ANATOLY LIBERMAN:
In Prayer and Laughter: Essays on Medieval Scandinavian and Germanic Mythology, Literature and Culture.
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Space allows here no more than a selective account of this book, which has twenty-one chapters, most of them previously published as articles and now revised. I shall concentrate first on the three longest chapters, and secondly on the three which have the most general application.

In chapter 1, 'Óðinn's path to greatness', Liberman sees the god Óðinn as originally a demon of death and a member of the Wild Hunt of Germanic mythology, sharing his name, **Wōðu*, with the hunt itself and becoming known as **Wōðanaz* 'the unstoppable'. As a rider in the hunt he was thought of as closely associated with his horse, the name of which, *Yggdrasill*, was made up of the elements *Yggr* (a substantivised form of the adjective *yggr* 'frightening' and one of Óðinn's names) and *drasill* meaning 'horse', giving the overall meaning 'the Óðinn-horse'.

In line with the use in Old Norse of tree-names as the basic words in poetic kennings for men, Óðinn came to be referred to as **askr Yggdrasils* 'the ash-tree (i.e. the man, he) of the Óðinn-horse'. The meaning of *drasill* was later all but forgotten (so that *Sleipnir* came into prominence as the name of Óðinn's horse), and the genitive *-s* ending of *Yggdrasils* was dropped, with the result that *Yggdrasill* was seen as in apposition to *askr* and, mistakenly, as the name of the world tree. Liberman finds no connection between the world tree (*Læráðr*) and the account of Óðinn hanging on a tree in *Hávamál* sts. 138-39, seeing this as a relatively late, imperfect representation of a ritual involving closeness to death as a precondition for gaining wisdom.

In chapter 6, 'Loki confronts his past', Liberman takes as his starting-point Snorri's story of Þórr's visit, accompanied by Loki, to the court of the giant Útgarðaloki, and Saxo's analogous account of Thorkillus's visit to the cave of Ugarthilocus. Loki is here, like Þórr, one of the Æsir, the race of gods associated with Óðinn, and in making the visit he is confronting his past in the sense that he was originally a chthonian deity (his name akin to German *Loch* 'hole') who evolved on the one hand into one of the Æsir and on the other into Útgarðaloki/Ugarthilocus, the ruler of Útgarðar ('distant dwellings') or Úgarðr ('no man's dwelling'), i.e. the Other World, the purpose of visiting which was to obtain the mantic wisdom over which he, Útgarðaloki, had control, as well as over thought (*Hugi*), fire (*Logi*), and the World Serpent (as Snorri's account shows), and also storms (as in Saxo's acccount). Thorkillus in Saxo's account is charged with asking Ugarthilocus (though he fails to do so) what happens to souls after death, while in Snorri's account Þórr discovers, in battling with Elli, that old age, once reached, cannot be overcome. While his identity with Útgarðaloki was forgotten, Loki as one of the Æsir retained something of his original nature, as shown by his status as a hostile outsider and a link between the gods and the giants.

Like the title of chapter 6, that of chapter 7, 'Darkness engulfs Baldr', sums up its argument, since Liberman sees the slaying of Baldr by the blind god Hǫðr as originally part of a myth about the rivalry between a sky god, protector of light, and a chthonian deity, ruler of darkness. The root of Baldr's name, he argues, 'is *bal-* "shining", as in

Engl. *bald*' (p. 259), while Hǫðr's name, cognate with German *Hader* 'discord', probably meant 'the contentious one', and his blindness was that of the mole, thought of as an enemy of light. As for the mistletoe, used as a missile by Hǫðr to kill Baldr because it was the one item exempt from the oath not to harm him, Liberman believes that this was originally a thistle or a reed, sacred to Baldr, but that the Old Norse word *mistilteinn*, adopted as a loan translation from Old English *misteltān,* was applied to the plant in question because the word's unfamiliarity in Old Norse allowed for freedom of interpretation, and because its elements *mist-* and *-teinn* had connotations of mist and weaponry respectively. The account in Snorri's *Edda* of Loki finding the mistletoe and talking Hǫðr into directing it at Baldr is probably a conflation of two originally alternative traditions, in which either Loki or Hǫðr was Baldr's slayer.

