

## Thor's Visit to Útgarðaloki

John Lindow

Snorri Sturluson lived more than five hundred years before Elias Lönnrot, and in a different part of the North, the commonwealth of Iceland. But he shared with Lönnrot a gift for collecting and systematizing, above all for creating from his own cultural materials something that the entire world would come to cherish. In Snorri's case this involved especially the mythology of his forebears, and his *Edda* has endured as the work that most defines that mythology.

The part of his *Edda* devoted exclusively to the mythology is *Gylfaginning*, and the longest and most complex narrative in it—about one-sixth of the entirety of *Gylfaginning*—describes Thor's journey to and visit with Útgarðaloki. Because *Gylfaginning* endeavors to present the entire curve of the mythology, from the creation of the cosmos through the ongoing conflict between gods and giants to the destruction of the cosmos, with non-narrative detours cataloging features of the gods and goddesses, that sixth part is large indeed. The story is also significant because it does not draw from the eddic poems *Völuspá*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, and *Grímnismál*, which were the major sources of *Gylfaginning*. Since the latter two—indeed, perhaps all three—are Odin poems, *Gylfaginning* has a certain focus on Odin, and besides the journey to Útgarðaloki, there is only one other Thor narrative in *Gylfaginning*, about his visit to the giant Hymir and fishing up of the Midgard serpent. Thus the visit to Útgarðaloki offers the fullest opportunity within *Gylfaginning* to see Thor in action—within all of *Snorra Edda*, actually, and judging by length at least, within the entire corpus.

The story comprises several parts, which I will designate as follows (these designations deliberately differ from what has ordinarily characterized analysis so as to emphasize the unity of the existing narrative): a prologue in which Thor visits with a human family; a journey undertaken with several companions and a mysterious giant, with whom Thor has a falling out; a sojourn at the court of Útgarðaloki, involving contests of various sorts; and an epilogue in which the contests are explained.

One motif from the prologue is found in altered form in *Hymiskviða* 37: Thor's lame goat. Parts of the travel sequence are also referred to in Eddic poetry: Odin and Loki accuse Thor of cowering in a giant's glove in, respectively, *Hárbarðsljóð* 26 and *Lokasenna* 60, and Loki also reminds Thor that he was unable to open the giant's food sack during the journey. Otherwise the story is all but unknown in verse, although Saxo Grammaticus also appears to have known it.

Research on the various parts of this story has tended to stress foreign origins on the one hand and a lack of mythic or religious significance on the other. As regards foreign origin, the title of a 1908 article by Friedrich von der Leyen says it all: "Útgarðaloke in Irland." For many scholars, Ireland has remained the location of the supposed sources of the narrative.<sup>1</sup> In 1964 Nora K. Chadwick went in the other direction when she pointed out parallels in Russian *byliny* relating to the giant Svyatogor. Citing a text catalogued by Georges Dumézil (1930:146), Jan de Vries (1970, 2:142) proposed an unconvincing Ossetic parallel, and this suggestion has entered the handbooks<sup>2</sup> and has even been attributed to Dumézil himself (e.g., Anne Holtmark in Munch 1967:102-03). Kaarle Krohn (1922:207-15) derived the story of the goats brought back to life in the "prologue" from medieval legend and identified a Finnish folktale parallel with the night Thor and his companions spend in the glove of Skrímir (215, fn. 1). The second major thrust<sup>3</sup> sees analogies to folklore, either in fairy tale or legend, depending on individual opinion. These analogies are found at both the stylistic and structural levels. At the stylistic level, the tone is judged light and ironic, a quality that some people seem to think is typical of folklore, perhaps especially fairy tale. I cannot accept this assumption, for even if one accepts a kind of universal *Märchenstil*, as described by Max Lüthi (1982), I do not believe that Snorri indulges in it here. As for structure, what the observers in question have in mind is a journey to Hell or the other world, and, although that is an apt analogy, it appears so frequently in the rest of the mythology as to render meaningless any special application in this case.

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<sup>1</sup> See C. W. von Sydow's important 1908 study (despite the polemic carried out between Finnur Jónsson [1921:104-15] and von Sydow [1921]) through those of Alexander Haggerty Krappe (1937) and Michael Chesnutt (1989).

