

**ENCYCLOPEDIA AESTHETICS:
SCIENCE, SALVATION, AND STORYTELLING
IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY**

A Dissertation

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Jeffrey, Ph. D.

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My dissertation, “*Encyclopedic Aesthetics: Science, Salvation, and Storytelling in the Thirteenth Century*,” deals with the idea of the encyclopedia in thirteenth-century vernacular narrative, and is a contribution to the history of secularization. I combine theoretical approaches to genre, literary reception, and political ideology with my philological grounding in Middle High German, Old Norse, and Italian in order to trace the tension between competing encyclopedic discourses (sacred and secular, foreign and native, Christian and pagan, Latin and vernacular) in literary narrative. I demonstrate how secular, vernacular authors invoke the framework of the medieval encyclopedia in order to legitimate the appropriation of heathen *scientia* for the new, this-worldly ethic of non-clerical audiences. I show how encyclopedism operates as a rhetorical strategy within three distinct political and cultural contexts: the parliamentary Icelandic Commonwealth, the feudal court of Thuringia, and the Italian city-state. The first of four main chapters investigates the merger of imported Christian and native pagan pedagogical traditions in the *Edda*, the mythographic-poetic treatise of the Icelandic chieftain Snorri Sturluson, as an allegorical negotiation of Icelandic identity under Norwegian hegemony. A second chapter on the *Edda* relocates the Norse sapiential tradition within the ideology of Snorri's mythographic ethnography. The third chapter reads Dante's dialogue with sacred authority in the *Paradiso* as a rehabilitation of the “failed encyclopedism” that leads to Adam's spiritual exile—a

mirror of Dante's political exodus. A final chapter on Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* and the technology of the book argues that Wolfram inverts the structure of the medieval encyclopedia—a Christian moral framework for Greco-Arabic science—in order to recover the world of heathen learning for the lay morality of his Christian audience. I conclude that encyclopedism can no longer be understood as the mere “reception” or insertion of encyclopedic discourses in narrative texts, but should be seen as a new cultural meta-narrative of secular authority framing the explosive development of vernacular literature in a long thirteenth century.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jeff Turco was born and raised in Middletown, Connecticut. He dropped out of high school when he was sixteen, attended Middlesex Community College for two years, and received his B.A. in German and Philosophy at Connecticut College. Before coming to Cornell, he spent four years in Germany and Italy, finally leaving Rome for Ithaca (an epic decision, but not one that ultimately withstands scrutiny). He studied at the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, in Tübingen, Heidelberg, and in Reykjavík. He has held two Fulbright grants and is editor and translator, respectively, of two future volumes of *Islandica* from Cornell University Press. He has served as Visiting Curator of the the Fiske Icelandic Collection in the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections at Cornell, and is the founder the annual Fiske Conference on Medieval Icelandic Studies. His graduate studies in German and Medieval Studies resulted in the present dissertation. While working towards the PhD, he taught German, Comparative Literature, and Italian Studies for three years at the University of Western Ontario. He currently teaches German and Scandinavian Studies at the University of Alberta.

For Thomas Melbert, Professor Emeritus of English, Middlesex Community College,
Middletown, Connecticut –
Encyclopedist

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According to a recent study, the average person says “thank you” over one hundred times a day. At that rate, a thorough accounting of my actual debts would surely take no more than a week?

In lieu of such bookkeeping, I hope my creditors (they know who they are) will settle for somewhat less. First and foremost, I would like to thank my friend and mentor Thomas D. Hill for a generosity of mind and matter that at times borders on the pathological. Perhaps the most important thing Tom has taught me and others is that it is possible to be a world-class scholar *and* a human being. I would also like to thank my *Doktorvater*, Art Groos, (affectionately known as “Art Vader”), who taught me a thing or two about how to read, which is no small matter. Pete Wetherbee deserves thanks for afternoons in his office with the radio on, espresso in hand, and the *Vita Nuova* on our minds. Wayne Harbert (who taught the single best course I took at Cornell) tolerated with characteristic humor and good nature my fledgling attempts in Germanic linguistics.

It would be difficult to acknowledge my full debt to the late John King, Professor of German at Connecticut College. John died before his time in 1995, but not before he somehow managed to get himself to campus once a week to teach his last course, an independent study with me on Thomas Mann’s *Zauberberg*. It is one thing to talk about devotion to teaching; it is another to teach on borrowed time in between chemotherapy sessions. Despite (or perhaps because of) the subject of our discussions, John never let death have any sovereignty over his—or my—thoughts.

My friend Robert Baldwin (Art History, Connecticut College) has been a source of support and kayaking trips for many years now. Joe Harris at Harvard and Kirsten Wolf at the University of Wisconsin-Madison have encouraged me in more

traditional but no less appreciated ways. Peter Zelinka and Reidar Maliks, the friends of my youth and adulthood, have been my immediate sources of inspiration. The same can be said of my father, whom his brother once referred to covertly (but correctly) as a national treasure.

I'm suddenly at a loss for how to thank my family—my mother, father, and sister—for all they do. That would make this a multi-volume undertaking, and surely they have been patient enough already waiting for just this one. However, I would like to thank my mother for making me explain my project to her.

My dissertation was inadvertently inspired many years ago when I discovered my first mentor, Thomas Melbert, midway through the 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica*. It was Tom who got me interested in the idea of universal knowledge, not least by his own humbling example. Tom had the great foresight to warn me against becoming a medievalist, “because if you're serious about it, you'll have to devote your whole life to it.” Since I failed to heed his warning so soundly, I hope he won't mind if I dedicate this dissertation to him.

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Encyclopedic Aesthetics: Science, Salvation, and Storytelling in the Thirteenth Century

This is not a study of the medieval encyclopedia but of medieval *encyclopedism*—a phenomenon not bound up solely in the leaves of its namesake. It examines the *idea* of the encyclopedia in the vernacular narrative literature of Europe in the Middle Ages.

It is a commonplace that many of the most widely received literary texts of the Middle Ages—Dante’s *Commedia*, the *Roman de la Rose*, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*—are in some sense “encyclopedic.” The merely casual application of this term has, however, ultimately hindered our understanding of the cultural production of a period the French historian Jacques Le Goff recently called “l’age encyclopédiques.”¹ The thirteenth century is in fact marked by a radical new desire for ordered totalities, both in literature and elsewhere, be it in the form of voluminous *summae*, the “visual catechism” of the great cathedrals, or the massive compilations of the medieval encyclopedists themselves. Surprisingly, a broad, interdisciplinary discussion of medieval encyclopedism—something such evidence would seem to cry out for—has yet to ignite; it has been prevented by an disciplinary fire-wall that divides the study of “the medieval encyclopedia” from *encyclopedism* as a wider mode of aesthetic intervention in the culture and politics of medieval society. The aim of this study is to breach that wall.

My concern is with “encyclopedism” in the broader literary culture of the long thirteenth century, with works themselves not classifiable as encyclopedias, but which nevertheless articulate an encyclopedic program.² I deal with the idea of the

¹ Jacques Le Goff, “Pourquoi Le XIIIe Siècle a-t-il été plus particulièrement un siècle d’encyclopédisme?” In *L’encyclopedismo medievale*, ed. Michelangelo Picone (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1994), 23-40.

² Paraphrasing Picone on “la rilevanza della cultura enciclopedica su opere che non sono catalogabili come enciclopediche, ma che sono costruite secondo una prospettiva enciclopedica” in “Il significato di

encyclopedia in thirteenth-century vernacular narrative; thus my project is also a contribution to the history of secularization. I combine theoretical approaches to genre, literary reception, and political ideology with my philological grounding in Middle High German, Old Norse, and Italian in order to trace the tension between competing encyclopedic discourses (sacred and secular, foreign and native, Christian and pagan, Latin and vernacular) in literary narrative. I demonstrate how secular, vernacular authors invoke the framework of the medieval encyclopedia in order to legitimate the appropriation of heathen *scientia* for the new, this-worldly ethic of non-clerical audiences.

Toward this end, I examine the representation of totality in certain literary texts of a rough-hewn century (ca. 1209-1321), with a focus on three European vernacular traditions rarely gathered through a single lens. My ultimate aim is to examine the scope and depth of an often-invoked “encyclopedic mentality” in the literary culture at large, not through a philological hunt for “learned insertions”³ from the great encyclopedias in literary texts (a project worth carrying out for other reasons), but on the level of structure, theme, and ideology (shorthand: “encyclopedic aesthetics”). I suggest how this aesthetics both reflects and intervenes in the social and political horizons of the works examined, situating what I call Encyclopedic Literature as part of a larger movement—well known, but not known well—in which the lay ruling classes of Western Europe strive to appropriate the intellectual tools of the clergy for their own ends. On the macro-level, my argument is that *narrative*, as a counter-means for the representation of totality (as opposed to the descriptive mode of what I call the Canonical Encyclopedia) becomes a means with which a secular, vernacular authorship attempts to appropriate the *auctoritas* of Latinate clerical tradition (a story

un convegno sull'enciclopedismo medievale” (Picone, 15-21; 20-21).

³ Cf. Bernard Ribémont, *Littérature et encyclopédies du Moyen Âge* (Orléans: Paradigme, 2002).

that will always have to be retold on the local level). In other words, in the thirteenth century, authors of vernacular narrative fiction begin to strive, alongside the compilers of the Canonical Encyclopedias, for a new status as *auctor*.⁴

In this light, “encyclopedism” is not primarily a matter of the *influence* of the Canonical Encyclopedia on literary culture at large, but, rather, a new cultural meta-narrative⁵ framing the explosive development of a lay, vernacular, literary culture among emerging classes of secular intellectuals in thirteenth-century Europe.⁶ (“Secular” in a medieval context always meaning “worldly” as opposed to clerical, never, of course, “non-religious.”) Determining the pervasiveness of this “narrative” will require us, borrowing the programmatic statement of Michelangelo Picone, to “avail ourselves of encyclopedism as a privileged key allowing us to decipher the literary production of the medieval period” (verremo cioè servirci dell’enciclopedismo come chiave privilegiata che ci consenta di decifrare la produzione letteraria mediavale).⁷ In what follows, I avail myself of this key to “decipher” the first book of the *Edda*, the mythographic-poetic treatise of the Icelandic Chieftain Snorri Sturluson,

⁴ In the *Apologia Auctoris* of his vast *Speculum maius*, Vincent of Beauvais writes that it is the *ordering* of the book, not the content itself, that is properly his (“nostrum autem sola partium ordinatione”). In other words, his own status as author and authority derive from the ability to put things in order. Here it is not hard to see how the idea of narrative would exert a broad appeal to a class of would-be authorities working outside the bounds of canonical tradition but still attracted to its ethos. I quote the edition of Serge Lusignan, *Préface au “Speculum Maius” de Vincent de Beauvais: réfraction et diffraction*, *Cahiers d’études médiévales* 5 (Montréal-Paris: Bellarmin, 1979), 118.

⁵ “Meta-narrative” often means different things in fields as diverse as film studies, political theory, psychoanalysis, and literary theory, and not infrequently within these disciplines themselves. Moreover, it is often used interchangeably with “grand” or “master-narrative,” and sometimes “master-plot”: terms whose exact significance can also vary widely. A useable definition of meta-narrative for my purposes is provided by John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children’s Literature* (New York: Garland, 1998), 3, 6: “a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience . . . the implicit and usually invisible ideologies, systems, and assumptions which operate globally in a society to order knowledge and experience.” Other medieval cultural meta-narratives along with “encyclopedic pedagogy” would include the process of self-perfection under the feudal contract (courtliness, chivalry), as well as the overarching meta-narrative of salvation history (Paradise, Fall, Redemption), which is recapitulated in the life of the individual believer (i.e. anagogically).

⁶ As described at length by Jacques Le Goff, *Les Intellectuels au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Editions du seuil, 1957).

⁷ Picone, 15-21.

parts of Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, and select *canti* of Dante's *Commedia*: all works by lay, vernacular authors active within a hundred-year span of one another, all responding to the encyclopedic dominant of the period. There is nothing strictly necessary about this particular constellation; I could have chosen different texts. (*Piers Plowman*, Wittenwiler's *Ring*, and the *Roman de la Rose* come to mind.) But I would be hard pressed to come up with a comparably "encyclopedic" set of figures. Dictated in part by my own philological abilities and inabilities, this selection is, moreover, intended to illuminate the intersection of encyclopedism with widely divergent cultural contexts: the lay ruling elite milieu of the last decades of the parliamentary Icelandic Free-State, the feudal German court of Landgraf Hermann of Thuringia, and early-urban Italy. My list of "Encyclopedic Literature" could be extended, but not indefinitely: Arthurian romance (*Parzival* excluded), the *Sagas of Icelanders*, and most courtly poetry follow meta-narratives of their own.

Of course, an exhaustive study of "Encyclopedic Literature" in the thirteenth century would require a book that is itself an encyclopedia. Such a book would be well worth writing. My present project cannot aspire to the scope of its subject, but aims to point the way.

Medieval Encyclopedias?

One problem for the study of the "encyclopedia" in the Middle Ages is that there appears to be no such thing; the term itself is an anachronism. Latin *encyclopedia* arrives on the scene as late as 1508, followed in English in 1531 in the sense of "curriculum," and in the French vernacular with "encyclopédie" in 1532,⁸ almost nine-hundred years after the death of Isidore of Seville, whose *Etymologiae* arguably constitute the first medieval encyclopedia. Hence, "the medieval

⁸ Le Goff (1994), 24-25.

encyclopedia” is born posthumously. Our modern word comes from the Greek *enkuklios paideia* or, literally, “circle of learning,” which has a sense closer to modern English “curriculum,” or “course of study,” than to its legitimate lexical offspring. The Greek implies neither a written work nor a systemization of the totality of knowledge, but, rather, a program of education propaedeutic to specialization within a specific discipline (e.g. architecture, music, etc.). The Greek concept is not, however, irrelevant to a discussion of what a scholarly *opinio communis* calls “the medieval encyclopedia”; it already indicates the “will-to-a-system” and ideas of practical instruction, general education, and vulgarization at play in medieval encyclopedic discourse.

What we do find in the Middle Ages is host of works with titles signaling programmatic claims to totality: *De ordine*, *De doctrina*, *De philosophia mundi*, *Etymologiae*, *Origines*, *De rerum naturis*, *Imago mundi*, *Compendium philosophiae*, *De proprietatibus rerum*, *Speculum*,⁹ etc. An embarrassment of riches—but all in seemingly different currencies. On account of this proliferation of titles, scholars have generally been of two minds regarding “the medieval encyclopedia,” approaching it either as a genre with its own conventions, or as a collective misnomer applied to a heterogeneous body of texts.¹⁰ Most recent research has adopted the former position and is largely predicated on the idea of an encyclopedic genre, although what exactly constitutes this genre remains hotly debated.¹¹ “Medieval encyclopedia” remains a

⁹ Cf. Ritamary Bradley, “Backgrounds of the Title *Speculum* in Mediaeval Literature,” *Speculum*, 29 (1954), 100-15. Also Herbert Grabes, *Speculum, Mirror und Looking-Glass: Kontinuität und Originalität in der Spiegelmetapher in den Buchtiteln des Mittelalters und der englischen Literature des 13. bis 17. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: Buchreihe der Anglia, Zeitschrift für englische Philologie, no. 16, 1973).

¹⁰ Christel Meier, “Grundzüge der mittelalterlichen Enzyklopädie: Zu Inhalten, Formen und Funktionen einer problematischen Gattung,” *Literatur und Laienbildung im Spätmittelalter und in der Reformationszeit: Symposion Wolfenbüttel 1981*, ed. Ludger Grenzmann and Karl Stackmann, Germanistische Symposien Berichtsbände 5 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1984), 467-500.

¹¹ The proceedings of four international conferences on the encyclopedia and encyclopedism have been published since 1991. The three most recent are devoted predominately to the Middle Ages: *L’Encyclopédisme: Actes du Colloque de Caen 12-16 janvier 1987*, ed. Annie Becq (Paris: Aux

shorthand, albeit a highly useful one.

Le Goff attempts to account for the *banalité fondamentale* of the inexistence of the word “encyclopedia” in the Middle Ages—the fragmentation into a set of approximate words for works constituting a single genre—in part as a result of the *multiplicité féconde* of intellectual life in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. More suggestively, he blames the lack of a single term on the *mauvaise conscience* of a medieval mind engaged in a search for what may in fact be forbidden knowledge—and still wary of the wrath of a secretive Creator-God who punished the first human couple for tasting of the *arbor scientiae*. The failure to declare the encyclopedic project is viewed by Le Goff in the context of a theologically grounded apprehension concerning a Creator who withholds fundamental knowledge from his creatures, and who, perhaps, still desires to confine human knowing to the same state of disorganized multiplicity to which language was reduced at Babel.¹² Thus the lack of a common encyclopedic denominator in the Middle Ages does not indicate the lack of the concept, but rather a form of caution on the part of this “bad conscience.” This multiplicity of titles can also, less speculatively, be traced to the sheer diversity of uses to which encyclopedic texts were put.

Canonical Encyclopedias - Literary Encyclopedias - Encyclopedic Literature

As one scholar has put it, “the history of the Encyclopedia—and not only of the *medieval* encyclopedia—is the history of its reorganization.”¹³ Therefore any attempt to delineate an encyclopedic genre on the basis of certain “invariables” (i.e.,

Amateurs de livres, 1991); *L'enciclopedismo medievale* (see footnote 1); *Pre-modern Encyclopaedic Texts: Proceedings of the Second COMERS Congress, Groningen, 1-4 July 1996*, ed. Peter Binkley (Leiden: Brill, 1997); *Die Enzyklopädie im Wandel vom Hochmittelalter bis zur frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Christel Meier (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2002).

¹² Le Goff (1994), 25-27. Curiously, Le Goff does not mention the *Book of Job* in this context.

¹³ Christel Meier, “Vom ‘homo celestis’ zum ‘homo faber’: die Reorganisation der mittelalterlichen Enzyklopädie für neue Gebrauchsfunktionen bei Vinzenz von Beauvais und Brunetto Latini.” In *Pragmatische Schriftlichkeit im Mittelalter: Erscheinungsformen und Entwicklungsstufen*, ed. Hagen Keller, Klaus Grubmüller, and Nikolaus Staubach (Munich: Fink, 1992), 157-75.

indispensable genetic material by which membership in an encyclopedic family is adjudicated by means of a literary-historical “paternity test”) will invariably be devoured by the million-headed hydra of empiricism. In what follows, I use the term “encyclopedic” broadly to refer to texts that present some mixture of “eine kohärente Gesamtschau der Natur, der Geschichte, der Moral, des Lebens und des ewigen Heils” (a coherent overview of nature, history, morals, human life, and eternal salvation).¹⁴ No single one of these elements must be present for a work to be considered as part of an encyclopedic genre. The one thing needful is a concern with the ordered totality (variously defined) of knowledge. Ultimately, I rely on a Wittgensteinian notion of “family resemblances”¹⁵ rather than a prescriptive catalogue of essential encyclopedic features derived from a normative precursor-text (e.g., Isidore’s *Etymologiae*), and try to shift the discussion of medieval encyclopedism away from its grounding over the last twenty years in the encyclopedia *per se*.

For heuristic purposes, it may be useful to distinguish between the following groups of texts (which I capitalize):

1) *Canonical Encyclopedias*: Latin works represented by, but not limited to: the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville (ca. 560 - 636), *De rerum naturis (De universo)* of Hrabanus Maurus (780-856), the *Speculum maius* of Vincent of Beauvais (ca. 1200-1264), *De Proprietatibus rerum* (ca. 1235) of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, the *Liber de natura rerum* of Thomas de Cantimpré (ca 1201-1270), the *Clavis Physicae* and

¹⁴ Ch. Hannick, “Enzyklopädie, Enzyklopädik,” *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, ed. Robert Auty, 1st ed. (Munich; Zürich: Artemis-Verlag, [1977]-1999), 2034.

¹⁵ Cf. Wittgenstein’s discussion of “Familienähnlichkeiten” in §§66/67 of his *Philosophische Untersuchungen*. Using games as an example, Wittgenstein shows that resemblances between exemplars of a genre do not consist in characteristics common to all. This is depicted as follows:

Game a:	A	B	C	D				
Game b:		B	C	D	E			
Game c:			C	D	E	F		
Game d:				D	E	F	G	
Game e:					E	F	G	H

Imago Mundi (ca. 1122-1152) of Honorius Augustodunensis. This grouping is motivated as much by the canonical status of these works in modern scholarship as on their organizational principle *per se*, although, with the exception of Isidore, they are arranged according to an objective “order of things.”

2) *Literary Encyclopedias*: encyclopedic-didactic poems in dialogue-form in the tradition of Boethius’s *Consolatio Philosophiae*, such as the *Cosmologia* of Bernardus Silvestris, *De Planctu Naturae* of Alan of Lille, and the *Tesoretto* of Brunetto Latini. I consider these primarily as works of “literarisierte Wissensvermittlung,” which is distinct from

3) *Encyclopedic Literature*: works of narrative fiction in the vernacular themselves not classifiable as encyclopedias, but which articulate an encyclopedic program, not limited to but including those discussed in this dissertation. Left out of this tripartite grouping (but not out of my study) are more speculative works like the *Philosophia Mundi* of William of Conches and works arranged according to a logical ordering of the arts and sciences (*ordo artium*), such as the *Didascalion* of Hugh of St. Victor. There is also the vast tradition of the *Vernacular Encyclopedia*, such as *L’Image du Monde* of Gossouin de Metz, the reworkings of Honorius’ *Elucidarium* in most European vernaculars (including the Middle High German *Lucidarius* and Old Norse *Elucidarius*), the *Buch Sidrach*, the *Buch von den natürlichen Dingen*¹⁶ of Konrad von Megenberg (his vernacular adaptation of the *Liber de natura rerum* of Thomas de Cantimpré), and the *Trésor* of Brunetto Latini. Finally, there is a vast tradition of Latin

¹⁶ This being the proper title of Konrad’s book, not, as Georg Steer points out, “Buch der Natur”: the title given to the work by its fifteenth century editors “in bewusstem Rückgriff auf die Lateinische Vorlage” (p.181) and retained in the edition of Franz Pfeiffer (Stuttgart: Karl Aue, 1861). See Georg Steer: “Das ‘Buch von den natürlichen Dingen’ Konrads von Megenberg--Ein ‘Buch der Natur’?” in *Die Enzyklopädie im Wandel vom Hochmittelalter bis zur frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Christel Meier (Munich: Fink, 2002), 181-188.

and Vernacular encyclopedias in dialogue-form: once more, the *Elucidarium* (with its many adaptations and translations) and the *Clavis Physicae* of Honorius, the Norwegian *Konungsskuggsjá*, the *Buch Sidrach*, the *Secretum Secretorum*, and the *Dragmaticon* of William of Conches (a reworking of his *Philosophia* as a dialogue between a Philosopher and his royal patron).

This grouping is meant to highlight a shift from an encyclopedic model rooted in the Isidoran tradition, based on synchrony and hierarchy (chain-of-being), to a new emphasis in certain quarters on *narrative* as the, perhaps, only truly sufficient means for the representation of totality. Totality refers to the knowable order of things; yet, there is an emerging sense in this period (if its literature is any guide) that it is comprised not only by this knowable order of things but also by human relationships. I locate this “narrative turn” of medieval encyclopedism in the context of an ongoing process of vernacularization and secularization of the arts (*trivium*) and sciences (*quadrivium*), as well as in a new awareness of history.¹⁷

“Totality” is, of course, a slippery concept. We can, however, distinguish between two common modes of its representation in medieval encyclopedic tradition. First, there is the attempt reproduce everything there is to know (*compilatio*), based on the notion that (human) knowledge is finite and exhaustible; this is where we find the great volumes of Isidore’s *Etymologiae*,¹⁸ *De rerum naturis*¹⁹ of Hrabanus Maurus, the

¹⁷ See M.-D. Chenu. *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997, esp. Ch. 5.

¹⁸ To give a sense of the structure some of these works, I have included a table of contents: *Etymologiae* 1) Grammar, 2) Rhetoric and Dialectic, 3) Mathematics, 4) Medicine, 5) Human and Divine Law, 6) Books and Offices of the Church, 7) God, Angels, Saints, 8) Church and Sects 9) Languages of foreigners; names or affinities of kings, warriors, and citizens, 10) Words, 11) Man and Portents, 12) Animals, 13) The World and its Parts, 14) The Earth and its Parts, 15) Of cities, of Edifices Urban and Rural, of Farms, of Boundaries and Measures of Farms, of Travel, 16) Stones and Metals, 17) Rustic Things, 18) War and Games, 19) Ships, Building, Weaving, 20) The Home and Domestic Implements.

¹⁹ *De rerum naturis*: 1) God, 2) Biblical Patriarchs, 3) Other Old Testament figures (men and women), 4) Figures of the New Testament. 5) Holy Scripture, 6) Man and his Parts, 7) Ages of Man, 8) Animals, 9) The Universe, 10) Time, 11) Water, 12) Earth (Geography), 13) Topography, 14) Public Buildings, 15) Philosophers, Poets, Sybils, Magicians, Pagans, Foreign Gods, 16) Foreign Languages, Cites, 17) Stones and Metals, 18) Weights, Measures, Numbers, Music, Medicine, 19) Agriculture and Botany,

Speculum quadruplex of Vincent of Beauvais, *De Proprietatibus rerum*²⁰ of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, and the *Liber de natura rerum* of Thomas de Cantimpré (i.e., group 1: Canonical Encyclopedias). There is, however, another encyclopedic tradition whose idea of totality is oriented around the individual subject—no longer concerned with “everything there is to know” but with “everything *you* need to know” (*compendium*). The latter model is closer to the etymological meaning of *enkuklios paideia*, and in the Middle Ages it is represented, e.g., by the *Lucidarius* tradition (which originally served the needs of clerical schooling), by a monastic encyclopedia like the *Hortus deliciarum* of Herrad von Hohenburg, by the German *Hausbuch* tradition, and by the Old Norse *Konungsskyggsjá* (*Speculum regale*) which, despite its title, is actually addressed to members of an upwardly-mobile merchant class.

What is novel about what I call “Encyclopedic Literature” is the conflation of these objective and subjective totalities: *enkuklios paideia* in its original sense of individual orientation and “round learning” played out within a comprehensive, knowable order of things. The knowable *ordo* becomes a locus for the unfolding of politico-social knowledge and history. The gap that separates the Encyclopedic Literature of Dante, Snorri, and Wolfram (to name again only the subjects of my dissertation) and the Literary Encyclopedia of the Boethian tradition (e.g., Bernardus Silvestris, Allain of Lille, Brunetto Latini), is the attention of Encyclopedic Literature to the *social* dimension of the encyclopedic agent as one who affects and is affected by human relationships. Unlike in Literary Encyclopedia, the hero is not led by *Philosophia* or *Natura* through the orders of being in the *gran turismo* of the soul; his relationship to the world is not (at least not primarily) that of microcosmos to

20) War, 21) Buildings and Clothes, 22) “Home Economics”

²⁰ *De Proprietatibus rerum*: 1) God, 2) Angels, 3) The Reasoning Soul, 4) The Elements and Humors, 5) Anatomy, 6) Ages of Man, 7) Sickness and Poisons, 8) The World and The Celestial Bodies, 9) Time, 10) Matter, Form, Elements, 11) Air, 12) Birds, 13) Waters, 14) The Earth (Geology) 15) Geography, 16) Stones and Metals, 17) Herbs and Plants, 18) Animals, 19) Accidentals: Colors, Flavors, Fluids, Smells, Eggs, Numbers, Musical Instruments.

macrocosmos. Encyclopedic Literature, in other words, opens the doors to the personal, secular, and the political, or, more generally, to questions of human relationships in time.²¹ It is at least suggestive in this context that Snorri's Gylfi is, and Parzival becomes, king, and that Dante holds various political offices in Florence before the long exile in which he declares himself a "party of one."

Scholarly discussion of medieval encyclopedism, however, has suffered from a bifurcation dividing the study of encyclopedias proper from *encyclopedism* as a wider mode of aesthetic intervention in the culture and politics of society. A case in point: Bernard Ribémont has recently provided a model for the derivation of an encyclopedic genre in the Middle Ages that focuses almost exclusively on the great canonical encyclopedias.²² Using the model "prototype-reception," Ribémont uses the Isidoran tradition to measure the "encyclopedicity" of later texts. Hence his book on *Literature and Encyclopedias in the Middle Ages*²³ focuses strictly on "insertions encyclopédiques" from a canonical "core" into narrative texts (i.e., where a work can be shown to quote or paraphrase material found in a given encyclopedia, bestiary, lapidary, etc). The Canonical Encyclopedia of Isidoran tradition is thereby made the epicenter of medieval encyclopedism, its other manifestations their textual aftershocks. While Ribémont's "Encyclopedic Model"²⁴ is adequate to delineate a canon of encyclopedias *per se*, it is too restrictive to account for the diverse

²¹ A similar process is well documented within the tradition of Canonical Encyclopedias themselves. See Christel Meier, "Der Wandel der mittelalterlichen Enzyklopädie vom 'Weltbuch' zum Thesaurus sozial gebundenen Kulturwissens: am Beispiel der Artes mechanicae," *Enzyklopädien der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Wolfgang Harms, Hans-Henrik Krummacher, and Werner Welzig, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1995. See also Meier, "Vom 'homo celestis' zum 'homo faber': die Reorganisation der mittelalterlichen Enzyklopädie für neue Gebrauchsfunktionen bei Vinzenz von Beauvais und Brunetto Latini," *Pragmatische Schriftlichkeit im Mittelalter: Erscheinungsformen und Entwicklungsstufen*, eds Hagen Keller, Klaus Grubmüller, and Nikolaus Staubach, Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften, 65 (München: Fink, 1992), 157-75.

²² Bernard Ribémont, "On the Definition of an Encyclopedic Genre in the Middle Ages," *Pre-Modern Encyclopedic Texts*, ed. Peter Binkley (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 47-61.

²³ Ribémont, *Littérature et encyclopédies du Moyen Âge* (Orléans: Paradigme, 2002).

²⁴ Ribémont (1997), 53.

articulations of medieval encyclopedism.²⁵ Ribémont’s model distinguishes “true” encyclopedias from epiphenomenal (often merely *shorter*) works.

While Ribémont’s conception of the encyclopedic “core” is clearly a product of his desire to establish a strict Isidoran genealogy for an “encyclopedic genre,” I wonder whether this notion is not prejudiced by the contemporary notion of the encyclopedia as a *big book*. In effect, he posits the Canonical Encyclopedia as a *cause* of medieval encyclopedism. If encyclopedism is approached as a broader cultural phenomenon not bound up exclusively with textual transmission, the strict Isidoran derivation becomes increasingly problematic. For example, if we consider the medieval cathedral as a visible *summa totiae scientiae* for the laity, a massive *biblia pauperum*, and, with its symbolic architecture, stained-glass windows, paintings, tapestries, and statuary art, as a kind of specular catechism—an *enkuklios paideia* in the etymological sense of a “course of education” directed towards a specific *telos*—it is hardly possible to insist that a restricted “core” of encyclopedic texts serve as measuring stick for the encyclopedicity of all other cultural artifacts.

An alternative model is afforded by the idea that the Canonical Encyclopedias, Literary Encyclopedias, and Encyclopedic Literature constitute different manifestations of the broader “encyclopedic turn” of the thirteenth century. Hence, encyclopedism in literature should not only, or primarily, be gauged by the presence of insertions from Canonical Encyclopedias. We should assume, rather, that the massive

²⁵ His dismissive treatment of *encyclopédies dialoguées* is a case in point. See Ribémont, *La “Renaissance” du XIIIe Siècle et l’Encyclopédisme* (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2002), 130-1. *Encyclopédies dialoguées*, according to Ribémont, are part of a literature that uses dialogue to convince of the usefulness of possessing knowledge of the nature of things and is devoted primarily to the curious (p. 132). He holds that the Dialogical Encyclopedia does not display the kind of ordering (p. 132) constitutive of an encyclopedic genre; he further believes that the “broadening” (*évasér*) of the genre through the “question and answer” format leads to a “loss,” or disorder, of both subject proper and encyclopedic *ordo* for the sake of the satisfaction of a wanton and unstructured *curiositas*. And yet the process of vulgarization (of high-level knowledge to its mid or low-level recipient) in the Dialogical Encyclopedia is a perfect example of the *transposition encyclopédique* that, according to Ribémont, is a pillar of the encyclopedic genre. Thus Ribémont ignores the entire *Elucidarius* tradition, presumably because it displays a clear encyclopedic *ordo* despite the “broad” (*évasé*) dialogue form.

codifying projects of the thirteenth century (Vincent's *Speculum*, Bartholomaeus Anglicus's *De probretatibus rerum*, as well as the great theological *summae*) are themselves a product, rather than cause, of the expanded interest in the representation of ordered totalities that is also taken up by producers of literary narrative.

Accepting the criteria of “order” and “totality” as fundamental to the constitution of an “encyclopedic genre” in the Middle Ages, one might ask whether Encyclopedic Literature—with its incorporation of (1) a plurality of Canonical-Encyclopedic discourses (2) disposed in space and time in a (3) narrative structure (4) that situates this sheer amassment of learning anthropologically for the orientation of the individual—is not in a sense more “encyclopedic” than the massive tomes of Vincent, Anglicus, *et al.* Encyclopedic Literature appropriates not only certain encyclopedic themes, but also the principle of “ordered totality” for a secular audience. Unlike the Canonical Encyclopedia, it is not intended for reference by a community (e.g., in a monastery) that consults parts of the whole over time, but to be experienced continuously by a reader/listener from start to finish. The point, however, not that Dante's *Commedia* or any other literary work is “really” an encyclopedia, or more encyclopedic than the encyclopedias themselves. We know from Dante's reluctance in the *Convivio* (Trattato Primo II 12-17) that the act of speaking of oneself (*lo parlare di se*) is something traditionally permitted only for the purpose of its exemplary value (as in Augustine's *Confessions*). With Dante (and perhaps not only with Dante), encyclopedic pedagogy legitimates the narration of subjective history.²⁶

²⁶ This is equally true if the “person” in question is a fictional or an allegorical character. There are, of course, other models for such personal narration, such as the Saint's Life. But other narratives of personhood lack the Saint's Life's theological justification.

Encyclopedisms: Legitimate and Illegitimate

It has been argued that any attempt to systematize the totality of knowledge in a single book needs to be legitimated against a looming theological proscription of *curiositas*.²⁷ To avoid any suggestion of innovation, and to ground his own authority, the encyclopedist links the arrangement of his work to a given, objective order. Scholars have found it convenient to distinguish between two main organizational principles for the medieval encyclopedia: the *ordo rerum* (order of things) and the *ordo artium* (order of the arts).²⁸ The former is ordered according to an ontological hierarchy, from the top to bottom or bottom to top of the order of being (the direction is a question of perspective—the hierarchy stays the same). The *ordo rerum* can also take the form of a chronology, sometimes using a hexameral scheme—treating the orders of being according to their order in the six days of Biblical creation (cosmogony). It can also proceed according to an eschatological scheme, including the course of salvation history and the end of the world as a framework for the orders of natural and human existence. Either way, the idea is that the book recapitulates the order of the objective world. The other (and later) *artes* model is based on the system of the *septem artes liberales*. It is anthropocentric, not cosmological, in its orientation, leading some to consider it a “maturation” of the encyclopedic project and precursor to an all-encompassing “Humanist universality.”²⁹ The *artes* model organizes the totality of human knowledge based on the rational organization of the sciences, and can therefore be called Aristotelian, whereas any model that reflects the perceived order of the world is ultimately of Neo-Platonic derivation.

The legitimation of the encyclopedic project is ultimately rooted in the idea—

²⁷ See Hans Blumenberg, “Aufnahme der Neugierde in den Lasterkatalog” and “Schwiegkeiten mit der Natürlichkeit der Wißbegierde im scholastischen System,” *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit: Dritter Teil: Der Prozeß der theoretischen Neugierde* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966), 358-400.

²⁸ Christel Meier, “Enzyklopädischer Ordo und sozialer Gebrauchsform,” Meier (2002), 511-532.

²⁹ Meier, *ibid.*

pervasive in the Middle Ages—of God as the author of two co-extensive texts: the *Book of God* and the *Book of Nature*, as well as in the idea of man as the *animal rationale* who can read the truths of the one in the pages of the other. The following passage from Hugh of St. Victor is representative:

For this whole visible world is a book written by the finger of God, that is, created by divine power . . . But just as some illiterate man who sees an open book looks at the figures but does not recognize the letters: just so the foolish natural man who does not perceive the things of God outwardly in these visible creatures sees the appearances but does not inwardly understand the reason. But he who is spiritual and can judge all things, while he considers outwardly the beauty of the work, inwardly conceives how marvelous is the wisdom of the Creator.³⁰

This idea (what Lukács calls “the perfect immanence of the transcendent”³¹) is seminal for the intellectual life of the Middle Ages, and can be traced to the world-view expressed in *Romans* 1:20:

Ever since the creation of the world, His invisible nature, namely, His eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.

(Invisibilia enim ipsius a creatura mundi per ea, quae facta sunt, intellecta conspiciuntur, sempiterna Eius et virtus et divinitas.)

Ultimately, the biblical legitimation of man as reader of the *ordo* of the world-book is grounded in a faith in the wisdom of a God who ordered all things in the created world (“ea, quae facta sunt”) *in mensura et numero et pondere* (“in measure, number, and weight”).³² “The encyclopedism of the thirteenth century was only possible after twelfth-century Humanism had restored confidence in ‘man’ created by God in his image, and established a Christian concept of ‘nature,’ a legitimately knowable ‘order

³⁰ Quoted in Gabriel Josipovici, *The World and the Book* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971), 29. For the “language of things” in the Middle Ages, see Hennig Brinkmann, *Mittelalterliche Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Niemeyer 1980), 25, 74ff.

³¹ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, Bostock trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 59.

³² *Wisdom* 11:20: “Sed omnia in mensura et numero et pondere disposuisti.”

of things.”³³ This nature is legible because it is “made for man” (*propter hominem factus est*).³⁴

This is why the *ordo* of the medieval encyclopedia is not the order of its modern namesake. The alphabetic organization of the modern encyclopedia bears no structural resemblance to the world it describes. For the primary recipients of medieval encyclopedias, such an order of words would have meant a disorder of things. Here the idea of the *world as book* finds its counterpart in the idea of the *book as world*.³⁵ As mentioned, the order-of-things in the microcosmic book-world of the medieval encyclopedia often recapitulates not only the fixed order of the world after its becoming, but also the order in which this *ordo* came to be in the *liber naturae* written by the hand of God: beginning with biblical creation and proceeding through natural, secular, and salvation history on to an eschatological account. Thus, at a higher degree of integration, a medieval encyclopedia may recapitulate not only an ontological *ordo* but also its unfolding (*evolutio*) in time. This chronological principle constitutes a key point of contact between certain models of medieval encyclopedia and literary narrative. The imposition of a narrative frame on work that addresses the order of the totality of knowledge is not the imposition of a convenient but extraneous organizing principle, but rather a further mirroring of the “order-of-things” (*ordo rerum*), reflecting not only its ontological status but also its historical becoming.

Encyclopedism as a Literary Aesthetic: Snorri, Dante, Wolfram

Although the *magna opera* of Dante, Snorri, and Wolfram encompass (or

³³ Le Goff (1994), 28 [my translation].

³⁴ “Hic quippe sensilis mundus propter hominem factus est” [(§261). “Totius mundus propter hominem et in homine”: Honorius Augustodunensis, *Clavis physicae*, ed. Paolo Lucentini (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1974), 212.

³⁵ For the most extensive study of the of the book-microcosm metaphor, see Hans Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000). Also, Ernst Robert Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter* (Bern; Munich: A. Franke Verlag, 1969), 323ff.

create) vast expanses of their contemporary intellectual landscape, they, unlike encyclopedias *sensu stricto*, cannot be considered primarily as works of *Wissensvermittlung*. It is, in fact, not entirely unproblematic to view transmission of knowledge as the ultimate aim of medieval encyclopedias generally, since this knowledge is typically handmaid to an exegesis of the *visibilia* of an immanent moral-order legible in both the book of the world (*liber mundi*) and in holy scripture. It is clear that the *Commedia*, *Snorra Edda*, and *Parzival* integrate a variety of encyclopedic discourses on cosmogeny, cosmology, theology, history, geography, mythography, sometimes medicine, botany, zoology, ethnography, and the disciplines of the *trivium* and *quadrivium* (especially astronomy). Yet none of these works can be described as mere depositories of knowledge or the “literarization”³⁶ of its transmission. The ultimate aim of Dante’s *Commedia* and Wolfram’s *Parzival*, both of which present a vision of the *ordo mundi* in the spheres of natural, human, and divine history, is not *Wissensvermittlung* but moral instruction.³⁷ These narratives are not primarily concerned with the transmission of knowledge (although they perform this function, as well) but with questions of ethical practice (*questiones morales*). Similarly, at least after Hrabanus Maurus (9th c.), the medieval encyclopedia does not attempt to organize the totality of knowledge as an end in itself, but depicts the *ordo mundi* as a reflection—in *aenigmat*e—of a divinely ordained moral order.³⁸ This outlook is grounded in a faith in the “significance of the cosmos as a motive force and

³⁶ Cf. *Wissensorganisierende und wissensvermittelnde Literatur im Mittelalter: Perspektiven ihrer Erforschung*: Kolloquium, 5.-7. Dezember 1985, ed. Norbert Richard Wolf. (Wiesbaden: L. Reichert, 1987).

³⁷ For the status of moral philosophy in the *Commedia*, see Dante, *Das Schreiben an Cangrande della Scala*, ed. and trans Thomas Ricklin and Ruedi Imbach (Hamburg: Mainer Verlag, 1993), 16-17: “Genus vero phylosophie sub quo hic in toto et parte proceditur, est morale negotium, sive ethica.”

³⁸ Earlier scholarship falsely presupposed a fundamental opposition between “zwei Arten der mittelalterlichen Enzyklopädie mit ganz verschiedenen Zielen, einer objektiv-wissenschaftlich die Welt erforschenden, die unterrichten will (meist lateinisch), und einer das Universum nur als Ensemble von Symbolen verstehenden, die der Erbauung dient (oft volkssprachig).” Quoted in Christel Meier, “Grundzüge der mittelalterlichen Enzyklopädie,” *Literatur und Laienbildung im Spätmittelalter und in der Reformationszeit*, ed. Ludger Grenzmann and Karl Stackmann (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1984), 470.

source of meaning in human existence, centering on the ordering power of nature and natural philosophy as a means to stability and moral guidance.”³⁹ This is why the genesis of *imagines mundi* is one feature of the medieval encyclopedia that also plays a major role in literary works whose concern is largely ethical.

Dialogizing the cosmic *ordo*

In one of the most widely disseminated models of the medieval encyclopedia, the genesis of images of the *ordo mundi* takes place in a dialogical process of question and answer between *magister* and *discipulus*. To give some sense of the scope of this tradition, it should suffice to recall a few of its major representatives and off-shoots: the *Elucidarius* of Honorius Augustodunensis and its adaptations in most of the European vernaculars (among them, the Middle High German *Lucidarius*), the *Buch Sidrach*, the *Secretum Secretorum*, the *Dragmaticon* of William of Conches (a dialogical reworking of his earlier *Philosophia Mundi*), and the *Tesoretto* of Brunetto Latini. Since the works of Dante, Snorri, and Wolfram under consideration here are so suggestive of the question-and-answer format of medieval encyclopedia, an investigation of their encyclopedism will have to focus on the conception of their works as dialogue. Among other things, it will be necessary to take into account what Hans Robert Jauß calls “die Funktionsgeschichte von Frage und Antwort.”⁴⁰ Any literary dialogue is essentially a conversation with assigned roles: student/teacher, Christian/pagan, man/nature, etc. Encyclopedic dialogue in the Middle Ages is almost always driven by pre-established conclusions, but still sometimes tries to give expression to the tentativeness of *fides quaerens intellectum*. A history of the function

³⁹ Winthrop Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 6.

⁴⁰ Hans Robert Jauß, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982), 377ff.

of dialogue would have to include dialogue as apology, as didaxis, and as dialectic (philosophical dialogue). The encyclopedia is fundamentally a didactic genre, and, with the appropriation of its question-and-answer format, literary fiction adapts the tools of traditional clerical education in order to develop a pedagogy of its own.

One criterion for making distinctions between types of dialogue is the question of the relative priority of question or answer. A question can be said to have priority when it lacks a predetermined response. Such a question is not merely a cue but participates in the openness of “actual” dialogue. I refer to this above as philosophical dialogue or “dialectic” because it suggests a process of genuine rapprochement between persons and ideas. This openness is, of course, still an idealized literary representation of the openness of dialogue between persons and lacks the spontaneous interplay of question and answer constitutive of the latter, since both are already present in the mind of the author. Still, the open-endedness of the search and the care taken to play out multiple possibilities and alternatives from various perspectives before offering conclusions can be seen as a concern of certain philosophical dialogues, notably Abelard’s *Dialogus inter Philosophum, Iudaeum et Christianum*, which at times reproduces the tentativeness of a “search for truth.” The priority of answer over question is most evident in the dramatized catechism of the tradition of master-student dialogue (*Lehrgespräch*). Here the focus is on delivering a pre-delineated body of propositional truths, the knowledge of which is deemed essential to salvation. Any curiosity that fails to serve this end is frivolous, if not already a potential first step to perdition.⁴¹

From its beginnings, Christian theology has understood itself primarily as an answer (or rather *the* answer) to questions. The *First Letter of Peter* (3:15) calls upon the individual believer to be prepared to give an account of the reasons behind his faith

⁴¹ See Blumenberg (1966), 358-400

(“parati semper ad defensorum omni poscenti vos rationem de ea, quae in vobis est spe”) and an outpouring of Christian apologetics in the second century contributed to the idea of Christianity as a religion capable of answering all questions.⁴² The dialogue-form employed in many theological texts contributed to this understanding: “Die Form des Dialoges gab . . . den christlichen Theologen Gelegenheit, die christliche Lehre als alle Fragen voll befriedigende Antwort vorzutragen.”⁴³ (This is hardly a goal shared by all religious traditions, not all of which extol the search for answers or claim to offer any. To the Zen Buddhist, for example, the beginning of wisdom is the recognition of the folly inherent in any propositional truth or dogma. A famous tale illustrates the point: a monk once asked a master: “All things are reducible to the One; where is this One to be reduced?” The master retorted: “When I was in the Tsin district I had a robe made that weighed seven *chin*.” And “this is one of the most noted sayings ever uttered by a Zen master.”⁴⁴ We can imagine the confusion, if not utter horror, of the *discipulus* of master-student dialogue upon hearing his question: “ubi est deus?” dispatched with a similar sartorial non-sequitur.)

The question-and-answer format, originally derived from Platonic dialogue and adapted for the purposes of Christian apologetics in the writings of the Greek church fathers,⁴⁵ serves a function both in literary encyclopedias and in encyclopedic literature similar to its function in the early church. In both instances, we find recourse to the dialogue-form in order to present a world-view that is strange, unfamiliar, and potentially objectionable. The target audience’s potential resistance to the radical *novum* of a work is anticipated, addressed, and assuaged through dialogue’s

⁴² Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Frage und Antwort -- Das Normative in christlicher Überlieferung und Theologie,” *Text und Applikation: Theologie, Jurisprudenz und Literaturwissenschaft im hermeneutischen Gespräch (Poetik und Hermeneutik IX)*, ed. Manfred Fuhrmann, Hans Robert Jauß, Wolfhart Pannenberg (Munich: Fink, 1981), 413.

⁴³ Pannenberg, *ibid*.

⁴⁴ D.T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Rider, 1949), 72.

⁴⁵ Martin Grabmann, *Die Geschichte der scholastischen Methode nach den gedruckten und ungedruckten Quellen dargestellt* (Basel: B. Schwabe, 1961), Bd. II, 218.

dramatization of a gradual process of understanding. The literarization of this trajectory, from befuddlement and confusion to tentative understanding, gradual illumination, and final comprehension, is a strategy for overcoming anticipated resistance to the strange and unfamiliar. As such dialogue opens up a unique window on authorial self-understanding. Literarization provides an imaginative paradigm for an exemplary process of understanding which attempts to guard against worst-case scenarios of misinterpretation (and their potential consequences). The question-and-answer form of dialogue may also have the advantage ascribed to it by St. Anselm: that it is better suited and more pleasing to the “multis et maxime tardioribus ingeniis”—to the many, and, particularly, to the *slower* in spirit.⁴⁶ Dialogue allows authors to address their own apprehension about a work’s reception by a given audience. By dramatizing an idealized process of understanding, the author produces a literary model for the reception of his work and attempts to guide the hermeneutic process *post partum* in a manner not afforded by other literary forms. More than any other genre, dialogue betrays an anxiety about a work’s reception.

In the present context, such anxiety is understandable. The narrative worlds of Dante’s *Commedia* and Snorri’s *Edda* hardly always reflect the *ordines mundi* of received or, in the latter case, even Christian tradition. The *ordines* they depict are derived from a reshaping and selective culling of distinct and sometimes disparate sources and traditions; their world-view does not already bear the *imprimatur* of authority. The *ordo* of Snorri’s *Edda* is no more that of the eddic poems than Wolfram’s *Parzival* is a dutiful translation of Chrétien, or the *Commedia* a rhyming version of St. Thomas Aquinas. The dialogic character of these works can best be understood as a means especially suited for the *descriptio* of a world that is still

⁴⁶ Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur deus homo, S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi Opera omnia*, vol. 2, Book I, Ch. I, 48 and Ch. II, 12-13. Quoted in Eileen Sweeny, “Anselm und der Dialog,” *Gespräche Lesen: Philosophische Dialoge im Mittelalter*, ed. Klaus Jacobi (Tübingen: G. Narr, 1999), 107n.

unsanctioned. In the case of the *Edda*, there is a clear sense in which the dialogue between King Gylfi and his pagan interlocutors reproduces the position of its Christian primary recipients, confronted with the increasingly unfamiliar pagan world-view of their ancestors. In the following, I attempt to show that the encounter with the non-Christian world is part of the “encyclopedic aesthetics” of the *Commedia* and Snorri’s *Edda*. On a thematic level, it reproduces for a vernacular audience the medieval encyclopedia’s appropriation of Arab and Greco-Arab learning, as well as its more obvious debts to classical tradition. By focusing on the conception of these “encounters” as dialogue, I try to suggest a more satisfying approach to the intersection of Encyclopedic Literature with the broader phenomenon of medieval encyclopedism than is offered by a narrow focus on *insertions encyclopédiques*.

Dialogue with the Heathens?

A Christian book that aims to contain the world within its covers—a microcosmic book-world of the world book—has to come to terms with the *factum brutum* of the presence of non-Christian characters on its pages. That is, a systematic representation of the elements of reality must address the theological problems posed Christendom’s vast intellectual debt to classical and Arab culture. Intercultural dialogue between Christian and heathen, for Dante, Wolfram, and Snorri, appropriates the encyclopedist’s role as a mediator between heathen science and Christian morality. Dante the pilgrim encounters a number of figures of pagan antiquity, including the noble pagans exiled to Limbo—whose peer he famously declares himself—and others among the *sommersi* and *salvati*.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Dante the poet elects Virgil, the noble

⁴⁷ In *Inferno* IV: Homer, Avicenna, Averroes, Horace, Ovid, Lucan, Electra, Aeneas, Caesar, Saladin, Aristotle, Plato, Cicero, Orpheus. Cleopatra, Achilles, Helen of Troy, Paris, Brutus and Cassius. *Inferno* V: Semiramis, Dido, Helen, Achilles. Paris. *Paradiso* XX:121-122: Trajan and Ripheus.

pagan and “wise magician” of medieval lore,⁴⁸ to guide his pilgrim through the first two realms of the Christian afterlife. In Snorri’s *Edda*, the mythic Swedish king, Gylfi, undertakes a lone journey to the Æsir in order to uncover the secret of their seeming superiority and engages in a contest of wisdom with these figures of the North’s pagan past.⁴⁹ Parzival’s father, Gahmuret, wins fame among the heathens and sires the hero’s half-black, half-white half-brother, Feirefiz, with his heathen bride, Belacâne, the black queen of Zazamanc. In fact, the narrative of *Parzival* was, according to Wolfram, first discovered written “in heidenischer schrift” (453.13) in Toledo, where the Middle Age’s greatest “dialogue of heathen and Christian”—the translation of Greek and Arabic learning into Latin—took place.

In what follows, I investigate the interplay of imported Christian and native pagan pedagogical traditions in the *Edda*. Their merger can be read both as an allegory of thirteenth-century Norwegian-Icelandic relations, in which Snorri played a prominent role as a political leader, and as Snorri’s self-commentary on his primary task as a mythographer: the integration of a native/pagan (Icelandic) with an imported/Christian (Norwegian) worldview.

⁴⁸ See Domenico Comparetti, *Vergil in the Middle Ages*, trans. E.F.M. Benecke (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). Latin *Virga* can mean “magic wand,” as it does in book 7, line 190 of the *Aeneid*.

⁴⁹ Cf. Lars Lönnroth, “The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas,” *Scandinavian Studies*, 41 (1969), 1-29.



Illustration 1: Gylfi (Gangleri) questioning his three informants in *Gylfaginning* (Icelandic, ca. 1300). From the Uppsala manuscript of the *Prose Edda*, Uppsala University Library, DG II, f. 26v.

Chapter 1: On the Shoulders of Frost Giants: Encyclopedic Poetics in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*

Snorri Sturluson's interest in the poetry of his pagan ancestors has been subject to a number of divergent interpretations, but these can typically be classified according to whether they focus on his *Edda* as a mythographic project⁵⁰ or as a poetics.⁵¹ Few ever went as far as Hans Kuhn, who tried to explain the perceived inconsistency of a Christian author's interest in a forbidden pagan past by claiming that Snorri still believed the old myths.⁵² As has been shown more recently, it is more productive—although not wholly uncontroversial—to see Snorri's project as informed by continental Christian literary traditions. Certainly few nowadays view it as the product of “recidive” paganism, or as an indigenous flowering of Nordic genius. Also, we should not forget that Snorri's stated purpose in the *Edda* is to produce a handbook for aspiring poets on the expiring art form of skaldic verse. Snorri may deserve some blame for this, since he only states his intentions after the first narrative segment of the second book, *Skáldskaparmál* (“ars poetica”), which culminates in the story of Odin's acquisition of the Mead of Poetry. The tales of *Gylfaginning* are conceived, at least in part, as a propaedeutic to this poetological endeavor—familiarizing the novice with

⁵⁰ See Richard Meyer, “Snorri als Mythograph,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 28 (1912), 116; Sigurður Nordal, *Snorri Sturluson* (Reykjavík: Þór. B. Þorláksson, 1920), 107; Walter Baetke, *Die Götterlehre der Snorra-Edda* (Berichte über die Verhandlungen der sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, Philol.-hist. Kl. 97, Bd., Heft 3, Berlin, 1952), 3; Anne Holtsmark, *Studier i Snorres mytologi* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1964), 83; Anthony Faulkes, “Introduction” in *Snorri Sturluson: Edda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), xvii.

⁵¹ See Finnur Jónsson, *Den oldnorske og oldislanske litteraturs historie*, v.1 (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gad, 1901), 684-685, 697; Anne Holtsmark, “Grammatisk literatur om modersmålet” in *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder* (Roskilde: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1962); Gerd Wolfgang Weber, “Edda, jüngere,” *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1985), 394; Margaret Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál: Snorri Sturluson's Ars Poetica and Medieval Theories of Language* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1987).

⁵² See Hans Kuhn, “Das nordgermanische Heidentum in den ersten christlichen Jahrhunderten,” *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 79 (1942/43), 132-166. Today, this view remains little more than a curiosity of *Edda* scholarship. It was severely criticized soon after its publication, especially by Baetke (1952).

the mythological lore needed to understand (or at least try to understand) the hyper-allusive kennings, or periphrastic metaphors, on which much Old Norse poetry is based. It is an irony of reception history that interest in the mythological propaedeutic has largely overshadowed the poetry it was intended to illuminate.

Earlier scholarship held that the prologue to the *Edda* offers an “apology” for the mythology of Snorri’s pagan ancestors, explaining it as the product of diabolical trickery.⁵³ More recently others, beginning with Peter and Ursula Dronke, have contended that Snorri stresses the continuity of pagan and Christian tradition in the spirit of the school of Chartres:

We would suggest that some of the emphases Snorri gives in his prologue are akin to those given by some of the greatest twelfth-century Christian Platonists — by William of Conches, Thierry of Chartres, Hugh of St. Victor, Bernard Silvestris, and Alan of Lille. There is nothing in Snorri’s prologue to show that he had works by these men at his elbow (though that he read some of there writings cannot be ruled out). Much, however, suggests to us that Snorri had become familiar with some of their most remarkable ideas — perhaps through conversation with scholars who had studied in France, or through teachers who had undergone this platonizing influence. Above all, we believe a certain influence, direct or indirect, was possible because Snorri would have found in twelfth-century Latin humanist speculation much that was congenial to him.⁵⁴

Snorri’s upbringing at the parish school at Oddi, founded roughly one hundred years before his birth by the cosmopolitan Sæmundur fróði (“the wise”) Sigfússon (1056-1133), favors the Dronkes’ thesis. According to family annals, Sæmundur had studied theology in *Frakkaland* (France), although his exact whereabouts, often presumed to be in Paris, have never been established. While we don’t know the contents of Oddi’s library, or whether the school, which flourished until the end of the thirteenth century, maintained its ties with the continent, it is not improbable that the most powerful

⁵³ See Baetke (1952), 37ff. Also see Anne Holtmark (1964), 15, 23ff.

