



* Archetypal Analyses *

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BETRAYAL AND TRANSFORMATION

Psychological Functions of Oath Breaking and Reconstitution
in the Poetic Edda

by Leslie Emery

Betrayal, Doom and Reconstitution Among the Gods

The writings known as the Poetic Edda elucidate various narratives from Scandinavian and Icelandic Viking tradition. These stories of divine and human characters are in places fragmentary and obscure in their references. There is extensive scholarly literature offering divergent interpretations of translations, originality of lines, inter-tale references, and the meanings of dissimilar versions of some stories. The obstacles to presenting any confident and complete reading of this surviving text of a 'lost,' pre-Christian culture are extensive. Yet there are also consistencies in the works that suggest inhering values.

The central cosmological images of the collection are found in the lay called "The Prophecy of the Seeress Voluspa." In these verses the origins and fate of divine and human persona are sketched. Lee Hollander summarizes thusly:

Othin, it seems, has summoned the seeress from her grave to appear before the assembled gods. . . . She tells how man is given the breath of life, how a golden age of innocence (among the gods) ends with the coming of the Norns (the Fates) and the ill-understood slaying of Gullvieg, a Pandoralike figure sent to the Aesir

by the Vanir, an older race of gods. A war between these powers results disastrously for the Aesir, whose battlements are laid low. In their rebuilding, broken oaths embroil the gods (now united?) with the world of giants, representative of brute force and darkness. Baldr, god of light, is slain, and evil enters into the world. Then, with strokes of tremendous dramatic power, the seeress foretells the downfall of the gods, heralded by general depravity, the breaking loose of all the powers of destruction, and the cataclysmic end of the old world. Out of its ruins a new world is born in which Baldr and other benign gods will establish a reign of justice and peace (Hollander 1).

In barest outline, then, an original age of innocent harmony is spoiled by two events. Firstly Voluspa recounts the coming of the three Norns, or Fates, who spin out the fates of each and all -- including the gods.

In their dwellings at peace
Of gold no lack
Till hither came up
Huge of might,
(“Voluspa” 121)

they played at tables,
did the gods then know,--
giant-maids three,
out of Jotunheim.

The Norns appear from below as forces greater than the divinities themselves. Their arrival brings un-avoidable, intransigent, ‘giant’ and ‘mighty’ forces of fate into the cosmos. The second turning point Voluspa narrates is an internecine assault on a magical goddess from one clan of divinities, the Vanir, by another, the Aesir.

The war I remember,
When the gods with spears
And in the hall
Three times burned,
(121)

the first in the world,
had smitten Gullvieg.
of Har had burned her,--
and three times born,

A cascade of oath breaking, deceits and betrayals follows the attempted murder

among what are essentially divine ‘siblings’ and the subsequent conflict. Gods and humans quarrel violently among themselves obsessively. The ‘mythological history’ that unfolds from that initial violent schism leads eventually to a cataclysmic conflagration. At the end of the grand battle of divine powers the world is consumed by fire.

Brothers shall fight And sister’s sons Hard is it on earth, Axe-time, sword-time, Wind-time, wolf-time Nor ever shall men (124)	and fell each other, shall kinship stain; with mighty whoredom; shields are sundered, ere the world fall; each other spare.
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This pattern of deceits and betrayals will evidently only be dramatically altered by the transformational bloodletting and immolation of *ragna rök*: the last battle in which the trickster god Loki, the divine wolf Fafnir and the ‘forces of darkness’ are destined to triumph, but which will bring a new order into being. The seeress tells how there will be a reprieve from destruction and a new and better world will emerge from the ashes of the present corrupt or doomed one.

Then fields unsowed All ills grow better, Baldr and Hod dwell And the mighty gods: More fair than the sun, Roofed with gold, There shall the righteous And happiness ever (126)	bear ripened fruit, and Baldr comes back; in Hropt’s battle-hall, would you know yet more? a hall I see, on Gimle it stands; rulers dwell, there shall have.
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These verses appear to be the conclusion to the prophecy. Yet here Voluspa uses the refrain, “would you know yet more?” for the sixth time. It seems she is repeatedly daring her audience to ‘hear it all.’ Her parting verse is a curious departure from the idyllic state of reconstitution she has just described.