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Simek 1984:364, 427-28, who, however, cited the seemingly irrelevant Dumézil 1943.

<sup>3</sup> Which is in fact closely connected to the first in the works of von der Leyen (also 1899:40-45) and von Sydow and developed independently by other scholars, such as Axel Olrik (1905) and not least Jan de Vries (1933:82-89; 1956-57, 2:131-45).

According to this major trend in the interpretation of the Útgardaloki story, then, the material was taken from somewhere else and assembled by Snorri, according to the notion of Snorri's "novellistische Darstellung" ("fictional presentation") as championed by Eugen Mogk (1923). It would then have had no mythological or religious significance<sup>4</sup> or at best only a few significant motifs.<sup>5</sup> I disagree completely with such an assumption and thus am in a minority camp.<sup>6</sup> Let me briefly present Clunies Ross' understanding of the myth as a whole.<sup>7</sup> After pointing out that the question of an Irish loan will never be answered, and that if there was such a loan the material must have been meaningful for Thor in any case, Clunies Ross focuses on the contests themselves. They are, she notices, all of them against forces that even the gods in this mythology cannot overcome: fire, thought, water, the midgard serpent, and death. All, in fact, have a connection with Ragnarök, the judgment of the gods and end of the current world order, for at that time the earth will burn and sink into the sea, the midgard serpent will be freed from its station encircling the earth and will battle the gods alongside the forces of evil; then the gods will die. Old age stands in this interpretation for death, and Útgardaloki's thought will be another uncontrollable force.

This is an elegant and ultimately convincing interpretation, and it makes most of the traditional scholarship on the story look quite wrong-headed. I intend now to offer a set of mostly complementary interpretations based on the details of the texts themselves, to which I propose to turn now.

### **Before the Prologue**

Note first the circumstances under which Gylfi / Gangleri elicits the story. If his interlocutors do not tell it to him, he declares that he will have overcome them. This relates to the frame story: "Hár said that he would not

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<sup>4</sup> So explicitly Krohn 1922:194, quoting Schück 1904, 1:21.

<sup>5</sup> So, e.g., Grønbech 1931, 2:268-69.

<sup>6</sup> Other members have included Folke Ström (1956:76-80) and Margaret Clunies Ross (1994:266-68).

<sup>7</sup> Which was also foreshadowed in the commentary of Gottfried Lorenz (1984:526-40).

emerge alive, unless he were the wiser”<sup>8</sup> The motif of the head-ransom is usually in this instance derived from *Vafþrúðnismál*, in which Odin and the giant Vafþrúðnir explicitly wager their heads. In *Grímnismál* something similar is implicit, for King Geirrøðr, who has been listening to Odin’s ecstatic wisdom performance, dies at the end of the poem. The reference to the motif at this later point in *Gylfaginning* is the only one following its original mention. Siegfried Beyschlag (1954) related this moment to the entire narrative logic of *Gylfaginning*: now the *Æsir* must tell stories about Thor in which he does not emerge triumphant. We can accept this point without losing sight of the fact that reintroduction of the head-ransom motif must indicate the importance of the story that is to follow and undermines any argument that it is insignificant.

## The Prologue

Ironically, it is in the first part of the story that the bulk of the scholarship has found an item of genuine religious significance, in the motif of Thor’s use of his hammer for the revival of the goats. It is not for most scholars the revival of the goats itself, which they see as typically Irish or folkloric, but rather the use of the hammer for the purpose of fertility that also appears to be echoed in a few other texts. I prefer to draw attention here to the interaction between deity and human community. The human community is represented by a nuclear family of father, mother, and children, living as people did on a farm and offering as people did hospitality to travelers. The story of the botched revival of the goats is etiological within the mythology, for it tells how Thor acquired his assistant Þjálfi. Structurally the incident may be read as a violation of ritual procedure provoking an angry response from the god, followed by a request for the god’s favor whose granting shows the removal of the god’s anger. The result of the sequence is the binding of two younger humans to the god, to be literally his followers for life. (Actually, Röskva vanishes from the extant mythology at this point, but Þjálfi is a constant presence within it). There is a second etiological moment, namely an explanation for the lame leg of one of Thor’s goats. This gimp leg makes the goats consistent with the many other flaws within the mythology: Odin lacks an eye and Týr a