⁵⁴ Peter and Ursula Dronke, “Prologue of the Prose *Edda*: Explorations of a Latin Background” in: *Intellectuals and Poets in the Middle Ages* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1992), 95; originally published in *Sjötíu ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni 20. júlí 1977*, 2 vols, ed. Einar G. Pétursson and Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1977), vol. 1.

institution of learning in Iceland would have done precisely this. Highly suggestive of such a connection with the European “mainstream,” is Guðrún Nordal’s recent argument for the influence of Plato’s *Timaeus* (the seminal text for 12th-century Neo-Platonism) on Snorri’s cosmology in the Edda.⁵⁵

Ursula Dronke and Margaret Clunies Ross, among others, have argued that Snorri’s interest in pagan poetry should be viewed against the broader background of the interest in *grammatica* and new openness to the pagan past characteristic of the school of Chartres, not in a scheme that pits indigenous pagan traditions against newer, imported Christian ones.⁵⁶ Snorri’s interest in the beliefs of his pagan forebears is a product of his cosmopolitanism, not its opposite. With Snorri we can observe a shift away from the utilitarian attitude toward heathen intellectual property espoused by St. Augustine in *De doctrina christiana*, where the spiritual achievements of heathendom are likened to the gold and silver vessels borne away by the Israelites fleeing Egypt. Snorri’s attitude does not reflect what some have called Augustine’s “quarrying” approach to non-Christian cultures; he is in line with developments in Chartrian thought that lead to “wholehearted acceptance of moments in pagan thought, because of a deep conviction that they were pointing, by the same images to the same

⁵⁵ Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 273-283. Anthony Faulkes argues against the possibility of unmediated contact between Snorri and continental tradition by pointing to the lack of evidence that Snorri knew Latin or knew it sufficiently to access such intellectual currents. See Anthony Faulkes, “The Sources of *Skáldskaparmál*: Snorri’s Intellectual Background” in *Snorri Sturluson: Kolloquium anlässlich der 750. Wiederkehr seines Todestages*, Script-Oralia 51, ed. Alois Wolf (Tübingen: G. Narr, 1993), 59–76. The issue is not ultimately resolvable. The encyclopedic tradition in Icelandic is well documented in the period before and during Snorri’s life. See Margaret Clunies Ross and Rudolf Simek, “Encyclopedic Literature,” *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano (New York: Garland, 1993), 164-166. Thus the question of Snorri’s Latin literacy, while of interest, remains secondary. Still, one should acknowledge contemporary political debates raising the stakes in what might seem like a strictly “academic” dispute. Recent and on-going attempts to articulate Scandinavian national identities, both as part of and distinct from “Europe,” are likely to influence the way in which the *tabula rasa* of Snorri’s intellectual biography is filled in. There are parallels to this very contemporary debate in the society of Snorri’s thirteenth-century Iceland at the end of the Free-State and beginning of Norwegian rule.

⁵⁶ Clunies Ross, 1987.

realities as Jewish and Christian traditions. Here the enormous reverence for antiquity, and the exhilarating sense that it is not distant but contemporary, are inseparable.”⁵⁷

Building on the Dronkes’ argument for the influence of the School of Chartres on Snorri, Margaret Clunies Ross proposes that “The purpose of the Prologue of the *Edda* was to suggest that the religious beliefs of the pre-Christian Scandinavians, and the language in which they expressed these ideas, anticipated Christian thought on fundamental concepts of the nature of the deity and the cosmos.”⁵⁸ As I will show in what follows, Snorri applies this idea of “anticipation” not only to Christian teachings themselves, but also to the pedagogical tradition responsible for their transmission.

Before proceeding, however, I should stress the two-fold agenda behind Snorri’s decision to make the *Æsir*’s interrogator a figure of pre-Christian Scandinavia, rather than composing a dialogue of heathen and Christian.⁵⁹ Since Gylfi is a heathen, he is not compelled to allegorize the figures of pagan mythology and integrate them into a comprehensive Christian world-view. By treating the *Æsir* as euhemerized historical personages of ultimately foreign origin, Snorri is able to avoid apologetics and legitimate the pagan past as a worthy object of historical interest. In contrast to the wider medieval reception of pagan antiquity, he does not interpret the *Æsir* as timeless exempla of modes of moral conduct, or representatives of philosophical or psychological truths.⁶⁰ Snorri does not present us with an *Edda Moralisé*, but with a comparatively “objective” and generally sympathetic account of pagan belief unique to the age in which it was produced.⁶¹ Clunies Ross comments:

⁵⁷ Peter Dronke, “New Approaches to the Schools of Chartres,” *Anuario de estudios medievales*, 6 (1969), 136. Reprinted in Dronke (1992), 36.

⁵⁸ Clunies Ross (1987), 13.

⁵⁹ A precedent for such cross-cultural dialogue had been established by Peter Abelard a century earlier.

⁶⁰ Snorri does present us with a compendium of different kinds of (im)moral behavior, but these are played out by flesh-and-blood characters, not in allegorical figures. The other works I consider here, most obviously Dante, but no less Wolfram, share Snorri’s interest in presenting such a compendium.

⁶¹ Cf. Clunies Ross (1987, 171) who paraphrases Holtsmark’s observation (“Ovid,” *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, 13 [1968], cols. 63-6, 65) that “Snorri’s Christian interpretation of Norse myths reminds one of various medieval Christian interpretations of Ovid.”

“In medieval Icelandic literature, unlike many other literatures of the European Middle Ages, the indigenous past and indigenous literary genres are not marginalized; on the contrary, they are made part of a Christian world history.”⁶² I would further nuance this distinction by adding that Snorri and other Icelandic traditions, such as the sagas, marginalize pagan elements in *time* (whereas Wolfram, Dante, and other continental traditions tend to marginalize them in *space*, be it on the outskirts of the known world or in hell). To put it another way, the pagan past of the Icelanders is integrated with the topography of their cultural present and recent history. Such historical continuity with pre-Christian tradition is frequently reinforced by reference to common locality, especially in the *Sagas of Icelanders*, where places and objects of importance in pagan times, such as burial mounds, can frequently “still be seen today.”⁶³

Encyclopedism and Genre in *Gylfaginning* (“The Beguiling of Gylfi”)

In her groundbreaking study of the second book of the *Edda*, *Skáldskaparmál* or “the art of poetry,” Margaret Clunies Ross devotes a chapter to “The formative influence of the medieval encyclopedia on Snorri’s *Edda*,” cataloguing potential correspondences between Snorri’s account of certain *res naturae* in *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál* and those in Bede’s *De natura rerum*, Isidore’s *Etymologiae*, and the *Imago mundi* of Honorius Augustodunensis.⁶⁴ While an invaluable contribution in its own right, it is somewhat narrowly circumscribed by her notion of the encyclopedia as a “literary form that treated the subjects that we would now call the natural sciences and astronomy.”⁶⁵ It is doubtless correct that “the repertoire of the encyclopedia gives us

⁶² Clunies Ross, “Medieval Iceland and the European Middle Ages,” *International Scandinavian Studies in Honor of Gerd Wolfgang Weber*, ed. Michael Dallapiazza (Triest: Edizione Parnaso, 2000), 111-120.

⁶³ The pagan holy “mountain,” Helgafell, in *Eyrbyggjasaga*, which later becomes the site of a Christian monastery, furnishes another example.

⁶⁴ Clunies Ross (1987), 151-173.

⁶⁵ Clunies Ross (1987), 151.

some insight into the reasons for Snorri's choice of certain subjects in the *Edda*, the manner of his treatment of them and, in some cases, the ordering of the material,"⁶⁶ but this is ultimately too narrow a lens with which to bring the rays of the encyclopedism of Snorra *Edda* into focus. To assume that the encyclopedic tradition concerned itself only topics of natural philosophy such as meteorology and astronomy ("the encyclopedic material in the *Edda*"⁶⁷) overlooks, for example, the tendency to synthesize cosmography and historiography that begins with Bede (ca. 672-735) in *De temporibus* and *De ratione temporum*. Snorri's encyclopedism cannot be understood solely in terms of his appropriation of natural-scientific topics from Canonical Encyclopedias (i.e., *insertions encyclopédiques*); it is also manifest in his interest in universal-history, as well as geographical and ethnological lore.⁶⁸ In fact, by placing these *natura rerum* discourses within the framework of an historical narrative poetics, Snorri's *Edda* creates a conceptual niche for itself between the organizational principles of *ordo rerum* and *ordo artium*.

The idea of the encyclopedia as a practical handbook (*compendium*) is common to the Middle Ages. A number of medieval encyclopedias are explicitly intended as references for preachers: as aids in the preparation of sermons, as source-books for analogies to the *visibilia* of a morally significant natural order, and as guides for dealing with questions with which over-inquisitive parishioners might tax the oftentimes limited learning of the rural clergy. Snorri's *Edda* is arguably part of this "handbook" tradition, but it is a handbook for thirteenth-century Christian Skaldic poets rather than for preachers. Its ambition to map out a poetics in the Icelandic vernacular makes it a kind of Nordic *De vulgari eloquentia*.⁶⁹ The allusion to Dante is

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁶⁸ Clunies Ross considers "chronological and geographical lore" to constitute a separate category (*ibid.*, 157).

⁶⁹ *Pace* Walter Haug's claim: "So far as we know, no vernacular writer of the Middle Ages wrote a treatise on poetics. The medieval poetics are all written in Latin and accordingly belong to that cultural

not casual, for the two are the Middle Age's preeminent theoreticians of the vernacular; both also attempt to establish the prestige of poetry in their mother-tongue vis-à-vis the literary traditions of classical antiquity. As Peter Foote writes, "Snorri assumed without question that what was preserved in Norse was classic in its own right. In his prologue he traces the venerable Trojan origins of the Æsir and hence establishes the dignity—on a par with that of Rome and Britain—of the dynasties they founded in the North and the poetry they discovered."⁷⁰

The author of medieval encyclopedias is first and foremost a *compiler* whose authority is grounded in his competence in selecting the most accurate sources for a project that involves the transmission of "high-level knowledge"⁷¹ (e.g., Aristotle, the Arabs, and other *auctoritates*) to the "middle-level" reader or listener. The author may occasionally take issue with the *auctores* he cites, preferring his judgment to theirs,⁷² but, as a rule, bases his authority on his ability to draw on the best sources, recount them accurately, and arrange them according to a scheme that mirrors an objective order. What was long read as a lack of originality is really adherence to a prohibition against innovation, since the world-order was created once-and-for-all by God ("solus creator est deus"). Snorri's *Edda* is conspicuously the result of such compilation, since it draws on diverse sources, including the *Poetic Edda*, possibly other texts no longer extant, and oral tradition to produce a largely coherent synthesis of a disparate mythological tradition.⁷³ In the course of his "Arbeit am Mythos," Snorri draws on a

tradition, derived as they are from classical theories of poetry." *Vernacular Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: The German Tradition, 800-1300 in Its European Context* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 7.

⁷⁰ Peter Foote, "Latin Rhetoric and Icelandic Poetry," *Saga och Sed* (1982), 115.

⁷¹ Ribémont, "On the Definition of an Encyclopedic Genre in the Middle Ages," *Pre-Modern Encyclopedic Texts*, ed. Peter Binkley (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 47-61; 50.

⁷² William of Conches, for example, frequently makes a point of furnishing his audience with the views he rejects as false. In the *Dragmaticon*, the Duke does not simply cue the "philosophus sine nomine," but rather states his own opinions, cites authorities, and raises objections against which better authorities are brought to bear. Cf. Snorri's judgment on the conflicting accounts of Thor's encounter with the Midgard Serpent.

⁷³ As an antiquarian, Snorri wants to preserve as much of his source material as possible and sometimes

multiplicity of literary genres in order to frame his mythological *matière*. Some of these are presumably native to pre-conversion Iceland, like the wisdom-quest (cf. *Baldrs draumar*), prophetic monologue (cf. *Völuspá*), and the wisdom-contest (cf. *Vafþrúðnismál*). But Snorri also incorporates elements of the master-student dialogue that plays such a large role in the Christian encyclopedic tradition. Thus in the *Edda*, Snorri acts as a *compiler* not only of mythological lore, poetic kennings, and verse forms, but also of literary *genres*. In what follows, I argue that the intersection “foreign” and “native” encyclopedic didactic traditions addressed in *Gylfaginning* provides a key not only to its perplexing frame story, but, moreover, to Snorri’s construction of authorship in the *Edda*.

To begin with the frame story: Snorri tells how King Gylfi ruled over those lands that are now called Sweden. As payment (*laun*) for her “conversation,”⁷⁴ he offers a wandering woman, as much land as four oxen can plow in one day and one night. Gefjun, however, is of the race of the Æsir and beguiles (*ginna*) the king, depriving him of a disagreeably large portion of his kingdom. She spans four oxen (sons spawned with a giant in *Jotunheim*) to a plow and they promptly heave up a colossal landmass and drag it out to sea, providing an aetiological account for *Seeland* in Denmark. (The hole left behind fills with water to form Lake Mälär in Sweden.) Gylfi’s loss of sovereign territory spurs him on a quest to determine the cause of the Æsir power—having learned its effect only all too well. He sets out to visit the Æsir in Asgard in order to determine whether this power stems from their own nature or from

relegates conflicting accounts to *Heimskringla*.

⁷⁴ The Icelandic word *skemmtun* in the phrase “at launum skemmtunar sinnar,” here translated as “conversation,” leaves room for conjecture. The German edition of Arnulf Krause (*Die Edda des Snorri Sturluson*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1997) renders it as “Unterhaltung” which better captures the connotation of “entertainment” and “amusement.” The Icelandic also has the sense of German “Kurzweil.” It remains ambiguous whether Gylfi is rewarding Gefjun for her conversation or simply for her company—with possible sexual connotations (noted by Holtsmark). Either way, the episode shows that Gylfi is either lacking in wisdom, or in the self-restraint and discipline expected of a king. It would be interesting to view this in the context of the discourse on kingship in the Norwegian *Konungskuggsjá* (*Speculum regale*).

the divinities (the “divine Æsir” or Norse gods) they worship. Through their unfolding dialogue, Snorri provides a unique mythographic synthesis of Norse paganism.

Before taking up Gylfi’s wisdom-quest, however, let us pause to consider the figure of Gefjun.⁷⁵ We might well ask to what manner of woman a king offers payment for her conversation? The wanderer who roams the world questioning and testing others in pursuit of wisdom, as Óðinn does in *Vafþrúðnismál*, is a topos of Old-Norse wisdom-poetry.⁷⁶ The poems of the *Poetic Edda* distinguish between episodes where Óðinn tests the knowledge of his adversary, and those where he acquires new knowledge, as he does in *Völuspá*. (The Seeress or *Völva* of *Völuspá* is the more ancient of the two and has first-hand knowledge of events before his birth).⁷⁷ On the other hand, Gefjun’s receipt of payment (*laun*) for her wisdom-service is suggestive of a Germanic tradition that survives in the figure of the wandering poet of Middle High German *Spruchdichtung*, who demands material payment in exchange for the wisdom he imparts to his noble audience (as opposed to the immaterial *lôn* sought by his almost-never-kissing cousin, the *Minnesänger*). Such wisdom is the prerogative of an aristocratic ruling class, even if its conduit, the poet, is a little “less than kind.” As is clear from Óðinn’s wisdom-monologue in *Hávamál*, this gnomic wisdom constitutes the kind of knowledge necessary for rulership. The Gefjun episode shows that Gylfi’s quest for knowledge does not begin with his journey to the Æsir, but is part of an

⁷⁵ The story of Gylfi and Gefjun may have been suggested to Snorri by the first verse quoted in the *Edda* (7, 12-19), which is thought to be from a poem known as *Ragnarsdrápa* by the first known Skald, Bragi hinn gamli (“Bragi the old”) in which several such tales of legendary character are recounted. See Snorri Sturluson, *Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. and trans. Anthony Faulkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), xxv-xxvi, note to p.7, l.12-19.

⁷⁶ See *Vafþrúðnismál*, stanza 43: “Frá jötna rúnum / ok allra goða / ek kann segja satt, / því at hvern hef ek / heim of komit: / níu kom ek heima / fyr Níflhel neðan; / hinig deyja ór helju halir.” (Of the secrets of the giants and of all the gods, I can speak the truth, for I have been to every world; nine worlds have I traveled down to Níflhel below, into which men die out of hell.) See also stanzas 3, 44, 46, 48, 50, 52, 54: “Fjölð ek fór / fjölð ek freistaðak.” (Much have I travelled / much have I tested). Also see Odin’s riddle-contest in *Heiðreks saga*.

⁷⁷ Judy Quinn, “Dialogue with a *Völva*,” in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (New York & London: Routledge, 2002), 245-274.

ongoing, if not always successful, pursuit of wisdom intimately connected with the question of sovereignty.

Grímnismál in the *Poetic Edda* provides another model of Old Norse wisdom poetry. Here Óðinn visits the hall of Geirrøðr in disguise to test Frigg's assertion that his charge, the king, is stringy with guests. Frigg tricks Geirrøðr into torturing Óðinn between two fires, and Óðinn gradually reveals his identity in a long wisdom-monologue; after this, Geirrøðr dies suddenly and is succeeded by his son, Agnarr, who demonstrates the wisdom his father lacked by giving Óðinn a drink. Jere Fleck has argued that Óðinn's ordeal and Agnarr's ascent to kingship is set in the context of a ritual in which the would-be ruler is initiated with the kind of mythological knowledge required for legitimate kingship.⁷⁸ The question of kingship, while never addressed explicitly in *Gylfaginning*, is arguably of central importance since all four interlocutors are themselves kings. Also Gylfi, like Geirrøðr, suffers from a lack of wisdom that, if not exactly fatal, does pose an acute threat to his sovereignty. While for Snorri Gylfi's quest provides a framework in which to order his mythological material, Gylfi's own purpose is to determine the source of the Æsir's power and better guard his kingdom against such deceit in the future. Thus just as the wisdom-poetry of the *Poetic Edda* thematizes the "knowledge criterion" essential for political sovereignty, *Gylfaginning*, as a poetological-political allegory, makes this same mythological inheritance the "knowledge criterion" for the thirteenth-century Christian poet who wishes to maintain sovereignty over his linguistic inheritance.

As is well known, Gylfi's entrance into the hall of the three Æsir named Hár, Jafnhár, and Thriði (or "High," "Just-as-High," and "Third") employs a another well-known topos from this inheritance: the loser is faced with the unappealing prospect of

⁷⁸ Jere Fleck, "Konr-Óttarr-Geirroðr: A Knowledge Criterion for Succession to the Germanic Sacred Kingship," *Scandinavian Studies*, 42 (1970), 39-49. Also see "The 'Knowledge Criterion' in the *Grímnismál*: The Case against 'Shamanism,'" *Arkiv for nordisk filolgi*, 86 (1971), 49-65.

emerging from the wisdom contest a full head shorter. When Gylfi/Gangleri enters the hall,

Hann segir at fyrst vil hann spyrja ef nokkvorr er fróðr maðr inni. Hár segir at hann komi eigi heill út nema hann sé fróðari. (8. 21-23)⁷⁹

(He said that he first wanted to ask if there was any wise man present. High replied that he would not come out of there alive, unless he were himself the wiser.)⁸⁰

This is a recapitulation of the beginning of the wisdom-contest between the giant Vafþrúðnir and the wayfaring Oðinn (disguised as “Gagnráðr”) in *Vafþrúðnismál*:

6. [Oðinn:]⁸¹

Odin said:⁸²

‘Heil þú nú, Vafðrúðnir! nú em ec í höll kominn,

“Hail, Vafðrúðnir! I’ve come to your hall

á þic siálfan siá;

to see you myself

hitt vil ec fyrst vita, ef þú fróðr sér

I’ve come to find out if they call you wise

eða alsviðr, iotunn.’

rightly or wrongly, giant.”

7. [Vafðrúðnir:]

Vafthrudnir said:

‘Hvat er þat manna, er í minom sal

What sort of man is this? He comes to my hall

verpomc orði á?

and flings bold words at my face?

Út þú né komir órom höllum frá,
nema þú inn snotrari sér.’

You’ll never leave here still alive unless you’re wiser than I.”

8. [Oðinn:]

Odin said:

‘Gagnrádr ec heiti; nú emc af göngo kominn

I am called Gagnrad. I’ve come to your hall

⁷⁹ All original citations from *Prologue and Gylfaginning* are from the normalized edition of Anthony Faulkes (1982), see note 75, above. Numbers refer to page and line.

⁸⁰ My translation. Unless noted, English translations are from Anthony Faulkes, *Edda* (London: Everyman, 1987).

⁸¹ All citations from the Poetic Edda are from the edition of Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn, *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, 5th ed. (Heidelberg: Winter, 1983). Numbers refer to stanza.

⁸² I have adapted the English translation of Patricia Terry, *Poems of the Elder Edda*, revised ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

þyrstr til þinna sala;
laðar þurfi hefi ec lengi farit
oc þinna andfanga, iotunn.’

thirsty from my travels;
a weary wanderer asks for
your welcome
will you not greet a guest,
giant?”

Snorri casts Gylfi in the Oðinn-role. He is not only wise (*vitr*) and skilled in magic (*fjölkuinnigr*) but, also like Oðinn, takes on the guise of a wandering old man to conceal his true identity from his opponents as he does in wisdom-contest in *Vafþrúðnismál* and in his wisdom monologue in *Grímnismál*. Not only Gylfi’s disguise but also the manner of his questioning frequently places the discourse of *Gylfaginning* within the framework of the wisdom-contest: “who is the most noble of the gods,” “where is this god,” “what was in the beginning—all assume a form familiar from the wisdom-contest between Oðinn and Vafþrúðnir in *Vafþrúðnismál* (i.e., “what is X called” and “where does X come from”). In fact, of the forty-seven direct questions Gylfi poses (not including asides that prompt further explanations from the Æsir), nineteen are either close paraphrases or thematically identical to Oðinn’s questions to Vafþrúðnir.

Snorri, however, promptly complicates the expectations he establishes, for the Æsir are wiser (*vísari*) than Gylfi and possess prophetic foresight (*spádóm*), and as such more akin to the more-knowing seeress in *Völuspá* than they are to Oðinn’s benighted foes in *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*. As Anne Holtmark first pointed out in her delineation of the genre-conventions of the wisdom-contest, the questioner must also be able to verify the truth of the answers he receives.⁸³ Gylfi is obviously in no such position, since his quest is motivated by his very lack of knowledge.

Within the matrix of this native tradition scholars have noted in Gylfi’s questions an echo of the master-student dialogue of the medieval encyclopedia, quite

⁸³ Anne Holtmark, “Den uløselige gåten,” *Maal og Minne* (1965), 101-5.

possibly known to Snorri through the Old-Norse *Elucidarius*.⁸⁴ In fact, Gylfi’s interrogation of the Æsir initially follows the widespread encyclopedic “Chain of Being” format, beginning with the highest deity. “Where does God live?” is the first question posed by the *discipulus* in the widely-transmitted *Elucidarium* of Honorius Augustodunensis. Written at the beginning of the twelfth century as a *dialogus de summa totius christianae theologiae*, it was used as a schoolbook, and soon translated into the major European vernaculars (the first translation into Old Norse being ca. 1200 or earlier).⁸⁵ The *magister* proceeds to detail God’s creation of the world, prompted by frequent exhortations to “explain this more clearly.” Gylfi’s two first questions: “who is the most noble and oldest of the gods?” and “where is this god and what is within his power and what great works has he performed?” (8. 27, 33-34), mirror even more closely the words of the *discipulus* in the Old Norse *Elucidarius* (AM 674a 4to): “could you at the beginning of this discussion tell me who God is?” and “where does God live?”⁸⁶

The patent absurdity of the hierarchical arrangement of Gylfi’s interlocutors, named “High,” “Just-as-High,” and “Third,” has been lost on few observers: High occupies the lowest seat on one of three vertically arranged thrones, with Just-as-High above him, and Third on top. As is well known, these three names, as well as “Gylfi,” are all *Oðinnsheiti* or “names of Oðinn” found in Oðinn’s wisdom-monologue in *Grímnismál*, which further invokes the generic register of native pedagogical tradition. One curiosity that has not been noted is that this vertical arrangement of the human Æsir constitutes a hyper-literal realization of Isidore of Seville’s definition of the

⁸⁴ Jan de Vries refers to the *Elucidarius* as a possible source for the dialogue form of the *Edda*. See his *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte*, vol. 2 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967), 221. Edith Marold also points out the two strands of wisdom contest and master-student dialogue but does not introduce the third element: the wisdom quest.

⁸⁵ *Elucidarius in Old Norse Translation*, ed. Evelyn Firchow and Kaaren Grimstad (Reykjavík: Stofun Árna Magnússonar, 1989), xxvi-xxvii.

⁸⁶ *The Old Norse Elucidarius*, ed. and trans. Evelyn Firchow (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 1992), 1.2, 1.10.

magister in the *Etymologiae* as “maior in statione,” or “greater in station.”⁸⁷ While Snorri’s familiarity with Isidore cannot be established, his works are thought to be the ultimate source of certain encyclopedic writings in Icelandic that Snorri could have known.

The juxtaposition of the wisdom-contest and master-student dialogue in *Gylfaginning* has often been noted, but never explained.⁸⁸ Instead, scholars have argued that it is “really” one genre or the other, or just thrown up their hands altogether. Contrary to Wolf, who argues for the predominance of the wisdom-contest, and Marold, who calls the latter a “blindes Motiv,” I would argue these disparate elements are Snorri’s way of addressing the most ambitious aspect of the *Edda*: the integration of a pagan past with the Christian present. In what follows I maintain that the same proleptic understanding of the truths of Christian revelation ascribed to Snorri’s pagan ancestors in the *Prologue* is also evident in Gylfi’s proleptic use of Christian pedagogical *practice* in *Gylfaginning*.

Scholars have generally assumed that the title *Gylfaginning* or the “Beguiling of Gylfi” “refers to the sudden lifting of illusion at the end of the frame narrative.”⁸⁹ This title exists only in one of the four complete manuscripts (U), not in the rubric but at the end of the prologue, and is not generally considered authorial. As Faulkes notes in his edition, this “beguiling” may refer to the fact that the “historical” Æsir (parsed by Snorri as “men of Asia”) trick the pre-pagan Scandinavians into taking them for gods.⁹⁰ Gylfi, who returns to his lands and tells “of those matters which he had seen and heard” (*segir þau tíðendi er hann hefir sét ok heyr⁹¹*), is the conduit through

⁸⁷ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, ed. W.M. Lindsay (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1911, 170: “Magister, maior in statione: nam †steron† Graece statio dicitur.”

⁸⁸ Cf. Edith Marold, “Der Dialog in Snorris Gylfaginning,” *Snorri Sturluson: Beiträge zu Werk und Rezeption*, ed. Hans Fix (Berlin-New York: de Gruyter, 1998). Also see Alois Wolf, 1977.

⁸⁹ Faulkes (1987), xiii.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, xviii.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 54. 34-35.

which these tidings spread: “and after him each man told the others these tales” (*Ok eptir honum sagði hverr maðr öðrum þessar sögur*⁹²). The text does not state whether Gylfi actually believes what he has seen, or merely relates what he has “seen and heard.” Thus it is uncertain whether “beguiling” can refer to Gylfi being fooled into believing the Æsir’s account or “conversion” to their beliefs. The use of the old Germanic formula “seen and heard” (*sét ok heyrtr*) suggests that he considers what he has learned to be true since for an almost universally illiterate society “seen and heard” often functioned as a truth-topos.⁹³ The abrupt closure of the frame narrative offers little hint as to whether Gylfi considers himself victorious or defeated—beguiler or beguiled.

There is a parallel between Snorri’s presentation of Gylfi as the pre-historic source or witness for Scandinavian mythology and Snorri’s account of his own historiographic methodology in *Heimskringla*. In his forward, Snorri states that he has based his account of the Kings of Norway “on the information given to me by well-informed men.” He goes on to say that “although we do not know whether these accounts are true, yet we do know that old and learned men (*fróðir menn*) consider them to be so.”⁹⁴ Applying Snorri’s source-critical approach in *Heimskringla* to Gyfli as such a “learned man” (*maðr vitr*, 7, 20) and our chief-informant on Norse mythology, we might not unreasonably conclude that while Gylfi did not “know” these accounts to be true, he “consider[ed] them to be so.”⁹⁵

Before proceeding, it is necessary to revisit the question, does “Gylfi’s Beguiling” refer to the deception of Gylfi by the Æsir, or does it indicate the

⁹² *Ibid.*, 54. 35.

⁹³ A fact that is parodied in the present-day use of this formula as a name for Scandinavian tabloids such as *Séð og Heyrt* and *Se og Hár*.

⁹⁴ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, ed. and trans. Lee Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), 3.

⁹⁵ See Edith Marold, who considers Gyfli to undergo “conversion” the Æsir’s beliefs, “Der Dialog in Snorris *Gylfaginning*,” *Snorri Sturluson: Beiträge zu Werk und Rezeption*, ed. Hans Fix (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998), 131-180, esp. 164

opposite?⁹⁶ As Rory McTurk points out, *Gylfa* (masculine, genitive, singular) is grammatically ambiguous and could refer, as has traditionally been assumed, to “Gylfi’s fooling” by the Æsir, or to “Gylfi’s fooling” of them. McTurk is fairly reserved about his own proposal (“such a double interpretation of the expression *Gylfaginning* is *theoretically possible*”⁹⁷), which has met with considerable resistance.⁹⁸ Still, he is correct that both possibilities are *equally* available from a purely grammatical point of view. McTurk speculates that Gylfi’s “beguiling” (*ginning*) of the Æsir consists in the “fact” that Gylfi has actually seen through the Æsir’s illusions and believes neither their account nor that they are in fact identical with the divinities they describe. Hence, Gylfi does not—as has been assumed—spread pagan beliefs among the people of Scandinavia (beliefs which from a Christian perspective, I would note, would comprise the biggest “beguiling” of them all).

This argument, which has the merit of raising the question, fails to convince. The Æsir’s stories are ultimately propagated and believed, suggesting that Gylfi did not see through them after all. Even if Gylfi did not believe what he has “seen and heard,” others clearly believe his account and adopt the Æsir’s beliefs—a rather empty victory for Gylfi. Clearly, as has traditionally been assumed, Gylfi is “fooled” in some sense, although McTurk senses correctly that he has not been sufficiently recognized as a practitioner of deception in his own right. The implicit *tertium comparationis* for both Gylfi’s pre-pagan proto-Christianity and the Æsir’s faith is, of course, Christianity itself. It is fitting that both Gylfi, as the representative of pre-pagan Scandinavia, and the Æsir, the source of pagan belief in that part of the world, should appear fallible, easily blind-sided, error-prone, and—despite the respect with which Snorri treats them—slightly ridiculous.

⁹⁶ Posed by Rory McTurk, “Fooling Gylfi: Who Tricks Who?”, *Alvissmál*, 3 (1994), 3-18.

⁹⁷ McTurk, 10.

⁹⁸ McTurk, 3, n.1.

McTurk's reading, moreover, overburdens Snorri's succinct closure to the frame story of Gylfi's journey to the Æsir:

Then he [Gylfi] went off on his way and came back to his kingdom and told of the events he had seen and heard about. And from his account these stories passed from one person to another. (57)

Doubtless, if Gylfi had really seen through the Æsir's attempt to make him the benighted apostle of paganism to the Scandinavians, this would constitute a beguiling of the first order. In fact, "Gylfaginning" would then have to be taken to refer *primarily* to the supposed foiling of the Æsir's scheme, rather than the reciprocal network of illusion and concealment that provides the basic structure for Snorri's mythography. Beyond the fact that this reading of "beguiling" lacks any basis in the text, it cannot readily be reconciled with Snorri's broader project in the *Edda*: to offer an apology for the paganism of his ancestors and to show how they, although ensconced in error, still anticipated fundamental aspects of Christian thought.

I would suggest that "beguiling" in *Gylfaginning* is indeed double-edged.⁹⁹ The *ginning* of *Gylfaginning*, or "beguiling" of Gylfi, refers potentially to at least four separate "beguilings." First, there are the events at the beginning of the frame-narrative when Gylfi is tricked into relinquishing part of his kingdom and his power through a ruse spawned by the superior wisdom of Gefjun, who is *af Ása ætt* (of the race of the Æsir) (*Gylfaginning* 7, 4). The second and third "beguilings" are Gylfi's disguise as Gangleri, and the illusions the Æsir prepare when they spy Gangleri making his way to meet them. The fourth is the final dispelling of illusion with which the Æsir interrupt Gylfi's interrogations and hence "beguile" him out of victory in the wisdom-contest. I would claim that the Æsir are at least equally beguiled, but for a wholly different reason than the one McTurk offers: Gylfi misdirects the Æsir's "reading" of the entire situation such that they initially mistake a dialogue of

⁹⁹ Although *not* in the manner suggested by McTurk.

unequals—a master-student dialogue—for a wisdom-contest. The beguiling is product of this deliberate generic ambiguity. “Gylfi’s beguiling” should thus *also* be taken to refer to the fact that Gylfi fools the Æsir into betraying their coveted, arcane knowledge—the source of their power and authority—to a rival who, unlike the his counterpart in a true wisdom-contest, is not in a position to verify the truth of the answers he receives.

Despite the commonplace that “Gylfi’s beguiling” refers to the “deceptive appearances” the Æsir prepare for him and then dispel without warning, nothing in the text suggests the Æsir have actually seen through his disguise. We are merely told that

Gylfi

set out to Asgard and traveled in secret and assumed the form of an old man and so disguised himself. But the Æsir were wiser in that they had the gift of prophecy, and they saw his movements before he arrived, and prepared deceptive appearances for him. (7)

All we can gather conclusively from this passage is that the Æsir see an old man approaching and (since they know a wisdom contest when they see it) take the necessary precautions. The text notes only that they see *Gangleri* approaching (*ferð hans*), not that they have seen through his disguise. Moreover, the hall that they conjure up to greet him, the *locus classicus* of the wisdom-contest a la *Vafþrúðnismál*, would indicate that the Æsir have swallowed the bait. The generic parameters of the wisdom contest are further invoked when Gylfi proclaims upon arrival that “he wished first to find out if there was any learned person in there” (8). With the Æsir’s response, that “[Gylfi] would not get out unscathed unless he was more learned” (8), the rules of this particular language game seem firmly established.

And yet, as often noted, this pretense of a wisdom-contest is not always sustained with great finesse by Gylfi, who frequently expresses his amazement at what he *learns*. The Æsir, however, are forced to maintain the pretense of the wisdom-contest despite Gylfi’s own increasingly evident lack of qualifications for such a

match. Even after several dead give-aways of his own ignorance, Gylfi is still able to threaten them with the rules of a game he is unqualified to play. Thus when the Æsir are unwilling to say whether Thor has ever met an adversary he could not handle, Gylfi can reply,

It looks to me as though I must have asked you something that none of you is capable of telling me...Here I shall stand and listen whether anyone offers a solution to this matter, and if not I declare you are overcome if you are not able to tell what I ask. (38 [43-44])

Despite their eventual awareness of his ignorance, the Æsir could only really “see through” Gylfi from a vantage point *outside* of the tradition they represent, which would rupture the generic convention that is the ground of their own illusory authority. Underscoring the comedy of this double-bind, the mechanics of this situation are apparent to *neither* party: not to Gylfi, who as *proto-Christian* has a practical, but no theoretical, understanding of his own actions; not to the pagan Æsir who lack even a *proleptic* understanding of master-student dialogue. The true situation is apparent only to the medieval reader from the vantage point of the Christian present—suggestive of the idea that true knowledge is only accessible to those whose grasp of Christian teaching is not merely anticipatory.

Ultimately aware that they have nothing to learn from Gylfi, the Æsir send him off with the hortatory words “may the knowledge you have gained do you good” (57) and dispel their hall. As Edith Marold has pointed out,¹⁰⁰ the phrase “ok note nú seem þú name” contains an echo of the words that with which Oðinn concludes the Old Norse didactic poem *Hávamál*. Although the Æsir might have long since broken with any pretense of a wisdom-contest, their frame of reference still derives from pagan didactic traditions they are unable to transcend—they cannot ultimately perceive that they have been playing *magister* to Gylfi’s *discipulus*.

¹⁰⁰ Marold (1998), 137.

These events invoke, but do not quite reproduce, the contest in *Vafþrúðnismál*, where the interrogated sees through the interrogator's disguise at the last minute. Still, the events of *Gylfaginning* are something of an ironic reversal of *Vafþrúðnismál*, where the rival is discovered to be "the wisest." Gylfi exhausts the Æsir's store of knowledge, not on the basis of his own superior lore, but because he establishes a set of expectations proper to one genre and then subverts them at his opponents' expense. The situation is akin to Thor's victory in the periodic wisdom-contest in *Alvíssmál*, where it is Thor's cleverness, rather than any wisdom, that succeeds in delaying the dwarf Elvis long enough for the encroaching daylight to transform him to stone.

Gylfi is still defeated in the sense that he falls prey to the Æsir's illusion. Yet his "defeat" in a contest he cannot win also contains a victory since the Æsir are at least equally deceived. Support for this idea is suggested by reading of one of the central episodes of the *Edda* as an allegory of the frame-story of Gylfi among the Æsir.¹⁰¹ The encounter of Thor and his companions and their defeat at the hands of Útgarða-Loki has long attracted the lion's share of attention both from scholars, readers, and anthologizers.¹⁰² The activity of the latter may account to some degree for the tale's popularity among the former, a tale that, along with the account of the creation of the world, the building of Asgard, and the account Ragnarok, is one of the most memorable, or most remembered, in the *Edda*. The extra attention lavished on this tale is, however, by no means limited to its historical reception. The tale of Thor in the hall of Útgarða-Loki is the longest sustained narrative passage in the *Edda*, free of interruption from those intrusive narrators, High, Just-as-High, and Third. Since this tale and the frame-story of Gylfi/Gangleri and the Æsir both take place in illusory

¹⁰¹ McTurk (p. 3) mentions the comparison of these two stories as a possibility suggested by Bjarne Fidjestøl but does not take it up in his argument.

¹⁰² It is, for example, the second longest selection in E. V. Gordon's long-standard *An Introduction to Old Norse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927).

halls, is inviting to view the Útgarða-Loki episode as a self-commentary on (or key to) the larger whole of *Gylfaginning*, which it recapitulates in part.

Just as Gylfi is allowed to maintain the pretense of the wisdom-contest, Útgarða-Loki allows Thor and his companions to spend the night in his illusory hall even though he has stated that “no one is allowed to stay here with us who does not have some art or skill in which he is superior to most people”(41). At stake is the right to stay—in the frame narrative it is the ability to leave alive that is contested. Thor and his companions suffer defeat in contests they cannot possibly win: Thor wrestles with Old Age; Loki has an eating-contest against Fire; Thor’s servant, Thialfi, races against Thought. But contrary to Útgarða-Loki’s proviso, they are allowed to stay the night and receive hospitality. Gylfi, on the other hand, is allowed to leave unscathed even though his knowledge is in fact inferior. Útgarða-Loki knows the gods are superior but deceives them with illusions; the Æsir grant Gylfi the victory even though he cannot win by the rules of their contest. Thor and his companions suffer defeat at the hands of Utgard-Loki, but all should nevertheless believe, according to High, that Thor is the most powerful. “Hier wird offen aufgefordert, gegen die Wirklichkeit zu glauben.”¹⁰³ This exhortation to believe what is contrary either to reason or appearance is another quintessential feature of master-student dialogue (as are, for that matter, the student’s ongoing expressions of amazement and admiration). Given the illusory nature of the opponents of Thor and his companions, and that they all represent insurmountable forces like Fire and Old Age, it is not hard to see the grain of triumph in their defeat. Similarly, just as Gylfi is beguiled by the illusory hall of High, Just-as-High, and Third, they are likewise beguiled by Gylfi’s disguise as an old wanderer which leads them initially to “misread” what is in essence a master-student dialogue as a wisdom-contest, and reveal their knowledge (and source of their power) to one who does not

¹⁰³ Marold (1998), 167.

already know the answers to his own questions. Thus the Æsir are true to their word when they said that Gylfi “ would not come out of there alive, unless he were himself the wiser.” Gylfi’s proleptic “mastery” of the master-student dialogue makes him precisely that.

As the composer of a vernacular *ars poetica*, Snorri also employs Gylfi’s naive manipulation of pagan and Christian didactic traditions to thematize a polyphony of genre-forms (wisdom contest, wisdom quest, master-student dialogue), combining them to create a rhetorical compendium that is not descriptive but in “real time.” That is to say, rather than merely offering a catalogue of genres—something essential to any *ars poetica* since Aristotle—Snorri shows them interacting within the ideal space provided allegorically by the Æsir’s hall. This allegory gives Snorri a framework in which to construct an ordered totality out of his own incompatible Christian-pagan cultural heritage, a project reminiscent of the great synthesis of heathen science and Christian morality found in the Canonical Encyclopedias. That, I would suggest, is a major, but overlooked, facet of “the formative influence of the medieval encyclopedia on Snorri’s *Edda*”¹⁰⁴—one which goes well beyond the ordering of natural-scientific material.

A discussion of Snorri’s encyclopedism is bound to stir the debate as to whether his work is significantly indebted to continental models or essentially autochthonic in character (a debate that even today shows few signs of abating).¹⁰⁵ In this context it is especially worth emphasizing again that Gylfi trumps the pagan Æsir by establishing an initial horizon of expectations suggested by an indigenous “pagan” genre (wisdom-contest) while simultaneously employing a mode of inquiry derived

¹⁰⁴ To quote the chapter heading in Margaret Clunies Ross’s *Skáldskaparmál*, 151; see n. 43.

¹⁰⁵ See esp. Klaus von See, *Mythos und Theologie im skandinavischen Hochmittelalter*, Heidelberg, 1988, and “Snorris Konzeption einer nordischen Sonderkultur,” *Snorri Sturluson: Kolloquium anlässlich der 750. Wiederkehr seines Todestages*. Script-Oralia 5, ed. Alois Wolf (Tübingen: G. Narr, 1993), 141–77. Also see Anthony Faulkes, “The Sources of *Skáldskaparmál*: Snorri’s Intellectual Background” (59–76) in the same volume.

from the Christian pedagogical tradition of continental Europe. By playing the wisdom-contest and master-student dialogue off one another, indeed, by turning the competition of various genres—the first indigenous, the second a foreign import—into the key element of the plot the frame-narrative, Snorri voices his overarching concern with the integration of the native/pagan with an imported/Christian world view. Snorri dramatizes the conflict of indigenous and foreign traditions by making them the object of manipulation by one of the characters. Clearly, the Æsir cannot help but be “beguiled” since they are wholly ignorant of the Christian model that Gylfi naively employs. Gylfi’s appropriation of this model is consistent with the discussion of the wisdom (*spekina*)¹⁰⁶ that God granted human beings that they might understand certain Christian teachings *proleptically*. Just as the pagans described in the prologue used this “earthly understanding” to anticipate truths later revealed by Christian teaching (such as the trinity),¹⁰⁷ Gylfi uses this same naive understanding to anticipate and employ the *practices* of the Christian pedagogical tradition later responsible for transmitting these truths.

A character, of course, Gylfi, cannot be “aware” of his own appropriation of Christian pedagogical practice. How much of a problem to consider this, if at all, depends in part on how inclined we are to underestimate Snorri as a humorist. Moreover, to make an objection on these grounds would gloss over Snorri’s desire to offer an apology for his pagan ancestors by showing how their beliefs and practices, although couched in error, anticipated fundamental aspects of Christian thought. Most of all, it would ignore Snorri’s avowed task: to compose a poetics in the Icelandic vernacular. Through Gylfi’s proleptic use of Christian pedagogical practice,

¹⁰⁶ Faulkes (1982), 3, 15.

¹⁰⁷ One should not lose sight of the comic potential of the very names Hár, Jafnhár, and Thriði (“High,” “Just-as-High,” and “Third”). While these names derive from various *Oðinnsheiti*, they form a rather parodic trinity, or, rather, perhaps they highlight the pagan Æsir’s inability to anticipate the true trinity of Christianity. Cf. Faulkes (1982), xxvii-xxviii.

Snorri shows how generic forms manipulate the expectations of a given audience by means of a fictive performance situation built into the narrative. Based on this, I would further suggest that the traditional distinction between *Gylfaginning* as mythographic narrative and *Skáldskaparmál* as an *ars poetica* is untenable. Just as *Skáldskaparmál* sometimes presents mythological material in the narrative mode of *Gylfaginning*, the narrative of *Gylfaginning* thematizes the rhetorical subject matter proper to Snorri's encyclopedic poetics.

Snorri's *Edda* strives to be a world-book no less than the Canonical Encyclopedias. The difference is that the world represented in the *Edda* is a pagan misapprehension of the true *order of things*. As mentioned, it has been suggested that the Æsir's parodic trinity of High, Just-as-High, and Third reveals an inability to apprehend the true trinity of Christianity.¹⁰⁸ I would further suggest reading Snorri's tale of one king's journey to three false kings as an inversion of the biblical story of the three kings' journey to the one true king, the infant Christ. The story of the Æsir (three human men who for Snorri's ancestors "become as gods") is an inversion of the narrative of Christian salvation-history: the story of a triune god who becomes human. Such an inversion is a fitting framework within which to elaborate the combination of native tradition and proleptic insight that Snorri ascribes to the "earthly understanding" of his pagan forebears.

One might consider the juxtaposition of the Norse wisdom-contest and the Latinate master-student dialogue as Snorri's way of addressing the "two cultures" of medieval Iceland. According to Lars Lönnroth, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson had argued

"that a secularized literate culture had developed out of [the] system [of literary production established by the catholic Church] as early as the beginning of the thirteenth century, largely as a result of conflicts between the Church and the secular chieftains. The split between clerical and secular

¹⁰⁸ Faulkes (1982), xxvii-xxviii.

culture had, in his view, resulted in a farm-based literary production system, independent of the Church and ideal for the preservation of ancient pagan traditions. According to him, sagas and other secular native genres were written by farmers for farmers on the farms, while saints' lives and other types of medieval genres were written by clerics in monasteries."¹⁰⁹

Lönnroth argues that while the evidence indicates formal education in Iceland was the same as in western Europe, i.e., conducted

in Latin and confined to the clergy . . . There was, on the other hand, quite a lot of information indicating that oral tales and poems, knowledge about the laws, and other types of traditional learning were cultivated on the farms and passed on from generation to generation, but only rarely in written form and certainly not part of any school curriculum."¹¹⁰

Lönnroth concludes that these were not in fact

“two separate literatures or literary production systems, one clerical and one secular, but rather . . . overlapping and peacefully coexisting cultures jointly promoted by the Church and the secular chieftains, one dominated by native oral tradition, the runic alphabet, Old Norse feud stories, Eddic and skaldic poetry, the other dominated by the Latin alphabet, clerical education, and foreign literary genres.”¹¹¹

I would suggest that Snorri's juxtaposition of the native wisdom-contest and clerical master-student dialogue reflects a preoccupation with the continuities and tensions that characterize the relationship of these “two cultures”—a reflection mirrored in the “world-book” of Snorri's encyclopedic poetics.

¹⁰⁹ Lars Lönnroth, “Sponsors, Writers, and Readers of Early Norse Literature,” *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*, ed. Ross Samson and Margaret Clunies Ross (Glasgow: Cruithne Press, 1991), 4.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

Chapter II. They Might *Not* Be Giants: The Sapiential Tradition, Ideology, and Snorri's Mythographic Ethnography



Illustration 2: “Thor and Skrymir” from *The Heroes of Asgard: Tales from Scandinavian Mythology*. By A.&E. Keary. Illustrated by C.E. Brock. New York: Macmillan & Co, 1870.

Standing on the shoulders of frost-giants (chapter 1), it is now possible for us to see our way to some far-reaching conclusions concerning the intersection of Snorri’s encyclopedism and the broader sapiential tradition in of Medieval Iceland. To

delineate the tensions between the “two cultures” of Norway and Iceland, I examine the nature of the relationship between the main opposing (yet equally mutually dependant) camps in Norse mythology: the gods and the giants. While not always in the form of a neat analogy, the tensions between these two societies are, I will argue, reproduced in stories handed down to us by the thirteenth-century mythographer about *Æsir* and *jötnar*. While the world of Norse myth is populated by dwarfs, elves (and even the occasional human being), Norse mythic history mainly recounts the storied interactions of the gods and their giant kin.

The figure of the giant occupies a central place in the Norse vernacular encyclopedic tradition. Giants are the sources and purveyors of encyclopedic wisdom. Therefore the question of “giantness” is central to Snorri’s practice of encyclopedism. The reading of the “two cultures” which has grown out of my discussion of the encyclopedic dimension of Snorri’s *Edda* can now be mobilized to support three theses:

- (1) the giants of Snorri’s *Edda* are not “gigantic.”

The evidence for this commonplace idea is at best scant in Snorri’s *Edda*, in which

- (2) the distinction between the gods and the giants is cultural, not physical or racial.

This explains one of the paradoxes of Norse myth: Odin continually struggles to acquire and display superior wisdom in the gods’ ongoing struggle with the giants, despite the patent uselessness of such wisdom in forestalling the doom of the gods.

- (3) Only the need to maintain this cultural distinction (2) accounts for the Odin’s pursuit of useless wisdom.

This accounts for the high value placed on wisdom in the Old Norse Icelandic

sapiential tradition, which is at the core of Snorri's encyclopedic project in the *Edda*. Wisdom is not good for *anything*—much less defeating the giants at Ragnarök—which is precisely why it is useful in the gods' construction of a distinct *Æsir* identity, predicated on alleged differences between god (*ás*) and giant (*jötunn*). It is a mere status symbol used to construct that difference, and like all status symbols, the more useless, the greater the prestige.

The most basic putative difference between god and giant is the conventional notion of the giants' super-human (or super-divine) size. However, what is well known is not necessarily known well. The notion of the giants' gigantic stature is—as far as the evidence of *Snorra Edda* is concerned—based on colossal suppositions and unsupported by the textual evidence of Snorri's mythography.

My claims will seem as counter-intuitive as their implications are far-reaching, and will be argued in detail in this chapter. Reframing the status of “wisdom,” in encyclopedic learning in particular and the sapiential tradition in general, challenges the conventional wisdom of both popular and scholarly notions concerning the ethnographic and social orders of Norse myth.

1. *What's so big about giants? The jötnar of Snorra Edda*

In a recent study of “Giants in Germanic Tradition,” Randi Eldvik provides an overview of Jacob Grimm’s investigations into the nature of giantness in German and Scandinavian tradition in the light of recent scholarship. Eldvik warns against applying ideas about giants derived from Greco-Roman antiquity (such as Titans and Cyclopes) and biblical sources (such as Goliath and the biblical *Γίγαντες*) to our conception of the “basic idea of a giant” in Germanic tradition.¹¹² This is a sound warning, but one Eldvik herself fails to heed in her re-examination of the Old Norse sources. Eldvik goes on to state that “In both traditions [i.e., Greco-Roman and Norse mythology], beings of *colossal size* [emphasis mine] constitute the greatest enemies and rivals of the ruling pantheon.”¹¹³

This notion is well beyond widespread; it is the bedrock on which the entire discussion on the subject rests. In practice, documenting it would mean excavating the entire critical literature, as well as myriad popular sources. A brief excerpt from *Cassell’s Dictionary of Norse Myth & Legend* by Andy Orchard allows us to conveniently focus on some common (but unsupported) assumptions that inform the discourse on giantness. Orchard writes that the giants “inhabit the margins of the known world, dwelling in Útgard.”¹¹⁴ While this may seem uncontroversial to anyone who has read Snorri’s account of the journey of Thor and his companions to Útgarða-Loki, it is far from clear that Útgarða-Loki and his men are coterminous with the giants of Norse myth as recounted by Snorri.¹¹⁵ Hence positing the location of the giants’ home “in Útgard” becomes equally problematic. Orchard (probably in implicit

¹¹² Eldvik (in Shippey), 86.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹¹⁴ Andy Orchard, *Cassell’s Dictionary of Norse Myth & Legend* (London: Cassell, 1997), 132.

¹¹⁵ Detlef Brennecke thinks the Skrymir episode is based on an original myth, cf. “Gab es eine Skrymiskviða?”, *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi*, 96 (1981), 1-8; cf. John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 43

reference to the classic article by Einar Haugen¹¹⁶) goes on to state that “perhaps the overriding characteristic of giants of all kinds is their essential hostility to gods *and men* [emphasis mine].”¹¹⁷ The problem is that the interactions of giants with humankind are, at best, sparsely attested, if at all. The final conflict of giants and men at Ragnarök can be inferred from the sources, but is nowhere described or attested in Snorri’s final accounting of the fate of Odin’s human warriors, the *einherjar*:

“The Æsir will put on their war gear, and so will all the Einherjar, and advance on to the field” (Faulkes, 54).

Gangleri also asks what will happen “after all Einherjar and all men are dead.” “Men,” it should be noted, are not previously and otherwise mentioned in Snorri’s account of Ragnarök, but the phrase “all Einherjar and all men” would seem to indicate that there is another group of humans, perhaps men still living at the time of Ragnarök, who fight alongside the gods and their undead human warriors. On this, the sources are silent.

It is curious, to say the least, that in Snorri’s otherwise thorough accounting of the pairings of mortal combatants at Ragnarök—Odin and the Fenris Wolf, Thor and the Midgard Serpent, Freyr and Surtr—that there is no word concerning the precise manner of the demise of the *einherjar*. One assumes that Odin’s anonymous warriors pair off against the equally anonymous Sons of Muspell, though this is mere inference. Equally curious is the fact that no accounting is given of the giants’ role in the final battle. Loki arrives with an otherwise unattested giant “Hrym,” who captains Naglfar, the ship made of dead men’s nails, and “with him all the frost-giants” (54). This harkens back to the story of the giant Bergelmir, who on his ark escapes the blood-dimmed tide loosed by the slaying of Ýmir. I do not believe it has previously been

¹¹⁶ Einar Haugen, “The Mythical Structure of the Ancient Scandinavians: Some Thoughts on Reading Dumézil,” *Introduction to Structuralism*, ed. Michael Lane (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 170-83.

¹¹⁷ Andy Orchard, 133.

noted that the history of the giants thus begins and ends with the figure of a giant in a boat.¹¹⁸ None of the gods' other giant-enemies—the Fenris Wolf, the Midgard Serpent, or Loki himself—is a giant in the traditional sense (as are, say, Hrýmir, Þrymr or Vafþrúðnir), but rather monstrous out-births of *jötunn-Æsir* miscegenation. Thus, the giants' "hostility to...men" can be inferred from, but is curiously undocumented in Snorri's otherwise painstaking account of Ragnarök. The hostility of Útgarða-Loki towards Thor's human companion, Þjálfi, might serve as evidence of such hostility, assuming one assumes that Útgarða-Loki and his men are in fact giants—an assumption that is open to serious question.

The point of the foregoing is not to contest Orchard's notion (with which I in fact agree) that the giants of Norse myth represent forces that are hostile to Æsir society, although the myths provide little evidence of hostility to humankind, for which one must look to the sagas. My point is simply that the sources, and Snorri's mythography in particular, do not provide the basis for that particular belief, or for many other widespread ideas about the giants and their nature. The "Reference Section" in the monumental five-volume translation into English of the *Complete Sagas of Icelanders* is another case in point; it provides another synopsis of widely held beliefs that are, at best, only tenuously supported:

giant *jötunn, risi*: According to the Nordic mythology, the giants (*jötnar*) had existed from the dawn of time. In many ways, they can be seen as the personification of the more powerful natural elements, and the enemies of the gods and mankind. The original belief was that they lived in the distant north and east in a place called Jotunheim ("the world of the giants"), where they were eternally planning the overthrow of the gods. The final battle of the gods and the giants, Ragnarök, would mark the end of the world. The original giants should not be regarded as stupid. They were clever, and devious, and had an even greater knowledge of the world and the future than that which was available to Odin. The term *risi* is a later term, coined when the old beliefs were fading and the ancient giants were on their way to becoming the stupid trolls of later ages. The expression refers primarily to the physical size of these

¹¹⁸ Cf. also *Hymisquiða*; *Örvar-Odds saga*, ch.18; *Gylfaginning* 49.23-30.

beings that live in the mountains on the borders of civilization.¹¹⁹

Much of this, stated with the brisk assurance of an encyclopedia entry, is open to question, if not outright rebuttal. What evidence is there that the giants personify natural elements (an idea that harkens back to the aetiological thinking and “nature cults” of nineteenth-century scholars), or, as argued above, that the giants are the enemies of mankind? The connection between Thor and the elements is clearer (both etymologically and mythographically) than that between the giants and the natural world. It is true that the sources speak of “Frost-giants” and “Mountain-giants,” but these terms are never even remotely explained. One might object that the name of Thor’s mother, Odin’s giantesses concubine Jorð, is indeed synonymous with “earth.”

Again, my point is not to disprove such connections, merely to point out their tenuousness and the degree to which inference has played a role in the development of an uncritical consensus. What evidence is there really, direct or indirect, that the giants are “eternally planning the overthrow of the gods”? The giants are nowhere shown in council scheming the defeat of their enemies, in stark contrast to the gods in the Giant-Builder episode.¹²⁰ In Snorri’s *Edda*, the giants undoubtedly attempt to acquire the women and the property of the gods by a number of means, ranging from exchange to predation and violent confrontation.¹²¹ Snorri, in fact, depicts these attempts in precisely that order, suggesting that the giants’ earlier attempts at peaceful negotiation only later devolve into violence when they are thwarted by the gods’ violent response, e.g., in the Giant builder episode. One can infer or allege a master plan behind these machinations, but nowhere are such a motives stated *expressis verbis*. It remains unclear whether the giants’ in their ambitions are merely acting locally or thinking

¹¹⁹ The *Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Including 49 Tales, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, Introduction by Robert Kellogg, 5 vols. (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiriksson, 1997), V.410.

¹²⁰ One wonders if the Æsir are not in fact accusing the enemy of their own misdoings in Rovian fashion?

¹²¹ Margaret Clunis Ross (1994), 107-126.

globally. In addition, while the giants are doubtless portrayed as wise (though at times stupid, e.g., Hrungrnir), there is little evidence that they are “clever,” since their strategies almost always result in the bashing of the seat of their wisdom (i.e., their heads) into tiny skull fragments courtesy of Thor.

The glossary’s assertion that the “term *rísi* is a later term, coined when the old beliefs were fading and the ancient giants were on their way to becoming the stupid trolls of later ages,” is also open to question. Wisdom in this case would consist in conceding that there is no statement that can be made of the giants of which the opposite does not hold equally well. Giants are wise and foolish; noble and savage; forces of chaos but bound by a social order. They are as complex, contradictory, and multi-dimensional as the gods, if not more so.

If scholars have been wrong so many seemingly uncontroversial points, this raises the prospect that they have been wrong about the giants’ size as well. My argument is not that the giants of Norse tradition are not “actually” big but that Snorri does not represent them as such. In fact, Snorri goes to great length to avoid depicting the physical stature of the giants as bigger than the gods. Representations of giants as beings marked by “colossal size” are indeed wholly lacking in Snorri’s mythography. Simply put, there are no big giants in Snorri’s *Edda*.