From below the dragon
 Nidhogg flying
 The bodies of men
 The serpent bright:
 (126)

dark comes forth,
 from Nidafjoll;
 on his wings he bears
 but now I must sink.

Perhaps there is a suggestion here that, despite the promised ‘new order,’ the dark serpent continues to exist in its Nidafjoll (dark fields). A new beginning there may yet be, but all darkness and conflict will evidently not be banished by the rebirth of the god of light, Baldr and his own blind brother who naively killed him originally, when tricked by Loki.

The descriptions in the stories of the Edda -- which in a sense all lead to the final, cosmos-transforming conflict of *ragna rök*-- often present the gods and heroes as contending with demonic entities such as the giants and dragons. But the gods are themselves frequently deceptive and hypocritical, as Voluspa’s initial narrative notes. One of their own, Loki, is constantly provoking quarrels and connives the death of widely favored Baldr. Indeed, most of the events in the Edda’s stories are consequences of some deceit, betrayal or oath breaking. The tales of humans related in these texts are similarly filled with conflicts between characters who are both honor bound and deceitful or vengeful.

The seeress’ recital, which seems to take place somewhere after the beginning of ‘time’ (designated by the coming of the Norns and the initial war between the clans of divinities, Aesir and Vanir) and long before its destined conclusion in the complete destruction of *ragna rök*. Thus, in her ‘premonition’ of the future, she reminds the principle divinity Othin and his assembly of their own behavior in the ‘present’ and its inevitable consequences. She repeatedly asks them if they would “know yet more” of their fates. Though she might be attempting to awaken them to the consequences of their reactionary obsessions with quarreling, she offers no hope of their avoiding *ragna rök*. Their fates appear ‘sealed’ even though she discloses same—and that at the behest of Othin who has summoned her.

As Above, So Below: Brynhild’s Foreknowledge, Sigurth’s ‘Unconscious’ Deceit and the Rectification of the Funeral Pyre.

The majority of the lays comprising the Edda narrate or refer to events in the lives of humans rather than divinities. In a central tale, a literary bridge of sorts is made from the divine world to the human one. The Valkyrie, Brynhild, is stripped of her divine associations by Odin for disobeying him: in essence, for her betrayal of her oath of allegiance and obedience to him. She incurs this 'demotion' from divine status by choosing to spare a human her father/master Odin has sent her to kill. Odin then dooms her to become a mere human wife. She manages to win from him the caveat that only a man so heroic that he has never known fear shall awaken her from a magical sleep to that live human existence.

Sigurth the dragon slayer and treasure winner is the sufficiently naive hero who can stride fearlessly through a wall of flame to activate Brynhild's new existence as a human woman. But the human characters and their behaviors which she subsequently encounters are little different than those of the quarrelsome divinities. Betrayals of sworn oaths and familial allegiances, along with a virtual absence of innocent parties (nearly all break oaths), constitute the subjects of the lays about humans as well.

Sigurth is warned by Brynhild when he seeks her wisdom and teaching that he will have a short life if he chooses her as his mate. He consciously accepts that likely fate. Almost immediately after dedicating himself to her he is 'overcome' by another woman's desire to be his lover and wife (Guthrun), represented in the form of a secret potion she gives him that erases his memory of his bond to Brynhild.

Sigurth is the closest to an innocent in this human world, if one credits his betrayal of Brynhild strictly to the drug and not to some 'unconscious' motive on his part. Whether or not one counts him 'guilty' for being seduced by Guthrun and tricking Brynhild into marrying Gunnar, he pays dearly for these deceits as Brynhild turns against him along with his new blood brothers, she for revenge and they for greed. Yet when Sigurth has been murdered, Brynhild rides into his funeral pyre in the hope that he and she may yet be together as they were meant to be. But before she departs this sorrow-filled realm of betrayals, she prophecies the doom of those who plotted against Sigurth with her. Like the seeress Voluspa, Brynhild seems to predict further un-avoidable betrayals and consequences. These characters are not allowed to proceed through their lives naive about their own deceits and the consequences.