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<sup>8</sup> “Hárr segir, at hann komi eigi heill út, nema hann sé fróðari.” (Normalized from Finnur Jónsson 1931:10; translation from Faulkes 1987:40. Unless otherwise indicated, all textual citations are from Finnur Jónsson 1931, and all translations are from Faulkes 1987.)

hand, Thor's hammer is slightly too short, and so forth. All these flaws are extensions of the basic flaw at the creation of the universe, which was made possible by a killing within a family—Odin and his brothers killed a maternal relative, the giant Ymir, and fashioned the cosmos from the parts of Ymir's body. When they killed him, Ymir's blood rushed forth and drowned all the giants save one, who repopulated the cosmos with his kind, the enemies of the gods.

A significant feature of this episode is the manifestation of Thor's rage. It begins with the sinking of his brow, which is a colorful and quite well-known motif in the sagas of Icelanders that indicates extreme repressed emotion. But it is Thor's eyes that truly frighten the farmer, who thought, Snorri wrote, that he would fall before Thor's gaze alone. Here Snorri is drawing on a common and powerful motif from Viking Age poetry and figural representations of Thor, whose gaze indeed was mighty. Poems and rock carvings alike focus on the meeting of eyes between Thor and the midgard serpent when Thor fished up the beast, and many of Thor's hammers are equipped with large eyes.<sup>9</sup> Thor is gripping his hammer, and we are to understand that he is fighting against the urge to use it on the family. That, however, would wholly violate the nature of the god, who among all the Norse gods was, as far as we can tell, the protector of humans from inimical forces. The famous example of Helgi the lean, who prayed to Christ when on land but to Thor when at sea, provides a concrete example; perhaps it was from the midgard serpent itself, whose domain was the sea, that Helgi wished to be protected. In any case, Thor's hammer is significant as the only artifact yielded by archaeology that shows a widespread desire within the human community for a connection with a deity, presumably for protection (Lindow 1994). Had Thor killed the farmer and his family, he would in fact have been acting like one of the giants or some other of the forces that threaten human existence. That he does not is mythologically correct, and it also indicates another mythological fact: the very thin line separating gods and giants.

Thus Þjálfi and Röskva became the servants (*þjónustumenn*) of Thor, in the closest such relationship to be found in the mythology. The only other god to whom more than one human is attached is Odin, and I would like to suggest that by this fact alone the prologue portion of our story implicitly compares Odin and Thor. The most famous of the Odin heroes was Starkaðr, and there is a complex of stories about his origin and the institution of his relationship with Odin. The most salient feature here is descent from the giants. Indeed, Starkaðr the old, a forebear of Starkaðr the Odin hero,

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<sup>9</sup> A potential association with leadership; see Marold 1998.

was a monster with extra arms that Thor tore from him to give him human form. As a descendent of the inimical forces, Starkaðr could never hope for the protection of Thor, and indeed *Gautreks saga* and *Hervarar saga* have a sequence in which Odin and Thor alternately bestow good and bad events on Starkaðr's future life. Perhaps the most salient point about Starkaðr, however, is that he himself is a disruptive force within human society, one who lives three lifetimes and commits three evil deeds during the course of those lifetimes. Of these the most salient is probably the slaying of the king whose retainer he is. Thus Þjálfi, the "Thor-hero," enjoys a productive relationship with his divine patron and even, by participating in the killing of Hrungnir when Thor dueled that giant and by killing the monster Mökkurkálfi himself, joins in his patron's sphere of religious activity, which is to make the world safe for humans. On the other hand, Starkaðr, the Odin-hero, has a distant relationship with his divine patron and joins to some extent in his patron's sphere of mythological activity though cowardice and breaches of faith. To contrast Thor and Odin even more explicitly, consider that according to Saxo (Book 8), Odin himself killed his follower Harald wartooth at the battle of Brávellir after betraying to Harald's enemy Ring the formation that had given Harald so many victories.