A review of the *jötnar* of *Snorra Edda* will demonstrate that this is indeed the case. Afterwards, I will offer a theory as to *why* this is the case. Since Old Norse-Icelandic sources both older than and contemporary with Snorri, such as Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*, the corpus of *fornaldarsögur*, and even a few of the *Íslendingasögur*, attest the idea of giants as beings distinguished by inordinate size, it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine that Snorri could have been ignorant of the Scandinavian mainstream. Snorri’s treatment of giants in the *Edda* attests that he is well aware of this current; in fact, it provides a foil for his own unique representation of giantkind.

Why, then, does Snorri represent the giants of the *Edda* as “no big deal”?

First, however, we must establish something the average reader will take for granted: namely, that the giants of Scandinavian tradition are usually *big*. While it may seem counterintuitive to offer so much evidence for what most will already believe, it is necessary to distinguish the sources of gigantic size in order to contrast them with Snorri’s depictions of the giants. The Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus, Snorri’s early thirteenth-century contemporary, provides succinct evidence of giants of gigantic size in an oft-cited passage from the beginning of the *Gesta Danorum*:

The fact that the land of Denmark was once inhabited by a race of giants is attested by the huge boulders found next to ancient burial mounds and caves. If anyone doubts whether this was carried out by superhuman powers, let him ponder the heights of certain mounds and then say, if he can, who carried such huge blocks to their tops. Anyone considering this wonder must reckon it unthinkable that ordinary human strength could lift such bulk to that height. Even on a level plain it would be difficult, and perhaps beyond your strength, to shift it. There is not enough evidence to decide whether those who devised these works were giants who lived after the influx of the flood or men of supernatural strength.¹²²

This passage indirectly supports the idea of the superhuman size of the giants, although on closer inspection it merely provides evidence for the idea of superhuman *strength*. One must infer that the giants’ “superhuman powers” are a result of being super-sized; Saxo, however, does not say this. Saxo’s account is also suggestive of Snorri’s myth of the Giant Builder, who constructs the gods’ fortress, Ásgarðr, by hauling similarly “huge blocks” with the aid of his horse, Svaðilfœri. Hence Saxo’s account provides some evidence of a general continuity between continental and Icelandic giant-lore.

For textual evidence of the giants’ gigantic size, we must look to the so-called “ancient-legendary sagas” or *fornaldarsögur*, fantastic tales of Scandinavian heroes,

¹²² Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson, trans. Peter Fisher (Suffolk and Rochester: Boydell and Brewer, 1979) 9.

whose exploits take place in the legendary past before the settlement of Iceland.

Thorstein Mansion-Might (*Þorsteins þátr bæjarmagns*) provides a clear and unambiguous expression of the equation, giants = big:

Nú er at segja af Þorsteini, at allan þann dag gengr hann um mörkina ok verðr við ekki varr. En at áliðnum degi kemr hann á eina braut breiða. Hann gekk eptir brautinni, þangat til at aptnaði. Gekk hann þá brott af brautinni ok víkr at einni stórri eik ok stígr upp í hana. Var þar nóg rúm í at liggja. Sefr hann þar um nóttina. En er sólin kom upp, heyrir hann dunur miklar ok manna mál. Sá hann þá, hvar margir menn ríða. Þeir váru tveir ok tuttugu. Þá bar svá skjótt um fram. *Undraðist Þorsteinn mjök vöxt þeira. Hafði hann eigi sét jafnstóra menn fyrr.* Þorsteinn klæðir sik. Líðr nú morgininn til þess, at sól er komin í landsuðr.¹²³

[Thorstein walked on through the forest all day without noticing anything particular. But towards evening he came to a wide road and followed it till dusk. He then turned off the road and made for a huge oak tree. He climbed it and found there was plenty of room to lie down, so he slept there through the night. At sunrise he heard a great deal of noise and some voices and saw twenty-two men riding hard past the tree. *Thorstein was amazed to see how big they were—he had never seen men of this size before* (all italics mine).]¹²⁴

Other examples from the *fornaldarsögur* expressly state the giants' inordinate size:

“Hún var í skinnkyrtli ok *mikil vexti* ok illilig, svá at þeir þóttust ekki kvikvendi slíkt sét hafa.” (*Örvar-Odds saga*, ch.5).

[She wore a leather tunic and was so *high in stature* and nasty looking that they thought they had never seen such a creature.]

Einn dag sér Oddr, at *jötunn mikill* rær á steinnökkva þangat at bælinu. Hann er hátalaðr ok mælti: “Illr fugl er þat, sem hér á bæli, því at hann venst á, dag eptir dag, at stela brott kjöti mínu nýsoðnu. Skal ek nú leita við at hefna honum nokkuru. Ætlaða ek þá annat, er ek tók yxnin frá konungi, en fugl þessi skyldi hafa þau. Oddr stendr þá upp ok drepr ungana, en kallar á jötuninn: “Hér er allt þat, er þú leitar at, ok hefi ek varðveitt þat. Jötunninn gengr upp í bælit ok tekr kjöt sitt ok berr á nökkvann. Jötunninn mælti: “Hvar er kögurbarn, er ek sá hér? Gangi þat fram óhrætt ok fari með mér. Oddr sýnir sik nú, ok tók jötunninn hann ok lét út í nökkvann” (*Örvar-Odds saga*, ch.18, p.74-5).

¹²³ All quotations from the *fornaldarsögur* are from *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, 4 vols., Akureyri: Íslendingasagnaútgáfa, 1954. English translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

¹²⁴ *Þorsteins þátr bæjarmagns*, trans. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Seven Viking Romances*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 262-3.

[One day Odd saw a *great giant* rowing up toward the nest in a stone boat. That's a wicked bird nesting here," he said in his very loud voice. "It's begun to make a habit of stealing my fresh cooked meat every day and now's the time to get my own back. When I took the king's oxen, it wasn't any part of my plan that this bird should get them. Then Odd stood up, killed the young vultures, and called out to the giant: "Here's everything you're looking for. I've been taking care of it. The giant climbed up into the lair, picked up his meat and carried it into the stone boat. Where's that little infant I saw here just now?" he asked. "There's no need to be frightened, step forward and come with me." Odd showed himself, and the giant picked him up [or simply, "took him" —JT] and put him in the boat.]

The bird stealing the giant's fresh cooked meat recalls the myth in *Skáldskaparmál* of the giant Þjazi, whereas the stolen oxen recall the oxen-seizing Thor in the poem *Hymisquiða*.

“Eptir þat settist Hildir til ára ok reri heim til Risalands, ok þótti Oddi fádæmi, hversu nökkvinn gekk. En er hann kom heim, sýndi hann barn þat, er hann hafði fundit, ok biðr dóttur sína gæta sem síns barns ok eigi verr. En er Hildigunnr tók við Oddi ok er hann stóð hjá henni, tók hann henni tæpt í mitt lær, en þó hafði Hildir allan vöxt yfir hana, eptir því sem karlmanni heyrði” (*Örvar-Odds saga*, ch.18, p.76).

[Then Hildir settled down to the oars and rowed home to Giantland. Odd was quite surprised how fast the stone boat went. When the giant got back home, he showed people the infant he had found and asked his daughter to look after him with his own baby son. Hildigunn took Odd, *and as he stood there beside her he barely reached her mid-thigh, yet Hildir was a lot bigger than she was, as you would expect of a man.*]

Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar contains a giant called “Sel,” also referred to as a *spellvirki* or troublemaker.

“Er þar sá spellvirki, er Selr heitir, ok með honum einn hundr stórr sem naut” (*Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar*, ch.16)

[There lives the mischief-worker called Selr, and with him a dog as big as a bull.]

“Þann mann er at nefna til sögunnar, er Kolr hét. Margt gott er af honum at segja, þat fyrst, at hann var *stórr sem jötunn*” (*Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, ch.3).

[The saga mentions a man named Kolr. Much good is to be said of him, foremost, that he was *as big as a giant*.]

“Lítr hann einn hræðiligan jötun liggja í sinni rekkju. *Aldri hafði konungsson sétt stærra mann*” (*Sörla saga sterka*, ch.3)

[He saw a terrifying giant lying in his bed. *Never had the king’s son seen a bigger man*.]

“Í þeira liði sást einn maðr, mikill ok sterkr. Drap þessi maðr menn ok hesta, svá at ekki stóð við, því at hann var *líkari jötnum en mönnum*” (*Norna-Gests þátr*, ch.7)

[In their company was a man to be seen, big and strong. This man killed both men and horses, such that no one withstood him, because he was *more like a giant than a man*.]

“Bóndi reri þá til lands. Hann hét Surtr. *Mikill var hann og illilegur*” (*Ketils saga hængs*, ch.2)

[The farmer rowed to land. His name was Surtr. *He was big and evil*.]

“Þeir sáu *einn stóran jötun* sitja við elds glór. Reykr var mikill í hellinum. Eitt kvikendi sat við eldinn ok kló jötuninum með kömbum, en hann ýtir höfðinu á móti ok skældi sik allan” (*Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, ch.9)

[They saw *a big giant* sitting by the glow of the fire. There was a lot of smoke in the hall. A creature sat by the fire and combed the giant with a comb, and he turned his head towards them and made a huge grimace.]

This scene is reminiscent of the famous episode where the young, troll-like Grettir Ásmundarson scratches his similarly-disposed father’s back with shearing combs by the fire. Indeed, there is some evidence that *Grettis saga* here draws on a “troll/giant-by-the-fire” type-scene, which it recapitulates when Grettir encounters the troll by the fire.¹²⁵

Röndólfr: “*Hann mátti vel tröll kallast fyrir vaxtar sakir ok afls Móðurætt hans var frá Áluborg í Jötunheimum ok þar hafði hann upp vaxit* (*Göngu-Hrólfis saga*, ch.30).

¹²⁵ For the “giant-by-the-fire” motif, see *Grettis saga*, ch. 66 and the myth of the giant-eagle Þjazi in *Snorra Edda*; also see *Jökuls Þátr Búasonar*. There is also indirect evidence in *Hymisqvíða*, since Hymir is noted for his brewing cauldron.

[*He might well be called a troll on account of his size and on account that his mother's side was from Áluborg in Jotunheim, and he had grown up there.*]

“Hann sá þar á hól *einum jötum mikinn*” (*Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, ch.11, probably the most giant-intensive of the *fornaldarsögur*).

[In a cave there he saw *a big giant*.]

In addition, *Völsunga saga* mentions giants in allusion to their sexual appetites, not their size. *Gríms saga loðinkinna* contains two giants (also referred to as *tröll*) without indication of size, but apparently a happily married couple. Thus, fifteen of the thirty-four or so *fornaldarsögur* feature or refer to one or more giants. The Ancient-Legendary sagas largely also explicitly describe the giants as big, though some refer instead to other attributes such as their wisdom (*Gautreks saga*), voraciousness (in the cases of *Sörla saga sterka* and *Ketils saga hængs*, this includes an appetite for man-flesh), and their outlandish sexual appetites (*Völsunga saga*).¹²⁶

While the dating of the sagas is fraught with perils, all the *Íslendingasögur* that refer to *jötnar* are considered late, from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Giants play a role in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, *Fljótsdæla saga*, *Grettis saga*, and *Jökuls Þáttur Búasonar*; *Egils saga* mentions a *jötunn* in two skaldic stanzas. There are also references to *jötnar* in *Flateyjarbók* (ch. 453-455) and *Landnámabók* (84). It is not possible to make a ready distinction between the depiction of giants in the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*, except for the fact that they are scarcely attested in the former and rampant in the latter. This, of course, speaks to the question of medieval Icelanders' concepts of truth and fiction.¹²⁷ Giants are typically regarded

¹²⁶ “Other references to giants in the *fornaldarsögur* (not pertaining to size) include: *Starkaðr var hundviss jötunn*” (*Gautreks saga*, ch.3) [Starkaðr was a very wise giant]; “At miðjum vetri kómu þeir í Heiðmörk. Þar var sá konungr fyrir, er Hrólfr í Bergi hét. Hann var sonr Svaða jötuns norðan af Dofrum ok Áshildar” (*Frá Fornjóti ok hans ættmönnum*, ch.1; a lengthy *jötunn*-genealogy follows.) [At mid-winter they came to Heiðmörk. There ruled that king called Hrólfr-in-the-mountain. He was the son of the giant Svaði north of Dovre and Áshildar]; “Þar fell margr tvíhöfðaðr jötunn” (*Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra*, ch.7). [Many two-headed giants fell there.]

¹²⁷ A question I address in my forthcoming paper, “Historia, argumentum, fabula: Genre and the Icelandic Saga revisited.” Cf. Strejblin Kaminski, *The Saga Mind*.

as creatures of the fantastic, who do not intrude on the “fiction of realism”¹²⁸ of the so-called family sagas or *Sagas of Icelanders*. Yet, these same “realist” sagas regularly feature visits from the dead, which—one cannot help but surmise—did not strike a medieval Icelandic audience as particularly fanciful, but rather a remote but present fact of life.¹²⁹ Thus, in terms of fact and fiction (not the anachronistic concepts they are often assumed to be), the giants are more fantastic, more alien to mundane experience than other creatures of the Icelandic imagination.

Both the *fornaldarsögur* and the *Íslendingasögur* largely (though not unanimously) attest the notion that the giants are beings of inordinate size. The following passages amply represent the beliefs of what I call the mainline Scandinavian tradition:

Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss:

Og eftir draum þenna fóru þau Bárður og Flaumgerður í burt frá Dofra en litlu síðar kom þar Haraldur Hálfðánarson og fæddist þar upp með Dofra jötni. Eflði Dofri hann síðan til konungs yfir Noregi eftir því sem segir í sögu Haralds konungs Dofrafóstra. (ch.1)

[After this dream Bard and FlaumGerðr moved away from Dofri, and shortly thereafter Harald Halfdan’s son arrived and grew up with Dofri the Giant. (*Complete Sagas*, II, 238)]

Mjöll giftist aftur Rauðfeld hinum sterka syni Svaða jötuns norðan frá Dofrum. Þau áttu þann son er Þorkell hét. Hann var mikill og sterkur. Hann var svartur á hár og hörund. En þegar hann hafði aldur til varð hann hinn mesti ójafnaðarmaður. (ch.2)

[Mjoll was married again to Red-cloak the Strong, son of Svadi the giant from Dovrefjell. They had son called Thorkel, who was big and strong, with dark hair and swarthy skin. When he got older, he became the worst troublemaker.

¹²⁸ Robert Kellog, “Introduction,” *The Sagas of Icelanders* (London: Penguin, 2000), xxxiv.

¹²⁹ Much as it does in Iceland today: My own landlord in Reykjavík, son of a famous Icelandic scholar, was convinced that he had held conversations with ghosts while working as a village school teacher in the remote Eastfjords, and also believed that a spiteful ex-girlfriend (a witch, as it happens) sent her fetch to press down on him in his sleep. This did not strike his friends or family as fanciful. Even if Icelanders do not believe such stories, they are reluctant to dismiss them out of hand, as attested by the fact that only 10% of Icelanders are willing to state on record that they unequivocally do not believe in the existence of elves.

(*Complete Sagas*, II, 239)]

Fljótsdæla saga:

Jarl svarar: “Hví mun eigi verða svo að vera? Eg átti mér eina dóttir, fyrr en þessa sveina tvo, er Droplaug hét. Það var kallað að hún væri vel mennt. Eg unni henni mikið. Á hinum fyrrum jólum hvarf hún héðan á burt. Hana tók jötunn sá er Geitir heitir. Á hann þar byggð er þú þóttist koma. Það heitir Geitishamar en það fjall heitir Geitissúlur. Að þeim manni verður mörgum mein. Meiðir hann bæði menn og fé en sjá meinvættur er mest á öllu Hjaltlandi. Hef eg það mælt að þeim manni mundi eg hana gefa ef nokkur væri svo frækinn að henni næði á burt.”(ch.5)

[The earl replied: “Why should it not be so? I had a daughter before these two boys. She was named Droplaug. It was said that she was highly accomplished. I loved her very much. Last Yule she vanished from here. A giant called Geitir took her. He lives in the place you dreamed you reached. It is called Geitishamar, and the mountain is called Geitissulur. Many people came to harm from this creature. He injures both men and cattle, and he is the greatest monster in all Shetland. I have declared that I would give her to the man, if he exists, who was bold enough to rescue her.” [(*Complete Sagas*, IV,386)]

Hann sér þá að bar við himni höfuð jötunsins, miklu hærra en hamarinn. Hann bar að henni grjót svo mikið að hún mátti ekki á burt komast. Þá tók hann sverðið og gengur í mót jötninum. Jötunninn kallar hátt og bað hann niður láta melluefni sitt “ætla þú þér mikið í fang að færast auðvirði þitt ef þú vilt taka hana frá mér er eg hefi áður lengi átt.” Og í þessu stígur jötunninn upp í skoruna bjargsins þá sem Þorvaldur hafði séð, en öðrum fæti á flesin og varð hann eigi votskór. Og sá hann að til þess var þessi skor að jötunninn vildi eigi vaða. En í þessu kemur Þorvaldur að og hleypur inn undir hann en jötunninn breiðir frá sér lámanna og ætlaði að taka Þorvald. En í því höggur Þorvaldur til hans og kom á mitt lærið jötunsins og tók af fótinn vinstra fyrir ofan kné en hinn hægra fyrir neðan kné og kom sverðið í sandinn niður. En jötunninn féll og kvað við sárlega og mælti: “Illa hefur þú mig svikið og meir en eg ætlaði að þú hefur tekið það eitt vopn er mér mátti grand vinna. Fór eg af því óhræddur eftir þér að eg hugsaði ekki að smámenni mundi mér verða að bana. En nú muntu þykjast hafa mikinn sigur unnið. Muntu ætla að bera vopn þetta og þínir ættmenn. En það mæli eg um að þá verði þeim síst gagn að er mest liggur við.”(ch.5)

[Then he saw the giant’s head looming on the skyline, high above the cliff. He carried some stones to her, so many that she could not get away. Then he took the sword and went to face the giant. The giant called out loudly to him and told him to put down his mistress – “you must think you can handle a lot, you wretch, if you want to take her from me whom I have possessed for a long time.” At that moment the giant stepped up into the cleft in the cliff which Thorvald had seen before, and he put the other foot on the flat rock, and he did

not get his shoe wet. And he saw that the cleft was there because the giant did not want to wade the shoal water. At that moment Thorvald came up and ran in underneath him, and the giant spread out his paws intending to catch Thorvald. But at that moment Thorvald struck at him and the blow landed on the middle of the giant's thigh and took off the left leg above the knee and the right one below the knee, and the sword came down into the sand. The giant fell and cried out painfully and said, "You have betrayed me wickedly, and worse than I thought, because you took from me the only weapon which could do me injury. That's why I came after you without any fear, because *I had no idea that a puny human* [lit. "small people"] *would turn out to be my killer*. Now you must think that you have won a great victory. You will be thinking that you and your descendants will bear this weapon. But I lay a curse on it, so that it will be the least help to them when they most depend on it. (*Complete Sagas*, IV, 387-388)]

Hann lætur hlaða bál og láta síðan draga jötuninn út á bálið og brenna hann að köldum kolum og eftir það flytja þeir öskuna á sjá út.(ch.5)

[He had a pyre built, and then had the giant dragged out on to it and burnt to cold ashes, and after that they carried the ashes out to sea (*Complete Sagas*, IV, 389)]

Grettis saga:

Grettir sá að þar lá jötunn *ógurlega mikill*. Hann var hræðilegur að sjá. En er Grettir kom að honum hljóp jötunninn upp og greip flein einn og hjó til þess er kominn var því að bæði mátti höggva og leggja með því. Tréskaft var í. Það kölluðu menn þá heftisax er þann veg var gert. Grettir hjó á móti með saxinu og kom á skaftið svo að í sundur tók. Jötunninn vildi þá seilast á bak sér aftur til sverðs er þar hékk í hellinum. Í því hjó Grettir framan á brjóstið svo að nálega tók af alla bringspalina og kviðinn svo að iðrin steyptust úr honum ofan í ána og keyrði þau ofan eftir ánni...Hann lét skammt höggva í milli þar til er jötunninn dó. (ch.66)

[He entered the cave and a great log fire was burning there. Grettir saw a giant lying there *monstrous in size* and terrible to behold. When Grettir approached it, the giant snatched up a pike and swung a blow at the intruder. Known as a shafted sword, this pike was equally suited for striking or stabbing and had a wooden shaft. Grettir returned the blow with his short sword, striking the shaft and chopping through it. The giant tried to reach behind him for a sword that was hanging on the wall of the cave, but as he did so Grettir struck him on the breast, slicing his lower ribs and belly straight off and sending his innards gushing out into the river where they were swept away...He struck a few quick blows at the giant until he was dead. (*Complete Sagas*, II, 66.154)]

Jökuls Þátrr Búasonar:

Þeir sáu að þrjú flögð sátu við eldinn og var ketill yfir eldinum. Jökull lætur sér óbilt verða bregður sverðinu og heggur á háls jötningnum svo af tók höfuðið og hraut ofan í ketilinn.(ch.2)

[They saw three giantesses sitting by a fire, over which a cauldron was hanging. Jökull did not panic, drew his sword and struck at the neck of one of the giantesses so that her head flew off and fell down into the cauldron.¹³⁰]

“Það gerði Skrámur er konungur er yfir öllum óbyggðum og allir jötnar eru hræddir við hann.”(ch.3)

[It was Skram, who is king of all the wilderness, and all the giants are afraid of him. (*Complete Sagas*, III, 332)]

“Hér er hellirinn Skráms konungs; hefur hann boðið hingað öllum jötnum og flagðkonum er í óbyggðum búa og munu þeir færa þig til heljar er þeir sjá þig, hverju ég vildi ekki valdið hafa. Hér er gull eitt er ég vil gefa þér; þar er í sá náttúrusteinn; ef þú dregur gullið upp á fingur þér þá sér þig enginn framur en þú vilt.”(ch.3)

[“Here is King Skram’s cave. He has invited all the giants and giantesses who live in the wilderness, and they will do you to death the minute they see you. This is not something I want to happen. Here is a ring which I will give you. If you put it on your finger, the stone has the power to make you as invisible as you want.” (*Complete Sagas*, III, 332, Modified)]

“Ég heiti Hvítserkur, sonur Soldáns konungs af Serklandi en systir mín Marsibilla. Skrámur jötunn heillaði okkur hingað, ætlaði hann Grímni, syni sínum, systur mína;”(ch.3) [“I am Hvítserk, the son of King Soldan of the land of the Saracens, and this is my sister, Marsibilla. The giant Skram brought us here by witchcraft. He intended his son Grímnir to marry my sister.” (*Complete Sagas*, III, 333, Modified)]

Landnámabók:

Ketill raumur hét hersir ágætur í Raumsdal í Noregi; hann var son Orms skeljamola, Hross-Bjarnarsonar, Raumssonar, Jötun-Bjarnarsonar norðan úr Noregi.(ch.56)

[Ketill raumar was the name of a prominent chieftain in Raumsdal in Norway; he was the son of Ormr skeljamoli, son of Hross-Björn, who was the son of Raum, who was son of the Giant-Björn.]

Þorvaldur holbarki var hinn fjórði; hann kom um haust eitt á Þorvarðsstaði til

¹³⁰ All English translations are from *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* (see note 119, above), III.2.330. Citations refer to volume, chapter, and page. I use the anglicized versions of proper names when quoting available translations; otherwise the spelling of the Icelandic original is maintained.

Smiðkels og dvaldist þar um hríð. Þá fór hann upp til hellisins Surts og færði þar drápu þá, er hann hafði ort um jötuninn í hellinum. Síðan fékk hann dóttur Smiðkels, og þeirra dóttir var Jorunn, móðir Þorbrands í Skarfsnesi.(ch.64)

[Þorvaldur holbarki was the fourth; he came one fall to Þorvarðsstaði to Smiðkell and stayed with him for a while. Then he journeyed up to the cave of Surtr and delivered that *drapa*, which he composed about the giant in the caves. Afterwards he married Smiðkell's daughter, and their daughter was Jorunn, the mother of Þorbrandr of Skarfsnes.]

The giants of the *Íslendingasögur* are betimes-powerful rulers, distinguished ancestors, terrible monsters, sexual predators, or guardians of treasure—all (?) roles attested in the mythological poetry and in Snorri's *Edda*. Yet despite their numerous attestations in the sagas, the giants are not primarily associated with the *Sagas of Icelanders*, nor with the more densely giant-populated tales of the *fornaldarsögur*. The scholarly and popular imaginations have seemingly relied largely on mythological sources such as Eddic poetry and Snorri's *Edda* for their depictions of giantkind. Yet the scholar's image is far closer to the portrayals of giants in the sagas than to the thirteenth-century mythographic tradition, represented chiefly by Snorri and the collection of poems known as the *Poetic Edda*.

Scholars have rightly—though somewhat overzealously—questioned Snorri's reliability as a witness for “actually-existing” Norse paganism.¹³¹ Historians of Norse religion have gone so far as to make the wholesale exclusion of Snorri's mythography a methodological requirement for further investigation in the field. Yet, despite concerns about his reliability as a source for actually-existing Norse paganism—sometimes justified, sometimes exaggerated—the author of the *Edda* remains our main and indispensable source for the narratives of Norse myth.

From the evidence of the sagas, it is clear that the giants of Scandinavian tradition are inordinate in size. My argument is not that the giants of Norse tradition

¹³¹ Most recently the Roberta-Frank school.

are not “actually” big but that Snorri does not represent them as such. Snorri in fact goes to great length to avoid depicting the physical stature of the giants as bigger than the gods. Representations of giants as beings marked by “colossal size” are wholly lacking in Snorri’s mythography. Simply put, there are no big giants in *Snorra Edda*.

This claim will seem counter-intuitive, or simply fanciful, to those acquainted with the most familiar tales of *Snorra Edda*, such as Thor’s encounter with Skrímir or journey to Útgarða-Loki, and his battle with Hrungrnir and Mökkurkálfi. However, it can be shown that all beings represented unambiguously as “gigantic” in size in *Snorra Edda* are not giants at all. In the case of any being identified *expressis verbis* as “jötunn,” it is the reader armed with the combined prejudices of popular and scholarly tradition who supplies ideas about size, not Snorri’s text.

What has escaped the attention of critics and scholars is that the only big giants in *Snorra Edda* are not giants at all. The two “giants” depicted as gigantic are Skrímir and Mökkurkálfi, neither of whom can be considered giants: the first is an illusion wrought by Útgarða-Loki; the second is a golem-like construct made by the giants as Hrungrnir’s *sekundant* in his duel against Thor. In addition, Snorri never refers to either as giants. Thus, the only two unambiguously big “giants” in the *Edda* are not giants at all.

As promised, I will now review the *jötnar* of *Snorra Edda* in support of this claim, beginning with the primal giant, Ýmir.

It seems intuitive that Ýmir’s must have been of gigantic proportions, since Bor’s sons construct the world from his dismembered body. Is Ýmir, however, bigger than the gods? The text offers little support for this conclusion. Is the mass of the world equal to the mass of Ýmir’s corpse, or is it more like the gods’ ship *Skiðblaðnir*, which is big enough to carry the whole pantheon yet folds into the size of a pocket? How much spit was required for the Æsir and Vanir to construct Kvasir? Is it equal to

the six quarts equal to the amount of blood in the human body? Or do the gods generate it after passing around the divine spitoon once only? How literally should we consider such questions of size? Does size matter?

We must assume that Ýmir, whose skull forms the sky, whose flesh forms the earth, and is big enough to supply oceans of blood, is either no bigger than the Æsir, who are capable of killing and him and rearranging his body parts, or, the gods must be possessed of the strength necessary for such a Herculean task, since the gods are unable to move even Hrungrir's leg off of Thor after their duel. Nowhere is it even alluded to that Ýmir's stature surpasses that of other giants. We are told that "so much blood flowed from his wounds that with it [Bor's sons] drowned the race of frost-giants" (11). Logically, if Ýmir's blood is sufficient to drown an entire race, his body must either be exponentially larger than that of other giants, or the blood must flow from his wounds perpetually, as in the case of certain Christian miracles or folk tales. We are in fact told that "the blood that came from his wounds...was flowing unconfined" (12). This would support a reading of the outpour of blood and transformation of his body as a miraculous event. Odin transforms the flesh of Ýmir's male body into the female earth [*Jorð*], who at that moment becomes his daughter, and who later will be his wife and mother of his son, Thor. It does not take a Freudian to read the "blood...flowing unconfined" as parallel to menstruation, further reinforcing the feminization implicit in the murder of Ýmir and transformation of his body.

This would seem to be the first instance in mythic history of *ergi*, the Old Icelandic concept whose basic meaning is "effeminacy" or "passive homosexuality." *Ergi* and its adjectival form *argr* extends to witchcraft, male and female promiscuity, cowardice, and other Norse concepts of "unmanliness."¹³² No greater slander is

¹³² Cf. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, The Viking Collection: Studies in Northern Civilization (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983).

possible in the myths and the sagas. The term also has legal standing; accusing another man of *ergi* is an actionable offence whose perpetrator can be slain with impunity.¹³³

The Norse creation account contracts the creation of the world and the first murder into one felonious event, both of which—in both the biblical account of the Fall and in Snorri’s account of creation—result in an unstaunchable female (or feminized) bleeding. Of course, as others have noted, Ýmir is already sexually ambiguous in that he gives birth to the next generation of giants in an act of “male pseudo-procreation.”¹³⁴ Since the earth itself can be regarded as both metaphorically male and female,¹³⁵ the transformation of Ýmir’s male body into the female *Jorð* provides a narrative basis for a well-worn paradox.

According to a much-neglected theory originally put forth by Finnur Jónsson almost a century ago, the animosity of Loki and the giants toward the Æsir is a form of revenge for the killing of Ýmir.¹³⁶ The theory, as I will argue later, has great explanatory force and helps us transform the scattered episodes of mythic history into a coherent narrative. Be that as it may, I would point out that what has been overlooked is that the giants are not merely seeking revenge for the *death* of Ýmir but also for the feminization implied by both the nature of his bleeding wound and the transformation of his male body into the female earth.

While I would leave open the possibility that Ýmir may indeed be bigger than human beings, there is little to suggest he is bigger than the gods. Whereas Odin’s paternal grandfather Buri is described as “big and powerful” (Faulkes, 11), Ýmir is nowhere described as “big.” Snorri quotes *Vafþrúðnismál* which describes Ýmir as

¹³³ Sørensen (1983), 16.

¹³⁴ Margaret Clunies Ross (1994), 144-186; see also Jan de Vries, *The Problem of Loki*, Folklore Fellows Communications No. 110 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1933), 221.

¹³⁵ André Jolles, “Geschlechtswechsel in Literatur und Volkskunde,” *Mitteldeutsche Blätter für Volkskunde*, 6 (1931), 160.

¹³⁶ Finnur Jónsson, *Goðafræði Norðmanna og Íslendinga: Eftir heimildum* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmentafjelag, 1913), 96.

“wise.” The passage (from *Vafþrúðnismál* and Snorri) is worth quoting in full:

And here it is told by the giant Vafþrúðnir

where Aurgelmir [i.e., Ýmir] came from together with the sons of giants [the Æsir? Cf. Odin to Thor, “son of a giantess”], that wise giant:

“When from Elivagar shot poison drops and grew until from them came a giant in whom our ancestries all converge: thus ever too terrible is all this.” (Faulkes, 10)

Who are the “sons of giants” to whom Vafþrúðnir refers? The giants themselves? Or the gods? The fact that Odin refers to Thor’s son Magni, who is counted among the Æsir, as “the son of a giantess” makes the latter reading plausible. This might suggest an early social union between “Bor’s sons,” Odin, Vili, and Ve and Ýmir. “Thus ever too terrible is all this”: what exactly is too terrible? Is it the manner in which Ýmir comes into being (“Elivagar shot poison drops and grew until from them came a giant”) or the fact that the gods’ “ancestries all converge” in him?

“The Æsir race” (Faulkes, 13) is first described as the family line that descends from Odin and his legitimate wife Frigg. This “race” is defined by its territorial dominion, as the race that “resided in old Asgard and the realms that belong to it” (13). They are likewise defined by their power. When Gylfi asks “which group was more powerful [the gods or the giants]”, Gangleri responds, “Bor’s sons killed the giant Ýmir” (11). The Æsir race’s “whole line of descent is of divine origin” (13), which is to say that they trace their origin back to Buri, Bor, and Odin. It is unclear whether Buri and Bor should be counted as “Æsir” or whether this is an Odinic innovation. This notion that all the Æsir are “of divine origin” is immediately undermined by the genealogical account of Thor, whom Odin begets with the giantess Jorð. It is striking, to say the least, that the account of the founding of an Æsir dynasty (where pure Æsir are defined as the offspring of Odin and Frigg) begins first with

Odin's bastard son Thor, thus strongly suggesting the distinction between god and giant is slippery, at best, and that Odin's experiment in eugenics will be short lived. Indeed, if one takes Odin as the first of the Æsir, their subsequent genealogy spans only two more generations, down to the sons of Thor. Notably, Odin's legitimate sons produce no heirs.

Finally, we must ask: when Bor's sons "drowned the race of frost-giants," was this an attack on a "race" that was already distinct from the Æsir, or was this itself the act that *created* this racial distinction in the first place? The Æsir define themselves as the patrilineal descendents of Buri, his son Bor, and his son Odin. Foremost among Odin's sons are Thor and Baldr. Thor is, as mentioned, the product of the union of god and giant, whereas Baldr is the legitimate son of Odin and Frigg, hence reckoned among the "pure" Æsir. Yet despite his mixed parentage, Thor is the "most outstanding" and "strongest" (22) of the Æsir, in stark contrast to the decidedly static figure of Baldr. Baldr is "best," "fair," and "wise" (?), unlike Thor, but "none of his decisions can be fulfilled. Baldr is *wise* but lacks the *wit* that is the active application of wisdom.

None of the *Ásynjur* are said to have giant lineages, as opposed to Thor, Móði, Magni, Víðarr, Vali, or Odin himself. We are left to speculate whether this is in fact the case or if their genealogies are perhaps omitted due to the taboo nature of god-giant unions. Perhaps the association of giant sexuality with female genealogy is more threatening than when male offspring are the result. Nowhere is the threat female genealogy is more evident than in giants' repeated attempts to secure *Ásynjur* brides. And nowhere is this threat greater than where Freyja, most coveted of the goddesses, is concerned, as in the case of the Giant Builder, who tries to secure her through peaceful exchange in a bargain to build a fortress for the gods. Despite being identified as a "mountain giant" (36), the Giant Builder lacks the strength that Saxo ascribes to

the giant inhabitants of prehistoric Denmark, who are able to move “huge boulders” by themselves. The Builder is marked not by size or strength but by excess. The giant wants as wages not only Freyja but the sun *and* the moon. The gods only realize “for certain” (36) that the master builder is a giant after he displays his uncontrolled giant’s rage (*jötunmoðr*). It is also clear that the Builder has only secured this shady deal with the assistance of his half-giant cousin, Loki. (Thus affirming that even among the gods construction contracts are secured through nepotism.) The gods contract with the Builder to make a fortress “secure against mountain-giants and frost-giants.” If one takes the hostility of the giants towards the gods as a given, this makes about as much sense as hiring prisoners to construct a prison, and lends credibility to the thesis that the gods do not know who they are dealing with, as affirmed by the fact that they only realize “for certain” that the Builder is a giant after his display of rage. This detail resists simple explanation since the gods, at least by the time of their emergency-council wonder “who had been responsible for the decision to marry Freyja into giantland” (35). It would seem that the gods were ignorant of the Builder’s nature when the deal was sealed, grew suspicious when the work was underway, and only realize “for certain” when the giant shows his true nature, which consists in excess, not gigantic size. This is parallel to how the Builder’s horse Svaðilfœri realizes “what kind of horse it was” (36) only when their dealings are underway. Loki’s “neighing” heralds the fact that he is a mare in the same way that the Builder’s violent outburst announces to all that he is a giant.

The line between the gods and the giants does at times appear to be dangerously thin. Both Thor and the Giant Builder fly into a giant rage when their respective animals (Thor’s goats and the Builder’s horse) are misused and contracts regarding them are violated (Thor’s implicit contract with a human family regarding the treatment of his goats and the Builder’s contractual right to avail himself of his

horse's labor). The god's rage at the violation of a contract regarding an animal is reflected in the thirteenth-century *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, when the wrathful Hrafnkell kills his laborer Einarr for riding a horse forbidden him by the terms of their agreement. This transpires during Thor's and his companions' "journey east to Giantland (*Jötunheim*)" (38), and it is natural to assume, when they come to the hall of Útgarða-Loki, that they have arrived. But are Útgarðr and *Jötunheim* really the same place? Are they synonyms? Scholars routinely make this equation,¹³⁷ but at no point does Snorri's text equate *Jötunheim* with Útgarðr. What scholars have failed to notice is that the word "jötunn" does not occur on any occasion in the Útgarða-Loki episode. This is not conclusive evidence in itself, but it is highly suggestive that the equation Útgarðr = *jötunheim* is at least problematic. There are many apparent references to large size in both Thor's journey and his and his companions stay in the hall of Útgarða-Loki. Curiously, these references are always oblique. The word *jötunn* is scrupulously avoided throughout Thor's journey to Útgarða-Loki's Hall.

En route to *Jötunheim*, Thor and his companions take shelter for the night in a strange dwelling that turns out to be the glove of a huge being who later identifies himself as "Skrýmir." Since Thor is en route to Giantland and Skrýmir is clearly as gigantic as it gets, one concludes that Skrýmir is a giant. Snorri, however, scrupulously avoids the word *jötunn*, and, as is typical of the entire Útgarða-Loki episode, describes Skrýmir's inordinate size through a series of *litotes* (a figure of speech consisting of an understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by negating its opposite). The text of Concerning Skrýmir's stature, Snorri's narrator, "Third," says that "he was no midget" (39) and "a person of no small build."

Skrýmir, the thumb of whose glove serves as lodgings for a night's rest for a party of four is clearly and unequivocally gigantic. But is he a *giant*? The correct

¹³⁷ Orchard, 370.

answer is that he *is not anything at all*. Skrímir, properly speaking, does not exist; he is an illusion. Therefore, he cannot be entered into evidence for any claims regarding the nature of the giants.

The journey of Thor and his and his companions is, notably, the only episode in Snorri's *Edda* where sleep is involved. Even the preceding episode where Thor takes lodging for the night with a peasant family elides the detail of slumber. In fact, it is doubtful that Thor spends the night there at all. The peasants' son fails to treat "the goat's bones with proper care" during the evening meal (38), rendering the animal crippled. Once Thor's wrath is assuaged the text states, "he left the goats behind there and started on his journey east to Giantland" (38), with no mention of his having spent the night. The fact that the Skrímir-episode, uniquely in the *Edda*, involves sleep calls attention to dream-logic at work therein. My point is not to prove whether Útgarða-Loki episode "really" is a dream or not, but rather to point out how normal conditions do not apply to an episode that is wrought by illusion and rounded with a sleep. Thor's journey to Útgarða-Loki is in fact the stuff of dreams—the stuff that anxiety nightmares are made of. Thor's fastest runner, Þjálfi, is hopelessly outrun, the ravenous god Loki is out-eaten, and the mighty Thor cannot even lift a mere cat off the ground. These are Old Norse versions of classic bad dreams such as having to repeat high school because of a missing gym credit, running while stuck in place, or showing up to work with no pants on.¹³⁸

More quotidian considerations speak against Útgarða-Loki and his companions being truly gigantic. If Útgarða-Loki and his men were disproportionately larger than their guests, Thor and his companions could pass more easily through the bars of

¹³⁸ Other familiar clinical examples of anxiety nightmares include falling, arriving too late, losing one's teeth, failing an examination, and not being able to move, cf. Michael Schredl, Petra Ciric, Simon Götz, Lutz Wittmann, "Typical Dreams: Stability and Gender Differences," *The Journal of Psychology*, 138 (2004), 485.

Útgarð's gate. Útgarða-Loki's champion runner, Hugi (the embodiment of his thought: *hugr*) is described as "a little fellow" (41). Loki loses his eating-contest to Logi (fire), who is faster, not bigger, than Thor's mischievous traveling companion. Still, it is clear from the text that Útgarða-Loki and his men (or many of them) are *bigger* than Thor and his companions. Skrímir tells Thor not to act "big" and that he will see bigger men than himself if he gets into Útgarð (41). Útgarða-Loki also calls Thor a "little fellow," quipping, "you must be bigger than you look to me" (41), and goes on to say that "Thor is short and small in comparison to the big fellows here with us" (43).¹³⁹

More important to note, however, is Útgarða-Loki's sustained use of circumlocution to describe the size of Thor, Loki, and Þjálfi. Útgarða-Loki is a *circumlocutor*. According to Útgarða-Loki, Thor is "not as great a person as the Æsir say" (43), "not as great as we thought" (43), and "much less impressive than we thought" (43). Útgarða-Loki's cat (who is really the Midgard Serpent incognito) is "rather big" (43). Thor attempts to drain Útgarða-Loki's drinking horn, which is "not big but rather long" (42). Thor's draught is "not excessive" (42). (That is to say, it is ungiantlike.) Útgarða-Loki has many men, "most of them a fair size" (41). The largeness of Skrímir, Útgarða-Loki, and his men is apparently real, yet most often described obliquely. Both Útgarða-Loki and the episode's narrator, Third, continue to use circumlocution parallel to Skrímir's use of *litotes*, as when he takes leave of Thor, saying, "I have heard you whispering among yourselves that I am a person of no small build" (40).

We can draw four conclusions from the foregoing analysis. First, in the only example in Snorri's *Edda* of beings unequivocally larger than the gods, this difference

¹³⁹ Although when Útgarða-Loki calls Thor a "Litill drekki maðr," this does not mean that Thor is a small man drinking, but a man who cannot hold much drink.

is predicated on an illusion, as Útgarða-Loki makes plain:

En sjónhverfingar hefi ek gert þér. [But I have deceived you with illusions.]
(47.42)

Second, these illusory beings are never called “giants.” That term is scrupulously and painstakingly avoided, yet the author flirts constantly with more direct indications of physical difference through a series of *litotes*, understatements, and other circumlocutory effects. Third, this illusory physical difference is a cipher for cultural difference; Útgarða-Loki society is bound by its own complex rules in which visitors must first be instructed. Fourth and lastly, this cultural difference is depicted as racial difference, which brings us back to the illusory difference in size.

Útgarða-Loki and his men are not really giants, in the same way that the three “historical” Æsir (High, Just-as-High, and Third) of the frame narration of *Gylfaginning* are not really the Æsir whose exploits they recount. The parallelism could hardly be more precise; only the blinders of an uncritical consensus have prevented us from noticing it.

This difference in size is nowhere else in evidence in Snorri’s *Edda*. In *Hymisqviða* in the *Poetic Edda*, Thor takes on the appearance of a “young boy” (46, cf. 41, 43) who is “small and just a youth” (46) in comparison to Hýmímir, but once more this difference in size is predicated on an illusion. Thor and Hýmímir set out on a fishing expedition where Thor, to the chagrin of his host, attempts a rematch with the Midgard Serpent. When Thor attempts to pull the *Miðgarðsórmr* in on his line, his feet crash through the bottom of the boat and he braces them against the ocean floor, just as in Útgarða-Loki’s hall he almost lifts the “cat” up to the sky (45). Thus, it is Thor, not the *jötunn* Hýmímir who appears gigantic in size. Yet there is no reason to suppose that Thor’s stretching act has any more basis in reality than his shrinking act when he “assumed the appearance of a young boy” (46), a stature as illusory as

Skrýmir's gigantic size. There is no indication of a difference in size between Thor and Hýmír any greater than that between a young boy and a grown man, and even this discrepancy is predicated on an illusion. Snorri's telling of the tale of Hýmír takes place under the same regime of circumlocution as governed Útgarða-Loki's realm. For example, when Thor propels the ship out to sea at breakneck speed, Hýmír thinks that there is "some impetus" (47) in the rowing.

Thor's duel against Hrungrnir would seem at first glance to provide evidence that giants are gigantic. However, in Snorri's *Edda*, appearances are—more often than not—deceiving. With Mokkurkálfi we would appear to finally have solid evidence for a general consensus that likes its giants *big*. Mokkurkálfi, we are told explicitly, is "nine leagues high and three broad beneath the arms" (78). This is, to the best of my knowledge, the only precise description of gigantic size in the *Edda*, or for that matter, the entire Old-Norse Icelandic corpus. The only example that comes close to this kind of precision is the previously-cited passage from *Örvar-Odds saga* (ch.18, p.76): "*and as [Oddr] stood there beside her he barely reached her mid-thigh.*" And yet, gigantic as he indisputably is, giant he is not, but rather a golem like construct—a parody (perhaps Snorri's) of the "basic idea of a giant" that permeates the Scandinavian tradition from the sagas, to later folklore, to popular and scholarly conventions.

Which leaves us with Hrungrnir himself. Odin rides into giantland and offronts Hrungrnir, whose steed is the slower of the two. Hrungrnir flies into the usual giant's rage and challenges Thor to a duel. Hrungrnir's size, in contrast to Mokkurkálfi's, is nowhere described in the episode. Hrungrnir's skull is promptly smashed into tiny fragments by Thor's hammer and Hrungrnir falls

forwards over Thor so that his leg lay across Thor's neck...Thialfi went up to Thor and and went to remove Hrungrnir's leg from him and was unable to manage it. Then all the Æsir came up when they found out that Thor had fallen, and went to remove the leg from him and could not move it at all. (78.)

Finally, Thor's three-year-old half-giant son Magni arrives on the scene and easily tosses the giant's leg off his prostrate father. Neither men nor gods can remove the giant's leg. Presumably, Hrungrnir's limb is so big, it takes a god of super-human (and super-divine) strength to move it. And presume one must, for this is pure inference. Nowhere does the text address Hrungrnir's size, or state that his leg was so large it could not be moved.

The Norse tradition, however, offers other examples of the immobile dead, corpses that cannot be moved by normal means, if at all. None of these examples have anything to do with the size of the body. Immobility is in fact the most distinctive feature of the dead.¹⁴⁰ In *Grettis saga*, the corpse of the farmhand Glámr cannot be moved for church burial by men, horses, or oxen (*Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, II.32.102). The slain body of Baldr also cannot be moved by the combined might of the gods, and the task of heaving his death-ship onto the water is left to the giantess Hyrrokkin (49). The nineteenth-century Icelandic folktale "How to Raise the Dead" attests the difficulty involved in moving the bodies of the dead.¹⁴¹

The giant Geirrøðr is the last giant Snorri introduces in extended narrative form, although obviously not the last giant to feature in mythic history itself (e.g., there will be more giants at Ragnarök). (Snorri reintroduces other giant figures, such as Ægir with reference to his previous accounts.) Snorri's account contains no indication of gigantic size, unlike its variant *Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns*, in which "the heathen god is replaced by a peasant's son."¹⁴² Saxo Grammaticus alludes to the myth of Thorkillus' journey to the realm of Geruthus, where he encounters several giants:

¹⁴⁰ Einar Haugen, "The Mythical Structure of the Ancient Scandinavians: Some Thoughts on Reading Dumézil," *Introduction to Structuralism*, ed. Michael Lane (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 170-83.

¹⁴¹ Jacqueline Simpson, *Icelandic Folktales and Legends*, 2 ed. (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing Limited, 2004), 149-152 [J.Á. I 317-19].

¹⁴² Jan de Vries (1933), 57.

“One of these creatures, more gigantic than the rest and armed with a massive club, waded out into the sea.” (Saxo, 263)

“As evening grew on, a man of extraordinary stature came up and greeted the seamen by their names.” (Saxo, 263)

While Saxo alludes only briefly to the tale of Thor and Geirrøðr, it is clear from the *Gesta Danorum* that the giants of Geirrøðr’s (*Geruthus*) realm are in fact huge, whereas Snorri nowhere alludes to a disparity in size in his telling of the myth.

Finally, backtracking somewhat in Snorri’s narrative order (though not necessarily the order of mythic history), Odin, Loki, and Hænir encounter Þjazi “in eagle shape” (60) (the only shape in which he is ever encountered) while they are unsuccessfully attempting to cook an oxen in an earth oven in the wilderness. Þjazi’s size is described with the *litotes* typical of Útgarðian circumlocution. We are told that the eagle was “no small one” (59). Yet Þjazi’s most clearly giant-like attribute is not his eagle shape (though another giant with eagle shape is attested in *Vafþrúðnismál* 37), nor the fact that eagle-Þjazi is “no small [eagle].” The most distinctive feature of the giant Þjazi—the most distinctive feature of all giants—is not *size* but *excess*.

Although excessive size is one such form of excess, it is not represented in *Snorra Edda*. Rage and lack of restraint feature foremost in Snorri’s depiction of giantkind. The giant builder wants not only Frejya but also the sun and the moon as payment (35) for the building of Ásgarðr. Odin’s steed, Sleipnir, is the poster-boy (or poster-horse) for the excess that defines the giants: he has eight legs, as opposed to the normal four; his mother is the half-giant Loki (transformed into a frisky mare), and the Giant Builder’s excessively strong stallion. Loki himself is product of a monstrous union of *Ásynja* (a female god) and giant sire. Hrungrir rides too far and into Ásgarð, and is later killed as a result. Hrungrir is offered a drink, then *demand*s one (78). The giants’ excess is also reflected in their inability to control liquids: The giant Suttungr is unable to retain control of the Mead of Poetry (63), which is made from the blood of

Kvasir, who is in turn made from the spittle of the gods. Mokkurkálfi wets himself when Thor arrives for the duel with Hrungrnir (78). (Again Hrungrnir demands a drink *after* he is offered one, again suggestive of an association of giant excess and control of liquids). The giantess Gjálp (82) raises the water-level by standing “astride the river” and presumably urinating in it when Thor tries to cross it. Þjazi, who attempts to eat more of the ox than is pleasing to Loki and to abduct the goddess Iðunn, is a creature of excessive gastronomic *and* sexual appetites. Giant excess is ultimately symbolized by Loki breaking his fetters at Ragnarök. It is excess that causes the doom of both gods and giants: excess finger nails used to build the ship of the dead, excess shoe-leather used to make the boot with which Viðar smites the ravenous wolf.

The connection between the giants and appetite is reflected in the possible etymology of their name, *jötunn*, which derives from the Germanic **edu*: “to eat.”¹⁴³ The excess of the giants is thus variously manifested in their outward proportions and their inner appetites. It is a difference between *monstrum in fronte* and *monstrum in animo*.¹⁴⁴ In his “Twilight of the Idols,” the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche writes:

Ugliness is often enough the expression of a development that has been crossed, thwarted in some way. Or it appears as declining development. The anthropological criminologists tell us that the typical criminal is ugly: *monstrum in fronte, monstrum in animo* [monstrous in appearance, monstrous in spirit]. But the criminal is a decadent.

The giants’ physical excess (read: ugliness) is a transference of their inner nature (excess) to their outward form. By externalizing this excess, those who would

¹⁴³ “*Etuna* m. Riese (eig. (Menschen)fresser?). an. Jötunn Riese; ags. Eoten Gigant, ält. Ud. Eteninne Hexe”: *Wörterbuch der Indogermanischen Sprachen*: Dritter Teil: Wortschatz der Germanischen Spracheinheit Author: August Fick, Hjalmar Falk, Alf Torp 1909. 24. See also Ferdinand Holthausen, *Vergleichendes und etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altwestnordischen, Altnorwegisch-isländischen, einschliesslich der Lehn- und Fremdwörter sowie der Eigennamen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1948).

¹⁴⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung*, “Das Problem des Socrates,” ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: dtv/de Gruyter, 1988), 69.

understand the giants as beings primarily of giant *size*, are able to externalize their own undisciplined desires and project them onto an allegedly wholly foreign creature. In Snorri, this process does not take place, although, as is clear from the evidence cited earlier in this chapter, it does in contemporary sources. Given the scarcity of evidence in *Íslendingasögur* and in Snorri, there may be some evidence from the sources that the “basic idea of giant” underwent a development from a creature of excess (excessively wise, gluttonous, libidinous) to a large, oftentimes stupid, being in whom this “excess” is ultimately externalized in terms of physical proportion. However, it seems more likely that Snorri is at variance with a mainline tradition of which he is well aware.

Perhaps some giants are of immense stature while others are not? The myths do after all speak of “giants,” “frost-giants,” and “mountain giants.” (Their names are legion, for they are many.) While I would not suggest rejecting the possibility out of hand, the evidence for such differentiation within the species “giant” appears to be non-existent.¹⁴⁵ For that matter, Snorri states that Ýmir produced male and female from giants from his armpits, and males from legs. Yet to my knowledge, no one has ever postulated that there are such things as “armpit giants” and “leg giants,” although there would be more basis for the existence of such beings than for mountain and frost-giants. The giants, though occasionally referred to with different names, seem no more distinct from one another as Thor does from “Öku-Thor,” which is, in fact, simply a byname for the same being. This form of prefixation merely adds to the richness of names used to describe one and the same thing—as should come of no

¹⁴⁵ Despite some impressive effort attempts to create a comprehensive taxonomy of *jötunn*, *þurs tröll*, and *risi* in Old Norse usage, such attempts invariably are thwarted by body of evidence as recalcitrant and untamable as the giants themselves are often represented. Cf. Lotte Motz, “Giants in Folklore and Mythology: A New Approach,” *Folklore*, 93 (1982), 70–84; Lotte Motz, “Gods and Demons of the Wilderness: A Study in Norse Tradition,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 99 (1984), 175–87; Lotte Motz, “The Families of Giants,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 102 (1987), 216–36; Lotte Motz, “Kingship and the Giants,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 111 (1996), 73–88.

surprise to the student of Skaldic wordsmithery where this sort of onomastic variety is the name of the game.

High, Just-as-High, and Third are unreliable narrators. Their entire account is predicated on a grand illusion. Why should they be treated as reliable informants on the giants, and not subject to their own particular biases? Concerning Ýmir, Gangleri innocently asks, “do you believe him to be a god whom you have just spoken of?” (11). The question seems preposterous to the three Æsir but apparently not to Gangleri. The oddly defensive phrasing of the Æsir’s response suddenly makes sense: “Not at all do we acknowledge him to be a god. He was evil and all his descendants.” *Not at all do we acknowledge him to be a god.* The Historical Æsir do not *acknowledge* Ýmir to be their kin, just as the gods refuse to acknowledge the giants as theirs. This is not that same thing as stating that he *is not* a god. The historical Æsir’s construction of difference explains their aggressive phrasing when it comes to the divine hierarchy, and Odin in particular: “This is the name of the one who is the greatest and most glorious that we know, *and you would do well to agree to call him that too*” (11, italics mine).

Furthermore, it is suggestive of the unity of god and giant that both giant and Æsir names may be used as *heiti* and in kennings that commonly refer to “man.”

Snorri says:

It is normal to refer to man using all the names of Æsir. Names of giants are also used, and this is mostly as satire or criticism. (94)

Both god and giants names can be used refer to the same being. The difference is merely one of connotation and moral judgment; an Æsir name denotes a good man, a giant name a bad one.

It may be objected that if inordinate size is part of “basic idea of a giant,” there would then be no reason for Snorri to make a point of the giants’ (alleged) immense

size; simply calling them “giants” would presumably make this clear. What is clear, however, after a fresh examination of the evidence, is that this objection takes for granted a premise (i.e., giants are bigger than the gods) that cannot be demonstrated on the basis of Snorri’s account. Snorri stands at odds with—not on the shoulders of—the giants of Scandinavian tradition.

Simply put, in Snorri’s *Edda* beings that are big are never called giants, and beings called giants are never big.

A reflection of this paradox, of giants who are not gigantic, can be found in the self-contradicting image of Gylfi’s three interlocutors, Hár, Jafnhár, and Þriði (“High,” “Just-as-High,” and “Third”). Represented as one on top of the other, their names stand in contradiction to their physical disposition. When it comes to the language of poetry (what Snorri calls *Skáldskaparmál*), *nomen non est omen*. High, Just-as-High, and Third represent a rift between words and things, between *res* and *verbum*. In the context of Skaldic poetics, such a disjuncture makes perfect sense. In the terms of classical rhetoric, they are, however, a *contradictio*—not in terms, but between language and reality itself.

As I argued in the last chapter, Hár, Jafnhár, and Þriði and, alternately, Gylfi can appear as victors in their wisdom contest based on the sapiential tradition, Christian or pagan, in which their encyclopedic dialogue is framed. Here once more, Hár, Jafnhár, and Þriði appear to be a contradiction when viewed through the lens of the foreign, Christian, Latinate tradition, but not in the terms of a native, Pagan, vernacular poetics. Combining the former and the latter is, once again, the singular achievement of Snorri’s encyclopedic poetics.

II. Gods *and* Giants? / Gods *as* Giants

“Waren diese Riesen wirklich von so hoher Statur? Die Furcht hat vielleicht ihrem Maße manche Elle hinzugefügt. Dergleichen hat sich oft schon ereignet. Nicetas, ein Byzantiner, der die Einnahme von Konstantinopel durch die Kreuzfahrer berichtet, gesteht ganz ernsthaft, daß einer dieser eisernen Ritter des Nordens, der alles vor sich her zu Paaren trieb, ihnen, in diesem schrecklichen Augenblicke, fünfzig Fuß groß zu sein schien.“

(Heinrich Heine. *Elementargeister*. Werke, zweiter Band. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1968, 655)

a. Of Master Builders and Constructions of Difference

Having established *that* Snorri’s giants are not bigger than the gods, it is time to address the reasons *why* he does not represent them as such. Why does Snorri tone down the giantness of the giants?

The distinction between gods and giants is arbitrary, imposed on the giants by the gods’ use of force. It is not an ethnic division but, at root, a class distinction. It is not based in race but social status. As with the Indian caste-system, racial thinking serves to legitimate a class distinction, not to create it in the first place. The god-giant distinction is an attempt to make social and cultural differences appear natural and given; in other words, it is ideological.

The etymology of the word *jötunn* helps underscore the ideological nature of the categories of Snorri’s mythological ethnography. Although the etymology of many basic words is problematic, the depiction of the giants as beholden to insatiable appetites, both gastronomic and sexual, lends credence to the derivation of *jötunn* from Germanic **edu* (to eat). The unrestrained appetites of the giants stand in stark contrast with the disciplined social order of the gods. This contrast closely parallels the distinction in European feudal ideology between noble and peasant. The idealized self-portrait of the nobility recorded in the literature of courtly romance is

distinguished by restraint and self-control in the bedroom, at the dining table, and on the battlefield. From the perspective of the nobility, the peasantry is marked by uncontrollable, bestial appetites.