Thus, in the psychological realm of the Edda, both the divine and human dimensions are fraught with devastating greed and violent conflicts which activate and shape these dramatic stories. Furthermore, having been forewarned of these dangers appears not to deter anyone from enacting their causes. Both human and divine may only attain a unified and purified state through death and a fire that burns away the corruption of betrayals and revenge. It is as if their conscious awareness of the consequences of their quarrelling is of no significance and they must 'follow through' with it to approach any status of reunion. This depiction might suggest that there are unconsciousness elements that encourage the deceitful behaviors and naive reactions which no amount of foretelling can help them evade. It appears that only through or beyond the funeral pyre can a re-ordering, a reconstitution be experienced.

Forewarned But Destined: Betrayal as Essential Transformative Vehicle

The Ever-Presence of Mythical Betrayal and Reconstitution

Rather than portray the narrative of the events and fate of the divine realm in a historical context from a human perspective (as in the Christian traditions), the Edda begins with the prophecy of a seeress called from her grave and given to the assembly of gods and goddesses. Her telling is curiously atemporal. She speaks of what 'will be' much as she does of 'what was.' There is no literal or fixed date given to the events she narrates. While there is a linear and conclusive plot to the tale, it is as if it has all already happened, since she knows exactly what and how it will transpire. Yet there is a quality to her tale that suggests the events are present, are happening now and also always will be about to happen. This temporal confusion suggests the 'inevitability' that enables her prophecy. That is, she knows their fates because these 'always were, always are, always will be.

Similarly, the other Edda tales, including those of more human exploits than the Voluspa, incorporate foretellings with visions of betrayals and their dire consequences. The motif of oath breaking and breaches of social custom leading to chains of violence and betrayal is frequently presented. The most significant

characteristic of this motif may be that the knowledge foretold never alters the course of action. What ever drives the characters to betrayal and revenge is mostly unchecked by the visions of disaster. Betrayal and conflagration are ever present in spite of prophecy. Re-ordering or reconstituting of the world comes through violent transformation and appears to require the inevitable vehicle of betrayal. But why then would the theme of foreknowledge be so frequently and centrally developed in these tales?

Foreknowledge or Continual Knowledge? Past, Present or Future ?

Since these tales are central to a cultural tradition, one can assume they are intended to impart some awareness of the psychological and social realities of 'being human.' Thus we can ask what these motifs might signify about the general nature of human relations. If fore-knowledge is not fore warning, that is, if it makes no difference to know what is going to happen, what is the point of including it in the narratives? If it does not function to alter the course of events such that it prevents disasters, what function could it serve? What meanings are to be derived from characters whose destructive path is revealed to them in advance and yet they choose to tread it anyway? Where is the suspense in a story whose end is always already foretold? What psychic trope or metaphor might this theme of ineffectual prophecy on the road to *ragna rök* and *Gottedamerung* ('twilight of the gods'), or merely human murder, be read as?

The ineffectual presence of such foretelling might be judged a nihilistic comment on fatedness: no matter who we are or what we do this life will be sorrowful and destructive because of betrayal. It might be seen as a comment on egotistical arrogance in divinities and humans alike, and thus a reminding mirror for us. From another perspective, embedded as it is in timeless yet linear plotting, the ineffectual prophecy suggests we are always caught up in the progressive consequences of betrayals leading to further betrayals and eventual *ragna rök*-- yet also cyclically, if not constantly, we are experiencing the conclusive funeral pyre and renewal as well.