I read the prologue, then, as an adumbration of the relationship of humans and their gods, explicitly Thor, implicitly Odin.

## The Journey

Joined now by Þjálfi and Röskva, in addition to Loki, Thor continues the journey through Jötunheimar and over the ocean to some distant land that we must assume from what transpires later is Útgarðar. This is one of the supposed folktale-like features of the narrative, but to put it in its place I will note that Thor's crossing of waters, not least rivers, and among them especially the one flooded by the daughters of the giant Geirrøðr, is a regular feature of the mythology. Drawing again on Helgi the lean, I propose that we read this passage religiously, that is, as an example of Thor helping humans, his servants Þjálfi and Röskva, to cross the deep sea. If accepted, this proposal draws together the prologue and journey.

Once Thor and his companions arrive in this strange world, they seek lodgings. Here again it is instructive to consider the world in which humans actually lived. In that world people would have sought out, as Thor and Loki did in the prologue, a farmhouse, and they would have enjoyed the hospitality of the household there. Thor and his companions come upon a house, but it is uninhabited. In the other world there is no hospitality. There

follows what I believe can only be a Snorrionic joke, an earthquake. Very soon in *Gylfaginning*, in connection with the punishment of Loki for his role in the death of Baldr, Snorri will tell us that all earthquakes originate in the writhing of the bound Loki when poison falls upon him from the snake fastened above him. Now Loki is in the so-called house and is frightened by the earthquake. Thor leads him and the others to a room further inside, where, like Þjálfi and Röskva, he cowers, while Thor stands in the doorway, once again exercising his protective function. The text says that Thor intends to protect himself (*verja sik*), but from the entire scene it is clear that he has the well-being of his companions in mind as well.

In the morning the origin of the empty house and the earthquake are disclosed when Thor emerges to find the huge person Skrímir and learns that the house was Skrímir's glove and the earthquake his snoring. We may ask ourselves where Skrímir was when Thor and his companions arrived to find the glove. If he was at hand, he withheld the normal greetings and hospitality. Thor behaves in the socially correct way when he asks about Skrímir's name, and he is apparently not surprised when Skrímir calls him by name, since Thor is not devious and, unlike Odin, in reality seldom does conceal his name (*Hárbarðsljóð* 9-10). At this point in our narrative there is no way to know what race of beings Skrímir belongs to, and thus Thor's treatment of him should excite no comment. Nor should Skrímir's offer that they travel together and share their provisions, although some critics have missed that point.

The offer to share food, and the result of that offer, constitute another feature drawing together prologue and journey and indeed the entire narrative, although to my knowledge this feature has been entirely overlooked in the scholarship and handbooks. For where Thor provided food to the human community in the prologue, here a giant denies it. Skrímir not only binds it with iron so strong that even Thor cannot get at it, but also at their parting, Skrímir actually steals their food: "Skrymir took the knapsack and threw it on his back and turned abruptly away from them into the forest, and there is no report that the Æsir expressed hope for a happy reunion" (Faulkes 1987:40)<sup>10</sup>

The duty of the gods is to help with food, not deny it, as Thor seems to understand. His inability to open the food sack so angers him that he strikes the sleeping Skrímir with his hammer Mjöllnir. Let us contrast this moment with the occasion in the prologue when Thor grips the hammer in

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<sup>10</sup> "Tekr Skrímir nestbaggann ok kastar á bak sér ok snýr þvers í skóginn frá þeim, ok er þess eigi getit, at æsirnar bæði þá heila hittaz" (Finnur Jónsson 1931:53).

anger against humans but does not use it. Thor, or perhaps I should rather say the narrative, has apparently unveiled Skrímir as a giant, and it is Thor's duty to kill giants. That he is thrice unable to kill this one is disquieting, to say the least. It is also disquieting that the effects of his hammer blows, so consistently fatal, are likened by the giant to falling leaves, nuts, and rubbish of some sort, presumably bird droppings. Mjölnir was manufactured with great craft, while these are useless items from nature.