A distinction between gods and giants on the basis of *behavior* as opposed to race makes better sense in a relatively racially undiverse medieval Scandinavian context. Behavior, along with birth, is after all, what is supposed to separate the nobility from non-nobles. The peasants represented in courtly literature (like Snorri's giants) cannot control their sexual, gastronomic, and economic appetites, and are greedy, unlike the always freely-giving nobility. We will have to wait for the nineteenth century and Wagner for the economic dimension of Norse myth to be played in a register more readily heard by modern ears. The comparison to Wagner is not incidental, for like Wagner, Snorri attempts to create a synthetic narrative of Norse mythic history based on disparate sources; consequently, my discussion always refers to this narrative, never to "actually-existing" Norse pagan belief.

Although this fact has to my knowledge never been noted, the figures in the Norse pantheon who have garnered the most critical attention are those who occupy the middle ground between the gods and the giants. This ambiguous terrain is occupied by Loki, whose dual nature is a commonplace,¹⁴⁶ but also by Thor, who is not typically seen in this light. Thor guards the boundary between the two groups. The boundary is not natural, since gods and giants can produce offspring—such as Thor himself—but cultural, maintained by force and deception. While Thor attempts to maintain this distinction through force, Loki, his companion and antipode, defends it with the guile that requires the wits that Thor (with the exception of his performance

¹⁴⁶ See de Vries (1933), 204, on Loki's "originally...ambiguous character"; also see Finnur Jónsson, 96; Orchard, 237; Jeffrey Turco, "Loki, *The Tale of Sarcastic Halli*, and the Case for a 'Skaldic Prosaics'" [forthcoming].

in the parodic *Alvíssmál*) lacks. Of course, Loki is a profoundly ambiguous figure and not a simple defender of Æsir family-values since he strives to maintain his position in a society whose order, values, and rules he also systematically subverts and undermines. Be that as it may, Thor and Loki represent two distinct means for dealing with the threat to the social order of the gods posed by the giants' excess, namely, *force* and *wit*. Loki is Thor's genealogical antipode as well, since Thor is the product of the union of god and giantess, and Loki of goddess and giant. The role of Thor—smasher of heads and breaker of oaths—in maintaining the distinction between god and giant underscores the violence and perjury at the root of the social system, of culture, and of the ordered cosmos itself, made from the body of the gods' slain maternal uncle, Ýmir.

Ýmir is “evil” according to the historical Æsir (11), although there is no evidence in *Gylfaginning* to support this claim, unless one assumes *a priori* that the gods' killing of him is justified. Ýmir is born (so to speak), gives birth, and is killed—that is all. Details that would support the Æsir's value judgement are not offered. The first sign of hostility between the gods and the giants is the murder of Ýmir itself. This killing is not a response to a prior act of aggression on the part of the giants, whose only offence, it seems, is their mere existence. The killing of Ýmir appears to be unmotivated. No reasons are offered for it, or for that matter asked for. Gylfi's informant, Hár, treats the Æsir's hostility to the giants as something natural and given: “Bor's sons killed the giant Ýmir.” The next passage reads, “And when he fell...” Only the *aftermath* of Ýmir's death is significant for the historical Æsir; the circumstances that led to it are apparently neither considered relevant nor in need of further explanation. This lack of detail or explanation makes the death of the frost-giant Norse myth's ultimate “cold case.”

One striking aspect of Snorri's depiction of the killing of Ýmir is the absence

of the baroque detail regarding wounds that is so well-attested in the sagas (cf. *Njáls saga*):

Mord named witnesses – “to witness that I call on these nine neighbors to the scene of the action to ride to the Althing and to form a panel of neighbors to determine whether Flosi Thordarson wounded Helgi Njalsson with a brain wound or internal wound or marrow wound which proved to be a fatal wound, and Helgi died of it at the place where Flosi Thordarson ran at Helgi Njalsson in a punishable assault. I call on you for all the findings which the law requires you to make and which I ask you to make before the court and which are relevant to this case. I call on you with a lawful summons in your own hearing. I call on you in the case turned over to me by Thorgeir Thorisson. (Cook, 240)

Legalistic forensics are not merely the province of the sagas, for Snorri’s *Edda* itself goes to some lengths to describe the nature of specific wounds and killings, e.g., Týr’s hand, the death of Baldr by mistletoe missile, the slitting of Baugi’s workers’ throats, etc. In the sagas, heads typically fly off without spraying torrents of blood. I am unable to find any instance of blood gushing as the result of a decapitation carried out in battle, as in the case of Helgi Njalsson, or a posthumous beheading, as in the case, e.g., of Glámr or Kár inn gamli in *Grettis saga*.¹⁴⁷

The pre-history of conflict between the *Æsir* and *jötnar*, however, is shrouded in silence. This is not to say *mystery*, for no curiosity regarding it is in fact ever expressed. Is the killing of Ýmir a “punishable assault”? A response to one? (If the dismembered Ýmir is indeed killed by sneak attack, the irony will not be lost on anyone familiar with the biography of Snorri himself—betrayed by his kin, taken by surprise, and cut to pieces on an autumn night in 1241.) Are there witnesses who could be called on testify to the killing of Ýmir? Such questions neither addressed, nor

¹⁴⁷ *Íslendinga saga* has a well-known reference to Kálfr, who is urged upon his execution to move away from a church wall so his blood will not besplatter it. There are also mentions of people walking out of church sanctuary unarmed so that the church will not be defiled by their blood (e.g., Holar 1209, and also at the tail end of Orlygsstadir 1238). There are not infrequent mentions of people who bled little when killed which may suggest that gushing blood is not the perceived norm (cf. the end of *Svinfellinga saga*, and Sturla Sigvatsson in *Íslendinga saga*).

answered. It is this omission, more than any speculation about what is omitted, that is relevant to my analysis of Snorri's mythographic ethnography.

When it comes to the forensics of killing Ýmir, Snorri's Æsir gloss over both the motive *for* and details *of* the primordial hostilities between gods and giants. Their conflicts are treated as natural and given. This stands in stark contrast to the tradition of Icelandic feud narrative, in which the roots of conflict and precise nature of wounds and killings are noted with legal exactitude. In contrast to the parties of feuds in the sagas, the giants stand outside the law and hence have no recourse to legal redress for their grievances. Instead they variously resort, as we have seen, to barter, theft, and predation. The exception to the giants' outlaw status is the fact that they make oaths and contracts with the gods. Yet while the giants themselves never break their word, such agreements are honored as long as they are convenient for the gods.

Egils saga offers an illuminating clue to this murky history of conflict between the gods and the giants. In *Sonatorek*, Egil's eulogy for his dead son, Egil invokes the myth of the Mead of Poetry, which Odin steals from the giant Suttungr:

Esa auðþeystr	Since heavy sobbing
þvít ekki veldr	is the cause —
höfugligr,	how hard to pour forth
ór hyggju stað	from the mind's root
fagnafundr	the prize that Frigg's
Friggjar niðja,	progeny found,
ár borinn	borne of old
ór Jötunheimum,	from the world of giants,
lastalauss	unflawed, which Bragi
es lifnaði	inspired with life
á Nökkvers	on the craft
nökkva bragi.	Of the watcher-dwarf.
Jötuns hals	Blood surges
undir þjóta	from the giant's wounded neck,
Náins niðr	crashes on the death-dwarf's
fyr naustdyrum.	boathouse door. ¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ *Egil's Saga*, trans. Bernard Scudder, *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, Including 49 Tales.*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, Introduction by Robert Kellogg. 5 vols. (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiriksson, 1997), I.40.77-78.

The last four lines “Jötuns hals / undir þjóta / Náins niðr / fyr naustdyrum” refer to the “giant’s wounded neck (“Blood surges from the giant’s wounded neck, crashes on the death dwarf’s boathouse door”). “Jötuns hals undir” translates as “the giant’s throat-waves,” i.e., the blood gushing or roaring (*þjóta*) from his throat, a clear allusion to the sea, made from the blood of the giant Ýmir. *Gylfaginning* itself offers no account of the nature of Ýmir’s wounds. The fact that blood gushes from Ýmir’s throat would strongly suggest that his throat was cut in stealth. While one might object that the blood from Ýmir’s throat could also result from his post-mortem decapitation and dismemberment at the hands of the gods, *þjóta* suggests a very powerful surge of fluid, suggestive of a mortal wound to the neck, such as that received by Helgi Njálsson, not a posthumous beheading.¹⁴⁹ “The giant’s wounded neck,” however, seems incompatible with a full-blown decapitation. Thus it seems most likely—at least according to the evidence of Skaldic poetry—that Ýmir’s throat was cut, and cut in stealth by the gods, not in open conflict or as the result of an aggravated assault.¹⁵⁰

If we accept the theory that *Egils saga* was written by Snorri Sturluson, this strengthens the case for including the evidence of *Sonatorrek* alongside that of the *Edda* in my investigation of the death of Ýmir. The theory of Snorri’s authorship, of course, has its adherents and detractors, the latter of whom rightly point out that there

¹⁴⁹ I am unable to find any description in the sagas of blood gushing from the throat of someone decapitated postumously.

¹⁵⁰ Dr. Peter Zelinka, M.D. of San Diego, California, confirms to me that the medical evidence supports the stealth-hypothesis: “Gushing blood must by necessity be from an arterial wound, i.e., a deep neck wound which could be delivered by stealth or frontal assault. Superficial wounds do not *spray* blood. Secondly, once the heart stops or there is a catastrophic loss of blood pressure, there can be no gushing of blood. Generally speaking, even a very low blood pressure just barely compatible with life will cause some pulsatile gushing. The saga implies a vigorous gush of blood which can only be delivered by an active, healthy heart. Thirdly, a dead body cannot gush blood. Fluid may leak or spill, of course, but it will never *gush*. Perhaps under the gaseous pressures of decomposition there could be some spray of corruption but this would not be oxygenated ‘red’ blood. Filling an ocean with blood is more likely with a venous bleed. Arterial blood stops sooner because those vessels have muscles than can contract the vessel and stop the bleeding, veins do not. It is a venous bleed that kills you with a slit throat. As the saying goes, go for the jugular, i.e., the big vein in the superficial neck (personal correspondence, Nov. 2, 2008).

is no direct evidence for the claim that Snorri wrote the saga.¹⁵¹ There is no point in rehearsing this debate here; but it is worth pointing out that if *Egils saga* was not written by Snorri, it might as well have been. Whoever wrote *Egils saga* was evidently immersed in the same mythographic tradition that finds its way to vellum in Snorri's *Edda*.

A possible analogue to the murder of Ýmir is found in another work attributed to Snorri Sturluson, namely *Heimskringla*. Snorri's account of the murder of Hákon Jarl at the hands of the slave Karkr parallels in many respects the murder of Ýmir. The tale tells of the Earl and Karkr, suspiciously eyeing one another in turn as the one wakes and the other sleeps, until eventually the Earl is betrayed by one who has always treated him well:¹⁵²

En Karkr varð hræddr og felmsfullr og greip kníf mikinn af linda sér og skaut gegnum barka jarli og skar út úr. Það var bani Hákonar jarls. Síðan sneið Karkr höfuð af jarli og hljóp í brott.¹⁵³

[But Kark grew frightened and alarmed. He took a big knife from his belt and cut the earl's throat, then slashed it clean through, and that was Earl Hakon's death. Then Kark cut off the earl's head and ran away with it.¹⁵⁴]

This recapitulates rather precisely the circumstances of the gods' murder of Ýmir, as I have reconstructed it. Hákon is asleep; sleep is in fact one of the three activities ascribed to Ýmir, along with feeding and procreation. Ýmir sires giants in his sleep from his profuse sweats. This fact is never explained; why does Ýmir sweat in his sleep? Does he sleep unsoundly for no reason? Or does he, like Hákon Jarl, fear treachery from his companions? Lending further credence to this association of the two tales, Hákon tells Karkr something he could not possibly know, namely that "We

¹⁵¹ Torfi Tulinius, *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*, trans. Randi C. Eldevik, The Viking Collection, Vol. 13 (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2002), 234-35.

¹⁵² Hollander, 192.

¹⁵³ ÍF XXVI.49.297.

¹⁵⁴ Hollander, 192.

are born in one and the same night” [*Við várum fæddir á einni nótt*]. This mysterious confession has the effect of making the two a pair of companions if not brothers. The same sentence could equally well have been spoken by Ýmir to Odin, Vili, and Vé: “We are born in one and the same night.” For while the *Edda* does not delineate the timeline of creation in such a way that we can know this to be the case, the account of the birth of Bor’s sons follows immediately after the account of the creation of Ýmir, all of which takes place before the formation of the earth, sky, and the sun—in other words, in the same primordial ‘night’ of mythic history. The motivation for the slaying of Hákon Jarl is also the same as the motivation for the killing of Ýmir: “honor and riches” as the *saga* puts it.¹⁵⁵ While this of course is only stated explicitly in *Ólafssaga Tryggvasonar*, the evidence of mythic history makes it clear that the killing of Ýmir serves precisely this dual purpose, i.e., of increasing the status of the gods (“honor”) and giving them control over the resources of the created world (“riches”).

Thus the killing of Ýmir seems more likely an act of unprovoked, premeditated murder than a response to giant aggression, or revenge for some unknown affront. The affront seems to consist in the giant’s mere existence. The killing of Ýmir is hence not simply the first of many episodes of racial conflict; the gods’ killing of Ýmir is the constitutive moment in the creation of such racial distinctions in the first place—the willful construction of a separate *Æsir* race. The gods do not kill him *because* he is different, but rather in order to make him so.

While a case can be made for the pre-existence of such a thing as “*Æsir*” as a distinct racial category, it is a weak one. Ýmir is formed when the sparks and molten particles of Muspell meet the ice and rime of Niflheim. The *Æsir*’s paternal ancestor, Búri, comes into being when the cow Audhumhla licks his body clear from the rime-stones. At first glance this would seem to establish a radically different genealogy

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

from Ýmir, yet this is not the case. Neither of them are procreated using time-honored means. Both are in fact formed when a source of heat (i.e., sparks; an animal's tongue) encounter the cold of ice and rime. Their creations are both variations on the same theme. It is not until Búri's son Borr takes a giantess wife that sexual pairing between male and female takes place. Is this the beginning of the Æsir "race"? It may seem so, but the word "Æsir" has not yet entered Snorri's ethnographic vocabulary at this stage in mythic history. It is not until Odin, Vili, and Vé kill Ýmir, create *Miðgarðr*, and Odin takes Frigg that Snorri speaks of an "Æsir race" (*Ása ættir*).¹⁵⁶

The very act of world-fashioning in Snorri's cosmogenesis is itself a killing and perhaps even a murder (distinguished from killing in the Norse legal system by its secretive nature). Snorri's version of the myth compounds two moments of Christian salvation history: In *Genesis* it is the first-born (as opposed to the first-created) man who is the first murderer. Cain's murder of Abel is the *consequence* of sin entering the world, not its cause. In Snorri's *Edda* this stain or "mark of Cain" is not borne by mankind, or even ultimately by the gods, but by the world itself which bears them. The physical world is the transformed corpse of the first being (a gigantic "body-modification"), and product of the first killing. The Norse world is corrupt from the beginning, "fallen" before it is first given shape or form. This physical world is a constant reminder, a nagging piece of forensic evidence of that primal crime. No wonder the giants are hell bent on burning it with fire. At the world-ending conflagration of Ragnarök, the giants perform a long-overdue funerary rite for their paternal dead ancestor.

Of the three possible origins of the cosmos (Ýggdrasill, raised from the sea, or created from the body of the slain frost-giant Ýmir), Snorri makes use only of the Ýmir myth. The reason for this, I suspect, is to establish a primal transgression or

¹⁵⁶ Faulkes, 13.

“original sin” for which a pre-existing tradition of Ragnarök can be reframed as its absolution. In so doing, Snorri remaps a pagan tradition onto a Christian concept of time, and attempts to demonstrate how his pagan ancestors proleptically grasped the truths of Christian revelation.

In this context, it would be relevant to recall how Cain, who killed his brother Abel, goes on to become the first citizen, a city dweller who takes the first step in the *civil-ization* of his culture. A similar tale is told in Snorri’s account of the Master Builder, in which the god’s kill their (unacknowledged) kin, the Giant Builder, in order to establish their city (*borg*) of Ásgarðr. Cain’s brother Abel was a shepherd, and more closely associated with the land and nature, just as the giants are more closely associated with the earth, which is formed from the body of their primordial ancestor, Ýmir. As in *Genesis*, the prophecy of *Völuspá* relates events in a systematic and familiar way, beginning with chaos, progressing to creation, judgment and order, and finally leading to the creation of humanity. Within this narrative, there is an obvious urban shift of focus—the Aesir become enthralled with the building of “altars, temples, high-timbered halls”—followed by a newfound appreciation for the rural and the pastoral, “sitting in meadows, smiling over gameboards.” Essentially the Aesir discover cottage country—an *Ersatz* state of nature. They will only be returned to nature when the dichotomy of nature and culture implodes at Ragnarök, where “they will find a wondrous treasure / gold gameboards, lying in the grass / where they had left them so long before” (47, cf. 10).

Christian and pagan traditions diverge in the chronology of their respective archetypal fratricides. In the Christian world-view, the story of Cain and Abel, takes place at the *beginning* of salvation history, whereas the archetypal fratricide of Norse myth—the death of Baldr at the hands of his blind brother, Höðr—brings mythic history (understood as that which happens *between* creation and destruction) to an *end*.

Since mythic history ends with fratricide, it is plausible to ask whether this history does not perhaps *begin* with it as well? My reading of the Æsir's slaying of Ýmir would certainly support such a claim. This parallel would in turn support my claim that for Snorri the death of Ýmir is a fratricide, and that "gods" and "giants" are cultural constructs made by Æsir society. There is a further symmetry in the fact that mythic history begins and ends with the killings of Ýmir and Baldr specifically. According to the Æsir view of history, Ýmir, is the Ur-giant, whereas Baldr is the purest of the gods, literally their "best and brightest."¹⁵⁷ Baldr represents the pinnacle of the Æsir racial ideology that, as with all ideologies, attempts to print its culture with the stamp of nature. Baldr and Ýmir occupy the extremes of the Æsir's ethnographic spectrum; thus it is fitting that they occupy the extremes of Æsir history as well.¹⁵⁸

This dichotomy of nature and culture is a source of tension throughout the stories about the Norse gods, who cannot escape the "original sin" caused by their abandonment of nature, personified in their kinsmen Ýmir, whose internecine murder makes possible the privileged, civilized order on which the culture of the gods depends. While "culture" and "nature" are two of the broadest concepts in our theoretical vocabulary, everybody has some basic sense of what is implied in their distinction. For example, the concepts "woman" and "man" belong to the sphere of nature (there would still be men and women even if there were no human societies), whereas the concepts "wife" and "husband" are cultural inventions. In the Norse system, they—like all cultural goods—add value to natural resources, as when the gods imbue lifeless tree-trunks with breath and life in order to make the first human beings, Askr and Embla.

¹⁵⁷ Faulkes, 23.

¹⁵⁸ Æsir history is not the same thing as *world* history; there is a cosmos before the Æsir, and a world without them (see pp. 111-112, below) after Ragnarök. It is parallel to the Christian *Saeculum*: that which happens between Fall and Last Judgement.

The metaphoric work or *Arbeit am Mythos* performed by the concepts of “male” and “female” in the myths, however, requires more fleshing out. In some ways these categories reflect sexist assumptions that seem familiar enough: women are passive—men are active; men are orderly, rational—women are chaotic, always change their minds (“*la donna e mobile*”), etc. Yet it will hardly suffice to superimpose our own weird ideas about the sexes on the Norse's weird ideas about them. Male and female are at the root of the culture-nature binary that Ragnarök destroys, and at the root of the god-giant distinction itself.

The first being in the cosmos, the giant Ýmir, plays a female role in that the other giants are “born” from him parthenogenically. Procreation up to this point is still strictly a male prerogative. The female role in reproduction is limited to a nurturing function by the primeval cow, Auðhumla, whose name Orchard interprets as meaning “hornless and fecund.”¹⁵⁹ The myths give the female no role in the dynamic, form-giving aspect of procreation, which is ascribed to the male. This is consistent with the prevailing notions of medieval and ancient Greek medicine, which view woman as a mere incubator and provider of raw material for the form-giving male artisan-creator. Any female share in reproduction for which there is not overwhelming visual evidence (e.g., lactation) is ascribed to the male agent. The female role in reproduction is acknowledged in the Edda only when individuals begin to marry outside their kinship-group (i.e., exogamously). Hence the first giantess we learn of by name is the also the first *wife*: Bestla, married to the second-generation Ás, Bor. The male usurpation of the female role in procreation is also evident in Loki, who turns himself into a mare and begets Hel, Fenrir, and the Midgard serpent with the stallion, Svaðilfœri. The Æsir also create (or rather engineer) the natural world out of the body of their maternal kinsman, Ýmir, and from this male body arise a race of spontaneously generated, all-

¹⁵⁹ Orchard, 142.

male creatures known as dwarfs.

The metaphors “male” and “female” are bound by the Norse conception of the female as the Natural, providing raw material, and the “male” as Cultural, giving shape or form to that material. Thus in the myth of Þjazi the Æsir try to transform a raw ox into a cooked ox, but are thwarted because they are in giantland, i.e., in the realm of Nature or the raw, not the cooked. The giant Þjazi, on the other hand, begins to devour the beast, tearing off its hams and shoulders. His threat to Loki is not limited to dragging him over stones and tree-tops: Loki thought his arms “were going to be wrenched from his shoulders” (60), which is precisely what just happened to the ox. Þjazi threatens to turn Loki into an animal. This underlying potential for bestialization underscores Loki's ambiguous and precarious position between the culture and nature, between man (and, indeed, woman) and beast.

Iðunn must also be noted in this context. Iðunn tends (cultivates = culture) the golden apples of the gods. Þjazi (giant = nature) uses an intermediary (neutralization = Loki) to bring Iðunn “back to nature”—not as his wife (marriage is after all a cultural institution), but presumably for a more “natural” extra-marital relationship. Loki transforms her into a nut (something raw) in order to transpose, or rather, transplant, her back into the gods' realm of culture, where she can continue tending the golden apples. Interestingly, Þjazi's daughter Skaði seeks compensation from the gods in the form of a marriage with one of the Æsir. While the male giant abjures the social constraints of marriage for concubinage, his daughter is willing to submit to the disciplining force of culture.

What do gods want? Women: more specifically, Æsir wives and giant concubines—as well as the riches of material culture. What the giants want is equally clear: Æsir and Vanir women. The giants may take, or threaten to take, the gods' possessions (Mjöllnir, Valhalla), but not, it seems, as ends in themselves, but as means

to attain Æsir brides. Tellingly, the giants cannot make any use of cultural resources after they take them (e.g., Mjöllnir). The dwarfs, who are born of the giants, can produce cultural goods, but cannot make use of them themselves (e.g., Sif's hair). Giant women seem more interested in entering into legitimate relationships with the gods, and seek out Æsir husbands (Skaði); however, they are deflected into less desirable marriages with the Vanir (Njórðr, Freyr), who as fertility figures occupy a medial position between culture and nature. In *Ynglingasaga* the condition of the Æsir-Vanir truce and integration of the Vanir into Æsir culture is the abandonment of their usual practice of incest (associated here as in Wagner with untamed nature). Gerðr, of course, does not actively seek out an Æsir husband, but her unwillingness to accept Freyr's marriage proposal might stem from a reluctance to accept such a match. (She is the most beautiful woman in the world, after all. Why settle for a Vanir?) Both Freyr/Gerðr and Njórðr/Skaði fail to reproduce (not a good thing if you happen to be a fertility god). After their “divorce,” Snorri says “Njórðr of Noatun had afterwards two children” (24). He does not say he had them with Skaði (although some sources indicate this); *Ynglingasaga* is clear that he had them with his unnamed sister. Freyr and Gerðr do not have any children either. A kenning in Snorri's *Edda* describes Odin's wife, Frigg, as “the rival of Jörð and Rindr and Gunnlöð and Gerðr” (86); the first three are mistresses of Odin, which leaves the possibility that Gerðr could be another.

The pattern that emerges in the myths is the desire on the part of the Æsir to maintain a strict monopoly on cultural and reproductive resources. Schematically, this can be represented as follows:

wish.

Just how different are the giants from the gods? The Giant Builder is clearly aware of Æsir hostility, since oaths of truce must be sworn before he agrees to undertake the work. But why would the giants agree to build an invulnerable fortress for the gods if they considered the animosity of the gods permanent? It seems, rather, that the Builder is attempting to establish economic and even marital relations, perhaps as a means of securing peace. Is the truce between the gods and the builder valid only for the length of construction, or is the Builder's agreement predicated on the idea of a permanent truce? A closer examination of Snorri's exact wording would suggest the latter:

But at their agreement there had been might witnesses invoked and many oaths, for the giants did not think it safe to be among the Æsir without a guarantee of safety if Thor were to return home, but at that time he was gone away into eastern parts to thrash trolls. (35)

Snorri's text says, "the giants did not think it safe," even though the tale speaks of only one giant, the Builder. This can be interpreted two ways: (1) the giants in general, and this giant in particular, did not think it safe to be among the gods, or (2) the agreement to build the gods' impregnable fortress is indicative of a general cease of hostility between the gods and the giants, or at least interpreted as such by the latter. The text does not allow us to draw a firm conclusion, but we should not let our preconceptions blind us to the existence of such ambiguities. It seems the gods perceive the giants as a threat more than vice-versa. It is certainly impossible to imagine the Æsir agreeing to build an impregnable fortress for the giants.

Since one purpose of the fortress is to protect Æsir women against the constant threat of giant predation, the fortress would arguably have no longer served any purpose once Freyja, i.e., the reproductive capacity of the gods, had been hauled off to giantland. We see the same catch-22 at work in *Þrýmsqviða*, where the gods must

choose between Freyja and Thor's hammer, or, more abstractly, a goddess and the means for protecting her. This is also the case in the tale of Freyr, who must relinquish his sword in order to attain a bride.

The giants, as we have seen, are marked by their rapaciousness, their desire for *Æsir* women, and their excesses and appetites in general. Odin's own rapaciousness for culture, for wisdom, and the lengths at which he goes to obtain them is suggestive of the same excess. The ways in which Odin's excesses are construed as different from giant excess is exceedingly suggestive. Odin, more than any of the other gods, seems particularly sensitive about the lack of degrees of separation between the gods and the giants, which is more acute in his case than in that of his offspring. Particularly telling of this anxiety, Odin berates Thor for giving the Hrungrnir's horse to his son Magni, "the son of a giantess." But Odin is no less the "son of a giantess" than Thor's son, since he is the son of the giantess Bestla.

The excesses of Hrungrnir, who rushes too far past the gates of *Ásgarðr*, "demands" a drink *after* he is offered one, gets drunk, threatens to remove Valhalla, kill all the gods, and abduct Sif and Freyja, are matched by those of his opponent Thor, who can lower the sea-level with his draughts, eat a whole ox and eight salmon, drink three casks of mead, and flies into a rage at the slightest provocation. If being out of control is a sign of giant excess, it is also a stark reminder of Thor's own genealogy.¹⁶¹ The perilous consanguinity is also signaled by the fact Hrungrnir takes Thor's place, drinking out of the Thor's golden goblets, while Thor is away (77).

Loki is a link between the gods and the giants, and hence is rejected by both sides. For both, Loki is an uncomfortable reminder of the lack of real distance between *Æsir* and *jötnar*. Both Thor and his companion Loki are walking reminders of the

¹⁶¹ For a contemporary parallel, Thor's aggression towards the giants he so closely resembles reminds one, *mutatis mutandis*, of the gay-bashing bigot who is himself a repressed homosexual.

violence necessary to maintain this arbitrary opposition—by force in the case of Thor, by wit in the case of Loki.

There is a common thread between the Giant Builder and Hrungrir episodes as well. Hrungrir is threatened with an anal assault. But the threat of sexual violence soon gives way to a sexually uncharged display of brute force. When Þjálfi warns Hrungrir of the impending threat to his posterior, wit, along with sex and force, joins the arsenal deployed against the giant. Hence the Hrungrir episode is a showcase of the three means for dealing with giant aggression: wit, sex, and force. In the case of Loki and Svaðilfœri, the gods initially abstain from the use of direct force, which is initially forbidden them by oath, by using the same sexual submission, this time proffered by Loki, with which Hrungrir is threatened by Þjálfi. In both cases, the gods trick the giants into mistaking a deployment of brute strength for a sexual encounter.

The evidence suggests that the giants do not so much represent disorder or chaos (as is commonly supposed by scholars who take their cues from the gods), as they do their own counter-order. This is most evident in the Gerð/Skírnir episode, and also in *Þrýmsqviða*, where the ordered social structure of the giants is in the foreground. Curiously, the giant's own social order is most in evidence when giantesses are concerned (Gunnlöð, Gerðr, Skaði, Thor-as-bride, etc.). This can be represented on a spectrum as follows:

God/Giant spectrum

Pure Æsir

Pure jötnar

Baldr – Odin – Thor – Magni, Viðar, etc – Loki – Giantesses – Giants
(1) (2) (3) (4) (3) (2) (1)

- 1st degree are slain or suffer as a result of treachery (cf. Baldr, Hrungrnir).
- 2nd degree are female or engage in female practices (cf. giantess, Odin's practice of *seiðr*); consort with one another
- 1st and 2nd degree both noted for their wisdom
- 3rd degree is sexually ambiguous; gender-bending; hyper masculine and hyper feminine (cf. Thor's cross dressing in *Þrýmsqviða*; Loki's androgyny); companions to each other, both possessed of wit, but not wisdom
- 4th degree are god/giant half-breeds, all are male, all are victorious; survive Ragnarök

1. Baldr, Hóðr, Týr, Hermóðr, Bragi; the Giant Builder, Hrungrnir, Hýmír
2. Odin & the giantesses Jorð, Rindr, Gunnlōð, and Gerðr
3. Thor and Loki
4. Moði, Magni, Viðar, Váli

Of course, this spectrum does not represent real, natural differences but rather differences perceived and imagined from the perspective of culture. After Ragnarök, all categories collapse into the 4th group in recognition of the post-ideological nature of the new world.

However, these similarities should not blind us to actual differences between the two sides either. The relation of the giants to the “nature” side of the equation is very important, since most of the gods' raw materials come from giants and dwarfs. Although, to follow this line of argument, saying that the god-giant distinction is unsustainable is perhaps another way of saying that the distinction between nature and culture is also unsustainable—not counterfeit, but predicated on willful (as opposed to natural) violence, deception, and subordination of “natural” impulses to social order. This explains the gods' *Gewaltmonopol* (monopoly of violence), whereby they may regularly violate their own oaths and bonds with the giants. The racial distinction

(god/giant) is the surface feature of a class distinction (rich/poor, noble/peasant, us/them), perhaps ultimately rooted in something as questionable as the culture-nature binary on which the veneer of civilization depends.

b. Ragnarök and Roll

Ragnarök depicts the collapse of these binaries—culture and nature, god and giant, male and female—and the breaking of the bonds, fetters, and constraints which kept them from collapse. At Ragnarök a being called Surtr (whom Snorri never calls a giant, although “Surtr” is among the giant names in *Skáldskaparmál*) will set the world ablaze with his flaming sword. A sword of flame—a human artifact composed of one of the four elements of medieval science—neatly symbolizes the merger of culture and nature, and is the ideal instrument with which to cancel out these binaries. From the giants’ perspective the world must be destroyed. The world—the scattered remains of their kinsman, Ýmir—is being used as a stomping ground for the gods. Burial by fire is a logical closure to the gods slaying of Ýmir.

While all the giants and most of the gods perish at Ragnarök, the lesson of Ragnarök is not that giants are stronger. Ultimately only a synthesis of opposing forces survives the old world. The new world, purged of conflict, is not ruled by gods or giants by the bastard offspring of both. Móði, Magni, Víðarr, and Váli are all sons of Æsir fathers and their giantess concubines, born out of wedlock. This signals that the new world will function harmoniously and naturally without any of the social constraints, oaths, or bonds invoked and broken in the old one. Baldr and Höðr, the purest of the pure Æsir survive as well, but I would note that they—unlike Móði, Magni, Víðarr, and Váli—have to be brought back from the dead. Baldr is united in peace with his slayer Höðr; Höðr is reunited in peace with his slayer Váli. The lions do not lay down with the lambs—the lions *are* the lambs and vice versa.

Snorri's account of the world after Ragnarök highlights the merging of god and giant bloodlines in Móði, Magni, Víðarr, Váli, or, rather, the recognition that these bloodlines are not different to begin with. There is a contrast between the resurrected gods of the Poetic Edda and the addition of the Æsir-giant half-breeds in Snorri. The pure Æsir do not survive Ragnarök: they are resurrected in its wake. The survival of Baldr, the poster-boy for Æsir racism, is potentially ambiguous. Does Baldr's continued existence suggest a carry-over of the old racial ideologies that led to the final conflagration in the first place? This ambiguity is resolved by the fact that Baldr does not survive; rather, he returns from the dead, reborn and purged of the sins of the old world.

How do the gods' (both Æsir and Vanir) legitimate, endogamous marriages pan out compared to their relationships with their giant mistresses? How do the legitimate offspring of the gods fare compared to their illegitimate half-siblings? What are their respective fates/accomplishments? One might expect legitimate marriages to produce the most favorable consequences for the Æsir, but the exact opposite is the case. Thor himself is the illegitimate son of Odin with the giantess Jörð, not with his wife, Frigg. Odin's legitimate children all meet with disaster before Ragnarök, while his illegitimate son Thor triumphs. The illegitimate children of the gods routinely prove more successful: Thor's children Móði, Magni, and Þrúðr (Thor doesn't have any children with his wife, Sif), as well as Odin's sons Víðarr (with the giantess Grið) and Váli (with the giantess Rindr) all fare well:

- Magni throws Hrungrnir's leg off his father when the other gods cannot.
- Móði and Magni will possess their father's hammer after Ragnarök.
- Víðarr defeats the Fenris Wolf.
- Váli avenges Baldr.
- Þrúðr escapes abduction by the dwarf Álviss.

Compared with these bastards, most of Odin's legitimate children (Baldr, Höðr, Hermóðr, Týr, Bragi) fare badly:

- Baldr – accidentally killed by Höðr
- Höðr – accidentally kills his brother Baldr
- Hermóðr – fails to retrieve Baldr from Hel
- Týr – hand bitten off by Fenris Wolf
- Bragi – his wife Iðunn is abducted by giants

Since Loki is also “counted among the Æsir,” we must also add Loki’s legitimate sons Váli and “Nari or Narfi” (26) to the mix. According to Snorri, the Æsir turn Váli into a wolf who tears his brother to pieces, whereupon the Æsir use his entrails to bind Loki until such time as all bonds break. Arguably the illegitimate children of Loki born to the giantess Angrboða (Hel, the Midgard Serpent, and the Fenris Wolf) give a much more distinguished account of themselves, even though they ultimately perish at Ragnarök.¹⁶²

Assuming that the myths leave little to chance, the issue of who fights, slays, and is killed by whom, and who survives at Ragnarök is of considerable symbolic import. What is the significance of these pairings? The pattern that emerges is that the offspring of gods and giantesses slay offspring of giants and goddesses:

<u>Gods</u>		<u>“Hel’s people”(54)</u>
	<i>kills</i>	
Thor	–	Midgard Serpent
Víðarr	–	Fenris Wolf
Heimdallr	–	Loki

Add Týr and Garmr and Freyr and Surtr to the list for a complete account of single combats. While we do not know Garmr’s pedigree, his conflict with Týr is parallel to Fenrir’s battle with Odin. Surtr is generally assumed to be a giant, although there is no concrete evidence that this is the case. Only two of the ten beings whose five final battles Snorri describes in detail survive the ordeal: Víðarr and Surtr. In Víðarr we have a figure who embodies the unity of the gods and the giants, and in Surtr we have

¹⁶² One wonders, although there are few points of comparison against which to measure, if Snorri’s versions exhibit a particularly Icelandic take on the myths that reflects the fear of inbreeding on a small isolated island with an estimated peak medieval population of 30,000.

a being who represents the fiery element of a formerly strife-filled nature with which the survivors of Ragnarök now live in harmony.

The pattern noted above, whereby “pure” offspring meet disaster while their mixed siblings achieve fame and fortune, is not only evident in myth but also in the saga tradition as well. In *Völsungasaga*, the most mythologically-minded of the *fornaldarsögur*, Sinfjötli, the most racially pure Völsung (born from the incestuous union of brother and sister) meets an ignominious death by poison; he furthermore suspects it is poison but drinks at the exhortation of his drunken father, Sigmundur. Sinfjötli stands in stark contrast to his successful half-brother Helgi, who is only half Völsung. Notably, the half-breed Helgi is the only character in the saga who makes it “out of the saga”—a tale best described as Ragnarök on a human scale—alive. And Helgi wins fame, fortune, and a wife in the process. The saga draws heavily on the mythological tradition as we know it via Snorri. Sigmundur battles a wolf while his son, Sigurðr, defeats a dragon (or “worm” in Old Norse), thus recapitulating the conflict of Odin and the Fenris Wolf and Thor and the Midgard Serpent. Sigmundur is angered when he is surpassed in battle by Sinfjötli, who kills 11 men. I do not believe that anyone has ever suggested this a possible psychological clue behind Sigmundur’s bad advice to his son that he drink the poison. This would also explain why Odin later kills Sigmundur himself. After all, Sigmundur succeeds where Odin will eventually fail, namely, Sigmundur kills a wolf who tries to eat him, whereas Odin will one-day be eaten by a wolf. It is quite plausible that Odin kills Sigmundur out of the same envy out of which Sigmundur appears to let Sinfjötli die.

Is the post-Ragnarök world of Snorri’s *Edda* a triumph of reconciliation of opposing groups or of ethnic cleansing? It is ultimately difficult not to see the co-existence of Höðr with his killer, and the sons of mixed god-giant parentage, as evidence of an age of reconciliation. Will it last? Or will violence repeat itself in

circular fashion? This speaks to the much-debated question as to whether Old Norse mythic time is circular or linear.¹⁶³ Here we must ultimately refocus on the disparity of the sources; there seem to be different answers to this question.

Divergent interpretations have been adduced for the ending of *Völuspá*. Is it a brave new world, or one full of dark portent? Much of this debate has been focused on the dragon, Níðhöggr of the last stanza:

There comes the dark	dragon flying,
Flashing upward	from Nidafells;
On wide swift wings	it soars above the earth,
carrying corpses.	Now she will sink down.

(Terry 8.50)

We cannot adequately address the question as to whether the dragon, Níðhöggr, is a “purifying” or a “threatening presence.”¹⁶⁴ The other question as to who the “she” of the last line is—the dragon or the Völva herself—cannot be adequately addressed here. What we can note, in either case, is that the threatening presence of monsters in the new world is at least externalized as a dragon and no longer represented as a racial Other. Hence the potential for the old racial divisions is eliminated after Ragnarök. This speaks against the theory that Old Norse mythic time is circular.

None of the survivors of Ragnarök are female. There is no accounting of the fate of the goddesses at or after Ragnarök. Snorri speaks of Líf and Lífþrasir, “two people” (57) whose names both simply mean “life.” Logically, one of must be male and the other female since “from these people there will be descended such a great progeny that all the world will be inhabited” (57) Nevertheless, Snorri avoids any direct reference to womankind. Furthermore, the evidence of early mythic history raises the possibility of continued male parthenogenesis. This seems unlikely given the precedent of the first human couple, Ask and Embla, but cannot be ruled out. The

¹⁶³ Lindow, 39-45; Clunies Ross (1994), 229-241.

¹⁶⁴ Patricia Terry, 10.

question is academic. The salient fact is that after Ragnarök there is no clear reference to female procreation, which is relegated to the cosmic realm in the form of the sun who will miraculously bear a daughter who will “follow the paths of her mother” (57). Cosmogogenesis was previously relegated to the male in the form of Ýmir’s body and its subsequent act of “male pseudo-procreation”¹⁶⁵ and the male Æsir who put the heavenly lights in place. After Ragnarök, the normal female role of reproduction is restored. Not even Odin’s Valkyries play a role at the end of the world; perhaps because there is not going to be a Valhalla for them to bring the slain to under this reign of peace? Even so, it is remarkable that there is no accounting of their fate. Perhaps it will be an age of peace because the main source of tension between the gods and giants will no longer be extant—there will be no more women to fight about.

Despite this lack of female inhabitants, Snorri’s post-Ragnarök world is more densely populated than either of his sources: *Völuspá* (46) lists only Báldr and Hóðr; *Vafþrúðnismál* lists Móði, Magni, Víðar, and Váli as the future inhabitants of this brave new world. Snorri’s account combines both sets: *Völuspá*’s pure Æsir and *Vafþrúðnismál*’s god-giant half-breeds. Commentators have been quick to point out Snorri’s antiquarian reflexes, and assume he is simply too thorough a compiler to let any strands of tradition slip away.¹⁶⁶ This, however, ignores that Snorri is in fact highly selective with his sources and leaves accounts out of his retellings of certain stories (*Hýmisqviða*, *For Skírnis*, *Völuspá*) that do not suit his cultural milieu or his agenda. I believe we should hesitate to ascribe Snorri’s more complete accounting of the inhabitants of this new earth to mere antiquarian thoroughness.

Two of the accounts are disparate; Snorri’s is synthetic. All three reveal something about the subject position of their fictional speakers, and perhaps, at

¹⁶⁵ Clunies Ross (1994), see note 134, above.

¹⁶⁶ As evinced, for example, by the sometimes contradictory mythography of the *Edda* and *Heimskringla*.

another remove, about their historical authors, especially Snorri and his priorities as a mythographer. Under closer scrutiny, two facts about the post-Ragnarökian accounts of *Völuspá*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, and *Gylfaginning* become clear: the Völva (or seeress) of *Völuspá* tells Oðinn that Báldr and Hóðr—the two “pure” Æsir—will survive Ragnarök; in other words, the Völva tells Oðinn exactly what he—whose efforts have been wholly directed at upholding this cultural distinction as racial—wants to hear. Vafþrúðnir caters less to Oðinn’s sensibilities. (They are, after all, engaged in a contest.) The names Vafþrúðnir lists are the god-giant halfbreeds, sons of pure Æsir and their giantess concubines, whom Oðinn denies membership in the Æsir club (*SnE* 79, Faulkes). Vafþrúðnir’s list is very much a wish-fulfilment for his giant kin who have heretofore been excluded from Æsir society. Thus, whereas the Völva tells Oðinn exactly what he wants to hear (she wants this unwelcome inquisition to be over with), Vafþrúðnir does the opposite: his census of the god-giant mixed beings of the post-Ragnarökian period is an affront to Oðinn’s racial program, an additional provocation to the god whose death Vafþrúðnir fortells. Therefore the accounts of survival that Vafþrúðnir and the Völva give are not merely bits of lore that vary from source to source. The traditions themselves have an agenda, one pro-Æsir, the other pro-giant.¹⁶⁷ These are selective readings, even prescriptive ones. Each has its own *Sitz im Leben*; each speaks from one of two positions in the conflict of the gods and the giants.

By combining the post-Ragnarökian personae from both sources, *Völuspá* and *Vafþrúðnismál*, and creating a more populous post-apocalypse, Snorri is not merely being a more thorough compiler; he is taking a position on cultural difference. The evidence—both of his version of life after Ragnarök and of his depiction of the giants generally—indicates that for Snorri the difference between Æsir and *jötnar* is cultural,

¹⁶⁷ The Völva’s pro-Æsir stance perhaps strengthens Ursula Dronke’s case (*Völ.*, 30-31) for the human identity of the Völva.

not physical. According to Snorri, this distinction will fade away when the baggage of mythic history is consumed in the flames and washed away by purging waters of Ragnarök.

That is why Snorri’s giants are not big.



Illustration 3: A present-day giant in Seattle, Washington, occupies “the margins of the known world” underneath a busy traffic bridge. Photo: Michael Hanson for The New York Times.

c. Iceland & Norway

In this ethnographic dimension the “political unconscious” of Snorri’s encyclopedic mythography comes to the surface. The relationship of the gods and the giants—two groups whose perceived differences are cultural, not racial—is a close parallel to the relationship of the Æsir to Gylfi and, more importantly, of Iceland to Norway.

Let us review the parallels between the gods and the giants, the Norwegians and the Icelanders:

- They share a common ancestry, but occupy different geographic locations.
- Both groups share a common language, with minor regional variations (cf. *Alvíssmál*)
- The stronger group looks to the weaker for natural resources and marriageable females.
- Peace between opposing sides depends on achieving some sort of political unity whose exact nature is unclear but is attained through a world-historical upheaval.

While the sagas are replete with tales of Norwegians who settle in Iceland and take local brides, there do not seem to be many sagas that feature Icelanders who journey to Norway to take a wife. The evidence of *Njáls saga*, in which Hrutr is seduced by the Queen of Norway with disastrous results, suggests that a system of “negative reciprocity”¹⁶⁸ in matters of matrimony governs the social relations of the Icelanders and the Norwegians no less than it does those of the gods and the giants.

This is not to claim that the gods are merely ciphers for the Norwegians or the giants for Icelanders. The myths do not allude in a neatly linear fashion. The reason they still resonate today is that they can be read in any number of fashions. What interests us is the *Sitz im Leben* of the myths with the inhabitants of medieval Iceland. thirteenth-century Icelanders could alternately relate to either group depending on the social context or situation. When dealing with the Norwegian nobility, how like a giant, when dealing with their own households and thingmen, or raiding abroad, how like a god.

The notion of “land-taking” or *landnám* is fundamental to medieval Icelandic nationalism. Land-taking, or rather “land-making” is also the first act performed by the gods at the dawn of mythic time. Thus the tales of the gods resonate in what I would call “the psycho-mythology of everyday life” in medieval Iceland. It is telling

¹⁶⁸ Clunies Ross (1994), 103-106.

that Snorri prefaces his own account of Norse mythology and mythic history with another “land-taking,” drawing on a bit of Skaldic verse to create a frame story of mythic land-taking—Gefjun’s seizure and transfer by oxen of a lake-sized chunk of Sweden to Denmark—which, most notably, is in essence about the transferal of an island (or what, at any rate, becomes an island) between two rival Scandinavian powers. The tale of Gefjun is a tale of the creation of a new island state founded by giants.¹⁶⁹

In the previous chapter, I discussed the encyclopedic dimension of Snorri’s *Edda* as Snorri’s attempt to serve as middle-man between the “two cultures” of Iceland and Norway. In this chapter, I argue that Snorri’s mythic ethnography, especially as it regards the “giantness” of the giants, is central to this project. In so doing I want to suggest that long-standing notions about the inhabitants of Snorri’s mythic world have little basis in his actual work. Standing once more on the shoulders of frost-giants (even though they are not especially tall in Snorri), we are now in a position to delineate the “two cultures” model more broadly as follows:

“Two Cultures”

Norway – Iceland
 Gods - Giants
 Æsir - Gylfi

Wisdom & Wit – Wisdom only
 Colonizer - Colonized
 Male - Female

Christian – Pagan
 Foreign – Native
 Latin – vernacular



the Encyclopedia

The difficulty faced by the mythical Æsir in maintaining an ethnic and cultural identity

¹⁶⁹ Margaret Clunies Ross, “The Myth of Gefjun and Gylfi and its Function in *Snorra Edda* and *Heimskringla*,” *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi*, 93 (1978), 149-65.

distinct from that of the giants is analogous to the plight of thirteenth-century Icelanders struggling to maintain their own ethnic and cultural identity distinct from Norway. The thirteenth century was a period in which that distinction, to the extent it once existed, was quickly devolving under conditions of renewed political and economic dependence.

I propose that Snorri maintains the “giantness” of the giants as “false appearances” in certain cases, as with Skrímir and Mökkurkálfi, paralleled by the illusions cast on Gylfi by the historical Æsir, and on Thor and his companions by Útgarða-Loki. The perceived cultural and ethnic differences between Iceland and Norway collapse into one another in the political *Dämmerung* of the mid thirteenth century, just as those between god and giant do at Ragnarök. The differences that separate Them and Us are illusory constructs, just as Skrímir and Mökkurkálfi are literally just that. Even so, these differences form an important part of a distinct Icelandic identity, and must be respected if only on the level of “deceptive appearances.”

The trials of Thor and his companions in the hall of Útgarða-Loki anticipate the events of Ragnarök. Like that final battle, in Útgarða-Loki’s hall the god and his companions are defeated by the Midgard Serpent, all-consuming fire, a sea whose tide they cannot stem, the passage of time, and ultimately by an illusory idea. The parallels to all but the last require no lengthy spelling out: Útgarða-Loki’s cat, the eating contest with Logi, Thor’s drinking match against the sea and wrestling with old age. But what is the “thought” that, like Hugi, the gods cannot catch? I would submit that it is the Æsir’s racist ideology itself, an idea that leads to their own defeat and destruction at Ragnarök. The giants, like Útgarða-Loki’s contestants, are not what the gods perceive them to be.

Thus the outer trappings of giantness are illusory, but still meaningful. The

“basic idea of a giant” (to quote Eldvik once more *pace* Eldvik) stems from the inability to regard other cultures as fully human. The giant is the outsider who “embodies” his cultural difference (in the sense of our current theoretical jargon). Thus dehumanized, his extermination is legitimated by the alleged threat he poses to human society. European conquerors and colonizers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, from Columbus onwards, sent back reports of Native Americans they regarded as “giants.”¹⁷⁰ To quote Heinrich Heine once more, “Die Furcht hat vielleicht ihrem Maße manche Elle hinzugefügt” (Fear perhaps added many a cubit to their measure).

To perceive differences between one’s social group and another as *cultural* as opposed to *natural* requires the ability to conceive one’s own values and institutions as mutable and contingent rather than fixed and eternal. Despite, or perhaps even *because* of its own recent religious conversion, this was no more the mindset of medieval Iceland than it was of the Spanish *conquistadors*. In the mainline Scandinavian tradition, differences that cannot be conceived in terms of culture are often projected onto the nature of things, as is the case with the giants. But for Snorri, who played a unique role as cultural and political mediator between all things Norwegian and Icelandic, Christian and pagan, foreign and native, Latin and vernacular, these gigantic differences remain “deceptive appearances.”

¹⁷⁰ John F. Moffin, “‘Een West-Indien Landschap met Vreet Ghebouw’: Jan Mostaert on the Architectural Primitivism Characterizing a ‘Golden Age’ Reborn in the New World,” *Art and the Native American: Perceptions, Reality, and Influences*, ed. Mary Louise Elliot Krumrine and Susan C. Scott, Papers in Art History from the Pennsylvania State University (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania State University Dept. of Art History: 2002), 111.

III. Wit, Wisdom, and the Sapiential Arms-Race

If the gods are fundamentally no different than the giants, how are they to distinguish themselves from them?

The answer to this question is bound up with the status of wisdom in Old Norse mythological tradition. Why do does Odin attempt to outdo the giants in all things sapiential? Why do the gods value wisdom in the first place? This is indeed a conundrum for the student of the sapiential tradition in Old Norse literature. Based on the evidence of the sources, it is clear that wisdom, once acquired, is of precious little avail, or in some cases even a detriment to the gods. Wisdom is of little use in forestalling, and no use whatsoever in preventing Ragnarök. *Hávamál* warns against the acquisition and display of excessive wisdom; the tales of Kvasir, Mímir, Baldr, Álviss, Ýmir, and Vafþrúðnir bear this warning out. The ultimate futility of Odin's pursuit of wisdom is evident from the events of Ragnarök depicted in Snorri's *Edda* and the Poetic Edda, and in the two sagas that reduce the narrative of Ragnarök to a human scale, *Völsunga saga* and *Njáls saga*. Wisdom, it seems, is not good for *anything*—much less defeating the giants at Ragnarök. It would be difficult to point to a single figure in Norse myth or saga who prevails on the basis of hard-gained wisdom; certainly neither Odin, nor Sigurðr, nor Njáll does.

Paradoxically, this is precisely why wisdom is essential to the gods' construction of a distinct *Æsir* identity predicated on alleged differences between *Æsir* and *jötnar*. I would argue that superior wisdom is a status symbol the gods use to construct that difference. Thus, the episodes where gods and giants match wits and other instances where wisdom plays a role in Old Norse myth are not isolated episodes but part of an ongoing "arms race."

How can wisdom be a weapon if its pursuit appears to be futile? Why does

wisdom confer status if it is not “useful” in any obvious sense? The answers to these questions clear up many enigmas. As with any status symbol, the more useless, the greater the status. Wisdom does not perform work (a task left to *cunning*, as I will later argue). Only the need to maintain the cultural distinction between gods and giants accounts for Odin’s pursuit of this useless knowledge.

The sapiential tradition in Old Norse Icelandic literature spans several genres, all of which share the agonistic (and antagonistic) element that characterizes the gods’ interactions with the giants. Scholars have coined the name “wisdom contest” (a term I also use in chapter 1) to describe Odin’s sapiential dueling in *Vafþrúðnismál*, and have discussed Snorri’s application of this model in *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál*. Chapter 1 made a case for moving beyond the competing either/or theories and argued that Snorri consciously merges the indigenous wisdom contest with the master-student dialogue of the Latinate Christian encyclopedic pedagogical tradition to address his own unique situation as a mediator between the “two cultures.”

The Old Norse sapiential tradition poses an ethnographic question that can accurately be answered in contradictory ways: Are the giants wise or foolish? On the one hand, they are depicted as beholden to physical urges—lust, gluttony, and anger—acquisitive as well as stupid, and always a step behind the gods’ machinations. Yet the giants are also venerable, older and wiser than the gods, and are sources of resources and wisdom. The stupid giant is more a creature of saga tradition than mythography, as evinced by the passages cited early in this chapter, and most succinctly by this Kári’s ally Björn in *Njáls saga*:

“Let’s fool them all like dumb giants” (*við skulum ginna þá alla sem þursa*)
(*Njáls saga* ch. 151.)

Although the giants are regularly outwitted by the gods (like, e.g., the Giant Builder, Hrungrnir, Þýrm, Þjazi, Skaði, and Hýmir), they are nevertheless depicted as wise.

Wisdom is in fact the first attribute mentioned of the first of their kind, Ýmir, “the wise giant” (*inn fróði jötunn*) (10:10). The giants’ store of wisdom is on its fullest display in *Vafþrúðnismál*. Aptly enough, giants are almost always killed by blows to the head—the seat of wisdom (cf. *Vafþrúðnismál* 7, 55; *Hýmisqviða* 25; *SnE* 36, 47, 62, 79, cf. 8).

The “wisdom contest” is a scholarly construct since no one example of the genre—neither *Vafþrúðnismál*, nor *Gylfaginning*, nor *Alvíssmál*—quite follows the “rules” as gleaned by scholars.¹⁷¹ The discussion of a common genre is only possible in terms of the Wittgensteinian “family resemblances” I discuss in chapter 1. The wisdom contest belongs to an extended family with many cousins in saga literature, such as the riddle contest of *Heidreks saga konungs ins vitra*, or the dialogue of Sigurðr and Brynhild in *Völsungasaga*.

It is possible, however, to make more theoretical and less normative distinctions between the genres of Old Norse sapiential tradition. Whereas an inductively derived, normative theory of genre gives us the “wisdom contest,” a more fundamental distinction can be made between works that represent the *acquisition* of wisdom and those that represent its *performance*; *Völuspá* would be a prime example of the former, *Grímnismál* of the latter. This is, of course, depends on an Æsir-centric perspective. Odin acquires wisdom and performs it in *Grímnismál*; but the Völva also performs wisdom, and Grímnir’s son, Agnar, acquires it. With that proviso in mind, I would suggest dividing Old Norse-Icelandic sapiential literature into Wisdom Acquisitions: *Völuspá* (Odin), *Grímnismál* (Agnar), *Gylfaginning* (Gylfi); and Wisdom Performances: *Vafþrúðnismál* (Vafþrúðnir, Odin), *Alvíssmál* (Alvis), *Hávamál* (Odin); noting that all Acquisitions (*Völuspá*, *Grímnismál*, *Gylfaginning*) are performances from the perspective of one of the parties (the Völva, Odin, and the

¹⁷¹ Judy Quinn (see note 77, above), 245-74.

Æsir).

“Wisdom” in the Old Norse sources is interchangeable with “knowledge.” The word *víss* (wise) refers primarily to someone who “knows much.” Only secondarily does it refer to the quality of “sound judgment” we are likely to associate with it. This is a secondary meaning predicated on the former; sound judgment stems from superior knowledge. Njáll serves as the prime example of this sound judgment in the sagas. However, as the examples of Njáll and Odin make clear, wisdom and judgment are ultimately futile when it comes to forstaying violence in an inherently violent system. Hence, wisdom’s status in a tradition that at first glance seems to value it above all else is radically called into question.

a. The Double Standard

The status of wisdom is a question at the very center of Snorri’s *Edda*. Gylfi and the historical Æsir’s attempts of to outwit each other in the frame narrative of *Gylfaginning* recapitulate the main theme and subject matter of Snorri’s mythic history: the gods’ and the giants’ attempts to outwit one another. I discuss the wisdom-contest dimension of *Gylfaginning* in the previous chapter (esp. pp. 37-39). But wisdom is explicitly thematized on other occasions as well.

Much of the wisdom of the Old Norse sapiential tradition is onomastic lore. As we all know from the fairy tale *Rumpelstilzchen*, knowing the name of something is the first step towards controlling it. Knowing a name gives one power over the thing named. This is why Sigurðr hesitates to betray his name to the dragon Fafnir whom he has mortally wounded. This ability to control names is a constitute feature of Old Norse wisdom poetry (*Völuspá*, *Grímnismál*, *Alvíssmál*) and of Snorri’s *Edda* as well, as evinced in Gylfi’s mock ironic response to the sixty names of Odin (or *Oðinsheiti*) that Third recites for him:

What a terrible lot of names you have given him! By my faith, one would need a great deal of learning to be able to give details and explanations of what events have given rise to each of these names. (22)

This is one of the more playful moments in the *Edda*. The wise reader gets no points for guessing just who has the requisite learning (hint: a certain fellow by the name of Snorri). High chimes in, “You cannot claim to be a *wise man* if you cannot tell of these important happenings” (22) which give rise to these names in the first place. With a similarly self-referential wink-and-nudge, High, on a later occasion, goes on to say, “But this question you are now asking, it seems to me very likely that *there can be few so wise* as to be able to give the correct answer to it” [all italics mine] (32). Snorri makes a distinction between the onomastic arcana appropriate to “scholars” (and, one might add, composers of Skaldic poetry) and the narrative lore that is part of popular and saga tradition, the most widely read and remembered part of *Snorra Edda* itself:

High replied: “It is no secret, *even among those who are not scholars*, that Thor achieved redress for this expedition [i.e., to Útgarðr] that has just been recounted.” [italics mine] (46)

Once more, there is no royal road to wisdom, only competing traditions (Christian and pagan, foreign and native, and Latin and vernacular), some perhaps more popular, such as we find in the sagas, others more linked to the high court culture for which Snorri and his circle (i.e., whoever was the target audience of the *Edda*) cultivated Skaldic verse.

