Yahweh overtaking the old gods of Norse heathenism, coming to "rule over everything". Note that even when interpreted in this way this passage does not discount the existence or power of the Norse gods – it merely states that Yahweh (or whatever else readers or listeners interpret the "power" as) will be *more* powerful, and will take control from the hands of the old gods. It is also interesting to note that, if this interpretation is correct, the individuals who worked together to produce the *Völuspá* see no issue with allowing Yahweh and the old gods to exist in the same reality. Whether or not audiences were meant to understand *Völuspá* as religious truth and prophecy or as a mythological story (likely it is some of each, and the relation between these two is much more complicated than either/or), Yahweh and Oðin are able to interact without a hitch, and these beings are considered to be a similar kind of being, although not identical.

62) What the "sinking" of the Völva means in terms of the plot or literary framing of the *Völuspá* is unclear. On the one hand, it seems to offer a comfortable bookend which parallels the bookend of the invocation to dutiful listening at the beginning, creating a symmetrical whole. It walks us out of what "I pray for hearing" walked us into, which is almost strikingly literal with the spatial language of the Völva "sinking" – she has risen into our line of sight, taking up our attention for the period in which we are hearing or reading her message, and now it is time for her to leave.

It also offers an interesting parallel with the "rising" of the new Earth that the Völva sees a few stanzas before, at stanza 59. As the new Earth comes into being, and the gods and other beings must cope with whatever remnant of the "before-time" is left, the Völva is leaving us to draw our own conclusions – her role (that of providing us knowledge) is done, and now we must go forward with what we have learned.

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