In the passage just cited above, Snorri refers to the traveling company of gods and humans as *Æsir*, the term ordinarily used for the gods alone. This does not mean that Þjálfí and Röskva have been promoted to the status of deities, but rather that the black-and-white situation is one in which *Æsir* oppose *jötnar*, the giants. Consider the directions mentioned just above. Thor and company should continue east, Skrímir says, while his path lies to the north. In mythic cosmology both these directions are associated with the *jötnar*. The battle has been drawn. Skrímir and Thor now part ways, and Thor and his companions arrive at the stronghold (*borg*) of Útgarðaloki.

## The Contests

At the beginning of the sequence at the stronghold we again find an inversion of normal human procedure, for Thor cannot open the gate, and hospitality, including of course food once again, is apparently denied. Arriving as they do at the middle of the day, the travelers have every right to expect to be fed, but such an expectation is not met. Instead, they are told, they must demonstrate accomplishments (*íþróttir*, which ordinarily involve activities requiring training, such as poetry, music, and the like). Guests, says Útgarðaloki, must demonstrate some “list eða kunnandi” (“art or skill”). These are to be displayed in contests.

The choice of eating as the first contest can hardly be arbitrary, given the importance of food throughout the narrative, as I have emphasized, and in his final explanation, Útgarðaloki says that Loki was ravenous (*mjök soltinn*) before the contest began. It is instructive to compare this eating sequence with the one in the prologue. There the breaking of one bone provoked a crisis; here Loki leaves all the bones intact, but Útgarðaloki's retainer named Logi destroys them along with the dish the meat was on and is thus declared the winner. Insofar as the meal in the prologue suggests a ritual, Loki has followed it, while in this later instance Logi has inverted it. By the logic of the narrative ritual, the food source that Útgarðaloki has used in the instance has been destroyed, an event that suggests a negative world

full of lack. It also could suggest that by the definition of the narrative as a whole, Loki won the contest, not Logi.

The second contest is formulated as a series of footraces between Þjálfi and Útgarðaloki's retainer named Hugi. The series follows the usual folkloric rule of three, but the key is found in Útgarðaloki's comment after the first race.

Purfa muntu, Þjálfi, at leggja þik meir fram, ef þú skalt vinna leikinn, en þó er þat satt, at ekki hafa hér komit þeir menn, er mér þykkir fóthvatari enn svá. (Finnur Jónsson 1931:55)

You will have to make a greater effort, Thialfi, if you are going to win the contest, and yet it is true that never before have people come here that have seemed to me to run faster than that. (Faulkes 1987:45-46)

The term he uses for people, namely *menn*, can refer to gods, giants, or humans, or indeed any race with human form. Þjálfi is, then, acknowledged as the fastest runner with a human body. Perhaps, like Loki, he too is the victor, although Hugi reaches the finish line first.

Thor participates in the next contests, which again follow the rule of three, tripled. Consistent with the theme of food, the first involves consumption of what initially appears to be beer. Elsewhere in the mythology Thor's appetite is a kind of comic commonplace; one poet, for example, claimed that Thor drank three barrels of mead when disguised as the beautiful Freyja who was to be bride to the giant Þrymr so that Thor could get his hammer back. To empty a mere drinking horn, however large it was, could hardly pose a challenge to such a tippler, especially since he is, according to Snorri, very thirsty, but Thor leaves behind more than he consumes. Snorri is probably playing here with his report elsewhere in *Gylfaginning* on Valhöll, Odin's hall, where the beer is inexhaustible, but in this context the leftover beverage represents a decided setback for Thor. Nor is it better when he tries to lift the cat or wrestle with the old woman called Elli. Only after these tests have been failed—or passed?—does Útgarðaloki show hospitality to his guests, and only on the following morning does he explicitly give them food and drink.