The gnomic wisdom poem *Hávamál* warns against excessive wisdom (stanzas 54-56) and praises good “common sense” (*manvit*) at the expense of what we might call book learning (stanza 10). Snorri puts some narrative meat on the bones of *Hávamál*'s warning in the tale of Kvasir:

The origin of [poetry] was that the gods had a dispute with the people called Vanir, and they appointed a peace conference and made a truce by this procedure, that both sides went up to a vat and spat their spittle into it. But when they dispersed, the gods kept this symbol of truce and decided not to let it be wasted. And out of it made a man. His name was Kvasir, he was so wise that no one could ask him any questions to which he did not know the answer. He travelled widely through the world teaching people knowledge, and when he arrived as a guest to some dwarfs, Fialar and Galar, they called him to a private discussion with them and killed him. They poured his blood into two vats and a pot, and the latter was called Odrerir, but the vats were called Son and Bodn. They mixed honey with the blood and it turned into the mead whoever drinks from which is becomes a poet or scholar. The dwarfs told the Æsir that Kvasir had suffocated in intelligence because there was no one there educated enough to be able to ask him questions. (62)

The fact that the dwarfs' bogus explanation strikes the gods as plausible is not the kindest commentary on Kvasir's brand of learning. Despite his vaunted wisdom, the wisest of all beings lacks the common sense to turn down an invitation from a bunch of crafty, malicious dwarfs, and their wits trump his wisdom. Kvasir is book-smart, but not streetwise. Kvasir is ultimately an artificial being, and like Mökkurkálf, the constructed companion of the giants, he fares badly. Kvasir's blood is turned into the Mead of Poetry. Beer takes away wit, as *Hávamál* tells us (stanza 18); so while Kvasir is all-wise, he is literally a walking intoxicant who lacks wit to avoid falling prey to treacherous dwarves. The stealthy dwarfs proceed to kill a giantess with a millstone to the head (62)—again, the seat of wisdom—demonstrating that head-blows are the preferred means of dispatching giants for both dwarfs and gods.¹⁷² One suspects that Ýmir, “that wise giant” (10), may have been killed in a manner similar to the dwarfs' killing of the all-too-wise but unsuspecting Kvasir.

The dangers of pursuing universal knowledge for its own sake (in other words, of a detached, unworldly encyclopedism) are made clear by the dwarf Álviss in *Álvissmál*. Thor turns Álviss's lore-mongering against him, prompting him to show off

¹⁷² For a Germanic analogue to the tale's death-by-millstone-to-the-head motif, cf. Grimms' *Märchen von dem Machandelboom* (*The Juniper Tree*) (KHM 47).

his great wisdom until he, unwisely, stays out after sunrise, and forgets that bit of wisdom about dwarfs turning to stone when struck by daylight. Álvíss's disquisition from stanza 9 to 26 constitutes a complete *ordo rerum*, an encyclopedia of topics: the Earth, sky, moon, sun, clouds, winds, water, and fire. The order of this order-of-things is largely the same as found in Snorri (12-13) and *Völuspá*. After water and fire (the elements that create and destroy the world), we might logically expect Álvíss to be finished; but Thor stalls for time, egging him on with a series of topics that are "out-of-order": forests, night (n.b.: but not day), seed, and ale, the last of which is suggestive of a dulling of wits. Much like Kvasir, who allegedly drowns in his own intelligence, Álvíss's wits are petrified by excessive wisdom, and the "day," which is introduced out of order, catches him off guard.

This is one of the many occasions in Snorri's *Edda* and the larger mythological tradition where wisdom is trumped by wit. Thor has struck many commentators as out of place in a contest of wisdom, and this parodic element of *Álvísmál* has been lost on few. Still, I would argue that Thor is very much in character in so far as he is the gods' instrument of choice when it comes to violating contracts (in this case a marriage agreement). What is unusual, or perhaps even carnevalesque in *Álvísmál* is that Thor usually accomplishes this with force, not with his wits. In so doing, Thor performs a role usually assigned to Loki.

Encyclopedic wisdom is ultimately as futile for Álvíss as it is for the Gods leading up to Ragnarök. Wisdom is, however, of short-term tactical advantage, as in the case of *Vafþrúðnismál*; it wins the battle, but not the war. Such tactical usefulness is also on display in *Grímnismál*, where a bound and captive Odin delivers a *wisdom performance* (see above), compiling an encyclopedia of cosmic-onomastic lore. Jere Fleck, as noted in the previous chapter, has discussed the "Knowledge Criterion for

Succession to the Germanic Sacred Kingship.”¹⁷³ Regardless of whether such a criterion actually existed in real life, in the world of the sources a ruler must be sovereign, strong, and fertile,¹⁷⁴ but also wise. Wisdom, along with generosity are constitutive of “sovereignty.” King Geirrøðr demonstrates his unfitness for command when he fails to realize who Odin is, despite numerous clues. *Grímnismál* is Wisdom 101 for Geirrøðr’s son Agnar. The farmer whispers something into his favorite son’s ear before sending him off in a boat. This is a widely noted analogue to Odin’s whisper in Baldr’s ear on the funeral pyre (*Snorra Edda* 49; *Vafþrúðnismál* 44). Knowledge of this lore gives Odin the tactical edge in the wisdom contest against Vafþrúðnir. *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Alvíssmál* show that mere knowledge is not enough; one must have the wits to put such knowledge to use, lest one lose one’s head.

Disembodied wisdom without the practical application of wit subject to a thorough critique in *Ynglingasaga* in the tale of Hœnir and Mímir. The two are given as hostages to the Vanir after their war with the Æsir. Hœnir, “a large man and exceedingly handsome” and “well fitted to be a chieftain” (Hollander 8) is promptly made one over the Vanir but appears unable to render judgments without Mímir at his side. This leads the Vanir to suspect that they have been defrauded and behead Mímir in retaliation for perceived deceit. (Note as in the case with giants, beings who are wise but not witty are killed by headblows or decapitation.)

Odin is the consummate encyclopedist. The mythological tradition including Snorri, the poems of the Poetic Edda, and scattered cameo appearances in the sagas all portray Odin as a collector and compiler of cosmic and gnostic wisdom. Odin roams

¹⁷³ Jere Fleck, “*Konr-Óttarr-Geirroðr*: A Knowledge Criterion for Succession to the Germanic Sacred Kingship,” *Scandinavian Studies*, 42 (1970), 39-49. Also see “The ‘Knowledge Criterion’ in the *Grímnismál*: The Case against ‘Shamanism,’” *Arkiv for nordisk filolgi*, 86 (1971), 49-65.

¹⁷⁴ Harkening back to Dumézil’s heuristically useful theory of the “three functions”; cf. Einar Haugen. “The Mythical Structure of the Ancient Scandinavians: Some Thoughts on Reading Dumézil,” *Introduction to Structuralism*, ed. Michael Lane (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 170-83.

the worlds consulting his “sources,” such as the giant Vafþrúðnir and the undead Völva of *Völuspá*, as one would consult a reference work. *Statim invenire!*¹⁷⁵ Odin’s world (Snorri’s version of it) is catalogued, indexed, and compiled into a coherent order of things, persons, and events, much like any world chronicle or medieval encyclopedia. Odin’s exploits as recounted by Snorri consist of so many reconnaissance missions, with the ultimate goal of filling in the remaining gaps in his knowledge in order to prevent or forestall the doom of the gods. It is a race against time, and against the rival wisdom of the giants.

In *Völuspá* Odin embarks on one of his reconnaissance missions with the goal of acquiring new wisdom, which he mobilizes against his enemy in *Vafþrúðnismál*. Read in conjunction, this provides a useful insight into the economy of wisdom in Snorri’s mythography and in the broader tradition. Wisdom that is acquired by the god from a female source is then deployed, with the aid of wit, against a male adversary in *Vafþrúðnismál*. This gathering of natural resources with the aid of females corresponds to a general pattern in the myths (cf. Gunnlöð, Hýmír’s wife), as well as the giants as the metaphorically female half of the male/female-culture/nature binary, in which the giants and other beings of lesser social status furnish the gods with women and resources (e.g., Hýmír’s cauldron, the dwarven treasures, the Mead of Poetry). The same pattern is in evidence in *Völsungasaga*, when Sigurðr acquires wisdom from Brynhild, but then—deprived of his wits—fails to put it into use.

This active use of wisdom for tactical advantage is what I call *cunning*. In *Alvíssmál*, Thor embodies the very notion of cunning when he is able to turn Alvíss’s

¹⁷⁵ Mary A. and Richard H. Rouse, “*Statim invenire*: Schools, Preachers, and New Attitudes to the Page,” *Authentic Witnesses: Approaches to Medieval Texts and Manuscripts* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 191-220.

lore-mongering against him, prompting him to show off his great wisdom until he, unwisely, stays out after sunrise and turns to stone. This is the sort of “excessive wisdom” that *Hávamál* warns against and which the figures of Kvasir and Mimir embody. The ability to rapidly change appearances is also a constitutive part of cunning. This is evident not only in Odin and Loki’s transformations into animal shape, but also, for example, by Thor’s ability to change the appearance of a wisdom contest to a contest of wit in *Alvíssmál*; likewise when Gylfi (as I argue in chapter 1) makes the historical Æsir mistake a Christian master-student dialogue for a pagan wisdom contest.

It seems that only the dwarf *Alvíss* and the giant *Vafþrúðnir* play the wisdom contest by the rules, whereas the gods win by superior wit, not wisdom. It is striking that there is no example of a “wisdom contest” not won by wit. According to game theory, every game is an implied contract, with defined sets of expectations, rules, and penalties for their violation. Yet these violations never seem to have any negative consequences for the gods (at least not in the short term).

b. Contracts and Oaths

Oaths, truces (not to mention physical fetters and bonds), agreements, and other forms of contract, implicit and explicit (such as marriage) play a central role in the mythological world of the *Edda*. The gods act as guarantors of contracts and oaths (at the very least, they swear an awful lot of them), yet they themselves appear to be the chief oath-breakers, as the following review of the evidence makes clear:

- Odin makes a vow of blood-brotherhood with Loki (*Lokasenna* 9). Loki will violate this bond at Ragnarök, when all social bonds and physical fetters break.
- The Æsir make an oath with the Fenris Wolf to release it if it is incapable of breaking the fetter they place on him. Týr’s hand is the surety of this oath. (Ironically, the gods violate their promise to break the physical bond by breaking their legal bond.)

- The gods make a contract with the Giant Builder for the construction of Ásgarðr; they furthermore swear oaths to leave the Builder unmolested which are broken when they realize that he is a giant.
- Freyr grants Skírnir his sword in exchange for acting as an intermediary with the giantess Gerðr. The unarmed Freyr is killed by Surtr at Ragnarök as a consequence.
- Loki makes a contract with dwarven smiths regarding a contest to produce treasures for the gods; Loki wagers his head in the bargain, but cleverly avoids beheading with a clever bit of legal trickery (the wager does not include his neck).
- Thor enters into a contract with a human family regarding the proper consumption of his magically regenerating goats; the contract is violated when Þjálfi cracks the marrow out of the bone, laming one goat. Thor's anger is assuaged by another oath, a promise of lifelong service from the farmer's children.
- Oaths with the giants are always made when Thor is away, e.g., when Freyja is promised to the Giant Builder, in *Alvíssmál* when Thor's daughter is promised in marriage to a dwarf, when Loki arranges for the return of Thor's hammer by means of marrying Freyja into giantland in *Þrýmsqviða*.
- The gods promise Þjazi "his share" of the ox, but Loki attempts to break this promise when "his share" turns out to be more than they bargained for.
- Skaði is granted a husband among the gods in compensation for the death of her father, Þjazi, but is deceived into selecting a match of lower social status with Freyr of the Vanir.
- The Dwarfs Fjalar and Galar give the mead made from Kvasir's blood to Suttungr as atonement for killing his father, the giant Gillingr (62).
- Baugi comes to an agreement with Odin (disguised as a certain "Bolverkr") that he will help him get some mead from his brother, Suttungr, in exchange for Odin's labor. Baugi asks his brother on Odin's behalf, but Suttungr refuses. When Odin tries to steal the mead, Baugi attempts to trick Odin by not boring through the mountain completely and by trying to stab him with the auger, apparently breaking his agreement that he would help him get the mead (63). This would at first seem to be the one example of a giant breaking his half of a bargain, but a careful reading shows that Baugi is no longer bound to Odin. The stated agreement was that Baugi "would go with Bolverk [Odin] and try whether they could get the mead. Once Suttungr refuses his brother request, Baugi has tried and lived up to his half of the bargain.
- Frigg considers the mistletoe that will eventually kill Baldr too "young...to demand an oath from" (48).

- An agreement is made with Hel that Baldr “shall go back to the Æsir” on the condition that “all things in the world, alive and dead, weep for him” (50).
- For all their dishonesty and oath-breaking trickery, there is a goddess named Vár (30) whose prime purpose is to uphold contracts—especially between men and women—and punish oathbreakers. The Æsir themselves, however, are not subject to such punishment, at least not until Ragnarök.
- At Ragnarök all fetters will break and oaths will be disregarded. Brothers will betray the bonds of their kinship, not only in terms of alluded incest (realized only in *Völsungasaga*, but also when Loki betrays the bonds of his blood-brotherhood with Odin by leading the armies of Muspell (not least his own monstrous children) against him. “There is nothing in this world that will be secure when Muspell’s sons attack” (15).
- When Loki breaks the bonds of his kinship with Odin, this is closure to the gods’ breaking of the bonds of their kinship with Ýmir.

The gods’ wanton disregard for their own oaths and contracts is striking, given the harsh punishments promised to breakers of oaths and vows in the *Edda*:

On Nastrands there is a large and unpleasant hall, and its doors face north. It is also woven out of snakes’ bodies like a wattled house, and the snakes’ heads all face inside the house and spit poison so that poison rivers flow along the hall, and wading those rivers are oathbreakers and murderers, as it says here:

I know a hall that stands far from the sun on Nastrand. North face the doors. Poison drops flow in through the smoke-hole. The hall is woven from snakes’ backs. There shall wade heavy streams men who are perjured and murderers. (56)

To the best of my knowledge, scholars have not noticed that Snorri’s description of oathbreakers is also a fitting description of Thor. Thor is the gods’ main instrument of when it comes to violating or undermining oaths of truce with the giants by force (e.g., Giant Builder, Hrungnir) or vows of marriage, as in *Þrýmsqviða* or with the dwarf in *Alvíssmál*. Like the oathbreakers of *Nástrandir*, Thor is frequently depicted in the *Edda* (18, 47, 52, 80, 82) as wading across rivers and other waters, and he is eventually killed at Ragnarök by the poison of a serpent.

Loki is the gods’ preferred tool when oaths must be broken by cunning, often

in conjunction with Thor's brute force as in *Þrýmsqviða*. Like the oathbreakers after Ragnarök (and, as I have argued, Thor) Loki is also punished by poison dripping from a snake (52). The close parallel between Thor, Loki, and the oathbreakers of *Nástrandir* is highly suggestive of the more critical attitude of Snorri towards the gods that I have argued.

Although the gods make oaths, which are often broken with impunity, the giants are rigorously held to their half of various bargains. Thus one must speak of a “double standard” in the gods’ dealings with the giants. Oaths have a way of begetting more oaths, as the gods’ broken oaths frequently requires an additional oath or agreement as compensation. For example, Loki makes an oath to the giant-eagle, Þjazi, promising him “his fill” of an ox if he agrees to let it cook (59-61). Loki breaks the promise or implied contract, and this requires a secondary oath, this time a promise to lead Iðunn to the Þjazi, who is ambushed when giving chase after Loki steals her back. One of the gods is obliged to make an oath of marriage to Skaði, the daughter of Þjazi, in compensation for the death of her father, and Loki must also make her laugh by means of a bizarre testicular tug-of-war with a nanny goat. Thus an episode that begins with a broken oath and Loki bound to an animal ends with another oath and Loki bound to another animal. Clearly, if the initial oaths had not been disregarded, further oaths of compensation and related troubles would not have been necessary.

Why are oaths broken then? When this happens, Loki is not far behind. But it has not been sufficiently acknowledged that he is the *instrument* and not the *cause* of the gods’ oathbreaking. The cause is the double standard that allows the gods to violate agreements with beings of lesser social status when it is convenient for them to do so. Contracts are implemented to reach a truce between two parties; they imply a legal parity ultimately incompatible with the Æsir’s racial ideology. Since Loki is “reckoned among the Æsir” (26) yet, by their standards, not truly one of them, he

allows the gods to keep their hands clean by doing their dirty work. Loki is disruptive to oaths and contracts, although he himself never breaks them. The gods contract with the Builder results from Loki's counsels, and Loki is called on again when the contract must be circumvented. He disguises himself as a woman to discover the one thing that has not sworn an oath to do Baldr no harm (48).

The entire order of things—fire, water, iron, all kinds of metal, stones, the earth, trees, diseases, the animals, the birds, poisons, snakes—swears to do Baldr no harm. This list is a veritable encyclopedia, and could practically serve as a table of contents for Isidore's *Etymologiae* (books XII and XIII), Hrabanus Maurus' *De rerum naturis* (books VIII and IX), or *De Proprietatibus rerum* of Bartholomaeus Anglicus (books VII, VIII, XIII, XVI, XVII, and XVIII). The list of things and beings that swear to do Baldr no bodily harm

- Fire
- Water
- Iron
- Other Metals
- Stones
- The earth
- Trees
- Diseases
- Animals
- Birds
- Poisons
- Snakes

could very well be taken from any one of the aforementioned works. The failure to save Baldr, by failing to secure an oath from the mistletoe, is ultimately the result of a failed encyclopedism.

The failure of universal wisdom is a recurring theme in the myths; the demise of Vafþrúðnir, Álvíss, Kvasir, Mímir, Baldr, and eventually Odin all bear witness to this. But this failure of wisdom is linked to a failure of contracts and bonds in a way

that has not been appreciated.

Kvasir, the being that according to Snorri embodies the collective wisdom of the gods, is himself the by-product of a contract, a peace treaty between the Æsir and the Vanir. Thus there is an implicit yet fundamental relationship between wisdom on the one hand, and contracts, oaths, and bonds on the other. This claim is a logical extension of the theory of the French comparative philologist Georges Dumézil who associates Odin and Týr, whom he associates with contracts based on his role in the myth of the binding of the Fenris Wolf,¹⁷⁶ with his first function of Sovereignty.

This alliance between wisdom and contracts is becomes a *mésalliance* at Ragnarök, which the gods' wisdom is unable to prevent, and where all contracts dissolve.

c. Vexed to Nightmare by a Ragna-Röking Cradle

The biggest challenge for Odin's wisdom and, hence, in for wisdom itself in the world of the myths, is the prevention of the death of Baldr, who “dreamed great dreams boding peril to his life” (48). Baldr is the culmination of a racial experiment that begins with the killing of Ýmir. He is the “best” and “wisest” (23) of the Æsir, and the purest. Yet his wisdom is furthest removed from the real world of practical decision making, since “none of his decisions can be fulfilled” (23). Since the ideology of racial purity that Baldr embodies collapses at Ragnarök, it makes sense that he should be the first casualty of the last battle of this ongoing war.

The death of Baldr is widely viewed as the catalyst for Ragnarök. The link between the Death of Baldr and Ragnarök takes foothold when the giantess Hyrrokkin arrives at his funeral with wolves and snakes, and pushes Baldr's burial ship out to

¹⁷⁶ Although of little relevance for the present argument, I take issue with the idea of Týr as a guarantor of oaths. While Týr does live up to his own bargain that the Wolf shall have his hand as collateral if the gods do not release him from his fetters, the gods' larger agreement with the Wolf is hardly made in good faith.

sea. Similarly, the giants, with the help of wolves and one very big snake (i.e., the Midgard Serpent) set the Æsir and their world aflame. Hence, the doom of the gods is prefigured by a giantess arriving with wolves and snakes who sends a funeral boat out to sea with a dead god on it.

This assumes (as I do) that there is an at least inherent, coherent mythological “plot” that accounts for the isolated episodes of myth recounted by Snorri and in the Poetic Edda from creation to apocalypse: a “mythic history” counterpart to Christian salvation history. The death of Baldr forms the turning point of this narrative. Scholars of “actually-existing Norse paganism” need not furrow skeptical brows at this suggestion; regardless of whether there ever was such a history, Snorri clearly thought there was.

Baldr’s death has traditionally been viewed as the pivotal event that “triggers” Ragnarök, a settling of accounts between the gods and the giants that have been piling up since the creation of the world. The death of Baldr has been interpreted in a number of ways: as the death of the nature god, an enactment of a lost cultic ritual, etc. What scholars have overlooked, however, is the practical dimension of Baldr’s death. Having received oaths from all animate and inanimate beings except one to do him no harm, Baldr is almost completely invulnerable. Perforce Baldr would be the last man standing at Ragnarök, even if all the other gods were vanquished. He can be harmed by neither by fire nor water, the two elements that destroy the world, nor by wolves or snakes, nor by anything else.¹⁷⁷ Baldr would have prevented the destruction of a world that, by Snorri’s account, is purged of the racism that Baldr represents. Hence the world would not be restored, nor Baldr be reborn; the cosmic flaw inherent since the killing of Ýmir would remain.

¹⁷⁷ The complete list: Fire, Water, Iron, Other Metals, Stones, The earth, Trees, Diseases, Animals, Birds, Poisons, Snakes.

Further evidence for such a view is provided by the grief of Odin, who “took it the hardest because he had the best idea what great deprivation and loss the death of Baldr would cause the Æsir” (49). Even though all the wisdom in the world could not protect the Æsir at Ragnarök, there would have been hope in Baldr’s invincibility.

It is debatable from the perspective of Snorri’s mythic history what would have been the greater cataclysm: the death of Baldr, or preventing the purging and rebirth that his death sets in motion. Clearly, the new world is vastly preferable to the old. It is a world of racial harmony, free of feuds and strife, populated, according to the giant Vafþrúðnir, by the god-giants, Víðarr, Váli, Móði, Magni, and by the “pure“ Æsir Baldr and Höðr according to *Völuspá*—joined together in Snorri’s vision of post-racial harmony. None of the “pure“ Æsir survive Ragnarök. Baldr and Höðr return from Hel, but must be resurrected, reborn, in order to be fit for the new world order, freed from the racial ideology of a system of which they had been the purest fruits. The image of the golden gamepieces suggests a harmonious state of free-play, rather than fruitless labor, broken contracts, conflict, and suffering until death.

Baldr’s purity can only be cancelled out by an equal purity: his innocent blind brother. Masterminding this is Loki’s ultimate coup. It is also a fulfillment of the prophecy of the *Völva* that:

Brothers will die, slain by their brothers,
Kinsmen betray their close kin.
(stanza 32)

The binding of Loki is itself instrumental in bringing about Ragnarök. Although Loki “counsels most ill,” he is also the gods’ mediator and regulates their interactions with giantkind. Only Loki, the giant who is “reckoned among the Æsir” (26) has the freedom to test and define the limits and boundaries that separate gods and giants, culture and nature, order and chaos, male and female. The gods are bound by their

ideology to considering these distinctions as sacrosanct. Once Loki is taken out of the equation there is no force in that serves as a buffer or a go-between for these groups and their ideological and conceptual oppositions. This makes open hostilities inevitable. The binding of Loki is the end of the gods' Cold War against the giants, and the end of their wisdom.

Loki is viewed a deceiver, but he is more conscientious than is generally supposed. According to High, some call Loki “the Æsir’s calumniator and originator of deceits and the disgrace of gods and men.” He is “evil in character” and “very capricious in behavior. He possessed to a greater degree than others the kind of wisdom [*speki*]¹⁷⁸ that is called cunning [*slægð*], and tricks for every purpose. He was always getting the Æsir into a complete fix and often got them out of it by trickery” (26, modified).

And yet unlike the rest of the Æsir, Loki seems to be rather meticulous about upholding his bargains. Loki could have agreed to do Þjazi’s bidding and then gone back on his word once Þjazi released him (60); the same is true of Loki’s dealings with Geirrøðr (81-82). Loki finds a way of delaying the Giant Builder that in itself is not a violation of their contract, and it is the Æsir who violate the terms of the terms of the truce with the giant. Loki, in fact, maintains his oath of blood-brotherhood with Odin until such time as after he is bound, which one might consider Odin’s violation of that oath. Could it be that Loki is more fastidious about keeping his oaths than we thought? Loki’s machinations may not be just, but they are always perfectly *legal*.

According to a theory first proposed by Finnur Jónsson, Loki’s eschatological role is omened in his *nomen*; Loki is “the being who makes an end to everything (*hann*

¹⁷⁸ Faulkes translation originally reads, “He possessed to a greater degree than others the kind of learning that is called cunning.” I consider “learning” misleading, since it is clear from my analysis that “cunning” is an innate ability that, unlike wisdom, cannot be acquired. “Cleverness,” “talent,” or even “understanding” would be adequate translations for ON *speki*.

er sá sem lýkur [loka: to lock, shut] öllu).” What scholars have failed to notice, however, is that from a strictly narratological perspective the binding of Loki brings about the end of the world because without this *agent provocateur*, nothing much else of interest can happen. Loki plays a pivotal role in an overwhelming number of the mythological narratives in the Edda. Loki is the one who disturbs the order, and then helps reaffirm it. He is the stuff that narrative is made of. Once he is out of the story, the story itself is out. Expressed at a higher level of generality, once Loki is bound, further narrative development becomes impossible. The only discord requiring narrative resolution is the negation of opposites in the final *dénouement* of Ragnarök. There the culture-nature binary collapses and opposing sides merge into one. It stands to reason that this process should be catalyzed by Loki who himself embodies the tensions and ambiguities—between gods and giants, culture and nature, male and female, order and chaos—that are resolved in the final cataclysm.

To an extent that has perhaps not been sufficiently realized, Ragnarök is Loki’s battle. He fights it with himself throughout mythic history; with the death of Baldr, he finally succeeds in drawing others into it. This requires the full measure of his craft. Ultimately, Odin’s wisdom does not prove a match for Loki’s wits. Yet even Odin’s wisdom needs to be conditioned by wit in order to be of any profit; as in the case of *Vafþrúðnismál*, or by means of negative example, in *Alvíssmál*. A being may also be wise but wholly lacking in wit, like Kvasir or Álvíss. The possession of wit without wisdom, however, seems to be something wholly unique to Loki.

The unfortunate role of wisdom in the death of Baldr has not been sufficiently recognized. One of the factors that lead to Baldr’s demise is Frigg’s unfortunate display of encyclopedic botanical learning; “all things” have sworn oaths not to harm Baldr. To receive oaths from “all things” requires one to know what “all things” are in the first place. This fact puts Odin’s pursuit of wisdom in its proper perspective. For

“fire and water, iron, and all kinds of metal, stones, the earth, trees, diseases, the animals, the birds, poisons, [and] snakes“ (48) to swear oaths requires an encyclopedic knowledge of the order of things. It is this all-encompassing knowledge that, as in the cases of Kvasir and Álviss, leads to demise when Frigg betrays the one thing that has not sworn an oath to Baldr. While all beings except one have sworn to do Baldr no harm, only one being has sworn to do Loki (the instigator and efficient cause of Baldr’s death) no harm: Loki’s blood-brother Odin. The inverse proportionality of this relationship (all minus one vs. zero plus one) highlights that despite the role of Loki, Frigg, Baldr, and Höðr in the narrative *dénouement* of Baldr’s death, this is just the penultimate episode in the ongoing conflict between the wit of Loki and the wisdom of Odin.

The strategic significance of the death of Kvasir for this conflict has not been recognized in Old Norse scholarship. All actions in the myths, such as Freyr’s gift of his sword to his servant Skírnir, can be measured proleptically against their consequences at Ragnarök. Thus if Kvasir had not been killed by dwarfs, he would have been able to advise the Æsir on how to prevent the death of Baldr and forestall Ragnarök. Kvasir’s wisdom is demonstrated to be of exactly this kind of tactical value when in a fireplace he discovers the shape of the net that is used to capture Loki (51). This fact explains a persistent enigma in Norse myth: Why does Thor kick the dwarf Litr into Baldr’s funeral fire for no apparent reason? For lack of better explanation, scholars have long posited that Thor kicks the dwarf out of a displaced frustration he cannot unleash upon the giantess Hyrrokkin. I would argue, however, that Thor’s kicking of Litr into the fire is first and foremost revenge for the death of Kvasir, killed by dwarfs. Only Kvasir had the wisdom to prevent or forestall Ragnarök. The gods’ lack of wisdom leads to the death of Baldr; the gods unwisely play games with Baldr’s life, and Frigg deems it unnecessary to secure an oath from all beings. (Surely Kvasir

would have counseled otherwise?) The deaths of Kvasir and Litr present two unrecognized problems: the gods engage in no random acts of violence; furthermore, they never allow violence against them to go unanswered. The deaths of Litr and Kvasir would appear to be the two great aberrations in mythic history. These problems are solved if we accept that Thor's seemingly arbitrary killing of Litr is revenge for the murder of Kvasir, seemingly arbitrarily murdered by the dwarfs. The killing of Litr is also the gods' last act of willful violence to go unmet, since after that they will meet their match at Ragnarök. The doomsday clock that begins ticking with the death of Baldr strikes its final hour with the "thud" of a dwarf punted into the fire. The death of Baldr and Ragnarök are about the settling of old scores and a balancing of accounts. The burning of the dwarf signals the end of the "cold" war and the beginning of open conflict with the giants, from whose kinsman's flesh the dwarfs came to life.

Thus the death of Baldr is ultimately a statement on wit, wisdom, and their uses and uselessness. The role of Kvasir (wisdom) in the binding of Loki (wit) (52) is confined to an advisory position; Loki is ultimately captured by Thor, his counterpart and sometime companion in both his sexual ambiguity (cf. *Þrýmsqviða*) and command of wit (cf. *Álvissmál*). The subsequent death of Kvasir at the hands of the dwarfs again shows the profitlessness of wisdom unconditioned by wit. With that in mind, we can divide the divine beings into three groups along a continuum: (1) the purely wise, (2) the purely witty, and (3) those who combine wisdom and wit:

- (1) the purely wise: Kvasir, Baldr, Álviss, Mímir, Ýmir, Vafþrúðnir
- (2) the purely witty: the dwarfs Fjalar and Galar, Loki, Thor
- (3) wise and witty: Odin

Three things can be gleaned from this comparison: (1) only beings at one extreme or another of the god-giant spectrum can be regarded as purely wise (Kvasir and Baldr on the one hand, dwarfs and giants on the other); (2) only beings who straddle the

ethnographic *Ginnungagap* between god and giant, and who are associated to some degree with the Female, such as Loki, Odin, and Thor, can be regarded as witty; (3) Odin alone combines the qualities of wisdom and wit.

d. Wit and Wisdom

Why do the gods resort to wit in the first place? Why not just let Thor come smashing, which is what he almost always ends up doing anyway? Clearly the gods are bound by certain parameters.¹⁷⁹ What is the precise nature of the ties that bind them, and how does wit help them escape these fetters? The distribution of wisdom and wit along the ethnographic lines I have argued shows that the question of when to trick and when to smash has everything to do with who is tricking, who is smashing, who is tricked, who smashed, and their relative social status. The division of labor between wisdom, wit and physical violence mirrors the social hierarchy of Norse myth.

The “double standard” applies to gods and giants when it comes to both social contracts and to the usefulness of wisdom. While the wisdom of the gods is key to their sovereignty, the wisdom of the giants is merely another resource for the gods to plunder. Just the gods’ oaths with the giants do not count, the giants’ wisdom does not count either.

The giants are sources of wisdom but their wisdom is a resource to be conquered and plundered, like a raw material or natural resource. As we have seen, wisdom needs to be “processed” by wit before it is useful. Since the gods alone command wit, only they can make use of this wisdom. This economy of wit and wisdom corresponds to a more general pattern of exchange whereby the beings on the lower end of the social hierarchy, such as the dwarfs, craft a material culture for the

¹⁷⁹ Nowhere is this point made more forcefully than in Richard Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

gods that the dwarfs are unable to keep and use for themselves (96-7) The dwarfs are alienated laborers in the classical Marxist sense. Similarly, the giants grant the gods their brewing cauldron, but are promptly killed if they are so uncouth as to stop by for a drink. The giants serve as repositories of wisdom but unable to put that wisdom to use. Even so, the gods' wit is less of an advantage than one might suppose. Wit is only useful to the gods in the short term, as when dealing with the Giant Builder, *et al.*; it does not provide solutions to long-term problems, such as Ragnarök. Wit ensures that the gods, like their human warriors in Valhalla, live to fight and die another day, but it cannot postpone that day indefinitely.

Wit and Wisdom are good for fundamentally different things. More precisely, wisdom is only good for one thing, whereas cunning is capable of addressing various challenges. Wisdom is a status symbol, a bauble, “bling” in today's vernacular: a symbol of status rather than something which produces that status. The status of the gods is based on violence and suppression rather than superior knowledge or ability. Wit, along with brute force, is one of the two forms of violence with which the gods' exalted status is maintained. As I have argued, wisdom is found only at the extremes of the ethnographic spectrum, among both gods and giants, whereas wit dwells only in the middle, among the ambiguous figures—Loki, Thor, and Odin. Odin, as I have argued, is unique in possessing both wisdom *and* cunning; knowing when to be witty and when to be wise is half the battle—not just a question of “know-how” but “know-when”—and is the prerogative of a being like Odin who possess both wisdom *and* cunning. As Kvasir and Baldr, Álviss and Vafþrúðnir learn the hard way, wisdom without the aid of wit is defenseless.

The dialectic between wit and wisdom can be formulated as follows: wisdom (status) is the legitimation of sovereignty and power; cunning, on the other hand, is the means with which this power is actually maintained, as is clear from any number of

tales, e.g., Thor vs. Alvíss, Loki vs. Master Builder, the binding of the Fenris Wolf, Thor and Hrungrnir. A topsy-turvy image of this world is presented in the illusory hall of Útgarða-Loki, where the two most cunning gods, Loki and Thor, are themselves defeated by cunning.

Although his star has dimmed since the heyday of comparative mythology in the 1960s and 1970s, George Dumézil's structuralizing theory of the "three functions" has tremendous explanatory force applied to the status of wit and wisdom (which something which Dumézil himself does not address). Dumézil famously posits a tripartite division of the divine functions of Indo-European mythology into of Sovereignty, Force, and Fertility, and Norse myth played a central role in the elaboration of this theory.¹⁸⁰ According to the tripartite theory, Odin is equated with Sovereignty (Týr with its contractual aspect), Thor with Force, and Freyr with Fertility.

Wisdom and wit can be viewed as factors of Dumézil's first two functions, Sovereignty and Force, respectively. Unlike wisdom, cunning performs work which is of lower social status. Wisdom does not "do" anything; it is a part of the status on which Sovereignty rests. With its spiritual and material abundance, manifested as wisdom and generosity, Sovereignty moves Force to act on its behalf. The cunning of Loki, like the violence of Thor, does the gods' dirty work. Because their role as enforcers casts them as laborers, both gods can only ever be marginal members of the aristocratic divine community; Loki, who is merely "reckoned among the Æsir" (26), is kept on its genealogical margins, Thor, who is almost always away, on its geographic ones.

Using Dumézil's language, I would align Baldr with Sovereignty. Baldr is the highest born of Odin's sons, and his presumable heir (assuming it makes sense to talk

¹⁸⁰ Georges Dumézil, 1939, 1940, 1959, 1973; Lindow, 43-44.

about an heirs in a group that does not age). Sovereignty is useless in the most literal sense. As under feudalism, the sovereign nobility performs no work. All useful tasks are executed by Force, i.e., figures lower on the class scale, such as Thor and his déclassé sons Móði and Magni (whom Odin refers to disparagingly as the “son of giantesses”). While Dumézil and his critics never found a place for Loki in the tripartite system, I would argue that Loki’s wit should be equated with Force alone with his companion Thor’s brute strength. Loki’s cunning or wit is distinct from Odin’s sovereign wisdom. The trials and hardships Odin endures shows the high regard in which wisdom is held. Wit, by contrast, is valued for less exalted and more practical purposes. Wisdom is really only good for one thing—status and prestige—whereas wit can multi-task. Wisdom is the unique foundation and legitimation of sovereignty and power (Odin), but wit—more often than not—is the varied means with which this power is maintained (Thor, Loki, etc.). True wisdom, perhaps, like true sovereignty, consists in knowing when to “outsource” the dirty-work that wit is good for.

The tenuous status of wit vis-à-vis wisdom has its analogue in figure of Loki, who most embodies both wit and uncertain social status, since he is an intermediary between the gods and the giants. Although Loki successfully brings about the death of Baldr, one cannot speak of a triumph of wit over wisdom, since Loki is ultimately captured, punished, and killed.

While I assign wit to Force in Dumézil’s terms, wit can be viewed as a mediator between wisdom (Sovereignty) and brute force (which explains Loki’s role as the companion of Thor). In many of the myths (e.g., the Giant Builder, *Þrymsqviða*, Hrungrnir), the cunning stratagems of Loki or another of Thor’s companions serve as a prelude to Thor’s head-bashing. Wisdom can create and force can destroy; but only wit can do both; therefore wit can prevail over either. This is particularly clear in

Alvíssmál, where force (Thor) cannot defeat wisdom (Alvíss) without resorting to wit. In the tales just cited, wit defeats force. In the tale of the dwarf's treasures, Loki's wit serves as a creative force. Wit is the rock that miraculously defeats both scissors *and* paper.

Loki plays a mediating role not only between Sovereignty and brute Force, but between Sovereignty and Fertility, e.g., when he helps secure the return of Íðunn and Freyja from giantland, or when he bears children himself; he also mediates between Sovereignty and Fertility in the sense of creativity, as when he arranges for dwarfs and to produce their treasures and the Giant Builder their fortress. Loki plays a role similar to that which management plays in modern capitalist economies. Loki serves as an intermediary between capital and labor.¹⁸¹ His essential ambiguity makes Loki the ideal middle-manager.¹⁸²

It is Loki's autonomy from both Sovereignty and Fertility that give him the freedom necessary to play this managerial role. Loki's wit, and wit in general, is self-sufficient, and does not require the heavy maintenance that Wisdom/Sovereignty and Force do. This is because cunning is innate whereas wisdom is acquired, a commodity that can be exchanged as opposed to an ability which one either has or does not. While wisdom can be nurtured, wit is a force of nature. Hence in the myths we see many instances of beings acquiring wisdom, but no examples of them learning cunning.¹⁸³

Wisdom is cultural; wit is natural. I have argued that only the mediary figures between culture and nature, god and giant, male and female (Thor, Odin, and Loki) command wit. Odin's wisdom is linked with his practice of "unmanly" magic (*seiðr*).

¹⁸¹ Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class," *Between Labor and Capital*, ed. Pat Walker (Boston: South End Press, 1979), 5-45.

¹⁸² The Ehrenreichs—unwitting mythologists both—describe the position of the Professional-Managerial Class as "salaried mental workers [i.e., wit] who do not own the means of production and whose major function in the social division of labor may be described broadly as the reproduction of capitalist [i.e., Æsir] culture and class relations."

¹⁸³ The practical wisdom of *Hávamál* arguably points in this direction, but it is strictly for human, not divine, consumption.

Thor is at his most cunning when disguised as a woman in *Þrýmsqviða*. Loki assumes female form when he is at his wittiest, as Svaðilfœri's mare, as Thor's bridesmaid in *Þrýmsqviða*, and finally as the giantess Þökk, who refuses to weep Baldr out of hell.

e. Loki and Other Shit-Disturbers

“Loki was a hacker. The other gods feared him, but they needed his tools.”¹⁸⁴

Loki's wits are a double-edged sword for the gods. All references to Loki's “evil” nature, however, are explicitly marked as from the Æsir's perspective:

That one is also reckoned among the Æsir whom some call the Æsir's calumniator and originator of deceits and the disgrace of all gods and men. His name is Loki or Lopt, son of the giant Fábauti. Laufey or Nál is his mother. Byleistr and Helblindi are his brothers. Loki is pleasing and handsome in appearance, evil in character, very capricious in behavior. (26)

...

It was presumed that this was Loki Laufeyarson, who has done most evil among the Æsir. (51)

The same can be said of the passage previously quoted regarding the “evil” nature of Ýmir. When Gangleri asks if the Historical Æsir “believe him to be a god whom you have just spoken of?”, they reply:

“Not at all do we acknowledge him to be a god. He was evil and all his descendants.” (11)

Loki's true nature, however, resides in his pervasive ambiguity: genealogical, ethnographic, sexual, and moral. He is only “evil” from the perspective of a racially exclusive Æsir society and its values, which, like any good subaltern, he simultaneously serves and undermines.

¹⁸⁴ Mattathias Schwartz, “The Trolls Among Us,” *NYT Magazine*, August 3, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/03/magazine/03trolls-t.html?pagewanted=5&_r=1&hp>

Internet users use the word “troll” to describe someone who intentionally disrupts online communities. The adoption of the Norse word “troll” to describe such disruptive forces holds a more than incidental fascination for the student of Norse mythology. Like their electronic namesakes, the trolls of Scandinavian folklore are “hidden people” who intentionally disrupt the order of a community. While “troll” in modern Internet parlance is probably gleaned from children’s tales of unsuspecting billy-goats unwarily crossing bridges or tales of other young naïves gobbled up by lurking dangers, the connection between mythic and modern-day disturbers of the peace yields interesting parallels for the student of Norse myth.

In a *New York Times Magazine* article on Internet trolls of August 2008, Mattathias Schwartz makes comments that are as applicable to the mythic order of the gods as they are to the “hidden people” of the Internet age:

That the Internet is now capacious enough to host an entire subculture of users who enjoy undermining its founding values is yet another symptom of its phenomenal success.¹⁸⁵

Schwartz’s comments, *mutatis mutandis*, apply equally well to the society of the Norse gods. For most of its history, the society of the Æsir was strong enough to tolerate a force devoted to undermining the very foundations of that society. Thus Loki (that consummate hacker) is accepted as a member of divine society. This is the case up until his final “hack,” orchestrating the death of Baldr—an act too destabilizing to be tolerated. The need to control (“con-troll?”) and contain the forces that Loki embodies signals the end of the strength of that society and its social experiment. As such, the binding of Loki is a symptom of decline. There is nothing new about Loki’s machinations against the gods, which have been ongoing throughout mythic history and do not represent some sudden, unheralded crisis. Loki’s actions do not “cause” the doom of the gods; rather, the gods’ inherent decline—an internal

¹⁸⁵ Schwartz, *ibid.*

decadence that requires no help from the outside—renders them suddenly vulnerable to Loki’s ongoing machinations. A society that is no longer “capacious enough to host an entire subculture of users who enjoy undermining its founding values” is not long for this world. Hence, Loki is something of a canary in the gods’ coal mine. Or as one of my students put it best, Loki is the gods’ “reality-check.”¹⁸⁶

f. “Uncle Ýmir” and the Self-Hating Giants

Like the Jews in nineteenth-century Germany, or blacks in nineteenth-century America (and beyond), the giants furnish the dominant culture with resources and women but are deemed incapable of assimilating or producing “true” culture. Whether Jew, Negro, communist, or giant, the dominant culture regards its enemies simultaneously as both too strong and too weak.¹⁸⁷ Umberto Eco describes this ideology in the context of his upbringing under Italian fascism:

When I was a boy I was taught to think of Englishmen as the five-meal people. They ate more frequently than the poor but sober Italians. Jews are rich and help each other through a secret web of mutual assistance. However, the followers of Ur-Fascism must also be convinced that they can overwhelm the enemies. Thus, by a continuous shifting of rhetorical focus, the enemies are at the same time too strong and too weak. Fascist governments are condemned to lose wars because they are constitutionally incapable of objectively evaluating the force of the enemy.

The giants are physically potent, yet beholden to lust, gluttony, and anger; wise yet unwitting and easily duped; possessed of vast resources, yet greedy and acquisitive; they are unable to make use of these resources or assimilate into the dominant culture, although their sexually-coveted females may to a limited extent. Anyone vaguely acquainted with the histories of European anti-Semitism and racism recognizes the structures of oppression that underlie the gods’ relations with the giants. They are

¹⁸⁶ I owe this apt formulation to my student Yazan Hijazi in my course “Myth, Legend, and Folklore: From Elves to Elvis,” at The University of Western Ontario, Fall 2006.

¹⁸⁷ Umberto Eco, *New York Review of Books*, June 22, 1995, 12-15.

fundamentally identical to any number of constructions of otherness with which dominant groups re-imagine minority cultures as less than human.

I began this chapter with three theses, based on my reading of the “two cultures” which emerged from my discussion of the encyclopedic dimension of Snorri’s *Edda*. The reader will have to decide whether they have been proven, but to recount, they are

- (1) that the giants of Snorri’s *Edda* are not “gigantic.”
- (2) that the distinction between the gods and the giants is cultural, not physical or racial.
- (3) and that only the need to maintain this cultural distinction accounts for Odin’s pursuit of useless knowledge.

To these three theses, I now make explicit a fourth which has been implicit in my discussion all along: (4) ultimately, the gods’ drive to maintain a unique cultural identity predicated on an ideology of racial, material, and spiritual superiority to the giants, but in fact founded on force and deception, is the root of their ongoing conflicts and their eventual demise. It is this ideology that is the source of the discord that is in turn resolved at Ragnarök.

The Cold War of the twentieth-century taught us (or should have taught us) of the ultimate futility of any and all arms races. Both politically and intellectually, Snorri served as a mediator (often a very self-interested one) between the “two cultures” of Iceland and Norway. In the *Edda* Snorri demonstrates the futility of conflict between god and giant, colonizer and colonized, Christian and pagan, foreign and native, Latin and vernacular, Norway and Iceland—not because these wars are unwinnable, but rather because the dichotomies on which they are based are deemed illusory in the first place, just like the vanishing edifices of the Æsir and Útgarda-Loki. If not in the halls of medieval Icelandic power, then at least in the imagined halls of

the *Edda*, Snorri's syncretic encyclopedic vision disallows the existence of these essential dualities.

Chapter 3: Dante: “Bound with Love in a Single Volume”

The *Commedia* is arguably the most widely read work of an age whose cultural production remains largely closed to us on account of what many (starting with Hans Robert Jauss) have called its “alterity,” or the gap that separates our naive understanding of its products from the linguistic, social, philosophical, theological, and scientific assumptions that inform them. Of the handful of medieval authors whose literary afterlife does not depend entirely on the life-support provided by high-school and university curricula, none can boast as broad a readership among the quick as Dante. The contemporary popularity of Dante’s poem, and the relative obscurity of other literary “monuments” of the Middle Ages, cannot be explained exclusively by considerations of artistic merit or *altezza d’ingegno*—regardless of how little inclined one is to call either into question. Dante’s accessibility (if the term can be applied) to the non-specialist, I would offer, is best viewed as a consequence of the dialogic conception of the *Commedia*; the same alterity that renders most works of medieval literature inaccessible to latter-day readers is paralleled in the experience of the pilgrim—whose encounters in the afterlife are hardly less strange to him than to us. If writing the poem required Dante to conceive multiple worlds, reading the *Commedia* critically requires no less of us, be it the “medieval world,” the early 14th-century Florentine *commune*, or the “world beyond” of Dante’s Catholicism. This experience of alterity—for us, this “medieval world,” for Dante, the unprecedentedly lucid and all-encompassing vision of the afterworld—is constantly mediated by a process of question and answer which takes place both on the level of the text, as Dante interrogates his interlocutors concerning the nature of these worlds, and on the level of the reader, as we interrogate the horizon of expectations within which the poem was conceived and attempt to overcome a cultural divide of space (Ithaca, NY vs.

Florence, Italy) and time (our cultural present vs. the early fourteenth century). The process of understanding that we undergo as readers is reproduced (or, rather, reproduces us) in the figure of the poet: Just as Dante the pilgrim is guided by Virgil, Beatrice, and St. Bernard of Clairvaux through the other world, Dante the poet guides his latter-day reader like no other through the otherness of his “medieval world.”

1. Making the World Safe for Encyclopedism in *Paradiso* XXVI

As an institution, the encyclopedia is systematic, hierarchical, and impersonal; Dante’s encyclopedic pilgrimage, on the other hand, is as personal as it gets. In what follows I focus on dialogue as a constitutive element of Dante’s encyclopedic project. It is possible to make a basic distinction between two kinds of dialogue in this poem. On the one hand, there is that series of dialogues which Dante engages in throughout his *cammino* with his guides: Virgil (from *Inferno* I to *Purgatorio* XXX), whom the pilgrim does not select for himself but is chosen for him by his second guide, “a lady” who accompanies him from *Purgatorio* XXX to *Paradiso* XXXI, before ceding this task to Bernard of Clairvaux in *Paradiso* XXXI. On the other hand, there is the array of episodic dialogues in which Dante engages with the personnel of the afterworld. Certain of these “dialogues with the dead” (paralleled, of course, by Aeneas’s dialogues with the Sibyl and Anchises in the *Aeneid*) are particularly relevant to a discussion of the encyclopedism of the *Commedia*; Dante’s conversation with Brunetto Latini (*Inf.* XV), his early mentor (since confined to hell) and author of both *Li Livres dou Tresor*, considered the first encyclopedia written in the French (or any) vernacular, as well as the *Tesoretto* (a shorter rhyming version in Italian), merits special consideration in a discussion of Dante’s encyclopedic project.¹⁸⁸ Finally, we

¹⁸⁸ And has received it, with massive erudition, in Giuseppe Mazzotta’s *Dante’s Vision and the Circle*

might extend the ideal of dialogue to include the ongoing dialogue the author conducts with himself, as Dante the poet confronts Dante the pilgrim as the author of earlier works whose positions he had sometimes abandoned between the experience and the writing of the *Commedia*.¹⁸⁹

The author's choice of the pagan poet as his *primo guida* and primary interlocutor needs to be viewed in the context of twelfth-century Neoplatonist discourses rehabilitating the "noble pagans" of pre-Christian times. Although cut off from divine revelation by priority in time to the crucial moment of salvation history, they nevertheless were attributed a proleptic apprehension of those gospel truths available to unaided reason. Recruited posthumously as part of a noble intellectual ancestry, certain exemplary figures of the past, although cut off from the divine light

of Knowledge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). Pointing to the long-standing tradition of distinguishing between Dante as poet and Dante the pilgrim, Charles T. Davis, writes "Undoubtedly Dante the pilgrim reveals limitations in his doctrinal knowledge and in his moral understanding throughout most of the poem." He asks, "Has Dante's vision of hell therefore only the negative educational value of a deterrent? In that case, Brunetto's words [in *Inferno* 15] must be regarded merely as self-deception. If this theory is accepted, it is difficult to see why Virgil does not rebuke Dante's admiration for the four illustrious sodomites [Brunetto and his fellow Florentines, Tegghiaio Aldobrandi, Guido Guerra, and Iacopo Rusticucci], or why the conversation between Dante and Brunetto about conditions in Florence is echoed and amplified by Cacciaguida. In view of the close parallels in content and tone between the Brunetto and Cacciaguida episodes, it seems far-fetched to conclude that Dante meant his meeting with his old master to be interpreted ironically," *Dante's Italy and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 194-5. This is precisely how Giuseppe Mazzotta does interpret this encounter; see *Dante and the Circle of Knowledge*, Ch. 1.

Contini suggests that Brunetto had intended to write a *prosimetrum* (cf. *Tesoretto*, line 1121) in order to communicate those things which he did not feel could be expressed *per rima*:

non dico ch'io m'afidi
di contarlo pe' rima
dal piè fin a la cima,
ma 'n bel volgare e puro,
tal che non sia oscuro,
vi dicerò per prosa
quasi tutta la cosa
qua 'nanti da la fine,
perché paia più fine.

Obviously, Dante did not feel bound by such constraints. (Brunetto Latini, *Tesoretto*, in G. Contini, *Poeti del duecento*, vol. 2. Milan: Mondadori, 1995, 215.)

¹⁸⁹ See Ruedi Imbach / Silvia Maspoli, "Philosophische Lehrgespräche in Dantes *Commedia*," *Gespräche lesen: Philosophische Dialoge im Mittelalter*, ed. Klaus Jacobi (Tübingen: G. Narr, 1999), 303.

of revelation, were deemed not wholly unilluminated.¹⁹⁰ While the dictum “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*” remains in force, it is tempered by a new enthusiasm for a “dialogue with the heathens.” It was first and foremost Virgil, whose famous *puer* of the fourth eclogue was widely read as a prophecy of the birth of Christ, who embodied the idea of a *revelatio ante Christum natum*. This is why Dante’s Statius can confess to the author of the *Aeneid*, “per te poeta fui, per te cristiano” (Through you I became a poet, through you a Christian) (*Purgatorio* XXII, 73). At the same time Dante celebrates Paulus Orosius, “avvocato de’ tempi cristiani” (*Paradiso*. X, 119), whose *Historiarum adversus paganos libri septem* defended Christianity from the charge that it was the source of the calamities that had befallen the same earthly Roman empire to which Virgil (only an honorary citizen of Christendom) ultimately remains relegated. While the long-standing interpretation of Virgil strictly as the personification of the poet’s rational faculty inevitably stales Virgil’s infinite variety, it does make it clear why a pagan (and not, say, a Christian saint) makes a fitting guide for that part of the afterworld (from *Inferno* I to *Purgatorio* XXX) where unaided reason (“intelletto humano,” *Par* XXVI, 46) is still able to guide (cf. *Par*. XXVI, 38-9), before it must abdicate to theology and the poet’s Christian *donna*.

Dante’s generic debt to Christian master-student dialogue has often been noted. The ultimate goal of the master-student dialogue is always moral-philosophical or ethical in nature. In his article on philosophical dialogue in the *Commedia*, Ruedi Imbach offers the following pertinent observation: “Zur Verwirklichung seines umfassenden ethischen Programms, das der *Commedia* zugrunde liegt, mußte Dante allerdings eine literarische Gattung und Form finden, die geeignet ist, den Leser zu

¹⁹⁰ A doctrine adopted by the Second Vatican Council in 1965: “Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience — those too may achieve eternal salvation” (Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, 16).

einer moralischen Besinnung hinzuführen. Daß aus didaktischen Gründen der Dialog deswegen zu einem stukturbildenden Moment der *Commedia* geworden ist, mag niemanden erstaunen” [In order to realize the comprehensive ethical program underlying the *Commedia*, it was necessary for Dante to find a genre and form suited to lead the reader on to moral reflection. It is no surprise that, for didactic reasons, the dialogue should therefore have become a structural building-block of the *Commedia*].¹⁹¹ And yet, the master-student dialogue of ecclesiastic tradition is not open to the surprises, intrusions, or narrative detours of literary fiction; the *curiositas* of the student is always regulated by the *auctoritas* of a *magister* who knows which questions lead to edification and which do not. The *discipulus* undergoes a disciplining process in which his questioning is increasingly directed toward specific conclusions, as the “wheat” of licit questions is separated from the “chaff” of the illicit by one who (in Isidore’s definition) is “maior in statione.”¹⁹² Within these parameters, the *auctoritas* of the latter is never at stake.

The topics of Dante’s master-student dialogue, by contrast, are typically suggested by the *visibilia* encountered along the journey’s path. This represents a complication of a genre in which, typically, hardly any attention is ever paid to the *locus* of dialogue. And yet, even those setting-less dialogues still presume a certain space; if anywhere, they can be located in the schools where any such interaction between *magister* and *discipulus* would have taken place. This static backdrop could presumably be provided by any one of the centers of medieval education: the cathedral or court school, the monastery, or the early university: centers of clerical education (as in the vast *Elucidarium* tradition), or of lay learning (as in the *Dragmaticon* of William of Conches). The setting of these dialogues is always irrelevant, however, to

¹⁹¹ Imbach, 295.

¹⁹² Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*. ed. W.M. Lindsay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911), 170: “Magister, maior in statione: nam †steron† Graece statio dicitur.”

their course, or relevant only insofar as it fulfills a need for a non-setting against which the dialogue can unfurl unimpeded. Fundamentally, this is the solitary space of quiet study and mental discipline within a hierarchy of learned authority. The authority of the *magister* is never subject to empirical review by the student (in other words: objects of discourse are not subject to inspection by the discoursing subject). Nor is the ebb and flow of question and answer dictated—as it is for Virgil and Dante—by the experiential dimension of the ever-shifting frame of reference that is provided by the empirical world through which the journey’s course is set.

How can all this be tied in more squarely with Dante’s encyclopedism? The *Convivio*, a work that places itself squarely in the vernacular encyclopedic tradition established by Dante’s *maestro*, Brunetto Latini, presents an image of the encyclopedic reader as one who has acquired the “habit of knowledge” that comes from eating “lo pane delli angeli.” Dante states, “poci rimangono quelli che all’abito [di sapere] da tutti desiderato possano pervenire, e innumerabili quasi sono li ‘mpediti che di questo cibo sempre vivono affamati” (There remain few who are capable of achieving the habit of knowledge desired by all, and the handicapped who live forever starved of this food are almost to numerous to count). This image of the sated few and the meager many is invoked again in the beginning of the second canto of the *Paradiso*. Here Dante distinguishes between two groups of readers of his work, whose course now turns to waters uncharted by other poets (“L’aqua ch’io prendo già mai non si corse”) (The water that I take was never coursed before)¹⁹³: there are those whose *picciotta barca* (little bark) is not quite sea-worthy and “voi altri pochi che drizzaste il collo per tempo *al pan de li angeli*” (*you other few* who lifted up your necks betimes for *bread of angels*). This introduction, with its clear echo of Dante’s earlier, incomplete attempt to produce a lay encyclopedia in the vernacular, casts the

¹⁹³ All citations, as well as translations, are from Singleton’s edition of the *Commedia*.

ensuing dialogue between Beatrice and Dante—a natural-philosophical disquisition on the “*segni bui*” or “dark spots” of the moon—squarely in the mold of encyclopedic discourse on natural philosophy and the tradition of the *dialogus magistri et discipuli*. The ensuing dialogue on the lunar sphere provides an exemplary instance of just how the ebb and flow of question and answer is dictated by the experiential dimension of the empirical world.