In chapter 17, 'The emergence of the runes', Liberman maintains that **rūnō* originally meant 'consultation' and that *rún* came to mean 'runic letter' only at the end of a long development. Emphasising that runic letters were first thought of in the plural and as forming the alphabetic sequence of the *fuþark* before attention was paid to them individually, he notes (following F. W. Schwink in *American Journal of Germanic Linguistics and Literatures* 12 (2000), 235-49) that the first six letters of the *fuþark* seem to spell the Old Norse words *fuð* 'vulva' and *arg-* 'effeminate', 'cowardly'. Arguing (if I have understood him correctly) that the coining of the Latin word *elementa* for 'letters of the alphabet' was stimulated by the word *alimenta* 'provisions', since letters have a nourishing function in relation to each other, he maintains that the first three letters of the *fuþark* were originally so ordered to signal the mutually productive character of all letters in the sequence. I am grateful to Professor Michael Barnes for pointing out to me that the forms of the words *fuð* and *arg-* would have been relatively long in the older *fuþark* period (Germ. **fuþi-*/**fuði-*, **arga-*) and that the k-rune could stand for both /g/ and /k/ in the younger *fuþark*, but not in the older.

In chapter 20, on 'Germanic laughter and the development of the sense of humor (*sic*)', Liberman argues that laughter originally signified life, witness the skaldic kenning *hlátra hamr* 'covering of laughter' for

'breast' and the statement that Beowulf in dying 'laid down laughter' (*hleahtor āleġde*). Thence developed the laughter of triumph at the death or defeat of enemies, witness Brynhildr laughing at Guðrún mourning the death of Sigurðr and the gods' laughter at the binding of Fenrir. Next came the 'post-heroic' stage of laughter as a sign of friendliness, whether real or feigned (reflected in *Hávamál* sts. 24, 25) and disdainful laughter (*Hávamál* st. 20). Liberman further sees myths which present the gods as suffering or misbehaving not as jokingly parodic but as embodying 'charters of behaviour' (p. 426), offering reassurance in showing that the failings and dangers to which humans are prone are also experienced by the gods. In Liberman's view, the association of laughter with humour was a decidedly late development; he even questions whether what we regard as Chaucer's irony would have seemed so to his original audience (p. 410).

In chapter 21, 'The limited world of the medieval narrator', Liberman writes of the failure of medieval writers to convey the simultaneous development of two lines of action, their tendency to concentrate on the appearance rather than the inner life of their characters, and their dependence on tradition, this last excluding the need for the concept of authorship. Even named writers such as Snorri and Saxo would not, he claims, have been seen as authors in the modern sense by themselves or their contemporaries, to whom 'authors' (*auctores*) were part of tradition, belonging exclusively to the past. Liberman nevertheless sees skaldic poets as exceptional in exemplifying the rise of conscious authorship. He writes here of medieval literature in terms of 'literary childhood' (p. 439, cf. p. 441), and in his chapter on laughter compares the history of laughter to the development of a child's sense of humour (p. 428).

Other chapters argue that the berserks were originally bareshirts rather than bearshirts (ch. 3); that dwarfs (*sic*) came to be associated with rocks as a result of rhotacism (**dwezg-* > **dwerg-*; *dverg-* 'dwarf' rhyming with *berg* 'rock') (ch. 12); that Old Norse *troll* 'troll' (noun) was originally an onomatopoeic word, its initial and final pairs of consonants expressing more or less thunderous noises (ch. 13); and that *Edda*, originally a pet name for *æðr* 'eider duck', is an example, along with *Grágás* 'grey goose', of the habit of naming Icelandic

manuscripts after birds (ch. 19).

There is thus much to question, absorb, and enjoy in this fascinating collection, by no means all of which has been covered in this review. With frequent references from one chapter to another, an 85-page Bibliography and three indexes, Liberman has succeeded admirably in bringing together what were originally separate essays in a single volume, which can be read from start to finish with great profit and pleasure.

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