At this point it is appropriate to wonder who Útgarðaloki might be and what kind of household this is. Útgarðaloki is called king, and he has retainers (*hirðmenn*)—by the early thirteenth century, when Snorri composed this text, the term referred to a royal or bishop's court. Certainly there were persons with arts, skills, and accomplishments at royal courts, and their practice of these functioned as entertainment, so the participation of Thor and his companions in the contests has a certain strange logic. That

Útgarðloki is a king adds a social dimension to the story. Thor comes first to a farmer, the head of a human household, and there the normal rules of hospitality obtain and Thor's position as a powerful deity is verified. Now he has traveled over the sea and come to the castle of a king, with a supernatural household where the ordinary rules do not seem to obtain. Thor knew just what to do in the farmer's house, but here in the king's hall he is clueless, and he fails to behave, apparently, as the king would wish. That could suggest a social dimension to the use of the god in the human community, the hoary notion of Thor as a god of yeomen and Odin as a god of kings. But it is also tempting to put the story in the context of the kingless Iceland in which it was written down and perhaps specifically in the context of Snorri himself, whose encomium for Hákon Hákonarson and Jarl Skuli may not have met with quite the success he had hoped.

The name *Útgarðaloki* (lit. Loki of Útgarðar [pl.]) has baffled observers. The fact that the first component is plural has, however, attracted little attention. I understand the plural as parallel to that of the home of the giants, Jötunheimar. Both, it seems to me, suggest a group of places as opposed to a unified cosmological center implied by Ásgarðr or Miðgarðr, the dwelling places of gods and men respectively. I see these groups of places as located at the periphery and indicative of an opposition between inside and outside, in group and out group, ultimately of nature and culture or even "holy" and "profane," if one wishes to express the opposition so (cf. Hastrup 1985:136-54). Unlike Clunies Ross (1994:266, n. 32), therefore, I am not worried by the fact that Snorri never identifies the inhabitants of Útgarðar as giants, nor that the realm of Utgarthilocus in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* is clearly one of the dead. Indeed, in describing Ragnarök, Snorri wrote later in *Gylfaginning* that Hrymr was accompanied by *hrímþursar* ("frost giants") and Loki by *allir Heljar sinnar* ("all the companions of Hel," that is, the dead; Finnur Jónsson 1931:71), thus verifying the obvious equivalence among the various non-social races in their opposition to the social order of gods and men. An equivalence between giants and the dead is indeed often accepted.<sup>11</sup>

As a shapechanger, the king of Útgarðar was a kind of Loki, and perhaps it is appropriate that the world of the giants should, like the world of the gods, have a Loki. The recent ruminations of Anatoly Liberman (1992) to the effect that Útgarðaloki represents an earlier stage of an originally chthonic Loki (one who locks) are stimulating but unverifiable. The reading I find most suggestive, however, was offered by Folke Ström (1956:80), who surmised that the Útgarðaloki of tradition, with his shapeshifting and

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<sup>11</sup> So Schoning 1903, but cf. von Sydow 1919:53-70.

control of magic, was a kind of *doppelgänger* of Odin who showed just how close Odin and Loki are. I will not rehearse his argument here, but will simply point out that according to Snorri Odin has two ravens, Huginn and Munin (“thought” and “memory”), who fly about the world gathering information for him, functioning as what we might now term shamanic helping spirits, and the first of these is of course just the definite form of the noun Hugi, the name of the retainer of Útgarðaloki. Logi, fire, inspires Odin to an ecstatic wisdom performance in the poem *Grímnismál*, for in it he is suspended in the fires at the hall of the human king Geirrøðr. The prodigious eating and drinking that characterize the hall of Útgarðaloki are of course also to be found in Valhöll, Odin’s hall, where there are endless sources of meat and mead for the *einherjar*, Odin’s chosen warriors, his *hirðmenn*—to use the term Snorri employed for Útgarðaloki’s retainers. In my view, then, what goes on at the court of Útgarðaloki has remarkable Odinic aspects, of which the most obvious is none of what I have just recounted but rather the way Thor and his companions fail the tests set for them. This parallel turns on the use of words. Thor and his companions fail to understand that a person named “fire” or “thought” or “old age” can actually be his or her name, or a personification of it. There is of course something of a joke here, for the nouns *logi*, *hugi*, and *elli* were hardly unknown, but understanding them in this context requires an ability to manipulate language, which is at the heart of poetry in Old Norse-Icelandic tradition. And poetry, in its turn, was delivered by Odin to gods and men and was perhaps Odin’s principal skill. In *Ynglinga saga* Snorri reports that Odin spoke in verse alone, and the acquisition of magic in *Hávamál* shows that Odin’s magic was for the most part a magic of verse.