The irregularity of the moon’s surface, in fact, presents a unique challenge to medieval cosmology. Like all heavenly bodies, the moon is purported to occupy a realm of uniform perfection. Explanations of the irregular appearance of the moon’s surface are, unsurprisingly, a stock fixture of medieval encyclopedic discourse. Konrad von Megenbergs’s *Buch der Natur*, for instance, explains that “*der môn hat in im swarz flecken, und sprechent die laien, ez sitz ein man mit ainer dornpürd in dem mônen*” (The moon has dark spots, and the layfolk say there is a man with a bundle of thorns sitting on the moon). This explanation from folklore is rejected, however, by Konrad (“*daz ist aber niht wâr*”) in favor of a scientific one: “*ez ist dar umb, daz der môn an den stucken dicker ist an seinem antlütz wann an andern enden, und dar umb nimt er dâ selben der sunnen schein niht, dâ von scheinert uns diu selben stuck vinstert*” (rather, it is because the moon is more dense in some parts on its face than it is on the other side, and therefore the light of the sun is not visible in those places, which is why they appear dark to us).¹⁹⁴ While the question of the moons may be a “cosmological” constant of medieval encyclopedic discourse, the answer is decidedly not—as a corresponding passage from the Middle High German *Lucidarius* illustrates:

Do sprach der junger: Waz ist der swarze flecke, den wir in dem manen sehent?

Der meister sprach: Also der mane daz lieht hat von der sunnen, also het er ouch die hize von der sunnen. Da von kumet daz, swie uol der mane werde,

¹⁹⁴ Konrad von Megenberg, *Das Buch der Natur*, ed. Franz Pfeiffer (Stuttgart: Karl Aue, 1861), 65.

iedoch blibet der alten keltin ein teil in dem liehte. Daz ist daz swarze. daz wir sehent in dem manen.¹⁹⁵

[Student: What are those dark spots we see in the moon?

Master: Just as the moon receives its light from the sun, it also receives its heat from the sun. Thus it comes about that a little of the old frigidty lingers in the light no matter how full the moon becomes.]

William of Conches gives a similar account of these “*segni bui*” in his *Philosophia*:

Cum luna frigida et humida sit, quamvis a sole illuminatur, aliquid naturalis obscuritatis in aliqua parte retinet, quae sibi semper apparet.¹⁹⁶

(Since the moon is cold and damp, even though it is illuminated by the sun, it retains in a given spot something of its natural darkness, which always remains visible.)

Beatrice, of course, gives an entirely different, lengthier, spiritual explanation for these “*segni*,” the details of which need not concern us here. The lesson for the pilgrim is that earth-bound knowledge based on sense-experience and human reason is not enough to comprehend the universe in its spiritual dimension; sufficient explanations will only be arrived at through formal principles and general propositions which are ultimately theologically grounded. Then—and only then—will it be possible to view the “scattered leaves” of the universe, of which the moon is but one, as part a single and coherent encyclopedic volume, as the pilgrim does in his final vision of *la luce eterna* (in *Paradiso XXXIII*, 85-87): “Nel suo profondo vidi che s’intera, legato con amore in un volume, ciò che per l’universo si squaderna” (In its depth I saw ingathered, bound by love in one single volume, that which is dispersed in leaves throughout the universe.) Before this can happen, however, he must be purged not only of sin but also of the “dark spots” of false opinion. It is to this end that ensuing

¹⁹⁵ *Der deutsche Lucidarius*, ed. Dagmar Gottschall and Georg Steer, 2 vols. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1994), 52-53.

¹⁹⁶ *Philosophia*, ed. and trans. Gregor Maurach (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1980), 72.

“theological examination” of Cantos XXIV-XXVI takes place.

Here Dante is quizzed on the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity by Saints Peter, James, and John the Evangelist, respectively. Upon passing this “entrance examination” (to use Singleton’s phrase), Dante the *discipulus* is once again allowed to pose questions to a *magister*, who in this case is none other than the *padre antico* of the human race, Adam himself. The mere presence of Adam, who in biblical history responds (evasively) to the first question ever posed by God (“Adam, where are you?”), although he does not himself pose humanity’s first question (a dignity, it seems, reserved for the first murderer: “Am I my brother’s keeper?”)—is enough to signal the centrality of “question and answer” in the canto and, given the pivotal moment in the pilgrim’s progress, in *Commedia* as a whole. Once Dante passes his “examination,” the discourse shifts markedly from an *interrogatio*—where the pilgrim is quizzed and tested—to a *dialogus* in which Dante reassumes the role of questioning student. As if to underscore this fundamental shift in Dante’s role from examinee to inquirer, the pilgrim’s first questions are directed to Adam, biblical history’s first answerer of questions.¹⁹⁷

For Dante, it is Adam in whom humanity’s first aspiration and temptation to encyclopedic knowledge (*eritis sicut deus scientes bonum et malum*) is so fatefully punished. Dante’s questions to Adam, concerning the time elapsed since his fateful *lapsus*, the amount of time he dwelled in paradise,¹⁹⁸ the true cause of mankind’s

¹⁹⁷ Not Eve, as one might expect: Dante considers the account of *Genesis* 3 to be in error (!) when it ascribes the first act of human speech to Eve, an act of such import in human history that it could not possibly—in Dante’s misogynistic view—have been granted to a woman. See *De vulgari eloquentia* (I, iv, 1-7). It is worth noting that in the Hebrew the serpent does not actually pose a question at all, as in the Latin “cur praecepit vobis Deus ut non comederetis de omni ligno paradisi” (*Genesis* 3:1). Rather, it says, “*Even though* God told you not to eat of the fruit of the garden,” upon which Eve promptly corrects this intentional distortion. Dante’s knowledge of Hebrew, for which there is no direct evidence, is a question of some controversy. My own complete lack of Hebrew is, however, is entirely non-controversial; I rely here on E.A. Speiser’s translation in *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (Doubleday: New York, 1962), 21; see the note to this passage on 23.

¹⁹⁸ The chronology of Adam’s fall (by Dante’s conservative account, during the seventh hour of the day, beginning just after noon) has, of course, a broader symbolic significance, reflected in the canonical

punishment, and the Adamic language to which he lends his name, are, without exception, stock questions of medieval encyclopedic discourse.¹⁹⁹

Since this is not a dialogue *about* Adam but rather a dialogue *with* Adam, Dante's third question about the true cause of mankind's punishment, which the *padre antico*—prioritizing his answers—addresses first, occasions nothing less than a *confession*. Thus it is granted to Dante, purged of sin and false opinion in preparation for his ascent to the empyrean, to hear the confession of the Original Sin from the original sinner. As he crosses the bound from the last intellectual sphere into the purely spiritual heaven in canto XXVII, Dante will re-enact primal man's "overpassing of the bound" (*il trapassar del segno*)—this time with divine sanction.

The ties that bind the poet with the sinful progenitor of the human race seem as close as the temporal gulf that separates them is vast. Surely, if anyone, it is Dante's pilgrim, having just completed his inspection-tour of hell, purgatory, and the better part of paradise, who is now "scientes bonum et malum." However, when he transcends the last intellectual sphere (the last domain of the *scientia* Adam was punished for acquiring illicitly) and ventures into the purely spiritual heavens, he is not guided by the *superbia* or *presumptio* that led to Adam's fall, but rather by the "right love" (XXVI, 63) that leads to the vision of the divine. Thus, in contrast to Adam, Dante's transgression of the bound that guards the spheres of moral knowledge takes place with divine approval ("Santo, santo, santo!" – XXVI, 69). Daringly, Dante here casts himself typologically in the role of *Adam novus*. Although it is certainly true that every Christian is a "new Adam" bearing the name of Christ, Dante "transgresses the bound" of this thoroughly familiar *sensus analogicus* by representing himself

hours of divine office. Noon is, of course, also the hour at which Adam's counterpart, the "new Adam," is crucified.

¹⁹⁹ "Wie lange lebet adam?" (*Lucidarius*, I.39); "Quamdiu fuerint in paradiso?"; "quid peccavit homo quod expulsus est de paradiso?" (*Elucidarium*, ed. Lefèvre, 90, 94; 377).

literally as the redeemer of Adam's illegitimate pursuit of encyclopedic knowledge.

In answering Dante's final question concerning the Adamic language, the *padre antico* couches his response in reference to humanity's most infamous post-lapsarian attempt to attain encyclopedic knowledge: the *ovra inconsummabile* (XXVI, 125) of the Tower of Babel (cf. *Genesis* 11:1-9). The overt reference to this massive, thwarted encyclopedic project—humanity's last, best hope for constructing an ordered totality—makes it clear that this same project, and more specifically Dante's rehabilitation of it, is the underlying theme of the canto: Dante casts himself in the role of rightful redeemer of the wrongful encyclopedism of both Eden and Babel.

That Dante's encyclopedic project now proceeds with divine sanction is underscored by the implicit *imprimatur* granted to the questions he asks. In fact, Dante's authority as examiner is attested by the fact that his questions need not even be posed at all; they are perceived by Adam as the reflections of thoughts in the divine mind. The usual reciprocity of dialogue is here realized at a level of transcendent ideality in so far as Adam is able to "read" Dante's questions as such reflections. Moreover, the fact that Adam is never asked *directly* is, I would argue, an invocation (not without irony?) of Adam's interrogation in *Genesis*. The situation in the *Paradiso* is, in fact, an inversion of that story: God's question to Adam ("Where are you?"—the first interrogative of Salvation History) is, notably, a question to which God already knows the answer; it is posed in speech, and Adam never responds to it directly. Dante both invokes and inverts the scenario of this primal interrogation, presenting a redeemed Adam who now answers questions that need not even be posed in spoken language, asked by one who does *not* already know the answers. Thus, although Dante casts himself typologically as *Adam novus*, he does not let this *sensus analogicus* lapse into outward blasphemy by casting himself in the role of the inquiring Creator addressing his creature. In fact, he inverts every aspect of God's interrogation of

Adam, or, schematically:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| -God already knows answer. | -Dante does not know the answers. |
| -God poses question in speech. | -Questions are read as reflections in the Divine mind. |
| -Adam evades question. | -Adam answers all questions. |

If this is a radical departure from the framework in which the four questions Dante poses—or, again, does not pose—have been asked heretofore, it is an equally radical departure from the kind of authority that has traditionally been invoked in response to such questions. As mentioned, all four questions belong to the standard repertoire of medieval encyclopedic dialogue. Yet Dante does not address them to a *doctor* or a *magister*; rather, he eliminates the need for any recourse to learned authority, since here the addressee of his inquiries is also their subject. In this rather pointed subversion of the master-student dialogue, Dante eliminates the middleman. Since this *facie ad faciem* dispenses with the usual practice of knowledge-transmission through learned intermediaries, the potential claims of any competing authority are superfluous at best. Dante's pilgrim supplants the *dialogus magistri et discipuli* of medieval encyclopedic tradition with something radically different: substituting recourse to learned authority with the drama of the author's own acquisition of *auctoritas*. The narrative renders explicit the credentials of its own encyclopedic *auctor*.

At the end of the *interrogatio* on love with St. John the Evangelist that leads up to the dialogue with Adam, Dante invokes the idea of an encyclopedic totality when he speaks of “le fronde onde si infronda tutto l’orto” (*Par.* XXVI, 64) (the leaves wherewith all the garden of the eternal Gardiner is enleavened). Singleton's commentary on this passage clearly, if unwittingly, supports this view: “Dante is saying that he loves the various creatures of God's creation (the leaves of His garden)

that make up the world in proportion to the goodness with which their maker (the eternal Gardener) in His predestination has bestowed upon them.” These *fronde* with which Dante invokes the image of an ordered totality (the encyclopedist’s ever-present goal) are, of course, things, not beings; still, as a distinctly bio-organic metaphor, they stand not only for the *res* but also for the *animata* of the created world—no less clipped and pruned into order by their “eternal Gardener.”

These *fronde* will resurface two more times in the *canto* with rather different meanings. In describing his reaction to the appearance of the first human interlocutor and *anima prima*, whose dialogue was previously discussed, Dante compares himself (XXVI, 85) to the “fronda che flette la cima nel transito del vento, e poi si leva per la propria virtù che la soblima” (“the bough which bends its top at passing of the wind, and then uplifts itself by its own virtue which raises it”). This image underscores the underlying ambivalence of Dante’s position vis-à-vis the *padre antico*: First Dante “bows” in awe, humbled by the presence of a venerable *magister*, but then he is borne back aloft by a confidence in his own recently demonstrated *auctoritas* and a desire to speak (“e poi mi rifece sicuro un disio di parlare ond’ io ardeva”) (and then a desire to speak, wherewith I was burning, gave me assurance again). That the pilgrim’s position vis-à-vis Adam is not necessarily subordinate is hinted by Dante’s exercise of his new privilege as examiner. As Hans Robert Jauß has observed, “it is the prerogative of the master to interrogate; to have to answer, and to speak only when asked, is the lot of the underling.”²⁰⁰ The assertion that the right to ask questions is only a “prerogative of the master” would not seem to apply to the *dialogus magistri et discipuli*, where it is not “having to answer” but rather *being able to answer* that is the mark of the *magister*. Here the matter is more complicated. The *Commedia*, up to this point, has traced

²⁰⁰ “Das Recht des Fragens ist ein Vorrecht der Herrenseite, antworten zu müssen und nur reden zu dürfen, wenn man gefragt wird, ist das Los des Untertans”: Hans Robert Jauß, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982), 378.

Dante's progress from questioner, to examinee, and once again to inquirer, only now the inquirer imbued with a new-found authority. The progress is from master-student dialogue, to *interrogatio*, to a *dialogus magistrorum*.

When Adam answers Dante's question about *la lingua ch'io parlai*, he does so in reference to two different names of God, who was first called *I* and later *El*.²⁰¹ Dante has not asked about the names of God; Adam merely wants to illustrate that the names of things, even the names of God, bear no necessary relation to their essence: "e ciò conviene, ch'èl'uso di mortali è come *fronda* in ramo, che sen va e altra vene" (*Par.* XXVI, 136-8) (and that is fitting, because the usage is as a leaf on a branch, which passes away and another comes). In this third instance, *fronde* (137) refer to the mutability of *verba* in rejection of any strict equation of *verbum* and *res* (what a later age might call "the arbitrary nature of the signifier"). Whereas Dante has heretofore employed *fronde* of the Garden (l. 64) to refer to "things" (*res*), both animate and inanimate, this third instance of *fronda*, in Adam's explication, clearly refers to "words" (*verba*). Thus Dante, the referent of the second instance of *fronda* in the *canto* (*la fronda che flette la cima*), positions himself between the *res* of the first *fronde* and *verba* of the third, suggesting that he is one who mediates between words and things. One might see this merely as an expression of the self-understanding of the poet or the encyclopedist. Yet in doing so, we risk missing something crucial.

Dante's association of words (*verba*) and botanical imagery ultimately derives from Jesus' parable of the vine and the branches in the *Book of John* in which Christ commands his followers to "love one another," and whose author happens to be Dante's examiner on "love" in the *canto*, as well as the preeminent theologian of the Word (i.e., *in principio erat verbum*). As I hope to have shown, the pilgrim has already cast himself literally as a "second Adam" who redeems the encyclopedic transgression

²⁰¹ "Primum apud Ebreos Dei nomen Eli dicitur," cf. Rabanus Maurus, *De rerum naturis*, Book 1.

of the first. Now, Dante assumes the role of the *tertium comparationis*, the true second Adam, Christ himself: In other words, in order to redeem the corrupt encyclopedism of Eden and Babel, Dante mediates—both as metaphorical *fronda*, and as encyclopedic *compiler* of “ciò che per l’universo si squaderna” (that which is dispersed in leaves throughout the universe)—between the material and the spiritual, between things and words, just as Christ mediates between word and flesh.

2. Encyclopedism: Old School and New Styles

Dante's predecessors in the Sicilian "school" of poets in and around the court of Emperor Frederick II (1194-1250) produced a poetry no less versed in the encyclopedic discourses of cosmological, lapidary, and bestiary lore, or questions subject to theological and scientific disputation. The Sicilian poets, most of them university-trained jurists and court administrators, are almost unique in the extent to which they are in the throws of the newly available Greek and Arabic science that is first translated into Latin in the late 1100s and forms the core of the encyclopedic tradition. To read them is to glimpse at the scientific works at their elbows. Pietro della Vigna, for example, describes the effect of love on the lover as the same as that of the magnet on metal:

Per la vertute de la calamita
Como lo ferro atira no se vede
Ma sì lo tira signorevolmente²⁰²

[In spite of the power of the magnet,
one cannot see how it attracts iron,
yet it attracts it in a powerful manner]²⁰³

The founder of the so-called *scuola siciliana*, Giacomo da Lentini, in line with the optical theory of his day, famously asks in a verse how the image of his lady comes to dwell in his heart:

Or come pote sì gran donna entrare
per gli occhi mei, che sì piccioli sone?²⁰⁴

[Now how could so great a Lady enter
my eyes which are so tiny?]

²⁰² *Poesia italiana: il Duecento. Introduzione, scelta dei testi, note e commenti*, ed. Piero Cudini (Milano: Garzanti, 1978), 22.

²⁰³ *Tuscan Poetry of the Duecento: An Anthology*, Garland Library of Medieval Literature, ed. and trans. Frede Jensen (New York: Routledge, 1994), 132-33.

²⁰⁴ *Poesia italiana*, 22.

The question is, since the lady is bigger than his eyes, how does she enter them “*sanza far rottura*” (without breaking them)? A question of a seemingly amorous nature is framed as a matter of exact science reminiscent of Dante’s disputation with Beatrice on the spots of the moon. Giacomo’s poem is a perfect illustration that not all is as it seems in regards to the seemingly objective “scientific” discourse on love held by the *siciliani*. The question of how a woman can “enter” a man without “breaking” anything (*sanza far rottura*) lends itself ambiguously to variously erotic interpretations, perhaps no less part of the *gioco* of Sicilian poetics than their scientific disputations. Moreover, the scientific analogy the poet makes to answer this question radically confounds the boundaries between subject and object, the distinction between inner and outer world, phenomenon and observer:

Or come pote sì gran donna entrare
per gli ochi mei che sì piccioli sone?
e nel mio core come pote stare,
che 'nentr'esso la porto là onque i' vone?
Lo loco là onde entra già non pare,
ond'io gran meraviglia me ne dònè;
ma voglio lei a lumera asomigliare,
e gli ochi mei al vetro ove si pone.
Lo foco inchiuso, poi passa difore
lo suo lostrore, sanza far rotura:
così per gli ochi mi pass'a lo core,
no la persona, ma la sua figura.
Rinovellare mi voglio d'amore,
poi porto insegna di tal criatura.

[Now how could so great a Lady enter
my eyes which are so tiny?
And how could she stay in my heart
that I carry her in it wherever I go?
The spot she enters is not seen,
whence I give myself great surprise—
but I want to compare her to a lamp
and my eyes to its glass.
The fire closed within then passes its
luster outside without shattering:
thus through my eyes it passes to my heart—

not her person, but her image.
I want to renew myself with love,
Then I'll carry the image of such a creature.]²⁰⁵

The poet's heart does not contain the lady herself but rather her image. The lady is compared to the flame of a lamp, which passes through the glass enclosure that divides it from the outer world, but without shattering the glass. The poet's eye is like the glass. But the structure of the analogy belies its seeming relation to the world of causal fact. Whereas the light of the flame passes from within the lamp, through the glass and into the outer world, the image of the lady passes through the eye and into the inner world of the poet's heart. In the case of the lamp the journey is from within the lamp to the world without, whereas the image of the lady passes from the outer world to the poet's own interior:

Flame = Lady
Glass = Poet's Eye
World = Poet's Heart

At first glance, Lentini seems to write about the lady the way a post-Galilean scientist would write about the natural world. But this impression is as fleeting as it is misleading. The external world of things and internal world of the poet are so thoroughly intermeshed that the distinction itself breaks down. Not the scientific fact is important, but rather the impression that it makes on the poetic subject.

And yet precisely these scientific facts—the behavior of basilisks, tigers, and swans, and the properties of magnets, mirrors, water and fire—fuel the Sicilians' poetic speculation on love. Giacomo da Lentini invokes several of these images to invoke the conventional notion of the lover's blissful despair:

²⁰⁵ *Melancholia Poetica: A Dual Language Anthology of Italian Poetry 1160-1560*, ed. and trans. Marc A. Cirigliano (Leicester: Troubador Publishing, 2007), 14.

Lo basilisco a lo spleco lucente
 Traggi a morire cum risbaldmento,
 Lo cesne canta è presso a lo so finimento
 Lo paon turba, istando plù guadente,
 Cum a soi pedi fa riguardamento,
 L'augel fenice s'arda veramente
 Per ritarnare in novo nascimento.
 In tai natura eo sentom'abenuto,
 Chi allegro vado a morte a le belleze,
 E 'nforzo 'l canto presso a lo finire.

[The *basilisk* before the shining *mirror*
 dies with pleasure;
 the *swan* sings with greatest rapture
 when it is nearest death;
 at the height of its pleasure the *peacock*
 gets upset when it looks at its feet;
 the *phoenix* burns itself all up
 to return and be reborn.
 I think I have become much like these creatures,
 I who go gladly to death before her beauty
 And make my song lusty as I approach the end.]

Conveying the same thought, Stefano Protonotaro invokes the image of the tigress
 held captive by its own gaze before a mirror while its whelps are stolen, another stock
 item of medieval bestiary lore (also depicted as a tableux on the Hereford
 Mappamundi):

quandu eu la guardu, sentir la dulzuri
 chi fa la tigma in illu miraturi;
 chi si vidi livari
 multu crudilimenti
 sua nuritura, chi ill'ha nutricatu;
 e si bonu li pari
 mirarsi dulcimenti
 dintru unu speclu chi li esti amustratu
 chi l'ubliã siguiri.

[when I look at her, I feel the same sweetness
 as does the *tiger* at a *mirror*;
 which sees taken away from it
 in a very cruel manner
 the young which it has nourished;
 and yet it finds great pleasure

in looking at itself sweetly
in a *mirror* which is shown to it,
that it forgets to follow them.]²⁰⁶

Concerning the tiger, Bartholomaeus Anglicus writes similarly in *De proprietatibus rerum*:

and [the hunter] that will bear away the whelps, leaves in the way great mirrors, and the mother follows and finds the mirrors in the way, and looks on them and sees her own shadow and image therein, and mistakenly believes that she sees her children therein, and is long occupied therefore to deliver her children out of the glass, and so the hunter has time and space to escape, and so she is beguiled with her own shadow, and she follows no farther after the hunter to deliver her children.²⁰⁷

These images convey the impression of love as a phenomenon that can be explained by reference to the external world, or at least in analogy to it. Yet the analogy, in the attempt to render the experience of love comprehensible, also perforce creates a gap between the poet's love and the reader's understanding of it. The encyclopedism of the *siciliani* is overt, yet static, the stuff of disputations, learned demonstrations, analogies, not a poetic representation of life as lived and loved, which we find first in Dante and the *stilnovisti*.

This is nowhere more evident than in the difference in the structure of the love relationship as conceived by the *stilnovisti* and the *siciliani*, which, as far as I am aware, has not been noted before. Guido delle Colonne says that "Love has become aware that it could not have attracted me to it, if it had not been through [his lady]:

Ancor che l'aigua per lo foco lassi
la sua grande freddura
non cangeria natura
s'alcun vasello in mezzo non vi stassi;

²⁰⁶ *German and Italian Lyrics of the Middle Ages: An Anthology and a History*, ed. and trans. Frederick Goldin (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1973), 84-85.

²⁰⁷ *Mediaeval Lore from Bartholomew Anglicus*, ed. Robert Steele (London: Alexander Moring, The King's Classics, 1905), ch. 18 (modified).

anzi averria senza lunga dimura
 che lo foco astutassi,
 o che l'aigua seccassi;
 ma per lo mezzo l'uno e l'otra dura.
 Cusi, gentil criatura,
 in me à mostrato Amore
 l'ardente suo valore:
 che senza Amore er'aigua fredda e ghiaccia,
 ma Amor m'à sì allumato
 di foco che m'abbraccia,
 ch'eo fora consumato,
 se voi, donna sovrana,
 non fustici mezzana
 infra l'Amore e meve,
 ca fa lo foco nascere di neve.

[Although *water*, because of *fire*, loses
 its great coldness,
 it would not change its nature
 if there were not some vessel in between,
 but rather it would happen without much delay
 that the fire would burn out
 or that the water would dry up;
 but because of what's between, both endure;
 thus, oh noble creature,
 in me Love has shown
 its burning force,
 for without love, I was cold water and ice;
 but Love has so strongly kindled in me
 a flame which envelops me
 that I would have been consumed by it,
 if you, sovereign lady,
 had not been between
 me and love,
 which makes fire issue from the snow.]²⁰⁸

This same notion of the poet being attracted to love through the mediating influence of
 the lady occurs later in the poem in the image of the magnet:

La calamita contano i saccenti
 che trare non poria
 lo ferro per maestria,
 se no che l'aire in mezzo le 'l consenti.
 Ancor che calamita petra sia,

²⁰⁸ *German and Italian Lyrics*, 44-45.

l'altre petre neenti
 non son cusì potenti
 a traier perché non hano bailia.
 Così, madonna mia,
 l'Amor s'è apperceptuto
 che non m'avria potuto
 traer' a sé se non fusse per voi

[The learned say that the magnet
 could not attract
 iron through its power,
 if the air in between does not permit it.
 Even though the magnet may be a stone,
 no other stones are
 so powerful
 that they can attract (iron), for they do not have the power.
 Thus, my lady,
 Love has become aware
 That it could not have attracted me to it, if it had not been through you.]²⁰⁹

The lady is a conduit to love. Guido delle Colonne describes the lady as a vessel that separates “water” and fire” (i.e., the lover and Love) such that the latter does not extinguish the former (lines 6-7). Thus in the *scuola siciliana* the lady acts as a conduit to Love rather than Love as a conduit to the lady, as we would expect—an expectation established by Dante in the *Vita nuova*. This can be represented schematically as follows:

<i>scuola siciliana</i> :	the Poet [>] the Lady [>] Love
<i>stilnovo</i> :	the Poet [>] Love [>] the Lady

At root of this distinction is the attempt of the *stilnovisti* attempt to represent a poetic subject who feels, whereas the *siciliani* reflect on Love (capital “L”) in the abstract. The question of real or autobiographical referents are unknowable and furthermore irrelevant. What is important is that the *stilnovisti* affect the portrayal of actual emotions. Thus, the *stilnovisti* tend to focus on the specific instance (“one day”) as

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

opposed to intellectual contemplation of love as a concept.

The poetic vocabulary of the *siciliani*—water, air, earth, and fire—reflect an “earthbound materiality.” Yet all such images are under tension since these *visibilia* can be read as signifiers of higher, spiritual truths. Dante explores these tensions between things and things signified more conspicuously than any of his predecessors. Still, we should exercise caution before buying into the teleological notion of literary progress embodied in Dante’s designation of his style as “new.” Dante, naturally, writes literary history from his own perspective, and his view is conditioned by the sense of spiritual progress that is a constitutive feature of his poetics as a whole. In effect, Dante projects his pilgrimage backwards in time onto his immediate poetic predecessors and makes their preparations prefigurations and prerequisites of his own journey. The “new” style is already old and gone, transcended by Dante, by the time it is first invoked by name; Dante’s designation is “curatorial” and antiquarian. We must distinguish between Dante’s perspective, the idea that he is getting right what others before him got wrong, and fact of the novelty of Dante’s view of love. Dante’s rhetorical move obscures a historical development.

The image of fire, so pervasive in the writings of the *siciliani*, provides a contrast with which to determine the focal points of the differing status of scientific discourse in Dante and his predecessors. Giacomo da Lentini attempts to describe fire from the vantage point of an (almost Newtonian) neutral observer:

Chi non avesse mai veduto foco
no crederia che cocere potesse,
anti li sembraria solazzo e gioco
lo so isprendore, quando lo vedesse.
Ma s'ello lo tocasse in alcun loco,
be·lli sembrara che forte cocesse:
quello d'Amore m'à tocato un poco,
molto me coce - Deo, che s'aprendesse!
Che s'aprendesse in voi, madonna mia,
che mi mostrate dar solazzo amando,

e voi mi date pur pen'e tormento.
Certo l'Amore fa gran vilania,
che no dstringe te che vai gabando,
a me che servo non dà isbaldimento.

[A man who had never seen *fire* before
would never think that it could burn;
rather, its splendor would strike him,
when he first saw it, as a delight, great amusement.

But if he ever touched it anywhere,
Then it would seem to him it burned—and badly.
The one that belongs to Love has touched me a little:
It burns me greatly. God, if it only took hold!
If it only took hold in you, my lady,
Who make me think you mean to comfort me by loving me
And give me only torments and distress.
Certainly Love acts ignobly,
For he does not tie you down who come forth only with words;
I serve. Yet he gives me no happiness.²¹⁰

The imagined neutral observer of Lentini's discourse on fire is replaced in the *Vita nuova* by Dante's dream vision of his own flaming heart, clutched in the hand of the god Amor. Lentini's hypothesis of the neutral observer is supplanted by the interiority of the dream; the fire observed set in the poet's own conflagrating cardiac organ:

A ciascun'alma presa e gentil core
nel cui cospecto ven lo dir presente,
in ciò che mi riscriva 'n suo parvente,
salute in lor signor, cioè Amore.
Già eran quasi che aterzate l'ore
del tempo che omne stella n'è lucente,
quando m'apparve Amor subitamente,
cui essenza membrar mi dà orrore.
Allegro mi sembrava Amor tenendo
meo core in mano, e nelle braccia avea
madonna involta in un drappo dormendo.
Poi la svegliava, e d'esto core ardendo
lei paventosa umilmente pascea.
Apresso gir lo ne vedea piangendo.

[To every loving heart and captive soul
into whose sights these present words may come

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 218-221 (modified).

for some elucidation in reply,
greetings I bring for their sweet lord's sake, Love.
The first three hours of the night were almost spent,
the time that every star shines down on us,
when Love appeared to me all of a sudden,
and I still shudder at the memory.
Joyous love looked to me while he was holding
My heart within his hands, and in his arms
My lady lay asleep wrapped in a veil.
He woke her then and trembling and obedient
She at that burning heart out of his hand;
Weeping I saw him depart from me.]

Dante's *A ciascun'alma presa e gentil core* ("To every loving heart") is a recapitulation or poetic synopsis of the *stilnovo*: the lover, the lady, Love, the heart, fire—all the inherited elements are there. All these images are also present in the various poets of the *scuola siciliana*, but they are used to opposite effect. Dante appropriates the scientific-encyclopedic discourses of the *siciliani* but transforms them into a romance of knowledge, as opposed to a knowledge of romance (in the contemporary sense of "love"), such as we find in Lentini's poem. In the *Vita nuova* Dante appropriates the "fuoco" of the *scuola's* scientific discourse for his own new subjective discourse on Love. There is a marked shift between Giacomo and Dante from the image of fire as an element of a scientific discourse to an intuitive image of burning passion that has since become cliché. Of course, the latter only seems more natural and intuitive to us because the image has become a commonplace. They are in their original context both equally *technical* explanations.

While Dante in his own depiction is merely describing love more accurately and appropriately than those who came before him, he is in fact changing the concept of Love itself. Representations of Love as "Lord" are less popular among the Siciliani, who actually lived within a feudal power structure, than among the citizen *stilnovisti* of the city-state of Florence, who lacked such lords. But what ultimately separates Dante from his predecessors and even a contemporary like Guido Cavalcanti is the

narrative dimension of his undertaking; the focus on the specific instance becomes a focus on a series of instances. The analogy borrowed from natural science becomes a story that requires a hero.

The image in the *Vita nuova* usurps the fire from the pages of the Sicilians' encyclopedias and sets Dante's disembodied heart aflame. For Dante, encyclopedic knowledge is located within the mind and soul of an individual on a path to salvation who is availed by it, not in a mind diseased, like Cavalcanti's *anima sbigottita*, which no amount of ministering can avail.

3. Cavalcanti's Counter-Encyclopedia of the Heart

It is no wonder then that Guido Cavalcanti had no use for Dante's sapiential-salvific vision. Cavalcanti dispenses with the sapiential dimension of the *scuola siciliana* and the early *stilnovisti*, though he is hardly unaware of their claims for love as a conduit to understanding—a love which can itself be understood by intellectual means. Yet he violently denies these claims and insists on love's purely irrational, destructive power. It is easy to see how Cavalcanti, the poet of spiritual fragmentation, whose mind is most frequently the site of ravaging and “destruction,” not amorous enlightenment, would have been skeptical, perhaps violently so, of any attempt to gather “bound by love in one single volume, that which is dispersed in leaves throughout the universe.” Cavalcanti's theory of love is directly at odds with Dante's encyclopedic vision. Dante and Guido's famous but still ill-understood rift can be seen to have its roots in their respective reactions to the intellectual inheritance of the *siciliani*. This ultimately has ramifications for both Dante's intellectual enterprise in the *Commedia* and Guido's rejection of it in his famous “disdegno” (*Inferno* X, 59) for Beatrice, who is its embodiment and representative. After a brief biographical sketch, I argue in what follows, that Cavalcanti's *disdegno* for Beatrice is ultimately rooted in Guido's rejection of Dante's encyclopedic poetics.

Guido Cavalcanti is unquestionably one of most enigmatic figures of Italian literature: poet, philosopher, courtly lover, suspected heretic—the list can be (and has been) extended. The details of his life are scarce by modern standards, but his are better documented than those of most of his contemporaries—a testament to his prominence in the Florence of his day. Born into a prominent family of Florentine patricians, probably around 1255, his father arranged a marriage for Guido when he was perhaps as young as twelve: a union designed to reconcile feuding factions (his bride was the daughter of the great Ghibelline leader Farinata degli Uberti; Guido's

father, Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti was a Guef). Guido most certainly received an education commensurate with his social standing and it is at least plausible to suppose a period of study in Bologna, where he would have become aquatinted with local Aristotelian traditions and with the work of the great Bolognese poet, Guido Guinizelli, who did not die until around 1276. We have chronicle evidence of a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela and a report of an attempt on Guido's life along the way. We also know something about Cavalcanti's participation in Florentine politics during the last fifteen years of the thirteenth century: in 1284 he was a member of the General Council of the Commune of Florence, on which sat other contemporary luminaries such as the scholar Brunetto Latini. In 1300 the city council sent Guido into exile along with certain other members of the White Guef faction as well as an even number of leading Black Guefs in an attempt to quell incessant feuding by temporarily depriving both sides of their leaders. Guido's death following his short exile is recorded by the chronicler Giovanni Villani:

[T]he Popolo sent the leaders of the other party [Whites] into exile at Sarzana [in the Tuscan territory near La Spezia]: namely Messer Gentile and Messer Torrigano and Carbone de' Cerchi and some of their relations... Guido Cavalcanti and some of his, and Giovanni Giacotti Malispini. But this party stayed less time in exile, for they were recalled from the unhealthy place, and Guido Cavalcanti retired ill, whence he died: and he was a great loss since he was as a philosopher an accomplished man [virtudioso] in many things, though he was too sensitive and irascible [*troppo tenero e stizzoso*].²¹¹

This, in outline form, is what we can actually *know* about Guido's life; the rest

²¹¹ Villani's *Chronicle*, Book 8, chapter 42, quoted in *The Poetry of Guido Cavalcanti*, ed. and trans. Lowry Nelson, Jr. (New York: Garland, 1986), xviii. The details of Guido's life presented above are taken from the same, pp. xiii-xviii.

is silence—or speculation.

It will come as little surprise then that the limited biographical material on Cavalcanti has given rise to such speculation. The fascinating elusiveness of his enigmatic figure is perhaps best illustrated by Boccaccio's fictional account of the Florentine poet in a *novella* of the *Decameron* (VI, 9). Boccaccio presents Cavalcanti as an austere philosopher wandering lost in thought among the marble tombs of a Florentine church cemetery. A band of youths, lead by Guido's rival, Betto Brunelleschi, rides around the city, frequenting celebrations at various patrician households. Cavalcanti was, according to Boccaccio, not well liked by them because, although rich and elegant, his refusal to join their band was an affront to the noble youth of his native city and his mysterious philosophical speculations were suspected of impiety:

One day Guido set out from Orto San Michele and chanced to come to San Giovanni by way of Corso degli Adimari, a route he frequently took; the great marble tombs now in Santa Reparata used to be located around San Giovanni, along with many others, and he was standing there between those tombs and the porphyry columns flanking the church, and the church door itself, which was locked. Along came Betto and his friends, crossing Piazza Santa Reparata on horseback, and they spotted Guido among the tombs. "Come on," they said, "let's go and needle him!" They spurred their horses and mounted a playful charge upon him, catching him unawares. "Guido," they cried, "here are you, refusing to join our club. When you've found out that God does not exist, where will that have got you?" Finding himself hemmed in, Guido promptly retorted: "Seeing that here you are at home, my lords, you can say to me what you please." With this he rested his hand on a tomb—they were not small—vaulted over it as one who weighed almost nothing [*sì come colui che legerissimo era*], and vanished from their sight.²¹²

²¹² Boccaccio, *Decameron*, trans. John Payne/Charles Singleton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) 402-403 (modified). "Ora avvenne un giorno che, essendo Guido partito d'Orto San Michele e venutosene per lo Corso degli Adimari infino a San Giovanni, il quale spesse volte era suo cammino, essendo arche grandi di marmo, che oggi sono in Santa reparata, e molte altre dintorno a San Giovanni, e egli essendo tralle colonne del porfido che vi sono e quelle arche e la porta di San Giovanni, che serrata era, messer Betto con sua brigata a caval venendo su per la piazza di Santa Reparata, vedendo Guido là tra quelle sepolture, dissero: "andiamo a dargli briga"; e spronati i cavalli, a guisa d'uno assalto sollazzevole gli furono, quasi prima che egli sen ne avvedesse, sopra e cominciaronogli a dire: "Guido, tu rifiuti d'esser di nostra brigata; ma ecco, quando tu avrai trovato che Idio non sia, che avrai fatto?A' quali Guido da lor veggendosi chiuso, prestamente disse: "Signori, voi

“That which interests us here,” writes one commentator

is not so much the joke attributed to Cavalcanti, (which can be interpreted in light of the fact that the poet’s supposed Epicureanism was in fact Averroism, according to which the individual soul is a part of the Universal Mind: the tombs are your house and not mine in as far as physical death is conquered by those who raise themselves to the contemplation of the universal by means of intellectual speculation). That which strikes us is the visual image that Boccaccio evokes of Cavalcanti, who liberates himself in a single bound “sì come colui leggerissimo era.”²¹³

Although Boccaccio’s picture of Cavalcanti is purely fictional, it is indeed consistent with the few contemporary descriptions we do have: Dino Compagni in his *Cronica* (one of two contemporary biographical sources, along with Villani’s *Cronica*), famously describes Guido as “cortese e ardito ma sdegnoso e solitario e intento allo studio” [courtly and bold but haughty and given to study].²¹⁴ Boccaccio also writes of Guido that he was “one of the best logicians in the world and the best natural philosopher.” What fascinates more than any given detail of Boccaccio’s fictive echoes of contemporary characterizations is the uncanny manner in which his fiction presages a Cavalcanti who continues to evade his pursuers (be they Florentine ruffians or contemporary scholars) with the effortless grace of a speedy leap.

There is still little critical commentary on the poetic works of Guido Cavalcanti: at first glance, this statement would seem at odds with the facts; the most complete and current bibliography on Guido lists well over one-hundred items.²¹⁵ The bulk of scholarly writing on Guido, however, is not about him, but rather about Dante—Guido and Dante, Guido *in* Dante: tracing the explicit and the not so explicit

mi potete dire a casa vostra ciò che vi piace”; e posta la mano sopra una di quelle arche, che grandi erano, sì come colui che leggerissimo era, prese un salto e fusi gittato dall’altra parte, e sviluppatosi da loro se n’ andò.” Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. Vittore Branca (Milan: Mondadori, 1989) 537-538.

²¹³ Italo Calvino, *Lezioni Americane: Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (Milan: Garzanti, 1988), 13.

²¹⁴ Quoted in *The Poetry of Guido Cavalcanti*, ed. and trans. Lowry Nelson, Jr. (New York: Garland, 1986), xvii.

²¹⁵ Enrico Fenzi, *La canzone d’amore di Guido Cavalcanti e i suoi antichi commenti* (Genova: Il melangolo, 1999), 289-300. Cavalcanti is the main subject of only a quarter of these.

strains of an ongoing intertextual exchange between the two authors. Excluding his “doctrinal” poem, “*donna me prega*,” almost none of Cavalcanti’s poems have received sustained analysis for their own sake, but rather as pieces that fit the puzzle posed by the infamously difficult and aforementioned “doctrinal poem” or the more complicated and ultimately insolvable puzzle of the exact nature and delineation of his relationship with Dante. Here, to be sure, it is prudent to use the term “relationship” and not “friendship”; while we have unmistakable evidence of the former, the latter term would exclude the period following the demise of that friendship, after which we have evidence of an ongoing and increasingly hostile exchange whose exact outlines elude us. The rift between Dante and Guido did not remain without practical consequences for the latter. As alluded to above, after an outbreak of civil strife in June, 1300, that ended in bloody riots, Dante, a *priore* of the city of Florence, voted to banish Guido and other leaders of the White and Black Guelphs in an effort to ease tensions between factions.

Guido in Dante: From *dissidio* to *disdegno*

Presenting a new edition of Cavalcanti’s *Rime* in 1966, as part of the celebration surrounding the seventh centennial of Dante, Gianfranco Contini synthesizes the complex relationship between these two figures, the greatest Italian poet of all time and the greatest Italian poet of the thirteenth century: the latter is exalted by the former as his “*primo amico*” and “*primo de li miei amici*,” not to mention as dedicatee of his first effort as an author, the *Vita Nuova*, the most significant work of early Italian literature. Contini also registers the immense difficulty involved in evaluating the traces of this relationship in Dante’s *oeuvre*:

Se la fase detta stilnovistica di Dante è poi di derivazione prevalentemente cavalcantiana, l’ombra e il pensiero di Cavalcanti lo accompagnano fino al termine d’una carriera tanto indeducibile dai suoi principi, ma in cui si sèguita

a fare i conti col padrono della sua giovinezza poetica...Nella *Commedia* la presenza di Cavalcanti aleggia in modo tanto più inquietante quanto più indiretto: inquietante per i posteri, non per lo scrittore, i cui silenzi, le cui reticenze, le cui oscurità e ambiguità sono ferree quanto tutto il resto.”²¹⁶

[Although what is called Dante’s *stil nuovo* phase is of predominantly Cavalcantian derivation, Cavalcanti’s shadow and thought accompany him up to the end of a career that is as such not deducible from his [Cavalcanti’s] principles, but during the course of which he continued to settle his accounts with the *padrono* of his poetic youth...The presence of Cavalcanti wafts through the *Commedia* in a manner all the more unsettling on account of its indirectness: unsettling for posterity, not for the author, whose silence, reticence, obscurity, and ambiguity are as tangible as the rest.]

Inferno X, 63

Cavalcanti, who even in his native Italy is not a household name, is known to English-speaking readers, if at all, as the subject of two footnotes to Dante’s *Commedia*. In *Inferno X*, 55-72, Dante encounters Guido’s father Cavalcante (alongside his father-in-law Farinata) in the tombs of the heretics—Cavalcante was, like his son in Boccaccio’s tale, popularly suspected of impiety or, more specifically, Epicureanism: “Suo cimitero da questa parte hanno / con Epicuro tutti suoi seguaci, / che l’anima col corpo morto fanno” [In this part Epicurus with all his followers, who make the soul die with the body, have their burial place] (*Inferno X*, 13-15). When Dante mentions Guido, in what is one of the most debated passages in the poem (*Inferno X*, 61-63), he refers his famous *disdegno*:

Da me stesso non vegno:
colui ch’attende là per chi mi mena,
forse cui Guido vostro ebbe a disdegno.

Part of the difficulty in interpreting this passage lurks in the exact translation of *cui*. Here there are essentially two contending readings. An older commentary tradition—nearly unanimous up to the beginning of the previous century—read *cui* as “whom”:

²¹⁶ Gianfranco Contini, *Varianti e altra linguistica; una raccolta di Saggi (1938-68)* (Turin: Einaudi, 1970), 433.

(to paraphrase) “I do not come here through my own power; he who is waiting there [Vergil], *whom* perhaps your Guido disdained, leads me through here”. A more recent tradition reads *cui* as *to whom*: “he who is waiting there leads me through here, perhaps to the one [Beatrice] whom your Guido disdained.” (A third, but comparatively minor tradition reads *cui* as God, whom Guido supposedly held in disdain.) In recent years, something approaching a consensus has been reached among scholars that *cui* does in fact refer to Beatrice.²¹⁷ “The other mystery-word,” writes Contini,²¹⁸ is the perfective ‘*ebbe*,’ the key to this equivocation,[...]: past historical and not durative, it indicates that Guido’s aversion to Beatrice or his rejection of her was not a mere state, but rather a specific act and gesture.”²¹⁸ While there is no evidence that Guido developed a disdain for the historical Beatrice, “there is no reason not to suppose that the two poets had at one time a fundamental disagreement about the salvific power of love between man and woman.”²¹⁹ Thus, Guido’s *disdegno* is not directed at Beatrice as a historical woman but rather “at the possibility that an earthly lady may be a divine signifier and hence a carrier of beatitude.”²²⁰ Guido’s experience of women, his concern with love’s psychological and physiological effects on the lover, the catalogue of sighs and sufferings that wrack the *mente sbiggotito* and the body it inhabits are certainly remote from Dante’s far grander conception of his *donna gentile* as a signifier and mediatrix of divine love and the path to salvation.²²¹

Guido’s famous *disdegno* for Beatrice, and what we can safely conjecture about its effect on Dante, is balanced, however, by the backhanded compliment that

²¹⁷ See Teodolina Barolini, *Dante’s Poets: Textuality and Truth in the ‘Comedy’* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 146n.

²¹⁸ Contini, 440: “L’alta parola misteriosa è il perfetto *ebbe*, chiave sì del equivoco[...]. Tempo storico, e non durativo, esso indica che l’avversione o il rifiuto di Guido non fu un mero stato, ma un gesto e un’azione determinati[.]”

²¹⁹ Nelson, *xxviii*.

²²⁰ Barolini, 146.

²²¹ Although, one might still note, Guido’s experience of love is, unlike Dante’s, immediately accessible to the modern reader.

Dante seems to pay him in the lines preceding “Da me stesso no vegno...”: Guido’s distraught father asks Dante accusingly,

“Se per questo cieco
carcere vai per *altezza d’ingegno*,
figlio mio ov’è? é perché non e teco?”[italics mine]

[“If you go through this blind prison on account of your high genius, where is my son? Why is he not with you?” (Singleton, modified)]

Cavalcante de’ Cavalcanti believes that Dante has been chosen for this journey to hell on account of intellectual merit and wonders why, that being the case, is his son not alongside him? To be sure, the mere suggestion that Dante the author had even a potential intellectual equal—even if put in the mouth of a proud and doting father—must be considered very high praise indeed.

Paradiso XI, 97 (l’altro Guido)

For the second and final *direct* reference to Guido in the *Commedia* we must wait until the eleventh book of the *Paradiso*. Here Dante further complicates his praise of Cavalcanti. In *Paradiso XI*, 94-99, Dante the pilgrim is given the following assessment of his position relative to his great poetic contemporaries:

Credette Cimabue ne la pittura
tener lo campo, e ora ha Giotto il grido,
sì che la fama di colui è scura.
Così ha tolto l’uno a l’altro Guido
la gloria de la lingua; e forse è nato
chi l’uno e l’altro caccerà del nido.

Cimabue thought to hold the field in painting and now Giotto is all the rage, so that his [Cimabue’s] fame is dark. In the same manner, one Guido has snatched the glory of our language from the other; and perhaps there is yet one born who will chase them both from the nest. [My trans.]

The first Guido is none other than Cavalcanti who “snatched” the poet’s laurels from his (and Dante’s) great predecessor, Guido Guinizelli. Dante of course intends himself

when he writes of “one who will chase them both from the nest.” As with *Inferno X*, Dante’s praise of Cavalcanti is deeply ambiguous: we should keep in mind that Cavalcanti’s implied *altezza d’ingegno* accords him what Barolini calls “the negative privilege of a position in hell.”²²² In a similarly ambiguous (or perhaps not so ambiguous) vein, the glory that Guido attained through his *altezza d’ingegno* is subsequently and summarily “snatched” from him by his younger contemporary.

Apart from these “due passi cavalcantiani”—which have given rise to enough hermeneutic travail to last several scholarly lifetimes—every other “elogio di Cavalcanti” passes in silence. Despite this fact, a significant trend within Dante scholarship has taken its cue from Contini’s assertion that “l’elogio in fatto di Dante a Cavalcanti non cessò mai” [In fact, Dante’s eulogy for Cavalcanti never ends],²²³ and has devoted itself to fleshing out the bare skeleton of the history (and precise nature) of Dante’s relationship with Cavalcanti.

Critical interest in the evolution of the relationship between Dante and Guido is thus neither recent nor superficial, nor is it a mere matter of biographical interest surrounding two great figures of Italian literature on the threshold of the thirteenth century. Viewed from one angle there is in fact an initial declaration of friendship between the two, which was almost certainly a matter of intellectual solidarity and possibly of genuine mutual affection. This is attested by the by the nature of the ongoing early poetic correspondence between the two—beginning with Dante’s very first sonnet *A ciascun’ alma presa e gentil core* [To every loving heart and captive soul] (*Vita nova*, III), to which Guido responded with *Vedeste, al mio parere, onne valore* [You saw, in my opinion, every power] (Cavalcanti, XXXVIIb), followed by Dante’s *Guido, i’ vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io* [Guido, I wish that you and Lapo and I]

²²² Barolini, 127.

²²³ Contini, 441.

and Guido's first reply to this sonnet in *S'io fosse quelli che d'Amor fu degno* [If I were he who was worthy of love], followed by his *Se vedi Amore assai ti priego*, *Dante* [I earnestly beg of you, Dante, if you see Love] and *Dante, un sospiro messenger del core* [Dante, a sigh, the heart's messenger] (Cavalcanti, XXXVIIIb-XL). Then there is the "Primavera" episode of the *Vita Nuova* involving the poets' two lady-loves, Guido's "monna Vanna" and Dante's "monna Bice" (to which I will return in my discussion of the *Vita Nuova*). Further evidence of friendship and mutual esteem would seem to be furnished by Dante's dedication of the his "libello" to Guido, "mio primo amico a cui io ciò scrivo" [my *primo amico* to whom I write this] (*Vita Nuova*, XXX), as well as abundant other references to "quelli cui io chiamo primo de li miei amici" [that one whom I call the first among my friends].²²⁴

Then we have evidence of a grave yet unspecified crisis in their friendship, the exact cause, chronology and nature of which still remain the elusive subject of ongoing scholarly debate.²²⁵ However this crisis came about, it clearly had a profound impact on the remainder of Dante's biography and presumably on Guido's as well. First, there is the much discussed²²⁶ "scolding" of Dante at the hands of Guido in the sonnet *I'vegno 'l giorno a te 'nfinite volte* [I come to you during the day countless times] (Cavalcanti, XLI). Then, in the words of Contini as quoted above, there are the disconcerting *silenzi, reticenze, oscurità* and *ambiguità* surrounding the conspicuous absence of the one-time "primo amico" in the *Commedia*; "conspicuous" not only in light of the vast "presenza cavalcantia" in the early poetry and the *Vita Nuova*, but also because of the diffuse and ineluctable intertextual "presence" of Cavalcanti in the

²²⁴ *Vita nova*, III. For more of Dante's references to his "primo amico" see books XXIV, XXV.

²²⁵ Most recently: Enrico Malato, *Dante e Guido Cavalcanti. Il dissidio per la Vita Nuova e il "disdegno" di Guido* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 1997); Antonio Gagliardi, *Guido Cavalcanti e Dante. Una questione d'amore* (Catanzaro: Pulano Editori, 1997); Teodolinda Barolini, "Dante and Cavalcanti (On Making Distinctions in Matters of Love): *Inferno* V in Its Lyric Context," *Dante Studies*, 116 (1998), 31-63.

²²⁶ For a relatively recent summary of this discussion see Letterio Cassata, "La paternale di Guido" ("Rime" XLI), *Studi Danteschi*, 53 (1981), 169-185.

Comedy.²²⁷

Intertextual Guido? Reconstructing the *dissidio*

An unwieldy scholarly debate has evolved around the attempt to establish a chronology for this *dissidio* between Guido and Dante. How far back can this rift be traced? Is Guido's "poema dottrinale," *Donna me prega*, a polemic against the vision of love expounded by Dante in the *Vita Nuova*²²⁸ or is the latter already a salvo of Dante's against the reputed pessimism of Guido's introspective love-drama? All attempts at reconstructing the exact stages of the ultimate and obvious rift must remain hypothetical in nature—it will remain to Dante to write the implicit history of his one true poetic predecessor of genius and one-time "primo amico," since he will in fact outlive him. Enrico Malato argues that Guido intended his poem as a polemical reply to Dante's *libello*. The opening line of Cavalcanti's discourse on the nature of love ("donna me prega per ch'eo voglio dire / du' accidente che sovente è fero / ed è sí altero ch'è chiamato amore") "can't help but remind us," writes Malato, of the passage in the *Vita Nuova* (XVIII) where Dante writes, "mi disse questa donna che m'avea prima parlato, queste parole: "Noi ti preghiamo che tu ne dichi ove sta questa tua beatitudine" [this lady who had spoken to me before then said these words to me: "I ask you that you might say where your beatitude resides"].²²⁹ One is equally free, however, to read these lines in the *Vita* as an echo, perhaps even an implicit parody, of the *incipit* of Guido's poem.²³⁰ There is no shortage of such comparisons in the works

²²⁷ Most notably Contini in his famous essay "Cavalcanti in Dante," where he shows other instances of how "Cavalcanti aveva salato il sangue a Dante"; see *Varianti e altra linguistica; una raccolta di Saggi (1938-68)* (Turin: Einaudi, 1970), 433-445; also see Theodolina Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the 'Comedy'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), especially 123-153.

²²⁸ This thesis was first put forward by Giuliano Tanturli in "Guido Cavalcanti contro Dante," *Le tradizioni del Testo: Studi di letteratura italiana offerti a Domenico De Robertis*, ed. Franco Gavazzoni and Guglielmo Gorni (Milano-Napoli: Ricciardi, 1993).

²²⁹ Malato, 23.

²³⁰ See *Vita Nova*, ed. Guglielmo Gorni (Torino: Einaudi, 1996), 89n.

mentioned: at times Dante seems to be paraphrasing Cavalcanti—or vice versa—sometimes with polemical intent. No amount of philological sifting, however, produces a stable chronology.

Teodolina Barolini argues, not only against Malato's thesis, but against any attempt to violate the opacity of the *Vita Nuova* as far as it regards Dante's "first friend." Against Giuliano Tanturli (who finds an air of "perfetta intesa"²³¹ in Dante's remarks on Guido in the *Vita*—and argues on that account that the polemicist must have been Cavalcanti), she supports the claim of Giorgio Inglese that "[t]ra l'autore della *Vita nuova* e il suo destinatario si percepisce un distacco" [One senses a rift between the author of the *Vita nova* and its dedicatee].²³² Inglese claims that "further precision as to the degree, intentionality, and trajectory of that divergence cannot be reconstructed from the data at hand": 'che esso [il distacco] già corrisponda,—in piena coscienza dell'uno, dell'altro o di entrambi,—alla distanza obiettiva che corre fra la dottrina del 'libello' e quella esposta in *Donna me prega*,—questo non si potrà affermare (perché Dante ne tace), e non si potrà negare, perché le effettive dichiarazioni di 'intesa' fra l'autore della *Vita nuova* e il suo primo amico non consentono la conclusione.'²³³ It sometimes appears that whether one grants the "last word" in the ideological debate that ended their friendship to one or the other depends largely on which figure the critic has chosen as his subject. If Cavalcanti is a footnote to Alighieri, then surely Dante must be responding to him. If Cavalcanti is our main concern, then his "doctrinal poem" should be granted the dignity of the status of a reply—to the *Vita Nuova*, the poetic manifesto that Dante wrote for his "first friend."

Although Barolini is right to be pessimistic about our ability to reconstruct the

²³¹ Tanturli, 8.

²³² Barolini, "Dante and Cavalcanti," 61.

²³³ Giorgio Inglese, "'...illa Guidonis de Florentis *Donna me prega*' (Tra Cavalcanti e Dante)," *Cultura neolatina*, 55 (1955), 182.

dissidio on the basis of what we know, it should certainly be possible to give a more nuanced account of the competing scenarios. What aside from the unquestionable ideological rift on the subject of love were the potential sources of tension between Dante and his “primo amico”?

Cavalcanti’s Poetic Ego: Drama versus History

In Guido’s *canzoniere*, the subject (“io”) of the poems is quintessentially an actor in the drama of his own demise at the hands of Love; Cavalcanti’s interest lies in depicting all the psycho-physiological processes at work in the lover and mobilizes vast armies of *spiriti* that bring him both solace and distress, but lead him inexorably to self-destruction. The “I” of Dante’s poems, by contrast, is always identical with their author, and takes part in a narrative *history*, which is the history of Dante’s own salvation. “Dante’s radical innovation in the genre of the lyric sequence was the introduction of prose passages, which...provided, in Sara Sturm-Maddox’s formulation,

the systematic testing of the sentiments and solutions proclaimed in the poems in terms of a life experience directly attested in the prose’ (“Transformations of Courtly love poetry” 130]. Dante insists on the truth of the poems and on their literal (rather than allegorical and paradigmatic) import. The narrative passages establish an identity between the author and the first person subject.”²³⁴

Unlike Dante, Guido is not telling a story in the first person and there is, in stark contrast to Dante, rarely anything in his works that allows an unmediated identification of the “Io” of the poems with their author. Although many of the poems are concerned with depicting and delineating the physio-psychological effects of *amor* on the “io” of the loving subject, there is nothing to suggest that Guido is presenting his audience with sublimated bits of his amatory autobiography. Throughout the

²³⁴ Olivia Holmes, *Assembling the Lyric Self: Authorship from Troubadour Song to Italian Book Poetry* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 19.

poems, which are replete with destructive love spirits, and physiological descriptions of love's effects on the lover—which has justly been called a phenomenology of love—there is a lack any explicitly personal element that would proclaim that their *io* to their author are one and the same. Guido's ladies do not have names and, if not for Dante, we would never have heard the name of his lady, Giovanna. If Guido's poems reflect lived experience, then it is precisely as a reflection—quite unlike Dante's autobiographical account of his love for a once concrete, historical woman whose mere greeting [*saluto*] he transformed into the source of his beatitude [*salute*]. *Contra* Dante, Guido refuses to engage in autobiography.