Like the Edda tales themselves, the actual temporal world constitutes an endless chain of such acts and consequences as well as a series of conclusive

endings and new beginnings. The pattern is consistent though the repetitions are various. In this view, we are always making the first ‘wrong move’ and being reborn from the transformation of the last *ragna rök*. Here it needs be noted that the Edda cycle also demonstrates a tendency to resist portraying any character as entirely evil (even Loki can be useful and helpful). Similarly, it typically suggests that most characters are not utterly without some reasonably just cause as part of their motive for deceit and betrayal. Thereby, it might be seen as expressing more a ‘positive’ embrace of psychic processes, than as presenting a grim paean to the psychopathology of human nature. In reference to such tellings, one might at least learn to consciously observe the human process of betrayals and retributions (interpersonal and intra-psychic) that seem to be our fate rather than deny them naively. Such awareness might not avert these acts and their terrible consequences, but it could enable one to ‘ride more knowingly into the transformative funeral pyres.’ Thereby the subsequent reconstitutions of relations might have a somewhat more mature self-awareness, such as Brynhild foresees with Sigurth. One could draw courage and affirmation from the sense that whatever the destructive entanglements of the moment, a reconstitution is coming, is probably already happening. If, as the tales tell, even the divinities must live out this inevitable process, then there must be some wisdom, some ‘numinosity of spirit’ in our embracing it.

While some characters in the Edda tales are portrayed as more greedy and guilty of criminal intent than others in their motives for oath breaking, others seem ‘legitimately’ unconscious—as with Sigurth, who is drugged to lose his memory of his betrothal to Brynhild. Yet the psycho-mythology of the Edda would not necessarily encourage one to be unconscious or naive about one’s own and other’s motives. Nor would it encourage greed or revenge -- insofar as both seem to lead to eventual destruction. We will, it determines, betray and be betrayed, there will be dire consequences. But these events also involve genuine affections and relationships—for it is this contrast that makes the stories and life poignant and worthwhile. Indeed, it would seem that loss and some form of ‘death’ are required to appreciate the values of such complexity of relations.

The cyclic betrayal/destruction/reconstitution that characterizes both the overall cosmology and various particular narratives in the Edda suggests that this is

the actual, on-going nature of life. There is no escape from it, but there is bold, even fearless embrace of it—there is a proceeding toward one's fate consciously. This view would require one to embrace as some ways positive, even desirable, the painful and destructive betrayals that are bound to bring us much misery, if not utter destruction. In this sense, the Edda demonstrates the transformation of unconscious motives into conscious ones. Both our acts of greed and naive betrayal may some way 'intend' transformative cataclysm. It might well be determined from these tales that human nature is violently inconsistent. But one could conclude also that to deny or ignore that reality is both naïve and foolish.

Broken Oaths and Whole Passion

Thus there is further a suggestion in this cataclysmic vision that the fullness of passion and courage has a relation to the extent of deceit and greed. Thus the vitality of life cannot be gauged and engaged without demonstrative betrayals of allegiances and vows—even of and by the divinities themselves. Perhaps passions and connections cannot be made 'whole,' or at least wholly felt, except in these destructive actions and their aftermath (the conflagration, the funeral pyre of broken oaths and intentions) whether these involve commitments to one's self or to others (intra-personal or intra--psychic).

From this perspective, any view the culture which produced the Edda as 'only' rampantly, indulgently deceitful and violent, presents a puritanical view of life in general. Rather, it could be conceived as a culture vividly attentive to the intricately complex and changeable nature of desires or intentions, the transformative and thus numinous powers of oaths, their inevitable betrayal, and the subsequent catalytic effects on psyche. Such awareness at the least posits the potential to act in relation to the destructive consequences of resisting consciousness of our foreknowledge of our own 'nature.' With such awareness we can at least approach a knowing that neither innocence, naiveté, or piously repressive morality will spare us the pain and 'death' that constitute the transformations of betrayal.

Works Cited

Hollander, Lee M., trans. The Poetic Edda. U. Tex. P., Austin, TX, 1962.

Internet Sacred Text Archive, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/poe/poe03.htm>

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