Before wrestling with Elli, Thor drinks the sea and lifts the cat. The drinking itself suggests an association with poetry, which was manifested as mead, and here we could see a direct Odinic challenge to Thor, to which he does not rise. The cat comes next, and it is worth pointing out that the *pulur*, versified lists of poetic vocabulary recorded in manuscripts of *Snorra Edda*, list *köttr* or “cat” among the names of giants. Here the joke would be opposite from that presented by Logi, Hugi and Elli. *Köttr* is a giant according to poetry, but Thor is ignorant of or cannot apply that fact. And although the kenning is not as far as I know attested, a cat of the sea, stretched and coiled, would of necessity be the midgard serpent in verse; compare the kenning used for this beast by Bragi the Old, traditionally reckoned the first skald: “coiling eel of the drink of the Völsung.” The possibility of an underlying kenning here would thus join Thor’s first two tests.

## The Epilogue

The final scene of the narrative takes place outside the hall of Útgarðaloki. After the events of the previous evening, Útgarðaloki has fed his visitors properly and now he accompanies them out of the hall, as was customary in the human world that fostered the mythology. In other words, although they have failed (or appear to have failed) his tests, he no longer withholds food from them and treats them with the normal hospitality. Now he explains the events, giving them the retrospective interpretation or reinterpretation so characteristic of this narrative.

At the very end of the entire narrative, after he has explained the tricks, Útgarðaloki's stronghold simply vanishes and Thor and his companions are left standing on the field. *Gylfaginning* ends in precisely the same way: the hall of the *Æsir* vanishes and Gylfi is left standing on the field. The similarity can hardly be coincidental, and it has attracted much comment. Let us follow its lead.

In *Gylfaginning*, three wizards bearing Odin names host and trick Gylfi/Gangleri. The underlying structure is taken from such contests of wisdom as *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál*, or the riddle sequence in *Hervarar saga*, in which Odin is the disguised visitor. In the Útgarðaloki sequence, a figure with Odinic characteristics hosts and tricks Thor. Moving from the underlying model through *Gylfaginning*, one might say that Thor is being tested in an Odin role, in Odin's realm, that of words. He fails the test, and the hierarchical superiority of Odin over Thor in this arena is reinforced. That the hierarchy was significant is established beyond a shadow of a doubt by the poem *Hárbarðsljóð*, in which, as Carol Clover has shown (1979), Thor is defeated and set hierarchically lower than Odin in the poetic realm because he cannot cope with Odin's playing with its form. Whether the issue is form as in *Hárbarðsljóð*, or words, as in the Útgarðaloki sequence, the result is the same.

And yet, as I hope to have shown in my discussion of the prologue and journey, Thor has revealed that he has a better relationship with humans than does Odin. Furthermore, a careful reading of the entire narrative shows that Thor can make claims within the Odinic realm. Consider first the blows of the hammer deflected by Skrímir onto a local mountain, which Thor thought had failed even to awaken the sleeping giant: as Útgarðaloki tells Thor during their last conversation, these blows created three valleys. Now, the creation of the cosmos was, as I have mentioned above, the work of Odin and two other gods, his brothers Vili and Vé, according to Snorri. Thor shows here that he too is a fashioner of the cosmos. The creation of the cosmos through the slaying of a giant sets an archetype for mythic activity in

which every slaying of a giant recapitulates the proto-slaying and thus is a creative activity, and Thor serves nobly in this arena through his frequent giant-slaying; but this is different, in that an area of the cosmos is actually ordered. Thor's swinging of his hammer in these three instances, then, was anything but wasted. And the physical landscape was not all he created, for in attempting to drain the drinking horn, he created the tides. These have, of course, a physical aspect, but as the etymology of English tide, transparent in Swedish *tidvatten*, will show, it has an anchor in time-reckoning. Time-reckoning too was the province of Odin and his brothers at creation, for after the cosmos was created, the sun, moon, and stars did not know where their stations were to be. These stations were assigned to them by Odin and his brothers, in order, *Völuspá* 6 explicitly states, that men may reckon time. Thus we may say that Thor has a valid claim to participation in both aspects of creation, the ordering of the cosmos and of the principle of time-reckoning.