Guido's poems are almost all written from the perspective of a first person narrator—either explicitly, through the use of *io* or the first person possessive pronoun *mio*, or implicitly, when the implied subject issues imperatives, either to the audience or to the poem itself in the *envoi*. Only two poems (XVIII and XXVIII) break with this pattern. In the first, “Pegli occhi fere un spirito sottile” (XXVIII), the Cavalcantian key-word “spirito” or some variant thereof (“spiritel,” “spiriti”) returns in each line of the sonnet in a whimsical moment of Cavalcantian self-parody: “Pegli occhi fere un spirito sottile, / che fa 'n la mente spirito destare, / dal qual si muove spirito d'amare, / ch'ogn'altro spiritel face gentile” [Through the eyes strikes a delicate spirit / That awakens a spirit in the mind / From which stirs the spirit of loving / That ennobles every other little spirit]. The other poem that dispenses with the first person stance, XVIII (“Noi siàn le triste penne isbigotite”) replaces the customary love-lovelorn narrator with the bewildered quills, little scissors and grieving pen knife who report the lamentable state of the hand that used to guide them:

Noi siàn le triste penne isbigotite,
 le cesoiuzze e 'l coltellin dolente,
 ch'avemo scritte dolorosamente
 quelle parole ch vo' avete udite.

We are the poor bewildered quills
 The little scissors and the grieving penknife
 Who have sorrowfully written
 Those words that you have heard.

Or vi diciàn perché noi siàn partite
e siàn venute a voi qui di presente:
la man che ci movea dice che sente
cose dubbiose nel core apparite;

le quali hanno destruto sì costui
ed hannol posto sì presso a la morte,
ch'altro non n'è rimaso che sospiri.

Or vi preghiàn quanto possiàn più forte
che non sdegn[i]ate di tenerci noi,
tanto ch'un poco di pietà vi miri.

Now we tell you why we have left
And presently come here to you:
The hand that used to move us says it feels
Dreadful things that have appeared in the
heart

Which have so undone him
And brought him so close to death
That nothing else is left of him but sighs

We now beg you earnestly as we can
That you not scorn to keep us
For so long as a little compassion suits
you.²³⁵

Curiously, the orphaned writing utensils' tale of their proprietor's demise produces a greater sense of intimacy and sincerity than the usual complaints of the *io* that speaks its sufferings itself. Ostensibly, only traces of an authorial presence remain within the sphere of the poem: the author's informant-hand breaks the news to distraught stationary-set of the dire events in the poet's heart. Transmitted through a series of distaccated and autonomous body parts, the relating of the ubiquitous lover's lament by proxy reduces the expected first person narrator to a mute producer of mere sighs. Since Cavalcanti is such an expert producer of stylized accounts *in rime* of the mind ravaged and destroyed by love, his assignment of the role of describing his painful travails to a set of orphaned writing implements produces a much more pathetic and personal picture of the suffering poet than we otherwise find in Cavalcanti's works: it is the only moment where depth of feeling becomes inexpressible. Yet, this inexpressibility is actually only a sly means of overcoming the lacquer of stylization that makes it impossible to write about genuine suffering, distress and vulnerability. It is here, if anywhere, that the implied subject of the poem might be identified with the poem's author. Cavalcanti's thoroughgoing sense of intellectual fragmentation—the opposite of Dante's encyclopedism—is realized metaphorically by a series of

²³⁵ Lowry, 25.

disassociated body parts, whose governing intellect has fled the field.

One then rightly wonders if the totalizing autobiographical nature of the *Vita Nuova* might have presented a problem for Cavalcanti. He, unlike Dante, does not have a *vita*. Guido does in fact seem to resist the self-referential, overtly autobiographical nature of Dante's early writings and the way that they insert their author's "I" into the discourse on love. We recall that Dante sends the very first poem of the *Vita*, "A ciascun'alma presa e gentil core" to Guido and other "fedeli d'amore." The poem recounts his vision of the sleeping Beatrice who, borne asleep in the arms of Love, is awakened and fed the poet's burning heart:²³⁶

A ciascun'alma presa e gentil core
nel cui cospetto ven lo dir presente,
in ciò che mi rescivan suo parvente,
salute in lor signor, cioè Amore.
Già eran quasi che atterzate l'ore
del tempo che onne s'tella n'è lucente,
quando m'apparve Amor subitamente,
cui essenza membrar mi dà orrore.
Allegro mi sembrava Amor tenendo
meo core in mano, e ne le braccia avea
madonna involta in un drappo dormendo.
Poi la svegliava, e d'esto core ardendo
lei paventosa umilmente pascea:
appresso gir lo ne vedea piangendo.

[To every loving heart and captive soul
into whose sight these present words may come
for some elucidation in reply,
greetings I bring for their sweet lord's sake, Love.
The first three hours of the night were almost spent,
the time that every star shines down on us,
when love appeared to me all of a sudden,
and I still shudder at the memory.
Joyous Love looked to me while he was holding
my heart within his hands, and in his arms
my lady lay asleep wrapped in a veil.
He woke her then and trembling and obedient

²³⁶ Dante Alighieri, *Vita nuova e Rime*, ed. Guido Davico Bondino, Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1985. The English translations are from *Vita Nuova*, ed. and trans. Mark Musa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

she ate that burning heart out of his hand;
weeping I saw him depart from me.]

Guido responds to Dante's request for an interpretation with *Vedeste, al mio parere onne valore*; Dante informs us that this poetic correspondence "fue quasi lo principio de'l amistà tra lui e me" [was more or less the beginning of the friendship between us]:

Vedeste, al mio parere, onne valore
e tutto gioco e quanto bene om sente,
se foste in prova del signor valente
che segnoreggia il mondo de l'onore,
poi vive in parte dove noia more,
e tien ragion nel cassar de la mente;
si va soave per sonno a la gente.
che 'l cor ne porta senza far dolore.
Di voi lo core ne portò, veggendo
che vostra donna alla morte cadea:
nodriala dello cor, di ciò temendo.
Quando v'aparve che se 'n gia dolendo.
fu'l dolce sonno ch'allor si compiea,
ché 'l su' contrario lo venìa vincendo

[You saw, in my opinion, every power
and all joy and whatever good man feels,
if you had experience of the powerful lord
who lords it over the world of honor,
since he lives in a place where vexation dies
and holds council in the turret of the mind;
he goes so gently to people in sleep
that he takes away the heart with out causing pain.
He took away your heart seeing
that your lady was inclining toward death:
fearful of that, he nourished her with the heart.
When it appeared that he was going away in grief,
it was sweet sleep that was then ending,
for its opposite came routing it.

In this famous first act of friendship, Cavalcanti responds to Dante's account of his profoundly novel and personal vision with only the vaguest of generalities ("*onne valore...tutto gioco...quanto bene om sente*" ["every power...all joy...whatever good]).

Even the most superficial acquaintance with Cavalcanti assures that he was capable of producing more than commonplaces such as these. What does the “primo amico[’s]” response actually achieve? Cavalcanti first takes great care to *depersonalize* Dante’s vision—hence reinscribing it the terms of more familiar discourse on love—before he offers an interpretation in the two final stanzas of his poetic *explication de texte*. The departure of the weeping *Amor* is also given a purely generic explanation—routed by the opposite of *dolce sonno*. It is no wonder then that Dante could still claim that “[l]o verace giudico del detto sogno non fue veduto allora per alcuno” [The true interpretation of the dream I described was not perceived by anyone then] even after directly referring to Cavalcanti’s response, where Guido *does* in fact predict Beatrice’s death (“che vostra donna alla morte cadea”). Guido’s failure to arrive at the “verace giudico” that is now, according to Dante, “manifestissimo a li più semplici [very clear even to the least sophisticated] can only consist, then, in his failure to appreciate the true significance of Beatrice, which, at this stage in the narrative, has yet to become fully apparent even to Dante.

Guido and the *Vita Nuova*

Primo amico?

There is general agreement that the main current of the *dissidio* between Dante and Cavalcanti, perhaps fed by smaller streams of growing intellectual disagreement on the subject of love, has its source in Guido’s *disdegno* for Beatrice. It is strange then that the implications of this widely accepted scenario have never been satisfactorily brought to bear on the debate surrounding the position of the *Vita Nuova* in the chronology of the *dissidio*. If we assume that the rift between the two poets was precipitated by the death of Beatrice, it indeed seems rather strange that Dante should continue to refer to Guido as his “primo amico” when he recounts her death years after

the fact. By the time Dante wrote his *libro de la [...] memoria* the foundation of their friendship would have at least *begun* to fracture. Yet it is precisely on the basis of Dante's references to the "primo amico" in the *Vita Nuova* that scholars have (almost unanimously²³⁷) found in it the *terminem post quem* for establishing the chronology of the *dissidio*. While there is no evidence to suggest that the rift had already taken shape by Dante's composition of the *Vita*²³⁸—his remarks about his "first friend" belie this—there is no reason to suppose that Dante's references to his "primo amico" are not perhaps more nuanced than they appear.

Dante's use of the term "primo amico" for Cavalcanti throughout the *Vita Nuova* has been generally taken to mean that the two were best friends; and no one doubts that there was a period of intense intellectual and perhaps even affective intimacy between the two. "Primo amico" is, however, a slightly unusual way of saying this; in modern Italian one would simply say *amico migliore* and not "primo amico." Scholars have gotten around this problem by taking "primo amico" to mean something like *first among my friends*, which preserves this reading of "primo" as "best." But might not Dante's insistence on the term "primo" imply a contrast with a later *secondo*? Mark Musa comes close to suggesting something like this in the introduction to his translation of the *Vita*. He first reminds us that the poems of the *Vita* fall into three distinct "movements." In the first movement (Chapters I-XVI),

²³⁷ Teodolinda Barolini, "Dante and Cavalcanti," 60-63.

²³⁸ Even here, however, one could speculate that Dante employs the artifice that he is not, in fact, *writing*, but rather *copying* from the "book of his memory" to allow him to speak in the present tense about a friendship that was already part of the past: In quella parte del libro de la mia memoria dananzi a la quale poco si potrebbe leggere, si trova una rubrica la quale dice: *Incipit vita nova*. Sotto la quale rubrica io trovo scritte le parole le quali è mio intendimento d'assemblare in questo libello...(*Vita Nuova*, I) ["In that part of the book of my memory before which little is to be read is found a chapter heading which says: "Here begins a new life" It is my intention to copy into this little book the words I find written under that heading..."] This would not be the last time Dante was suspected of having employed chronological slight-of-hand in order avoid directly addressing his rift with Cavalcanti: there is general suspicion that Dante set the fictional date of the beginning of the *Comedia* five months prior to Guido's death precisely in order to spare himself the bitter task of assigning the former "first friend" a place in the poem's infernal topography.

Dante describes three encounters with Beatrice: when he first sees her; when she first greets him; when she denies him her greeting. Musa adds:

it is perhaps not without significance that Dante mentions his ‘first friend’ in the opening section of his book, for when he treats love in the first movement, it is from the point of view adopted by Cavalcanti in his own *canzoniere*: no poet had ever investigated more thoroughly and successfully the dramatic and mysterious possibilities of love or its manifold effects on the lover. *It is as though Dante had assigned himself a guide for the first phase of the journey* [my italics], particularly for the closing self-analytical sonnets in which he probes into the workings of love on the human heart.²³⁹

When, in the second movement of the “libello” (Books XVII-XXXI), Dante takes up praise of his lady as the new and exclusive theme of his *rime*, he adopts the general practice of a second Guido: Guido Guinizelli, the famous Bolognese poet and “sage” who Musa calls “Dante’s new guide for his second movement in love” (although while missing the opportunity to point to the suggestiveness of Dante’s two “guides” in the *Vita Nuova* both being named *Guido*—only a vowel away from Italian *guida* or “guide”). Another at least potential nuance of Dante’s use of “primo amico” emerges from this general picture. The exact wording of Dante’s first reference to Cavalcanti in the *Vita Nuova* (Book III), “quelli cui io chiamo primo de li miei amici” [the one whom I call the first of my friends], leaves us enough room to ponder if this emphasis could not in fact mean something to the effect of “my *first* friend as opposed to another, later one who supplanted him.”

Prima verrà: “monna Vanna and monna Bice”

A matter further complicating any conception of Dante’s relationship to his “primo amico” is the “Primavera” episode in Book XXIV of the *Vita Nuova*. Dante recounts how one day when sitting in thought in “a certain place,” Love appears to him and tells him to prepare to bless the day he took hold of him, and Dante’s heart is

²³⁹ Musa, “Introduction,” x.

soon so overcome with joy that he is no longer able to recognize it as his own. Thereupon he sees a certain woman famed for her beauty walking in his direction; she was nicknamed “Primavera,” supposedly on account of her beauty and was called Giovanna: “la quale...fue già molto donna die questo primo mio amico” [who had been formerly the much-loved lady of my first friend]. Dante spies Beatrice approaching “appreso lei” [behind her]; after both Guido’s Giovanna and the “mirabile Beatrice” have passed by, Love tells Dante that the first lady is only called “Primavera” only because of the manner in which she has appeared today: *she will come first* (“prima verrà”) on the day when Beatrice first reveals herself after the poet’s last vision of her in Book XXIII. This prefiguration of the one lady by the other seems particularly fitting to Dante since the very name “Giovanna” comes from that “Giovanni lo quale precedette the verace luce” [John (the Baptist) who preceded the true light]. Dante then proceeds to quote Matthew 3.13: “Ego vox clamantis in deserto: parate viam Domini.” We might ask ourselves if we should take statements at face value about a “primo amico” who is cast as “precursor John the Baptist to Dante’s resurgent Christ.”²⁴⁰ When Dante decides to send verses dealing with the episode to his “first friend,” it is no wonder that he decides to “keep silent about certain things that seemed best to keep silent about” [*tacendomi certe parole le quale pareano da tacere*]. One can only wonder what effect these passages must have had on the dedicatee of Dante’s libello, “mio primo amico a cui io ciò scrivo” [my *primo amico* to whom I write this] (*Vita Nuova*, XXX). It is difficult to see the dedication of book containing such passages an entirely amicable gesture. One might furthermore interpret Dante’s use of Latin to punctuate this and other episodes as a deliberate flaunting of Cavalcanti’s injunction that he should write only in *vulgare*.

Perhaps we can now form a more plausible picture of the evolution of the

²⁴⁰ Barolini, 61.

relationship between Dante and his “primo amico.” It is now possible to assert that when Dante wrote the *Vita*, his feelings towards Cavalcanti were at least *ambivalent*. If there was no open hostility or *dissidio*, there was perhaps an increasingly bitter awareness of a drifting apart. Hope of rapprochement may still have been accompanied by a need to send warning signals about the growing weakness both were beginning to perceive in the foundations of their friendship. The inherent ambiguity of this situation is best illustrated by the questions raised surrounding a passage that has not previously been considered as part of the *dissidio* debate.

***Inferno* X, 59 and *Vita Nuova* XXXI: “Li occhi dolenti per pieta del core”**

Let’s recall the question posed by Guido’s father, Cavalcante del Cavalcante, in the first Cavalcantian *passo* of the poem, the famous interpretive crux, *Inferno* 10. 58-60: “se per questo cieco / carcere vai per altezza d’ingegno, / figlio mio ov’è? é perché non e teco?” [if you go through this blind prison on account of your high genius, where is my son, and why is he not with you—Singleton, modified]. If, as noted, there is anyone else worthy to undertake the pilgrim’s journey on the basis of intellectual merit (*altezza d’ingegno*), surely it is Guido, whom Dante here suggests as his one possible intellectual equal.

This term *ingegno* appears a total of eighteen times in the *Commedia*, but only twice in conjunction with the word *altezza*, or its adjectival form, *alto*²⁴¹. In *Inferno* 10.59, as we have seen, Dante explicitly associates this particular quality of mind with Guido. Previously, in *Inferno* 2.7-9, Dante had invoked his own²⁴² *alto ingegno*, so

²⁴¹ *Inf.* 34.26; *Purg.* 1.2, 9.125, 11.9, 12.66, 14.54, 18.40, 27.130; *Par.* 4.40, 5.89, 7.59, 13.72, 14.117, 22.114, 24.81

²⁴² The question of whether Dante is here invoking his own, or some higher power is irrelevant for present purposes. “Those who believe that in the earlier passage Dante had invoked his own poetic powers see in Cavalcanti’s doting father’s reaction a simple sense of rivalry: which of these two poets is more gifted? If, on the other hand, we believe that Dante, in the invocation, calls for aid from a Higher Power, then the father’s question indicates that he doesn’t understand, materialist that he is, the nature of true Christian poetic inspiration. His son’s genius and that inspiring Dante are not commensurable” (*The*

that it might bless his bold poetic undertaking:

O Muse, o <i>alto ingegno</i> , or m'aiutate;	O muses, O High genius, help me now!
o mente che scrivesti ciò ch'io vidi,	O memory that wrote down what I saw,
qui si parrà la tua nobilitate.[italics mine]	here shall your worthiness appear!

The *altezza d'ingegno* that the deceased Cavalcante claims for his son in *Inferno* 10.59 is clearly meant as an echo of Dante's earlier use of the word. (The implication, it would seem, is that Guido's *ingegno* is an "echo" of Dante's, equal in kind but not in degree.) Thus, in the *Commedia*, the attribution of *alto* or *altezza* to *ingegno* occurs only in contexts with explicit—or implicit, but obvious—reference to Cavalcanti. All other instances of *ingegno*—the first, twenty-four books later in *Inferno* 34, with fifteen others scattered throughout the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*—come with sufficient infrequency, and after a large enough period of total disuse, to further underscore the (near) uniqueness of this particular quality, which Dante attributes only to himself and, at least to some degree, to Guido. Thus in the *Commedia*, the *altezza d'ingegno* that Dante claims for himself and at least associates with, if not attributes to, Cavalcanti reveals his opaque homage to the once strong ties between himself and his former *amico*. Yet, this quality, shared in kind but not degree, ultimately only further separates and distinguishes the two poets since Guido is not—despite his *altezza d'ingegno*—allowed (either by the poet or by the forces that lead him in the poem) to accompany Dante on the journey.

In the *Commedia* the phrase *altezza d'ingegno* / *alto ingegno*, thus appears in contexts which contrast Dante and Cavalcanti—in a manner that is at least agonistic, if not antagonistic. Now I would like to posit another instance of "Cavalcanti in

Princeton Dante Project, commentary on *Inferno* X, 59, <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/>). Either way, the *altezza* of Dante's *ingegno* is not attained by Guido.

Dante”²⁴³ which has not previously been recognized, but which calls for such an interpretation.

In the *Vita Nuova*, Dante devotes exactly three books (XXVIII-XXX), written exclusively in prose, to the death of Beatrice²⁴⁴ before composing his first lament for her in the form of a poem: “Li occhi dolenti per pietà del core,” in book XXXI. Dante “divides” or adds a prose commentary to most of the poems in the *Vita Nuova*. Prior to and including book XXVI this commentary follows the poems; beginning with “Li occhi dolenti” in book XXI, the order is reversed—prose commentaries begin to precede the verse. Dante does not divide the intervening fragmentary *canzone* of book XXVII, which itself quite literally divides those poems with following *divisioni* (books III-XXVI) from those preceded by them from “Li occhi dolenti” in book XXXI onward.

Dante divides this first poem on the death of Beatrice into three parts, the first and sixth *stanze* forming parts one and three, respectively, and stanzas 2-4 forming the second part. This second part is then further divided into three parts: “ne la prima dico chi non la piange; ne la seconda dico chi la piange; ne la terza dico de la mia condizione” [in the first part I tell who did not mourn her; in the second, who mourned her; in the third I speak of my state]. In the third stanza, beginning “Partissi de la sua bella persona,” Dante speaks of “chi non la pianga”:

Partissi de la sua bella persona
piena di grazia l’anima gentile
ed éssi gloriosa in loco degno.
Chi no la piange, quando ne ragiona,
core ha di pietra sì malvagio e vile,

²⁴³ See Contini’s article of the same name in *Varianti e altra linguistica; una raccolta di Saggi (1938-68)* (Turin: Einaudi, 1970), 433-445.

²⁴⁴ This is only fitting, since three is the square root of the number nine which, Dante points out in the middle passage of the three just mentioned (*Vita nova* XXIX), is symbolic of Beatrice herself: “...lo tre é fattore per sé medesimo del nove, e lo fattore per sé de li miracoli é tre, cioè Padre e Figlio e Spirito Santo, li quali sono tre e uno, questa donna fue accompagnata da questo numero del nove a dare ad intendere ch’ella era uno nove, cioè un miracolo.”

ch'entrar no i puote spirito benegno.
Non é di cor villan sì *alto ingegno*,
che possa imaginar di lei alquanto,
e però no li ven di pianger doglia:
[italics mine]

And once from its enchanting form,
the tender soul, perfectly filled with grace,
now lives with glory in a worthy place.
Who speaks of her and does not weeping speak,
possesses heart of stone so hard and vile
no kindly sentiment could penetrate
No evil heart could have sufficient wit
to conceive in any way what she was like,
and so it has no urge to weep from grief.

We recall here that the phrase *altezza d'ingegno* occurs twice in the *Commedia*, both in reference to Cavalcanti: first when Dante invokes his own poetic powers, and again (this time in explicit reference to Guido) in implicit contrast with Dante's earlier use of the term as a description and evocation of his own poetic genius. The Cavalcantian echo of Dante's first use of the term is only realized through the explicit contrast with Cavalcanti when it is used again. In the above passage—after the Cavalcantian signal-word, “spirito”—Dante speaks of the “*alto ingegno*” which is lacking in the “cor villan” of the man who neither comprehends the true significance of Beatrice nor mourns her death. Since the phrase “*alto ingegno*” and its potential variants do not occur elsewhere in the *Vita Nuova*, the *Rime*, or *anywhere* else in Dante, one is led to wonder if the “*alto ingegno*” of “Li occhi dolenti,” the only other occurrence of the phrase in Dante, is in fact another instance—hitherto unnoticed—of “Cavalcanti in Dante,” ardently traced by Contini and others in his wake.

During the last fifty years, scholars have become increasingly unanimous in declaring Beatrice (not Vergil, or God) the subject of Guido's famous *disdegno*²⁴⁵. In the aftermath of Beatrice's death, we may safely assume that Dante places Guido, on

²⁴⁵ For a summary, see Theodolina Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the 'Comedy'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 146n.

this very account, among the ranks of “chi non la piange.” Clearly, there is much at stake if Cavalcanti is actually among those here intended, given the harsh terms Dante uses to describe the base (*vile*) and wicked (or evil—*malvagio*) nature of those who fail to mourn at the death of Beatrice.

Here one needs to take into consideration the considerable chronological distance between “Li occhi dolenti” and the *Commedia*; if the phrase “altezza d’ingegno” is not associated with Cavalcanti until years later in *Inferno* 10.59, how can we possibly view the passage in “Li occhi dolenti” as a reference to *him*? Certainly we should pause before entertaining that a phrase which occurs exactly three times in Dante’s *opera*—twice, as we have seen, under the specter of Cavalcanti—is here used a third time without *any* relation to the other two occurrences of this curious Dantean coinage. And who among “chi non la piange,” we must ask, had (in Dante’s mind) a more *alto ingegno* than Guido?

One possibility is that Dante actually had Cavalcanti in mind when he wrote “Li occhi dolenti,” but only unveiled the insult after Guido’s death; a more subtle but perhaps more psychologically realistic variation on this theme would be to suggest “[n]on é di cor villan sì *alto ingegno*” as an implicit reproach to Guido: one with such a lofty mind should be capable of grasping Beatrice’s significance. Such reproaches are not unknown to their poetic correspondence: recall Guido’s famous *rimenata*, “*I’vegno ‘l giorno a te ‘nfinite volte*” where he bemoans Dante’s “mente invilata.” Clearly Dante’s reproach in “Li occhi” would belong to the earlier phase of the growing *dissidio* when both poets began to perceive the growing stress fractures in their friendship. A more modest hypothesis would be that after an irreconcilable split, Dante recalled in his own earlier work an apt description of his one-time *primo amico* and then proceeded to apply these lines to him *retroactively*, overwriting the chronologically prior passage as an allusion to Guido by means of the later self-quote

in the *Inferno* passage, put in the mouth of Guido's father. The linking of these two passages, which seems certain, provides us with a basis for the more radical conjecture that the famous *dissidio* can in fact be traced back well into the biographical course traced by the *Vita Nuova*. At the very least, it provides one more rare opportunity to probe the full depth and measure of "Cavalcanti in Dante" and the ultimate rift between the two *ingenii*.²⁴⁶ In what follows, I proceed from the biographical towards the intellectual basis for the *dissidio*, which I argue is rooted Cavalcanti's opposition to the encyclopedic project itself.

Cavalcanti's Discursive Counter-encyclopedism

Cavalcanti's *disdegno* for Beatrice is at root an opposition to the entire Dantean project and its rationalist conception of Love as an encyclopedic, order-giving motive-force. Guido's famous "disdegno" for Beatrice is rooted in Cavalcanti's discursive counter-encyclopedism. The lady can never serve as a focal point for knowledge, or a means to knowledge or salvation, as Cavalcanti writes:

Chi è questa che vèn, ch'ogni'om la mira,
che fa tremar di chiaritate l'are
e mena seco Amor, sì che parlare
null'omo pote, ma ciascun sospira?
O Deo, che sembra quando li occhi gira,
dical' Amor ch'i' nol savria contare:
cotando d'umiltà donna mi pare,
ch'ogn'altra ver di lei i' la chiam' ira.
Non si poria contar la sua piagenza,
ch'a le s'inchin' ogni gentil vertute,
e la beltate per sua dea la mostra.
Non fu sì alta già la mente nostra
e non si pose 'n noi tanta salute,
che propriamente n'aviàn canoscenza.

²⁴⁶ See Enrico Malato, *Dante e Guido Cavalcanti. Il dissidio per la Vita Nuova e il "disdegno" di Guido* (Roma: Salerno Editrice, 1997), 22; For a "contestatione globale" of Malato's position, see Teodolinda Barolini, "Dante and Cavalcanti (On Making Distinctions in Matters of Love): *Inferno* V in Its Lyric Context," *Dante Studies*, 116 (1998), 60-63.

[Who is she who comes, that everyone looks at her,
 Who makes the air tremble with clarity
 And brings Love with her, so that no one
 Can speak, though everyone sighs?
 O God, what she looks like when she turns her eyes
 Let love say, for I could not describe it.
 To me she seems so much a lady of good will
 That any other, in comparison to her, I call vexation.
 One could not describe her gracefulness,
 For every noble virtue inclines towards her
 And beauty displays her as its goddess.
 Our mind was never so lofty
 And was never was such beatitude granted us
 That we could really have knowledge of her.]

Cavalcanti's poem is a deconstructive antidote to the intellectualized disputations of the *siciliani* and *stilnovisti* in the mode of Guido Guinizelli. Whereas the latter elaborate learned definitions and complex metaphors based on the natural science of the day, Cavalcanti's "Chi è questa che vèn" stresses the ineluctability and indeterminacy of the love experience, far removed from anything resembling the rationalist poetics of Dante and the *stilnovisti*. Central to Guido's lady is her unknowability, her boggling of the poet's ravaged mind. Despite the fact that "everyone looks at her," her true nature can never be seen, even though, paradoxically, she makes the air "tremble with clarity." The poem instead focuses on the lady as a locus of the impossibility of knowledge, or at least of communicating it in a manner that is—like Dante's encyclopedic project—systematic, rationally ordered, and universally accessible:

"no one can speak, though everyone sighs" ...

"I could not describe it" ...

"To me she seems so much a lady of good will" ...

"One could not describe her gracefulness" ...

"Our mind was never so lofty...that we could really have knowledge of her."

The Cavalcantian *donna* is a *summa* of the virtues (“For every noble virtue inclines towards her”), but these, too, can neither be described nor communicated. Cavalcanti’s experience of the beloved, as is clear from the rest of his corpus, is universally destructive and mind-numbing, most succinctly represented in his poem beginning:

L’anima mia vilement’ è sbigotita
De la battaglia ch’ell’ave dal core.²⁴⁷

[My mind is abjectly bewildered
by the assault it had from the heart (my trans.)]

Whoever the lady of these poems is, she is the anti-Beatrice.

Cavalcanti denies love the crown of epistemic sovereignty with which Dante would coronate it. Aside from a fixation on the pneumatic operations of the soul—the *spiriti* that dwell in Cavalcanti’s *œuvre*—notably absent in Guido’s poetry are the encyclopedic discourses, the lapidary and bestiary lore that intrigue the *siciliani* and the *stilnovisti*. Given Dante’s admiration for Guido as his one possible intellectual peer, and given what we know of Guido’s intellectual achievements from the poems themselves, his ignorance of these discourses can be safely ruled out. Yet Cavalcanti’s poems are devoid of the ubiquitous four elements, magnets, tigers, phoenixes and other scientific topics that pervade the poetry of his Sicilian predecessors and Tuscan contemporaries.

The only book-length study of Cavalcanti to appear in almost sixty years goes badly astray in its admittedly brief discussion of Cavalcanti’s relation to the encyclopedic tradition. Maria Luisa Ardizzone states that with Cavalcanti “Poetry becomes a language able to encompass the different topics furnished by the encyclopedia of the time. By connecting logic, science, and philosophy, Cavalcanti is able to answer old and new questions alike.”²⁴⁸ While this is true to a limited extent in

²⁴⁷ *Poesia italiana*, 336.

²⁴⁸ Maria Luisa Ardizzone, *Guido Cavalcanti: The Other Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 15.

the “doctrinal” poem, *Donne me prega*, where Cavalcanti takes issue with competing love theories of his day, Cavalcanti’s poetics is, on the contrary, overwhelmingly characterized by a pervasive sense of the failure of logic, science, and philosophy to provide answers to any questions whatsoever. Cavalcanti is as much or more versed than any of his contemporaries, including Dante, in the logic, science, and philosophy that Dante and the Sicilians before him had trusted to furnish a phenomenology of love, as well as answers to fundamental questions of human experience, but Guido does not share their faith in them. The second-most intellectual poet of the *duecento* is its foremost devotee of the irrational. Love for Cavalcanti is fundamentally *unbound*, both in the sense that it is limitless, but also in that for Guido it can never act as an organizing, ordering force—as it does so famously in Dante’s image of the universe as the scattered pages of words and things *legato con amore in un volume*. Dante’s idea of love as an ennobling, intellectual, and salvific force has no place in the Cavalcantian canon. The leaves of Guido’s Book of Love remain scattered, never to be bound in a single volume.

Chapter 4: *Per ordinem*: “Getting it Straight” in Wolfram’s *Parzival*

1. *Compilatio*: the Audience as Encyclopedist

Wolfram’s closes the book on *Parzival* with the assertion that its narrative, or rather that of its fictional source Kyot, is *reht* (correct/straight),²⁴⁹ whereas Chrétien’s narrative is *unreht* (incorrect/crooked) (827.16).²⁵⁰ Wolfram’s authority—like that of the medieval encyclopedist—is grounded in his ability to discern, select, and transmit the authoritative, and hence true, sources of the *Parzival* story and fashion them into a coherent whole. Wolfram, however, does not present himself as encyclopedic *compiler*.²⁵¹ Rather, the narrative, Wolfram claims, is taken over *en masse* from a single source and not ordered from varied bits and pieces gleaned from multiple authorities (453.11-22). He defers to his fictive source, the heathen scholar Kyot, who has already performed the role of *compiler* for him.²⁵²

This state of affairs presents an obvious problem—or at the very least a very *Wolframian* puzzle—for a reading of his work under the rubric of an “encyclopedic aesthetics.” Wolfram’s implicit disavowal of the role of *compiler* seems at first glance to foreclose the possibility of any such understanding. However, Wolfram is in the habit of making pronouncements that his audience would have recognized as palpably counter-factual. Indeed, Wolfram’s disavowal of the compiler’s role is cut from the same cloth as his once hotly-debated claim about his own illiteracy: “ine kan

²⁴⁹ A quality attributed to prose in classical rhetoric; prose is “straightforward” (*rectus*) according to Isidore of Seville, cf. *Etymologiae*, ed. W. M. Lindsay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911), I.xxxviii.1.

²⁵⁰ Wolfram is fond of the formulaic opposition of *krump* (crooked, bent) and *sleht* (straight) (246.16, 347.23, 509.20, 589.26; see also the pun on this pair in 827.15-16 (*geslehte-rehte*), where the spatial and linear notions of order explicit in *reht* is reintegrated with the ordering principle of genealogy (*geslehte*) on which note the narrative of *Parzival* begins.

²⁵¹ Malcolm B. Parkes, “The Influence of the Concepts of *Ordinatio* and *Compilatio* on the Development of the Book,” *Scribes, Scripts and Readers: Studies in the Communication, Presentation and Dissemination of Medieval Texts* (London: The Hambleton Press, 1991), 35-70.

²⁵² Arthur Groos, *Romancing the Grail: Genre, Science, and Quest in Wolfram’s “Parzival”* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 141.

decheinen buochstap” (I don’t know a single letter of the alphabet) (115.27), or that *Parzival* is not a book and proceeds “without the guidance of books” (115.25-30; 116.1-4). Scholars have amply documented the extent of bookish guidance that Wolfram so stubbornly denies. Wolfram’s numerous polyglossic debts, what he owes to specific narrative, theological, and scientific sources,²⁵³ reveal him perhaps as the most widely read of the medieval German poets. Most critics accept the view that his authorial self-construction as illiterate *laie* (layman) requires him to disavow the ability to consult such works.

Wolfram’s patently false claim about his illiteracy—his best-known exercise in unreliable narration—is hardly without company. The same pattern of obfuscation is at work in the Kyot-puzzle. Wolfram habitually disavows his greatest achievement: the compilation of the vast (one might proleptically say *Wagnerian*) narrative expanse of *Parzival* from various sources. Indeed, Wolfram performs the role of an encyclopedic *compiler*, drawing on Chrétien de Troyes’ *Perceval* as well as other narrative, theological, and scientific sources.²⁵⁴ At the same time he denies his role as

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ Adrian Stevens, “Fiction, Plot, and Discourse: Wolfram’s *Parzival* and Its Narrative Sources,” *A Companion to Wolfram’s Parzival*, ed. Will Hasty (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1999), 99-123; Ulrich W Eisenecker, “Einflüsse des ‘Lucidarius’ im ‘Parzival’ Wolframs von Eschenbach,” *Granatapfel: Festschrift für Gerhard Bauer zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Bernhard Dietrich Haage, Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik 580 (Kümmerle, Göppingen, 1994), 149-165; Thomas Bein, review of André de Mandach: *Le »Roman du Graal« originaire. Bd. 1. Sur les traces du modèle commun en code transpyrénéen de Chrétien de Troyes et Wolfram von Eschenbach*, Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik 581 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1992) in *Germanistik*, 34 (1993), 634; János Harmatta, “Les Sources iraniennes de la légende du Graal,” *Neohelicon*, 21, 1 (1994), 209-216; Arthur Groos, 1995; Paul Kunitzsch, “Quellenkritische Bemerkungen zu einigen Wolframschen Orientalia,” *Reflexe des Orients im Namengut mittelalterlicher europäischer Literatur: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Documenta onomastica litteralia medii aevi, Reihe B: Studien, 2, (Hildesheim: Olms, 1996), 91-103; Eberhard Nellmann, “Zu Wolframs Bildung und zum Literaturkonzept des *Parzival*,” *Poetica*, 28 (1996), 327-344; Danielle Buschinger, “Französisch-deutsche Literaturbeziehungen im Mittelalter,” *Zeitschrift für germanisches Altertum*, 11 (1990), 172-183; Ulrike Draesner, *Wege durch erzählte Welten: Intertextuelle Verweise als Mittel der Bedeutungskonstitution in Wolframs ‘Parzival’*, *Mikrokosmos* 36 (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 1993); Eberhard Nellmann, “Produktive Mißverständnisse. Wolfram als Übersetzer Chrétiens,” *Wolfram-Studien*, 14: *Übersetzen im Mittelalter*, Cambridge Kolloquium 1994 (Berlin: Schmidt, 1996), 134-148; Roger Sherman Loomis, *The Grail. From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Walter Haug, “Hat Wolfram von Eschenbach Chrétiens Conte du Graal kongenial ergänzt?,” *Arturus Rex. Volumen II. Acta conventus Lovaniensis* 1987, ed. Wener Verbeke, *Mediaevalia Lovaniensia*, 17 (Leuven:

compiler, claiming to have received the tale from a single monolithic source. Wolfram addresses his readers and listeners at the end of Book 2, stating that he will continue to tell his story so long as his audience does not “attribute it to any book” (50). Wolfram in fact makes a series of claims which are demonstrably false:

- 1) *Parzival* is not a book.
- 2) It is not based on books.
- 3) Its author is illiterate.
- 4) Chrétien de Troyes does fundamental injustice to the tale.²⁵⁵

Not only are these claims false, they would have been transparently so to Wolfram’s medieval audience. “Very well then....I contradict myself” seems to be Wolfram’s implicit motto, as is also evident in the surface tension his narration maintains between the written transmission he disclaims and the tale’s allegedly oral reception:

Nu weiz ich, swelch sinnec wîp,
ob si hât getriwen lîp,
diu diz mære *geschriben siht*,
daz si mir mit wârheit giht,
ich kunde wîben *sprechen* baz
denne als ich sanc gein einer maz. (337, 1-6)

[Now I know that any sensible woman, if she is true, *seeing this tale written down*, will admit to me sincerely that I am capable of *speaking* better of women than the song I once aimed at one woman in particular (107-8).]²⁵⁶

This passage, with its overt invocation of both literate modes of reception (“seeing these tales written down”) and orality (“speaking”) has fed academic debates about Wolfram’s and his audience’s alleged literacy or illiteracy that have lasted several

Leuven University Press, 1991), 236-258; Joachim Bumke, *Wolfram von Eschenbach*. 6th ed. (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1991), 7-9, 156-161.

²⁵⁵ Wolfram perhaps assumes his audience’s familiarity with Chrétien’s work when he asserts that “it has irked many people that this tale has been kept locked away from them,” although this can also refer to Wolfram’s own “crooked” narrative technique.

²⁵⁶ Unless noted, all translations are from Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, trans. Cyril Edwards (Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2004), here modified. The tension between “written tales” and “speaking of women” can also be understood as a tension between the genres of romance and *Minnesang*, which Wolfram addresses in the “Selbstverteidigung” between books 2 and 3.

scholarly lifetimes.

Why bother with such disingenuous contortions? The varied answers to this question invariably take the form of a commentary on Wolfram's conception of authorship: Is Wolfram taking credit where it is due, albeit tongue firmly in cheek? Or does he deny all claims to originality, in line with prevalent medieval theories of authorship, or as part of a more elaborate scheme of authorial self-fashioning?

While previous interpretations have focused on Wolfram's construction of an authorial persona (*Erzähler-Ich*) in order to explain these contradictions,²⁵⁷ the role of Wolfram's obfuscations in the construction of his audience as encyclopedist has not been recognized.²⁵⁸ I would argue that Wolfram denies his role as *compiler* in order to force an unaccustomed audience to play this part themselves. By compelling his audience to sift, order, and arrange his crooked, disjointed narrative into a comprehensive whole, Wolfram casts his reader-listenership into the role of encyclopedic *compiler* that he himself plays but playfully abjures.

While scholars have analyzed the representations of literacy and education within Wolfram's text,²⁵⁹ critical attention to the poem's construction of its audience has focused almost exclusively on the tension between oral and literate modes of reception.²⁶⁰ Thus the critical discourse on *Parzival* has failed to recognize Wolfram's

²⁵⁷ Siegfried Christoph, "Authority and text in Wolfram's *Titirel* and *Parzival*," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, Vol. 73 (1999), 211-227, esp. 211; Arthur Groos (1995), 41-45; Eberhard Nellmann, "Zu Wolframs Bildung und zum Literaturkonzept des 'Parzival,'" *Poetica*, 28 (1996), 327-344; Horst Wenzel, *Hören und Sehen: Schrift und Bild. Kultur und Gedächtnis im Mittelalter* (Munich: Beck, 1995).

²⁵⁸ Steven Harrofft argues that Wolfram's machinations force the audience to experience the tale as quest and hence as "quester-audience." See *Wolfram and His Audience: A Study of the Themes of Quest and of Recognition of Kinship Identity* (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1974), 2. In a similar vein, see Robert Lee Bradley, *Narrator and Audience roles in Wolfram's "Parzival"* (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1981).

²⁵⁹ Albrecht Classen, "Reading, Writing, and Learning in the *Parzival*," *A Companion to Wolfram's Parzival*, ed. Will Hasty, (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1999), 189-202; D. H. Green, *Medieval Listening and Reading: The Primary Reception of German Literature 800-1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

²⁶⁰ Cf. Michael Curschmann, "Hören - Lesen - Sehen. Buch und Schriftlichkeit im Selbstverständnis der volkssprachlichen literarischen Kultur Deutschlands um 1200," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, 106 (1984), 218-257; D. H. Green, "On the Primary Reception of Narrative

construction of his audience as encyclopedist. Wolfram's "crooked" narrator feeds his audience the scattered bits and pieces of information essential to understand the narrative, as one commentator notes, "like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle which make sense only when fitted together."²⁶¹ (Some may consider even this too optimistic an assessment.) Wolfram's de-centering of all authority—even, or especially, his own—is hardly what one would expect from a medieval author; but in disavowing his own author-ity, Wolfram transfers (in the sense of Latin *translatio*) this authority to his audience. Ultimately neither the hero of *Parzival* nor its author fulfills the encyclopedist's task of ordering universal knowledge in a way that is both accessible and useful. Wolfram's compiling audience must discern, pick, and choose—relying on their own judgment and authority in order to put Wolfram's crooked narrative "in order" (*per ordinem*) in their own minds:

ouch erkante ich nie sô wîsen man,
 ern möhte gerne künde hân,
 welher stiure disiu mære gernt
 und waz si guoter lêre wernt.
 dar an si nimmer des verzagent,
 beidiu si vliehent unde jagent,
 si entwîchent unde kêrent,
 si lasternt unde êrent.
 swer mit disen schanzen allen kan,
 an dem hât witze wol getân,
 der sich niht versitzet noch vergêt
 und sich anders wol verstêt. (1.5-15)

Literature in Medieval Germany," *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 20 (1984), 289-308; Rüdiger Krohn, "Kulturgeschichtliche Bedingungen," *Aus der Mündlichkeit in die Schriftlichkeit: Höfische und andere Literatur 750-1320, Deutsche Literatur: Eine Sozialgeschichte I*, ed. Ursula Liebertz-Grün (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1988), 29-45; Manfred Günter Scholz, *Hören und Lesen. Studien zur primären Rezeption der Literatur im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert*, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1980; Linda Sue Sussman, *The Speech of the Grail: A Journey toward Speaking that Heals and Transforms* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1995); Haiko Wandhoff, *Der epische Blick: Eine mediengeschichtliche Studie zur höfischen Literatur*, Philologische Studien und Quellen 141 (Berlin: Schmidt Verlag, 1996); Horst Wenzel, *Hören und Sehen. Schrift und Bild: Kultur und Gedächtnis im Mittelalter* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1995).

²⁶¹ Hermann J. Weigand, "Spiritual Therapy in Wolfram's *Parzival*," *The German Quarterly*, 51 (1978), 444-464. For more on Wolfram's narrative obscurantism see D.H. Green, *The Art of Recognition in Wolfram's "Parzival"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

[Nor did I ever know a man so wise that he wouldn't gladly gain acquaintance with what guidance these tales crave, and what good doctrine they confer. They are never daunted, but they both flee and give chase, retreat and turn back, disgrace and honour. He who can cope with all these turns of the dice is well blessed with wit, if he does not sit too long or go astray, and keep as clear mind in other respects (1).]

This task of "ordering" is the encyclopedist's task *par excellence*, formulated by Vincent of Beauvais in chapter IV of his *Libellus apologeticus*, the general prologue to his *Speculum Maius*:

Nam ex meo ingenio pauca, et quasi nulla addidi...meum autem sola partium ordinatio.²⁶²

[I have added little, almost nothing of my own invention...the ordering alone has been my task.]

Wolfram, supposedly a humble illiterate, can or will not perform this ordering task of compilation for the reader. To read or listen to *Parzival* is thus, willy-nilly, to become an encyclopedist. The singular popularity of *Parzival* in the Middle Ages perhaps derives not least from the fact that Wolfram requires and constructs a new generation of *reader*: one who appropriates the tools of clerical learning and the elliptical reading practices of sacred exegesis for the interpretation of secular texts.

The story of Loherangrin introduced in Book 16 is an exercise in precisely the sort of compressed, linear narrative that Wolfram has studiously avoided throughout *Parzival*, and has in fact mocked his audience for expecting in the first place. This brief genealogical epilogue, a model of narrative compression, is every bit as succinct and linear as Parzival's five years of wandering are protracted and crooked.

At the opening of Book 15, Wolfram speaks of the frustration of those whom the tale has been "locked away from" (*Vil liute des hât verdrozzen, den diz mæer was*

²⁶² Quoted from the edition of Douai 1624 (reprint Graz 1964), p. 4. Cf. M. Paulmier-Foucart, "Ordre encyclopédique et organisation de la matière dans le *Speculum maius*, de Vincent de Beauvais," *L'Encyclopédisme: Actes du Colloque de Caen 12-16 janvier 1987*, ed. Annie Becq (Paris: Aux Amateurs de livres, 1991), 201-226.

vor beslozzen: *genuoge kundenz nie ervarn*, 734, 1-3).²⁶³ Wolfram's comment has been taken to refer to Chrétien's unfinished *Perceval*.²⁶⁴ Yet it just as readily applies to the broken-off story of Parzival and his pursuit of the Grail, now resumed after the lengthy Gawan adventure. This reading is supported by Wolfram's ensuing proclamation: "Now I shall hold back no longer (*nu wil ich daz niht langer sparn*, 734, 4). It is Wolfram, not Chrétien, who has been holding out on the audience. Chrétien de Troyes attributes his *Perceval* to an unidentified and unidentifiable book given to him by his patron, Count Philip of Flanders:

Donc avra bien sauve sa peinne
 Crestiens, qui antant et peinne
 a rimoier le meillor conte,
 par le comandement le conte,
 qui soit contez an cort real.
 Ce est li contes del graal,
 don li cuens li baille le livre,
 s'orroiz comant il s'an delivre.²⁶⁵

[Therefore Chrétien will not be wasting his efforts as he labors and strives, on the count's orders, to tell in rhyme the finest story ever related in a royal court. That is the story of the Grail, found in the book the count gave him.²⁶⁶]

Like Chrétien, Wolfram attributes his tale to an unidentifiable text, ironically repeating Chrétien's appeal to written sources while simultaneously disavowing Chrétien as a written source.²⁶⁷ Wolfram's narrative appears to be "out of order," like the scattered leaves of an unbound book, what Dante calls "ciò che per l'universo si squaderna"

²⁶³ "Locked away" might also refer to the lockable clasps sometimes found on the bindings of thirteenth-century manuscripts. See J.A. Szirmai, *The Archeology of Medieval Bookbinding* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999).

²⁶⁴ "The opening of Book XV refers to Chrétien de Troyes' incomplete work, which also inspired several Old French continuations. Wolfram is asserting his exclusive claim as a continuator": Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, trans Cyril Edwards (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 233.

²⁶⁵ Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Roman de Perceval ou Le conte du Graal*, ed William Roach (Geneva: Droz, 1959), lines 62-69.

²⁶⁶ Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, ed. and trans. D.D.R. Owen (London: Everyman, 1987), 375.

²⁶⁷ Cf. Walter Falk, "Wolframs Kyot und die Bedeutung der 'Quelle' im Mittelalter," *Die Entdeckung der potentialgeschichtlichen Ordnung: Kleine Schriften 1956-1984, 1. Teil: Der Weg zur Komponentenanalyse* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1985), 99-155.

(that which is dispersed throughout the universe in leaves).²⁶⁸ It is only at the moment of reception that Wolfram's "leaves" are gathered together in a single volume, i.e., from a unitary standpoint. Yet this is not the standpoint of Wolfram's authorial persona, who "scatters" himself by introducing multiple competing authorial *personae*. Like the Judeo-Christian creator-God, Wolfram's authorial persona's true nature is hidden both *from* and *in* his creation.²⁶⁹ Encyclopedic synthesis is achieved only at the level of the reader who reconstructs (or *re-authorizes*) Wolfram's narrative.

Wolfram's use of a pseudo-source is consistent with own his tongue-in-cheek claims to illiteracy. Yet it is through this technique that Wolfram establishes his authority. Presenting himself as an illiterate *laie*, Wolfram creates a persona with whom his lay, secular audience can identify. Whereas the bookish *meister* and probable cleric Chrétien de Troyes has deceived his audience in the past by doing the tale an "injustice" (827.1-2), the knightly Wolfram claims to bypass the written authority of the churchmen; Wolfram's lore is (allegedly) transmitted directly from "heathen" sources into the Provençal and German vernaculars. The misinformation supplied by Trevrizent in Book 9 (who is not strictly speaking a cleric, but rather a "holy man") is suggestive of the unreliability of clerical authority and transmission. This unreliability suggests a need for a vernacular "bypass" of clerical tradition.

Similarly, Wolfram casts doubt on his own narratorial persona in the famous metaphor of the bow, wherein he remarks with approval of "straightforward tales" (*mæren sleht*. 241.13) and states, "Whoever tells you of crookedness desires to lead you astray" (*swer iu saget von der krümbe / er wil iuch leiten ümbe*, 241.15-16). The use of Trevrizent as an unreliable narrator hints at Wolfram's awareness of the theme

²⁶⁸ Perhaps it is for this reason that Gottfried von Strassburg famously refers to Wolfram as "der maere wildenare" in the literary excursus in *Tristan* (4636-88). Usually understood as "teller of wild tales" (an expression of Gottfried's dislike of Wolfram's complex and obscure style), *der maere wildenare* might also plausibly be interpreted to mean "the savager of tales."

²⁶⁹ Wolfram's exhortation "nu lâit mîn eines wesen dri" (4.2), with its Trinitarian overtones, would support such a reading.

of unreliable narration in his work, and, by extension, the unreliability of Flegetanis and Kyot.²⁷⁰ When even Christian hermits lie, the narratorial authority of a heathen is doubtless doubly suspect. With his words, “If I have not lied to you” (*ob ich iu niht gelogen han*, 216.9) Wolfram undermines his own credibility as narrator, just as he undermines Trevrizent’s, and surrounds himself with the unreliable narrators “Flegetanis” and “Kyot.”²⁷¹

It would appear that Wolfram’s de-centering of clerical authority requires an all-out assault on the notion of authority itself. Thus Wolfram is required to dismantle his own mantle of authority no sooner than he snatches it up from Chrétien and other clerical sources. Wolfram questions Chrétien’s and his own reliability as a way of calling into question authority more generally. Wolfram, always irascible and quixotic, also stridently defends his authority at times; thus for him authorship is a dialectical and dialogical process which both foresees and reacts to the audience’s ongoing negotiation of the text, not a hegemonic discourse *ex cathedra* (as exemplified by his sometimes browbeating narrator). Wolfram’s textual anti-authoritarianism takes on sudden political relevance if we accept Ronald Murphy’s recent thesis that *Parzival* is written at least partly as an act of resistance to one particular authority’s contemporary call to action: namely, the fourth crusade to the Holy Land.²⁷²

In many ways, Wolfram’s ongoing discursive games can be seen as a solution to the problem of authority raised by the composition of encyclopedic texts. It has been argued that any attempt to systematize the totality of knowledge in a single book needs to be legitimated against a looming theological proscription of *curiositas*.²⁷³ The

²⁷⁰ Trevrizent’s “retraction” is discussed by Arthur Groos, “Trevrizent’s Retraction: Interpolation or Narrative Strategy?” *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 55 (1981), 44-63; see also “Inconclusive Speech Acts: Trevrizent’s ‘Retraction’” in Groos (1995), 220-241.

²⁷¹ For the Kyot problem in general, see Carl Lofmark, “Zur Interpretation der Kyotstellen im *Parzival*,” *Wolfram Studien*, 4 (1977), 33-70.

²⁷² Ronald Murphy, *Gemstones of Paradise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 11-12, 69-97.

²⁷³ See Hans Blumenberg, “Aufnahme der Neugierde in den Lasterkatalog” and “Schwiegigkeiten mit

encyclopedic compiler may well be wary of the wrath of a secretive Creator-God who punished the first humans for tasting from the *arbor scientiae*. Thus there is a theologically grounded apprehension concerning a Creator who withholds fundamental knowledge from his creatures, and who, perhaps, still desires to confine human knowing to the same state of disorganized multiplicity to which language was reduced at Babel.²⁷⁴ The pseudo-illiterate Wolfram playfully circumvents this problem by denying his role as encyclopedic compiler in the first place. As I noted in the “Introduction” to this dissertation, the transmission of “heathen” Greco-Arabic learning, first into Latin and then the vernacular, is at the core of the medieval encyclopedic project. Wolfram bypasses the first, Latinate phase of this transmission, removing or at least de-centering the mediating authority of the church, and hence mainstreaming the transmission of encyclopedic knowledge for secular audiences.²⁷⁵

Like the encyclopedia, the narrative of *Parzival* is bound up in questions of and anxieties about the transmission of heathen culture within the framework of Christian morality. These anxieties are expressed in *Parzival* by a series of dynastic relationships: Parzival’s father, Gahmuret, wins fame and a queen among the heathens and sires the hero’s half-brother, Feirefiz, with his heathen bride. In fact, the tale of *Parzival* was, according to Wolfram, first discovered written “in heidenischer schrift” (453.13) in Toledo, where the Middle Age’s greatest dialogue of heathen and Christian—the translation of Greek and Arabic learning into Latin—took place:²⁷⁶

der Natürlichkeit der Wißbegierde im scholastischen System,” *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit: Dritter Teil: Der Prozeß der theoretischen Neugierde* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966), 358-400.

²⁷⁴ See Jacques Le Goff, “Pourquoi Le XIIIe Siècle a-t il été plus particulièrement un siècle d’encyclopédisme?” *L’enciclopedismo medievale*, ed. Michelangelo Picone (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1994), 23-40, esp. 25-27.

²⁷⁵ It is possible to glimpse in Wolfram the first inkling of the revolt against the mediating role of the Latin church that took place under Luther three centuries later. Yet Wolfram is no revolutionary and certainly no Protestant, although, as Heinrich Heine once famously argued (in his *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*), the Germans were a protesting lot long before they became Protestants.

²⁷⁶ Cf. Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), especially chapter 9, “The Translators from Greek and Arabic”; also see

Kyôt der meister wol bekant
 ze Dôlet verworfen ligen vant
 in heidenischer schrifte
 dirre âventiure gestifte.
 der karakter â b c
 muoser hân gelernet ê,
 ân den list von nigrômanzî.
 ez half daz im der touf was bî:
 anders waer diz maer noch unvernunn.
 kein heidensch list möht uns gefrumn
 ze künden umbes grâles art,
 wie man sîner tougen innen wart.
 (453.11-22)

[Kyot, the renowned scholar, found in Toledo, lying neglected, in heathen script, this adventure's fundament. The a b c of those characters he must have learned beforehand, without the art of necromancy. It helped that baptism dwelt with him, or else this tale would still be unheard. No cunning heathen could avail to tell us about the Grail's nature – how its mysteries were perceived (145).]

Thus, just as baptism allows Feirefiz to see the Grail, baptism allows Kyot to communicate the Grail's nature to the extent possible in fallen human language.

The broader theme of heathen “transmission” should not obscure Wolfram's debts to specific encyclopedic works. Wolfram's penchant for descriptions in the form of run-on lists is suggestive of his consultation of medieval glossaries and other encyclopedic texts. The description of Anfortas' bed in Book 16 is a case in point:

ez was rîche an allen sîten:
 niemen darf des strîten
 daz er bezzerz ie gesæhe.
 ez was tiwer unde wæhe
 von der edeln steine geslehte.
 die hœrt hie nennen rehte.
 791 Karfunkl unt silenîtes,
 balax unt gagâtromes,
 ônix unt calcidôn,
 coralîs unt bestîôn,
 unjô unt optallîes,

Charles Burnett, “The Coherence of the Arabic-Latin Translation Program in Toledo in the Twelfth Century,” *Science in Context*, 14 (2001): 249-288, esp. 249-51, 270.

cerâuns unt epistîtes,
 jerachîtes unt eljotrôpîâ,
 panthers unt antrodrâgmâ,
 prasem unde saddâ,
 emathîtes unt djonisîâ,
 achâtes unt celidôn,
 sardonîs unt calcofôn,
 cornîol unt jaspîs,
 echîtes unt îrîs,
 gagâtes unt ligûrîus,
 abestô unt cegôlitus,
 galactîdâ unt jacinctus,
 orîtes unt enîdrus,
 absist unt alabandâ,
 crisolecter unt hîennîâ,
 smârât unt magnes,
 sapfîr unt pirrîtes.
 ouch stuont her unde dâ
 turkoyses unt lipparêâ,
 crisolte, rubîne,
 paleise unt sardîne,
 adamas unt crisoprassîs,
 melochîtes unt dîadochîs,
 pêanîtes unt mêdus,
 berillus unt topazîus. (790.25-791.30)

[Carbuncle and moonstone
 balas and gagathromeus
 onyx and bestion,
 union and ophthalmite,
 ceraunite and epistites,
 hierachite and heliotrope,
 pantherus and androdragma,
 prasine and sagda,
 hæmatite and dionise,
 agate and celidony,
 sardonyx and chalcophonite,
 cornelian and jasper,
 aetites and iris,
 gagate and ligurite,
 asbestos and cegolite,
 galactite and hyacinth,
 orites and enhydrite,
 absist and alabandine,
 chrysolectrus and hyæna,
 emerald and loadstone,
 sapphire and pyrites.