Above I observed that an argument could be made that both Loki and Þjálfí actually “won” their contests with the retainers of Útgarðaloki, Logi and Hugi. To these we can add the creative aspects of Thor's drinking from the horn, as well as his creative hammer blows on the journey to Útgarðaloki's castle. Let me now take up the cat and the old woman.

By lifting the cat, that is, the midgard serpent, off the ground but not completely so, Thor verified the mythic present, where his conflict with the midgard serpent remains a standoff. The texts are, quite frankly, unclear as to whether Thor killed the serpent when he fished it up, possibly because the story changed over time (Meulengracht Sørensen 1986), but for Snorri, I think, the serpent needed to stay in the sea until Ragnarök, the end of the world, when it would emerge for its final battle with Thor and each would kill the other. By staggering back nine paces before dying, however, Thor obtains a kind of moral victory. He is, as it were, unbowed by death, just as he is unbowed by old age when he grapples with it at the court of Útgarðaloki. Thus he makes possible his heroic death at Ragnarök.

Even in these two cases, then, it is difficult to see that Thor actually lost the contests. If we now look back at all five contests, we can see that the judgment of defeat of Thor and his companions was in every case except the first—Loki versus Logi—made in the form of verbal interpretation by Útgarðaloki. By his mastery over words he persuades even us, the readers, that his interpretation of events is to prevail.

I wish to make one last point about the remarkable parallelism between the frame story of *Gylfaginning* and the Útgarðaloki narrative. This parallel is complete in the area of the *ginning* or deceiving of the principal characters—indeed, the Útgarðaloki narrative has been called *Þórsginning*—

and the use of *sjónhverfingar* (lit. “alterations of visual perception”) in both instances. However, a final explanatory scene parallel to the one in which Útgarðaloki explains it all to Thor, is absent, and in my view conspicuously so, from *Gylfaginning*. It should be apparent by now that I harbor enormous respect for Snorri the author and that I do not find much that is random in *Gylfaginning* (or indeed elsewhere in his splendid authorship). The absence of the explanatory scene invites us, or so I believe, to supply one. Who were Hárr, Jafnhárr, and Þriði, and what would an explanation have looked like if Snorri had put one in their loquacious mouths? That will turn on how we understand the nature and purpose of *Snorra Edda*, but I would be content to regard it as an explanation of the underlying euhemerism. This explanation would join *Gylfaginning* to the Prologue to *Snorra Edda* and the opening chapters of *Ynglinga saga* in *Heimskringla*, Snorri’s redaction of the sagas of the Norwegian kings. In both texts such a theory is set forth explicitly. The *Æsir* were men of Asia, who emigrated to the north under the leadership of a historical Odin, who established other Asia-men as his temple priests. Later, at the moment Snorri captures in *Gylfaginning*, descendants of these immigrants from Asia kindle in Gylfi/Gangleri a belief in their forebears. That, I would like to believe, is what Hárr, Jafnhárr, and Þriði would have told Gylfi/Gangleri just before the hall disappeared.

At the beginning of this essay I summarized the prevailing view of the narrative of Thor’s journey to Útgarðaloki as a pastiche of elements borrowed from here and there, from Irish tradition, from migratory folk narratives, combined into a whole by Snorri to no particular purpose. My goal has been to suggest that the importance of the narrative within *Gylfaginning*, as measured in sheer bulk, is commensurate with its mythological significance. It serves to order the two chief deities, Odin and Thor, allowing each hegemony in certain areas. Thor has a comfortable relationship with the human community, Odin does not. Odin commands words, Thor does not. Odin created and ordered the cosmos and time-reckoning, but Thor contributed in that arena as well. This narrative is not the only “Thor” myth to indulge in comparison with Odin; so too, I have argued, does the Hrungrnir myth (Lindow 1996). The pantheon required both of them, Thor and Odin, for they had different and often complementary things to contribute. The narrative form of myth functions, then, as a means of exploring and evaluating the contributions of two essential deities and allows explicit comment on the nature and structure of the pantheon.

*University of California at Berkeley*

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