Here stood also
Turquoise and liparite,
chrysolite and sardine,
diamond and chrysoprase,
malachite and diadochite,
beryl and topaz (252-253).]

The fifty-eight stones of Wolfram's so-called *Edelsteinliste* correspond precisely with fifty-three of the sixty stones treated in Marbod von Rennes *De lapidibus* (ca. 1090), which lists their qualities and medicinal properties.²⁷⁷ Nellmann argues against a possible oral derivation for the list due to the difficulty involved in composing such a catalogue in rhyme without a written source.

Such effusions of encyclopedic learning are in fact a pervasive feature of *Parzival*.²⁷⁸ The Gawain narrative of Book 12 also displays Wolfram's knowledge of lapidary as well as the geometric tradition of the *quadrivium*:

Ûf durch den palas einesît
gienc ein gewelbe niht ze wît,
gegrêdet über den palas hôch:
sinwel sich daz umbe zôch.
dar ûffe stuont ein clâriu sûl:
diu was niht von holze fûl,
si was lieht unde starc,
sô grôz, froun Camillen sarc
wær drûffe wol gestanden.¹⁰
ûz Feirefiz's landen
brâht ez der wîse Clinschor,
werc daz hie stuont enbor.
sinwel als ein gezelt ez was.
der meister Jêometras,
solt ez geworht hân des hant,
diu kunst wære im unbekant.
ez was geworht mit liste.
adamas und amatiste

²⁷⁷ Cf. Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, ed. Eberhard Nellmann, vol. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994), 774. Nellman rejects a derivation from the lapidary of Arnoldus Saxo on chronological grounds.

²⁷⁸ See, for example, Feirefiz's name-list of the knights accompanying him (770.1-30), which, like the list of gems, takes up exactly thirty lines or one manuscript column.

(diu âventiure uns wizzen lât),
thôpazje und grânât,
crisolte, rubbîne,
smârâde, sardîne,
sus wârñ diu venster rîche. (589.1-23)

[Up through the hall on the one side rose a vault, none too wide, with steps mounting high above the hall; the vault wound in a circle. On top of it stood a lustrous pillar. It was not made of rotten wood, but was bright and sturdy, so huge that Lady Kamille's sarcophagus could easily have stood on top of it. From Feirefiz's lands wise Clinschor had brought the edifice that rose there. Round as a pavilion it was. If the hand of Master Geometras had had to design it, such artistry would have been beyond him. It was wrought with cunning: diamond and amethyst – so the adventure informs us – topaz and garnet, chrysolite, ruby, emerald, sardine – such were its sumptuous windows (189).]

Naturally, Wolfram is quick to disavow any and all written, Latin sources (“so the adventure informs us”). In his desire to make the world of encyclopedic learning not only accessible but *useful* to his lay, largely illiterate audience, Wolfram's project is analogous to the so-called *tumben-bibel* (*biblia pauperum*), the “dumb” or picture Bibles of the thirteenth century; these visually depict the elements (and sometimes the implements) of Christian salvation history with the aim of making the central tenets of faith knowable and accessible to illiterate elites and, eventually, a broader public.²⁷⁹ In Wolfram's hands, the narrative material of the Perceval-Parzival tradition becomes a “tumben-encyclopädie”; it renders traditional encyclopedic discourses on astronomy, medicine, lapidary, herbal, bestiary, and world history accessible and useful to a partly Latinless public.

Thus Wolfram's integration of encyclopedic topics in *Parzival* is not merely a conspicuous display of the author's own wide learning, but a fundamental part of his construction of an ideal audience. Wolfram famously refers to “tumbe liute” (foolish people) (1.16) for whom his literary machinations are too sophisticated, dividing his

²⁷⁹ Cf. Maurus Berve, *Die Armenbibel: Herkunft, Gestalt, Typologie: Dargestellt anhand von Miniaturen ans der Handschrift Cpg 148 der Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg* (Beuron: Beuronischer Kunstverlag, 1969).

imagined readers into two distinct interpretive communities, exoteric and esoteric. Wolfram constructs his true audience as “wise” (*swer mit disen schanzen allen kan, an dem hât witze wol getân*, 2.13-14), if unread. For Wolfram, knowledge is integral to morality, but the intellectual capacity of the reader/listener, or *witze* (2.14), is insufficient without the moral agency or *muot* (2.17) to make use of it.

The interest of vernacular audiences (such as at the court of Wolfram’s patron, Hermann of Thuringia) in the classical encyclopedic topics, in conjunction with the role of knowledge and science in an emerging sense of lay piety, is evident in Wolfram’s introductory prayer in his *Willehalm*, which like *Parzival* focuses on the reconciliation of “heathen” and Christian faiths. In his introductory prayer, Wolfram portrays God as the supreme encyclopedist by invoking a nearly all the classical encyclopedic topics common since Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae* (indicated in italics):

Ane valsch du reiner,
du drî unt doch einer,
schepfaere über *alle geschafft*,
âne urhap dîn staetiu kraft
ân ende ouch belîbet.
ob diu von mir vertrîbet
gedanc die gar flüstic sint,
sô bistu vater unt bin ich kint.
hôch edel ob aller edelkeit,
lâ dîner tugende wesen leit,
dâ kêre dîne erbarme zuo,
swa ich, hêrre, an dir missetuo.
lâz, hêrre, mich niht übersehen
swaz mir saelden ist geschehen,
und endelôser wünne.
dîn kint und dîn künne
bin ich bescheidenlîche,
ich arm und du vil rîche.
dîn *mennisheit* mir sippe gît
dîner gotheit mich âne strît
der *pâter noster* nennet
zeinem kinde erkennet.
sô gît der touf mir einen trôst

der mich zwîvels hât erlôst:
 ich hân gelouphaften sin,
 daz ich dîn genanne bin:
wisheit ob allen listen,
 du bist Krist, sô bin ich kristen.
dîner hoehe und dîner breite,
dîner tiefen antreite
 wart nie gezilt anz ende.
 ouch louft in dîner hende
der siben sterne gâhen,
 daz sin *himel* wider vâhen.
luft wazzer fiur und erde
 wont gar in dînem werde.
 ze dîme gebot ez allez stêt,
 dâ *wilt unt zam* mit umbe gêt.
 ouch hât dîn götlîchiu maht
 den *liechten tac*, die *trüeben naht*
 gezilt und onderscheiden
 mit *der sunnen louften* beiden.
 niemer wirt, nie wart dîn ebenmâz.
 al *der steine kraft*, *der wûrze wâz*
 hâstu bekant unz an daz ort.
der rehten schrift dôn unde wort
 dîn geist hât gesterket.
 mîn sin dich kreftec merket:
swaz an den buochen stêt geschriben,
 des bin ich künstelôs beliben.
 niht anders ich gelêret bin:
 wan hân ich kunst, die gît mir sin.
 diu helfe dîner güete
 sende in mîn gemüete.²⁸⁰
 (1.1-2.24)

[You Purity immaculate
 You Three yet One,
 Creator over *all creation*,
 Your constant power is without beginning and endures
 Without end.
 If that Power banishes from my mind thoughts which
 Lead to the death of my soul, then You are my
Father and I your child.
 You who are supremely noble beyond all nobility,
 Have compassion in Your goodness and turn Your
 Pity towards me,
 Lord,

²⁸⁰ Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Willehalm*, ed. Werner Schröder (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2003).

No matter how I sin against You.
 Let me be mindful,
 Lord,
 Of whatever blessings and infinite joy
 Have fallen to my lot.
 I am assuredly Your child and of Your lineage,
 Poor as I am and mighty as You are.
 Your own *humanity* grants me that kinship.
 The *Paternoster* does indeed call me a
 Child of Your divinity
 And acknowledges me as such.
 Likewise does *Holy Baptism* give me an assurance that
 Has freed me from despair, for I have the certainty
 That I am Your namesake:
Wisdom above all knowledge,
 You are Christ,
 Thus I am a Christian.
 No one has ever fathomed the ordering of *Your Height, Your Breath, Your
 Depth.*
 The course of the *seven planets*, too, is in Your hand,
 So that they counteract the movement of the *heavens.*
Air, water, fire and earth are all in Your Power.
 All that surrounds the *creatures wild and tame*
 Stands at Your command.
 Moreover, Your divine Power has separated the *bright day*
 And *the dark night*, and has set limits on each of them
 Through *the courses of the sun.*
 There never was Your equal, nor will there ever be.
 The *power of all stones, the scent of all herb,*
 You know in every detail.
 Your Spirit has informed the *sound and the words of*
Holy Scriptures.
 My mind feels the force of Your Presence.
 I have remained ignorant of *what is written in books*
 And I am tutored in this way alone: if I have any skill,
 It comes from my mind.²⁸¹

A comparison of Wolfram's prayer with the table of contents of Isidore's
Etymologiae, the foundational text of the medieval encyclopedic tradition, reveals a
 striking continuity of topics:

- 1) Grammar: *der rechten schrift dôn unde wort* (2.16)

²⁸¹ Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Willehalm*, trans. Marion E. Gibbs and Sidney M. Johnson (New York: Penguin, 1984), 17-18 (*modified*).

- 2) Rhetoric and Dialectic: *swaz an den buochen stêt geschriben* (2.19)
- 3) Mathematics, Music: *dîner hoehe und dîner breite, dîner tiefen antreite* (1.29-30)
Astronomy: *der siben sterne gâhen* (2.3); *himmel* (2.4); *der sunnen louften* (2.12)
- 4) [Medicine]
- 5) Laws and Times: *den liechten tac, die trüeben naht* (2.10)
- 6) Books and Offices of the Church: *swaz an den buochen stêt geschriben* (2.19);
Offices of the Church: *pâter noster* (1.21); *der touf* (1.23)
- 7) God, Angels, Saints (1.1-1.28)
- 8) Church and Sects: *du bist Krist, sô bin ich kristen.* (1.28)
- 9) Languages of foreigners (i.e. Greek, Latin, Hebrew):: *der rehten schrift dôn unde wort* (2.16)
Family Relationships: *sô bistu vater unt bin ich kint* (1.8)
- 10) Vocabulary: *du bist Krist, sô bin ich kristen.* (1.28)
- 11) Man and Portents: *mennischeit* (1.19)
- 12) Animals: *wilt unt zam* (2.8)
- 13) The Cosmos and its Parts: *luft wazzer fiur und erde* (2.5)
- 14) [The Earth and its Parts]
- 15) [Of cities, of Edifices Urban and Rural, of Farms, of Boundaries and Measures of Farms, of Travel]
- 16) Stones and Metals: *der steine kraft* (2.14)
- 17) Rustic Things: *der wûrze wâz:* (2.14)
- 18) [War and Games]
- 19) Ships, Building, Weaving: *kunst* (2.22)
- 20) The Home and Domestic Implements: *kunst* (2.22)

This is no mere act of citation; Wolfram transforms the classic encyclopedic topics (since Isidore) into an overtly religious discourse in the form of a prayer. Wolfram's prayer addresses roughly three-quarters of Isidore's encyclopedic topics and, by comparison, more than half of those of Hrabanus Maurus' *De universo*. Only four Isidoran topics (i.e., War, Medicine, Geography, and Cities) are not invoked in Wolfram's invocation, and these omitted topics nonetheless play major roles in both *Willehalm* and *Parzival*.

The nature of Wolfram's Grail must also be considered in light of the encyclopedic topics. Since Wolfram's Grail is a stone, unlike Chrétien's or Robert de Boron's Grail-cup, Wolfram's is the only Grail-object which has any counterpart in medieval encyclopedic discourse, namely, in the lapidary tradition. (Wolfram

enigmatically calls it “lapsit exillis,” 469.7) The Grail is also overtly connected with writing (and hence the encyclopedia) by means of the divine inscriptions on it. Since the Grail-narrator’s view of the world is from a divine perspective, gazing down from the heavens, it shares the same top-down view of the celestial *ordo* reproduced in the canonical encyclopedic tradition from Isidore onwards.

Wolfram’s invocation of the encyclopedic topics is pervasive. He begins his narrative with an *exemplum* concerning the magpie, in which he invokes elements of medieval bestiary tradition. The magpie is known as a thief who steals from others to make its own nest, much as Wolfram “steals” from multiple genres and discourses (e.g., romance, science, hagiography, epic) to construct his narrative, and like Parzival, who steals his armor from the Red Knight. The Gahmuret prologue introduces the theme of geography; Wolfram’s indebtedness in subsequent books to specific astronomical, calendrical, and medicinal sources is documented as well.²⁸² Wolfram’s *Parzival*, one might claim, is in a sense Chrétien’s *Perceval* plus the encyclopedia. What is remarkable is that, of the two, the text with a sustained indebtedness to the Latinate encyclopedic tradition is by the layman and supposed illiterate, Wolfram, not by the presumed Latin-schooled cleric, Chrétien. This speaks to the status of what I have called “encyclopedic literature” (here exemplified by Wolfram, Dante, and Snorri) as the self-assertion of a lay, vernacular culture vis-à-vis the clergy, and its first attempts to formulate a comprehensive secular literary discourse.

There is scant contemporary parallel in thirteenth-century Latin literature to the encyclopedic vogue in vernacular narrative. Arguably one can look back to the earlier Boethian tradition and the *Cosmographia* of Bernardus Silvestris for attempts to locate encyclopedic learning in the context of a comprehensive pedagogical narrative, although without the focus on an individual, lay literary subjectivity. In its vernacular

²⁸² Cf. Groos (1995), 119-219.

manifestations where it mediates between clerical and lay culture, the medieval encyclopedia reconciles conflicting codes and value systems, synthesizes them, and renders them mutually useful. Similarly, *Parzival* reconciles the conflicting dictates of the Grail society and courtly society, the *clerus* and the laity, the learned and the vernacular, the sacred and the secular, heathen and Christian, black and white. But the encyclopedism of *Parzival* (the poem) is not the encyclopedism of Parzival (Wolfram's hero).

Nothing in Parzival's slow development towards wisdom suggests that universal knowledge is either his goal or a prerequisite for his salvation. In fact, it is debatable precisely how much more Parzival knows at tale's end than at its beginning. Doubtless his knowledge of fundamental religious doctrines and courtly etiquette are much improved, but the encyclopedic knowledge that figures so prominently in his story plays no discernable part in his salvation. (The same can by no means be said of Dante's pilgrim, for example.) What is necessary, however, is for Parzival to take the first step in the dialogical process of *becoming* wise, which begins with his words, "ich bin niht wîs" (178.29). This "quest" is tied to its etymological cousin—the *question*. Yet despite the educative process that Parzival undergoes, the encyclopedism of Wolfram's *Parzival* is ultimately not manifest in its slowly-wise (*træclîche wîs*) hero, nor in its evasive narrator, but rather in its audience.

As one critic states, "a vital part of [Wolfram's] narrator's arsenal is precisely his ability to keep both his audience and his hero in a baffled and questioning state of mind."²⁸³ While Wolfram's narrative roles may be various, the role of his audience remains consistently that of questioner who slowly puts together (*compilare*) the narrative's disjointed pieces. The compiling reader/listener is thus compelled to play

²⁸³ Neil Thomas, "Wolfram von Eschenbach: Modes of Narrative Presentation," *A Companion to Wolfram's Parzival*, ed. Will Hasty (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1999), 124-139, esp. 132.

discipulus to Wolfram's *magister*. Elements of the narrative, such as Parzival's master-student dialogue with Trevrizent among others (including his mother and Cundrie) reproduce this fundamental relationship between reader and text diagetically, and represent a moment of identification between audience and hero in their shared role as quester/questioner/compiler.

The question-and-answer format constitutes one of the primary modes of medieval encyclopedic discourse. In few works of the period is the problem of question and answer as crucial as in Wolfram's *Parzival*. The question of question-and-answer—and of the one redeeming question in particular—furnishes the tale with a central organizing principle. The hero's encounter with Trevrizent in book 9 invokes the conventions of master-student dialogue familiar to readers of the *Lucidarius* and other widely transmitted encyclopedic-didactic texts of the period, as well as the conventions of the confessional dialogue and the *disputatio* between heathens and Christians. But the dialogue with Trevrizent is merely the most explicit realization of the poem's most fundamental organizing principle: the dialogue between author and reader.

The construction of *Parzival* is fundamentally a dialogue: between author and audience, audience and work, and among different works—between competing source and genre traditions such as the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, classical science, pastoral, romance, dynastic chronicle, and the saint's life—all within the poem itself. In the whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, *Parzival* constitutes an *enkuklios paideia*, what Giuseppe Mazzotta (speaking of Dante), calls a “mixture of encyclopedic structure and the narrative of the education of the self.”²⁸⁴ Yet this whole is assembled neither by Parzival nor by his author but by Wolfram's compiling reader.

²⁸⁴ Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 27.

2. *nune mac ich disen heiden vom getouften niht gescheiden: Heathen and Christian, Compiled*

compilatio as Dialogue

This notion of dialogue is integral to the act of compilation as practiced by Wolfram both as author of *Parzival* and as “author-izer” of his ideal reader. Dialogue is a means for the *descriptio* of a world that is unsanctioned and heterodox. The dialogic principle anchors (much like the “anchor” emblem on Gahmuret’s armor) the heterodox in the familiar, while also allowing what is orthodox to seem strange and open to question. Yet the concept of dialogism in *Parzival* needs to be broadened to encompass its pervasive *thematic* dualities as well as its structural ones, or what one might call the poem’s “binocular” vision: a field of vision that comes into resolution, only from the unitary standpoint of an individual readerly subjectivity. The prologue introduces, in order, the following binary oppositions:

Doubt (<i>zwîvel</i> , 1.1)	Constancy (<i>stæten gedanken</i> , 1.14)
Heart (<i>herzen</i> , 1.1)	Soul (<i>sêle</i> , 1.2)
Black (<i>die swarzen varwe</i> , 1.11)	White (<i>die blanken[varwe]</i> , 1.13)
Woman (<i>wîp</i> , 2.25; <i>wîp</i> , 3.25)	Man (<i>manne</i> , 2.24; <i>man</i> , 3.25)
Foolish (<i>tumben</i> , 1.16)	Wise (<i>witze</i> , 1.30; <i>wîsen</i> , 2.5; <i>witze</i> , 2.14)
Hell (<i>helle</i> , 1.9)	Heaven (<i>himels</i> , 1.9)
Blindness (<i>blinden</i> , 1.21)	Vision (<i>schîn</i> , 1.24)
Hair (<i>wer roufet mich</i> , 1.26)	Baldness (<i>dâ nie kein hâr gewuohs</i> , 1.26-27)
Water (<i>in dem brunnen</i> , 2.3; <i>daz tou</i> , 2.4)	Fire (<i>viur</i> , 2.3; <i>von der sunnen</i> , 2.4)
Loyalty (<i>triuwe</i> , 3.2)	Falsity (<i>valsche</i> , 3.7)
Straight (<i>sleht</i> , 4.12)	Bent (<i>gebouc</i> , 4.13)

This recurrent dualism promptly reemerges in section 5 of Book 1:

age (<i>altest</i> , 5.4 ; <i>alter</i> , 5.12)	youth (<i>jungern</i> , 5.6; <i>jugent</i> , 5.13)
death (<i>tôt</i> , 5.7)	life (<i>leben</i> , 5.7)
poverty (<i>armuot</i> , 5.16)	riches (<i>guot</i> , 5.12)

[*W*]and an im sint beidiu teil (1.8)—“for both have a share in him,” states Wolfram’s narrator, both Heaven and Hell, thus demarcating *Parzival* as a narrative space for a

marriage of seemingly irreconcilable contraries, though it is ultimately Wolfram's reader/compiler who officiates at this "wedding."

The medieval encyclopedia provides the foremost example and model of precisely this sort of forced marriage, since it is fundamentally the site of a merger between "heathen" science and Christian morality. In this regard, Wolfram's encyclopedism is a product and expression of his ecumenicalism, as well as of the broader dialogic dimension of his work.²⁸⁵

The dualities of *Parzival* are of one piece with Wolfram's aforementioned contradictory claims that *Parzival* is not a book; that its author is illiterate; that it fundamentally different from Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*; and that it is not based on books, i.e., that it is not the product of learned compilation. Wolfram presents the reader with a final puzzle in his assertion that, contrary to all appearances, his narrative is in fact "straightforward" (*reht*) and linear, as opposed to "crooked" (*unreht* or *krump*). This assertion, like the others, is patently false, unless the lay reader, employing the clerical tools of the encyclopedic and typological traditions, is able to "get it straight." The remainder of this chapter demonstrates this process at work.

Getting it Straight

The influence of the medieval encyclopedia on *Parzival* is evident not only on the level of theme and ideology, but in the novel and often perplexing structure of the poem. Regardless of organizational principle, be it master-student dialogue, order of arts (*ordo artium*) or things (*ordo rerum*), or universal history, the encyclopedia fundamentally provides a framework for the integration of heathen *matière*, i.e., classical and Arab science, with Christian morality and salvation history. Thus, the encyclopedia's structural principle and historical outlook are Christian, although its

²⁸⁵ For the latter, cf. Groos (1995), esp. 96-118.

sources are pagan in origin. While the frame story of Parzival—the first two and last two books—are deeply intertwined with the heathen world, the vast narrative center (Books 3-14) is almost totally devoid of actual heathens, and spare in references to heathendom. (Seeming exceptions to this rule, such as Trevrizent’s accounting of Greco-Arabic medical lore in Book 9, serve rather to confirm it, as I will show.) In contrast to the pro- and epilogues, heathens play no substantial roles as actors in the drama of Books 3-14.

Proceeding first on the level of assertion (to be backed up with detailed arguments below), I claim that, with the exception of Trevrizent’s description of failed attempts to heal Anfortas, the “heathen” material of *Parzival* is predominantly found in the first and last two heathen books (1 and 2, and 15 and 16), which frame the Christian narrative Wolfram appropriates from Chrétien de Troyes. The framework of *Parzival* is literally encyclopedic, since the first two books contain a wealth of geographic and bestiary lore, whereas the latter two draw extensively on herbal, lapidary, and astronomical traditions. The encyclopedic elements of the master-student dialogue in Book 9 are theological in nature and eschew the heathen learning of the pro- and epilogues. Trevrizent’s lengthy account of heathen medical lore, which would seem to belie this, belongs, as I will show, to another genre altogether, and is no longer part of the encyclopedic *dialogus magistri et discipuli*.

The narrative structure of *Parzival* is a drama of Christian education within the framework of the heathen world-history of the pro- and epilogues. *Parzival*’s framework is heathen, its content Christian. Hence, in its structure *Parzival* inverts the basic idea of the medieval encyclopedia, which, since Hrabanus Maurus (ca. 850), had provided a Christian framework for heathen content. An examination of the books in question will make this ordering evident.

Heathen Elements in Books 1 and 2

The *Prologue* begins with an invocation of Bestiary lore (i.e., *magpie*, *hare*, *horsefly*, *heron*, and *fish*), as well as metallurgic and lapidary (*tin*, *glass*, *gold*, *ruby*, *brass*), as well as cosmology and meteorology (*ice* and *sun*)—all topics of the medieval encyclopedic tradition since Isidore’s *Etymologiae*.²⁸⁶ Descriptions of the provenance of various warriors in Books 1 and 2 constitute something of an *imago mundi*: *Rome*, *Baldac*, *Nineveh*, *Morrocco*, *Persia*, *Damascus*, *Aleppo*, *Alexandria*, *France*, *Scotland*, *Greenland*, *Seville*, and *Toledo*. Only the problematic “Waleis” and fictive “Zazamanc” and “Azagouc” lack counterparts in Isidore or later encyclopedic works.

This rehearsal of canonical encyclopedic topics is (as we shall also see in Books 15 and 16) set against the looming background of the heathen world. Of Gahmuret’s military service of the heathen Baruch, we are told

sîn manlîchiu kraft
behielt den prîs in heidenschaft,
ze Marroch unt ze Persîâ.
sîn hant bezalt ouch anderswâ,
ze Dâmasc und ze Hâlap,
und swâ man ritterschaft dâ gap,
ze Arâbîe und vor Arâbî... (15.15.21)

[His valiant prowess won the prize in *heathendom*, in Morocco and in Persia. His hand took such toll elsewhere, too—in Damascus and in Aleppo, and wherever nightly deeds were proffered, in Arabia and before Araby (5-6, emphasis mine)]

Later, Gahmuret fights to defend the heathen Queen, Belcane, against partly Christian forces. This potential misalliance of Christian warrior and heathen sovereign is legitimated, however, by Wolfram’s description of Belcane as implicitly Christian in her virtue, if not in her faith:

Gahmureten dûhte sîn,
swie si wære ein heidenin,

²⁸⁶ See Isidore, pp. 267, 248, 270, 265, 259-63, 332, 328, 329, 330, respectively.

mit triwen wîplîcher sin
 in wîbes herze nie geslouf.
 ir kiusche was ein reiner touf,
 und ouch der regen der si begôz,
 der wâc der von ir ougen flôz
 ûf ir zobel und an ir brust.
 riwen phlege was ir gelust,
 und rehtiu jâmers lêre. (28.10-19)

[Gahmuret's immediate thought was that, although she was a *heathen*, a more womanly and royal disposition had never glided into a woman's heart. Her chastity was a pure baptism, as was the rain which poured upon her, the flood that flowed from her eyes down upon her sable and her breast. Contrition's cult was her delight, and true grief's doctrine (9).]

Gahmuret's death and burial also highlight the special status of encyclopedic learning in the four "heathen" Books of *Parzival* (also see pp. 254-57, below). A Christian, Gahmuret is buried in Baldac by the heathen Baruch (106.29-30) at great expense. "Heathens worship Gahmuret, in all sincerity, as their honoured god, not because of the Cross's honour, not because of baptism's doctrine" [*ez betent heiden sunder spot / an in als an ir werden got / niht durch des kriuzes êre noch durch des toufes lêre*] (107.19-22). Feirefiz's initial attachment to Repanse de Schoye recalls this image of the personal devotion of the heathens, ignorant of Christian doctrine, to an individual Christian. Like the Gahmuret-worshipping heathens, Feirefiz knows nothing of "that care of the Cross by which Christ's death bequeathed us benediction" [*kan niht kriuzes phlegm / als Kristes tât uns liez den segn.*] (107.17-18). In the case of Feirefiz, however, devotion to an individual Christian is transformed in the Grail community into devotion to Christ. There is no concomitant transformation of heathens into Christians through their idolatrous worship of Gahmuret. The devotion of the heathens to Gahmuret prefigures Feirefiz's devotion to Repanse de Schoye, but this typological relationship is marked not only by repetition but also by difference, intensification, and fulfillment, since Feirefiz actually converts to Christianity.

The story of Gahmuret's adventures, wooing and abandonment of the heathen

Queen, Belcane, subsequent marriage to Herzeloyde, and founding of a new line has been shown to correspond structurally with the adventures of Veldeke's Aeneas.²⁸⁷ Aeneas/Gahmuret come to Dido/Belcane after the fall of Troy/Niniveh, plagued en route by a dangerous storm (16.20-21). Aeneas/Gahmuret later abandons Dido/Belcane by order of the gods/due to religious difference. The Parzival narrative can be considered a fulfillment of the Gahmuret prologue, which is itself, through its association with the tale of Aeneas, linked typologically with the classical/heathen past. Feirefiz's conversion *sub gratia* thus represents the fulfillment of the *typus* represented by the heathen's personal devotion to and quasi-religious veneration of Gahmuret. The typological relationship between Gahmuret in heathendom and Feirefiz the heathen convert bridges the history of Parzival's salvation—a *Hauptgeschichte* that is largely devoid of heathen elements.

Heathen Elements in Books 3-14

Books 3-14 contain *reports* of heathens and of heathendom, but heathen figures themselves play no real role in the narrative. This is a stark contrast to the active role heathen figures play in Books 1 and 2 and 15 and 16. The seeming exception to this pattern in fact confirms the rule: the heathen Queen of Janfuse briefly appears at Arthur's court (328.1-30), but her function is limited to giving a report of Feirefiz. Cundrie is not identified as heathen although she speaks *heidensch* (782.2) and is sent from Tribalibot as a representative of Feirefiz's lady, the heathen Queen Secundille. Cundrie is a member of the Grail community (albeit a peripatetic one) and spanned between two worlds, although she can be said to a degree to represent the

²⁸⁷ Cf. Petrus W. Tax, "Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* in the Light of Biblical Typology," *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, 9 (1973), 1-14; also see "Gahmuret zwischen Aeneas und Parzival: Zur Struktur der Vorgeschichte von Wolframs *Parzival*," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, 92 (1973), 24-37, which supplements this discussion Cf. p. 253 and note 308, below, for the derivation of Gahmuret's grave from Veldeke's *Eneit*.

interests of heathendom. Her role is that of messenger, and messengers (e.g., Mercury) have a foot (sometimes a winged one!) in both worlds. Representatives of the heathen world are not actors in the narrative time of Books 3-14, but, rather, vehicles for reporting and back-narration.

References to heathendom in Books 3-14 construe it as a place of sumptuous garments, coverings (269.8-11, 679.8-11), and riches (326.20-27). The silk of Orilus' "surcoat and tabard" are "made in heathendom" (261.1-15), as are the clothes Cunneware has brought to Parzival (306.10-13). The emphasis on rich heathen clothes and "coverings," worn not only by heathens but also by Christians, is perhaps analogous to *Parzival* as a whole, whose "body" is wrapped in the heathen frame-story of the first and last two books. The recurring image of heathen coverings for Christian bodies perhaps serves as a inverse-metaphor for Wolfram's work, which dresses up heathen science with Christian meanings. Thus Wolfram's obsession with exotic accoutrements, while a typical courtly fetish, can be seen not only as a feature of his orientalism²⁸⁸ but also of his encyclopedism.

Disembodied heathen language also plays a role between the pro- and epilogues as well. We are told that Cundrie speaks *heidensch* (312.22), as well as Latin and French. Wolfram also speaks of Kyot, who sees the tale written down in "heathen tongue" (416.27). Kyot translates this lore from "heathen" to French. The only works translated from Arabic in the twelfth century and in Wolfram's day were of a natural-scientific and theological-philosophical nature, not literary fictions. By positing a Heathen origin for his narrative, Wolfram locates *Parzival* in the context of the transmission of Greco-Arabic encyclopedic works, translated into Latin by the

²⁸⁸ Arthur Groos, "Orientalizing the Medieval Orient: The East in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*," *Kulturen des Manuskriptzeitalters*, ed. Arthur Groos and Hans-Jochen Schiewer (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2004), 61-86.

“Toledo school.” However, the tale of *Parzival* is not translated from “heathen” into Latin, but into French, and then by Wolfram into German. Wolfram’s continuation of Kyot’s vernacular transposition underscores his ongoing vernacular “bypass” of clerical authority.

Parzival’s lack of knowledge of *heidensch* is mentioned implicitly in passing in Cundrie’s invective after Parzival fails to ask the redeeming question in Book 5:

wær ze Munsalvæsche iu vrâgen mite,
in heidenschaft ze Tabronite
317 Diu stat hât erden wunsches solt:
hie het iu vrâgen mêt erholt.

[“If questioning had kept you there—in Heathendom, in Tabronit, a city holds earth's perfection’s reward—yet there at Munsalvæsche your questioning would have fetched you more.”] (316.29-317.2).

Once more, the heathen world is marked in the central books (3-14) by its *absence*, both physical and linguistic. The Grail is mentioned in Book 10 as an object of heathen longing, hence also in the context of a *lack*—something the heathen world fails to possess but still desires (519.2-30).²⁸⁹ This heathen desire is described against the background of a disquisition on wondrous peoples, astronomy, herb lore, and Adamic theology, thus hinting at the interconnectedness of heathendom, natural science, and the Grail.

The heathen desire for the totality represented by the Grail is most fully realized in the figure of the sorcerer Clinschor, who provides a model of “wrongful encyclopedism” (see p. 169, above), akin to the evil desire for universal knowledge that was struck down in Eden and Babel. Clinschor holds dominion over all “who dwell between the firmament and the earth’s compass” (658.28-29), and his power extends over *mal unde bêâ schent* (658.27)—a totality topos similar to “young and old,” meaning simply “everyone” whom God does not protect. Clinschor’s domain is

²⁸⁹ The heathen who wounds Anfortas is likewise questing for the Grail (479.13-19).

also full of pagans and Christians (659.11-17); and it seems increasingly clear that Wolfram, hardly incidentally, emphasizes encyclopedic discourses in the context of the conjunction of these two groups.

In the midst of this locus cohabited by Christians and heathens, Clinschor possesses a magic pillar, in which all earthly things can be beheld (589.27-590.14) within a range of six miles. But the “heathen vision” of the magic pillar, which Gawan is thwarted from investigating (590.15ff.), is limited by its range and narrow focus on the natural world. Despite its all-encompassing nature, it reveals only the outward surfaces of things. Therefore it can be regarded as a sort of heathen “encyclopedia,” whose scope is limited to the things of the natural world, without the explication of them as moral allegory, which characterizes the Christian encyclopedia. A precedent for such heathen “counterparts” to Christian institutions is provided in the figure of the Baruch, who rules in Baldac as the pope does in Rome (13.25-14.2). For a *moral* explication of encyclopedic learning, however, we must turn back to Parzival’s dialogue with Trevrizent in Book 9.

Heathen Elements in Book 9

The dialogic aspect of Book 9 is foreshadowed with a miniature reprise of the thematic dualism of the prologue, as discussed (pp. 239-40):

...wie vert er nuo?
den selben mæren grîfet zuo,
ober an freuden sî verzagt,
oder hât er hôhen prîs bejagt?
oder ob sîn ganziu werdekeit
sî beidiu lang unde breit,
oder ist si kurz oder smal? (433.20-21)

[How does he fare now? Take up these tales: is he daunted of joys, or has he won high fame? Is his unimpaired honour both *long* and *broad*, or is it *short* and *narrow*? (139, emphasis mine).]

These dualities are introduced in a process of rhetorical question-and-answer that anticipates the pending master-student dialogue between Parzival and Trevrizent. The dialogue between the knight and the saintly man—more abstractly, the secular and the sacred—takes place, not incidentally, in the narrative center and turning point of Wolfram’s poem.

Scholars have failed to distinguish between the master-student dialogue proper of Book 9 (462.1-467.15) and the *counsel* that Trevrizent offers Parzival (467.16-502.30), which constitutes a new generic frame of reference. This transition is marked by Parzival’s words to Trevrizent:

Parzivâl sprach zim dô
“hêrre, ich bin des immer frô,
daz ir mich von dem bescheiden hât,
der nihtes ungelônnet lât,
der missewende noch der tugent.” (467.11-15)

[Parzival then said to him: “Lord, I am eternally grateful that you have informed me about Him who leaves nothing unrewarded, neither misdeed nor virtue” (150).]

It is typical of the medieval Latin master-student dialogue and its vernacular offshoots for the *discipulus* to express gratitude and amazement to the *magister* at the dialogue’s end. Parzival’s valediction recalls the closing words of the student to the teacher in the Latin *Elucidarium*:

O mirabilis contrarietas! Sicut illorum gaudia erunt inexcogitabilia et indicibilia; ita istorum supplicia erunt incomparabilia et ineffabilia.²⁹⁰

[Oh marvelous contradiction! Just as the joy of these [i.e., the saved] is unthinkable and indescribable, so the punishment of those [i.e., the damned] is incomparable and ineffable.]

Parzival’s statement marks the end of the master-student dialogue. Trevrizent’s next

²⁹⁰ Honorius Augustodunensis, *Elucidarium sive dialogus de summa totius Christianae Theologiae* in Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 172, 1176a-b.

words mark the beginning of his “wise counsel,” which constitutes the generic mode of the remainder of their encounter. Whereas the master-student dialogue has dealt with Christian theology, Trevrizent’s counsel contains the heathen encyclopedic lore of Book 9, which consists largely of herbal, lapidary, and medicine. The transition from master-student dialogue to “counsel” is explicit in the text:

der wirt sprach aber wider zim
“nimts iuch niht hæl, gern ich vernim
waz ir kumbers unde sünden hât.
ob ir mich diu prüeven lâ, t,
dar zuo gib ich iu lihte râ, t,
des ir selbe niht enhât.” (467.19-24)

[The host replied in turn: “If you’ve no cause to conceal it, I’ll gladly learn what troubles and sins you have. If you let me judge of them, perhaps I can give you counsel which you yourself lack (150).]

This invitation to reveal one’s woes has no counterpart in master-student dialogue and constitutes a change in generic register. Trevrizent’s “counsel” is distinguished from master-student dialogue by its character as *confession*: *gern ich vermin waz ir kumbers unde sünden hât*. This is confirmed by Trevrizent’s parting words:

er sprach “gip mir dîn sünde her:
vor gote ich bin dîn wandels wer.
und leist als ich dir hân gesagt:
belîp des willen unverzagt.” (502.25-28)

[Trevrizent spoke: “Give your sin over to me. Before God I am your atonement’s guarantor. And act as I have told you—remain undaunted in your resolve!” (161)]

The encyclopedic lore of Parzival’s master-student dialogue proper (i.e., as distinct from Trevrizent’s wise counsel) is theological in nature. This includes the short salvation history of lines 463.1-465.30. The topics of heathen science (bestiary, herbs, and medicine), on the other hand, are relegated to Trevrizent’s “counsel” and the ensuing confessional dialogue, which are no longer an encyclopedic genre. As I have noted, the Gahmuret prologue and Parzival’s winning of the Grail in Books 1 and

2 and 15 and 16, respectively, are marked both by the presence of the heathen world and by a concomitant proliferation of discourses on astronomy, botany, herbs, lapidary, geography, and medicine.²⁹¹ I would suggest that the formal generic division between pagan science and Christian theology in Book 9 indicates a failure on Trevrizent's part to integrate the topics of heathen science with the poem's ecumenical, Christian encyclopedism—a task that will be left for his nephew to complete in the attainment of the Grail in Books 15 and 16.

The account of the catechism of Book 9 is itself introduced with a catechistic admonition: *Swerz niht geloubt, der sündet* (435.1) (Anyone who doesn't believe this [story] is a sinner). The discreet treatment of strictly theological concerns in Book 9 is in fact consistent with the German vernacular encyclopedic tradition. The most widespread vernacular German encyclopedia of the period, the *Lucidarius*, is divided into three sections: natural science, theology, and eschatology. Hence, the *Lucidarius* proceeds from a reading of the world according to the literal sense of things and events (i.e., *historice*), followed by their spiritual explication (i.e., *allegorice*). The moral explication of the *ordo rerum* is in turn followed by an account of the end of the world and the afterlife. This tripartite division is evident in *Parzival* as well.

In his ignorance, Parzival experiences his adventures (Books 3-9) in their merely literal-historical dimension, until their spiritual meaning is explicated by Trevrizent in Book 9. The Gawan adventure (Books 10-14) has often been understood as commentary on the Parzival-Grail narrative and can thus be seen as a continuation by other means of the exegesis Trevrizent provides of Parzival's previous adventures in Book 9. The remaining books, 15 and 16, provide an eschatological account of the Grail world. Thus, the broad trajectory of the narrative of *Parzival* shows a basic

²⁹¹ None of which, of course, can be wholly separated from the Theological in a transcendent world-order.

structural similarity with the trajectory of the most influential German vernacular encyclopedia of Wolfram's age, a work with which there is good evidence that he may have been directly acquainted.²⁹²

Book 9 is not only the most “theological” of *Parzival* but also the book least hospitable to heathens. Heathens are mentioned here only to mark their *absence* from the Good Friday narrative and their exclusion from salvation. Immediately before Parzival is counseled to seek out the holy hermit Trevrizent, pilgrims exhort him:

ez ist hiute der karfrîtac,
des al diu werlt sich freun mac
unt dâ bî mit angest siufzec sîn.
wâ wart ie hôher triwe schîn,
dan die got durch uns begienc,
den man durch uns anz kriuze hienc?
hêrre, pflegt ir toufes,
sô jâmer iuch des koufes:
er hât sîn werdeclîchez lebn
mit tât für unser schult gegeben,
durch daz der mensche was verlorn,
durch schulde hin zer helle erkorn.
ob ir niht ein heiden sît,
sô denket, hêrre, an dise zît. (748.7-20)

[Today is Good Friday, because of which all the world may rejoice, and at the same time sigh in anguish. Where was greater loyalty ever shown than that which God manifested for our sake—He whom they hung on the cross for us? Sir, *if you practice baptism's faith*, then grieve for that purchase. He gave his noble life, by His death, for our guilt, by which mankind had been doomed, allotted to Hell because of guilt. *If you are no heathen*, then think, lord, upon this season (114, emphasis mine).]

The catechism offered by the pilgrims and by Trevrizent is not universally accessible, but only *if you are no heathen*. Earlier and later on (especially in Books 1 and 2 and 15 and 16) encyclopedic discourses are bound up with heathendom, but the fact that heathen elements are excluded from Trevrizent's “hidden tidings concerning the Grail” (452.30) is made explicit in his account of Kyot's discovery of the Grail

²⁹² For the *Lucidarius* in *Parzival*, see Groos (1995), 155, 299; also see Edwards (trans.), 166, 210.

âventiure:

Kyôt der meister wol bekant
ze Dôlet verworfen ligen vant
in heidenischer schrifte
dirre âventiure gestifte.
der karakter â b c
muoser hân gelernet ê,
ân den list von nigrômanzî.
ez half daz im der touf was bî:
anders wær diz mær noch unvernumn.
kein heidensch list möht uns gefrumn
ze künden umbes grâles art,
wie man sîner tougen innen wart. (453.11-22)

[Kyot, the renowned scholar, found in Toledo, lying neglected, in heathen script, this adventure's fundament. The a b c of those characters he must have learned beforehand, without the art of necromancy. It helped that baptism dwelt with him, or else this tale would still be unheard. *No cunning heathen could avail to tell us about the Grail's nature*—how its mysteries were perceived (145, emphasis mine).]

Not only would the heathens remain ignorant of the Grail's nature if they tried to fathom it, they “neglect” the story of the Grail in the first place. A report is given of “Flegetanis the heathen” (453.23), who reads the name of the Grail in the constellations (454.18-22), but who lived in the time before baptism (453.29-30). Flegetanis knew “what it was called” (*wie der hiez*, 454.23), but nothing of the Grail's nature, save that it had to be tended by the baptised. This is consistent with the tendency of the heathens to grasp only the surfaces of things (as evinced by Clinschor's all-seeing pillar) but not their spiritual dimension; which is only revealed after baptism. Flegetanis' knowledge avails him nothing, since he continues to worship “a calf as if it were his god” (454.2-3). Flegetanis can name the Grail, but the Grail cannot name *him*, which Trevrizent posits as the precondition for attaining it (cf. 468.12-14).

Other references to heathens and heathendom in Book 9 further serve merely

to underscore the heathen world's absence, ineffectuality, or perdition: Trevrizent tells Parzival that his father was slain by a heathen (479.13): *ez was ein heiden der dâ streit unt der die selben tjoste reit* ["It was a heathen who fought there and rode that joust against him" (479.13-14)]. He remarks that in his soldiering days "Heathen and Christian were all alike to me in battle" (*der heidn unt der getoufte wârn mir strîtes al gelîch*, 495.28-29), as long as he received the love of his lady. This recalls Gahmuret, who slays both heathens and Christians for the love of the heathen queen Belcane. Trevrizent also describes Aeneas' twig (481.30-482.10) and the other ineffectual cures attempted on the Fisher King.

In fact, it is Anfortas' wounding at the hands of a heathen with a venom-tipped spear that prompts the lengthy, and futile, attempts to heal him, of which Aeneas' twig is but one. Other failed remedies include the herbs and aromatics described in Book 16 (789.21-790.8) and the gems set in Anfortas' bed (discussed above, p. 223-225). Parzival's reconciliation with his heathen half-brother is also a *de facto*, if not theological, precondition for returning to Munsalvæsche and healing the Fisher King. Thus, both the cause of Anfortas' wound, its potential, but failed, cures, and its true remedy owe something to heathen "sources." But it is only when this last heathen "source" (i.e., Feirefiz) is integrated into a Christian worldview—in a manner that reflects the merger of Christian morality and heathen science in the encyclopedia—that healing is ultimately possible.

Yet it is not the heathen world that presents Parzival with the greatest obstacles on his quest to heal the Fisher King. The misinformation Trevrizent provides Parzival regarding the way the Grail is attained—his attempt to divert Parzival, his comment on the status of the neutral angels, and his so-called "retraction" in Book 16—have long presented scholars with a puzzle.²⁹³ Trevrizent's deception would seem

²⁹³ See Groos (1995), 221-224 for an overview and succinct bibliography of attempts to solve it.

to violate the bounds of the master-student dialogue, the encyclopedic-didactic framework in which their conversation takes place: the *magister* may not lie to his *discipulus*. None of the arguments adduced to explain Trevrizent's retraction can be dismissed out of hand (except perhaps the unlikely proposal that it is an interpolation).²⁹⁴ Either the conditions for winning the Grail have changed, Wolfram is confused, or these merely seeming contradictions are the product of a “decentered and pluralistic discourse”²⁹⁵ that allows for a polyphony of overlapping voices, even when they sing off key.

A complementary solution to this long-standing crux—one which takes the encyclopedic dimension of Wolfram’s poem into account—is that Trevrizent may indeed include contradictory facts, but in so doing he is in fact a model encyclopedic *compiler*. His *didaxis* conjoins discourses on theology, genealogy, bestiary, lapidary, herbal, medicine, and astronomy, and is one of the most densely encyclopedic moments in *Parzival*. Wolfram, like Snorri, also complies different dialogue genres: master-student dialogue, confession, and *disputatio*, which may account for some of his apparent discrepancies. “We cannot rationalize all the inconsistencies in Trevrizent’s ‘Retraction.’”²⁹⁶ But the inclusion of mutually contradictory explanations of natural phenomena, things, or events has a precedent in the medieval encyclopedic tradition which partly frames his dialogue in Book 9. For example, William of Conches’ dialogue between “Duke” and “Philosopher” in his *Dragmaticon* explores contrary positions, objections, and alternatives, and contradictory accounts find a place in the compendium.²⁹⁷ Similarly, Snorri Sturluson describes the gods as divine beings in his *Edda* but as euhemerized human beings in *Heimskringla*. As Arthur Groos has

²⁹⁴ As argued by Peter Wapnewski, “Trevrizent: Widerruf und Gralprämissen,” *Wolfram's Parzival: Studien zur Religiosität und Form* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1955), 172-73.

²⁹⁵ Groos, *ibid.*, 224.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 226.

²⁹⁷ See note 72, above.

argued, Trevrizent's confusion is not necessarily Wolfram's.²⁹⁸ Such contradictions are prominent in encyclopedias in the dialogue form that Parzival's encounter with Trevrizent reproduces, such as the *Dragmaticon* and the German *Lucidarius*. I have already argued that Wolfram's discussion of theology in Book 9 may reflect a tendency toward the separate treatment of religious topics in the German vernacular encyclopedic tradition. Wolfram's inclusion of Trevrizent's contradictory "Retraction" may appear puzzling, but is also consistent with the encyclopedic tradition. Ultimately, Trevrizent's deception shows that Parzival's encyclopedic questioning (which is merely the beginning of the slow process of becoming wise), is not a sufficient condition for salvation. This reveals the limits of encyclopedic learning without Christian moralization, as exemplified by the works of classical and heathen antiquity. The redeeming question is only possible *sub gratia*.

Heathen Elements in Books 15 and 16

Wolfram refers to the tale having been "locked away," perhaps not strictly metaphorically, but also in reference to the metal clasps that sometimes held a bound manuscript closed ("verslozen").²⁹⁹ Thus Wolfram's return to the heathen frame narrative may also refer to the physical frame or binding of the book itself. This is perhaps another of Wolfram's sly acknowledgements of *Parzival's* status, contrary to his own famous statement, as a "book" and perhaps even of the frame of reference of the medieval encyclopedia.

There is indeed a marked increase in the volume of encyclopedic lore in Books 15 and 16 that accompanies the reintroduction of the heathen world, now as an *active*

²⁹⁸A modern parallel is afforded by the problem of Hamlet's age. Shakespeare's play furnishes evidence that allows us to plausibly calculate the Prince of Denmark's age as around both 18 and 30, but the information provided to reach those numbers is provided not by Shakespeare but by other characters; Shakespeare merely includes these confused, variant interpretations.

²⁹⁹ See note 264.

player in the theological drama of *Parzival*. Feirefiz is the first heathen introduced since the Gahmuret prologue who plays an active role in the narrative, since, as I have argued, other heathen figures are mentioned only by report, or serve to report events known to them.

The influx of heathen riches that has since become a commonplace in *Parzival* (cf. 261.1-15, 279.8-11) is linked in Book 15 with the encyclopedic tradition in the description of Feirefiz's accoutrements. Wolfram draws on the encyclopedic sub-genres of bestiary and lapidary to account for Feirefiz's heathen riches:

waz diende Artûses hant
ze Bertâne unde in Engellant,
daz vergulte niht die steine
die mit edelem arde reine
lâgen ûf des heldes wâpenroc.
der was tiure ân al getroc:
rubbîne, calcidône,
wârn dâ ze swachem lône.
der wâpenroc gap planken schîn.
ime berge zAgremuntîn
die wûrme salamander
in worhten zein ander
in dem heizen fiure.
die wâren steine tiure
lâgen drûf tunkel unde lieht:
ir art mac ich benennen niht. (735.15.30)

[All that served Arthur's hand in Britain and in England would not pay for the stones, which, with their noble, pure nature, studded the warrior's surcoat. It was costly beyond all deception: rubies and chalcedony would fetch a poor price there. The surcoat gave off a dazzling sheen. In the mountain of Agremontin the salamander worms had woven it together in the hot fire. True precious stones lay upon it, dark and bright—I cannot name their nature (234).]

Descriptions of gems and of the salamander are a staple of medieval encyclopedic works. In Latin, the salamander was reported to live in flames at least since Isidore.³⁰⁰ The legendary *Letter of Prester John*, a wonder-tale which circulated widely in Europe from 1165 onwards, reported that the salamander produces an inflammable, asbestos-

³⁰⁰ *Etymologiae*, XII.iv.36.

like material out of which precious clothing can be produced.³⁰¹ Yet the description of the surcoat also represents a *failure* of the encyclopedic tradition, since some of Feirefiz's wondrous stones are beyond even its grasp (*ir art mac ich benennen nieht*).

The continued association in *Parzival* of encyclopedic lore and heathen "coverings" is perhaps suggestive of an ongoing metaphorical relationship between the influx of heathen material riches and the influx of heathen intellectual goods in the form of encyclopedic learning, such as the lapidary and bestiary lore that informs the description of Feirefiz's vestments. While sumptuous heathen clothing is a fixation of courtly romance, novel to Wolfram is the description of heathen accoutrements almost always in terms borrowed from Christian encyclopedic discourses.

This interweaving of heathen and Christian is suggested in particular by the origin of Feirefiz's surcoat in the fires of *Agremuntîn*. This is likely a reference to Mt. Acremonte in Sicily.³⁰² The history of Sicily is palimpsest of Roman, Germanic, Christian, Greek, and Arab/Muslim influences. Medieval Sicily, although predominantly Christian, was, due to its status as a crossroads of several major trade roots, especially open to the influence of Muslim and Jewish culture. This unique history perhaps prepared the ground for the famous tolerance and admiration of the Muslim world noted of Wolfram's younger contemporary, Frederick II, the king of Sicily and later Holy Roman Emperor.³⁰³ Frederick is reputed to have spoken Latin, Sicilian, German, French, Greek, and Arabic (thus trumping even Wolfram's Cundrie).³⁰⁴ His court was open to Muslim scholars, and his tolerance of non-Christians extended to allowing the Sicilian Saracens to remain on the mainland, build mosques, and live according to their traditions.³⁰⁵

³⁰¹ Nellmann (1994), 756.

³⁰² Cf. Nellmann (1994), 756.

³⁰³ Cf. Herbert Nette, *Friedrich II. Von Hohenstaufen* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1975), 43.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 7, 43.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

The literal conflict of heathen and Christian in *Parzival* is almost always accompanied by citations from encyclopedic sources, which reconcile heathen and Christian on a level that is intellectual and spiritual. During the battle between Parzival and Feirefiz in Book 15, Wolfram cites lore also found in Isidore's *Etymologiae* on the lion, born dead but brought to life by his father's roar—*pagan* lore later endowed with *Christological* meaning. The context of this encyclopedic citation is hardly incidental, since Wolfram uses an encyclopedic topic to describe the struggle for supremacy between heathen and Christian. The Christian bestiary tradition has its origin in Greek pagan sources, such as the *Physiologus*, works of Aristotle, Herodotus, Pliny the elder, Solinus, and Aelian.³⁰⁶ Thus the physical struggle and reconciliation between Parzival and Feirefiz reproduces the spiritual rapprochement between heathen science and Christian moralization at the core of the encyclopedic tradition. This conflict is made explicit in course of the battle, (235) during which Feirefiz and Parzival are exclusively referred to as “the heathen” and “the Christian” (from 738.11-12 to 748.13), particularly in the refrain, *der heiden tet em getouften wê* [The heathen hurt the Christian hard] (739.23, 741.1). Only after they recognize each other as brothers does the narrator refer to them once again as “Parzival” and “Feirefiz” (749.15, 23).

The same pattern, whereby references to encyclopedic lore surface at a moment of conflict between heathen and Christian, is evident in the episode of Gahmuret's death:

gunêrtiu heidensch witze
 hât uns verstoln den helt guot.
 ein ritter hete bockes bluot
 genomen in ein langez glas:
 daz sluoger ûf den adamas:
 dô wart er weicher danne ein swamp. (105.16-21)

³⁰⁶ Cf. Wilma B. George, *The Naming of the Beasts: Natural History in the Medieval Bestiary* (London: Duckworth, 1991). See also Debra Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[Cursed heathen's guile stole the goodly warrior from us. A knight had poured he-goat's blood into a tall glass; he broke that upon the adamant. Then it became softer than a sponge" (33).]

According to a twelfth-century Latin bestiary,

the nature of goats is so extremely hot that a stone of adamant, which neither fire nor iron implement can alter, is dissolved merely by the blood of one of these creatures.³⁰⁷

As in the Parzival-Feirefiz episode, the conflict of heathen and Christian is accompanied by an invocation of pagan science, which the bestiary tradition imbues with a Christian moral explication. The fact that the heathen warrior uses bestiary lore to deadly advantage against a Christian underscores the originally heathen provenance and danger of this "science." Another instance of the conflict of heathen and Christian in the context of pagan science is the description of Gahmuret's tomb, which draws on both lapidary lore and Heinrich von Veldeke's description of Dido's tomb in his *Eneide*, a work Wolfram made frequent use of.³⁰⁸ The tomb is described as an amalgam of heathen and Christian elements (106.29-107.24), a contested site with competing agendas, "compiled" (as it were) under the highest earthly hand of the Baruch. The battle between Gahmuret and the heathen who sends him to his death prefigures the confraternal conflict of his sons Parzival and Feirefiz, yet with the crucial difference that their battle results in reconciliation and the realization that Christian and heathen are in fact brothers.

The conflict of the heathen and Christian half-brothers continues with reference to the tension between Heathen and Christian Science. Wolfram draws on lapidary lore to describe Feirefiz's gem-encrusted shield (741.11-14):

ûf dem buckelhûse stuont
ein stein, des namn tuon ich iu kuont;

³⁰⁷ *The Book of Beasts: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century*, ed. T.H. White (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1954), 75.

³⁰⁸ Cf. Groos (1995), 15-16, 31, 36, 37, 86, 151. See also Nellman (1994), 512, and Gabriele Schieb, ed., *Eneide: Henric van Veldeken* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1965), 76, note to line 2510.

antrax dort genennet,
karfunkel hie bekennet.

[On the boss-point itself was a gem with whose name I will acquaint you:
“*antrax*” it is called yonder; here it is known as “*carbuncle*” (emphasis mine)
(236).]

Wolfram’s etymology of *karfunkel* and *antrax* is derived from Isidore’s *Etymologiae*.³⁰⁹ Isidore gives the Latin *carbunculus* along with the Greek *Ἀνθραξ* (anthrax). Thus the tension between heathen and Christian that culminates in the battle of the brothers extends even to the scientific nomenclature of Heathendom and Christianity, the language of “here” and “there.” Regarding such nomenclature, it is typically assumed that Feirefiz’s invocation of the Roman gods “Juno” and “Jupiter” (748.17,19; 749.16; 750.2) reflects Wolfram’s ignorance of Islamic monotheism (or is perhaps, at best, an *interpretatio romana* of Islam). But Wolfram’s (or Feirefiz’s?) “mistake,” which gives Roman names to *heidensch* deities, closely mirrors the role of 12th-century “heathen” Arabic scholars, whose translations into Latin restored the Greek scientific and philosophical tradition to the Christian West. Feirefiz’s “Roman” gods adhere to the same basic pattern as the encyclopedic transpositions of the 12th-century “heathen” scholars, whereby something originally Greek (*Zeus/Hera*) is translated into Latin (*Jupiter/Juno*) by a “heathen.” Feirefiz’s ongoing Greek frame-of-reference, as when he compares his army with the forces at Troy (768.1-9), conforms to this pattern, as does the narrator’s description of Feirefiz’s shield in terms (*antrax dort genennet / karfunkel hie bekennet*) from from Greek to Latin.

The reconciliation of heathen and Christian culminates in the attainment of the Grail. Parzival, Feirefiz, and Cundrie ride together to Munsalvæsche (784.26-27, 793.15-30) to heal the Fisher King—the prerequisite for gaining the Grail. An outpouring of encyclopedic knowledge attends the reintroduction of the Grail, which ranges from heathen astronomy (782.1-21, 789.5) to herbal (789.21-790.8), bestiary

³⁰⁹ XVI.xiv.1 (see note 87, above).

(790.10, 22), and lapidary lore (791.1-30). Although Parzival is “slowly wise,” he is at this point assuredly *wîs*, if he ever is.³¹⁰ As long as he remains a heathen, Feirefiz, whose skin resembles “a written-on leaf of parchment” (747.26), is a *loose* leaf that remains to be bound (“with love in a single volume,” as it were) to the Grail community. The attainment of the Grail, the object of both heathen and Christian desire, is Feirefiz’s achievement as much as it is Parzival’s.

The union of heathen and Christian promised by the reconciliation of the brothers is consummated by Feirefiz’s betrothal to the Grail bearer, Repanse de Schoye (818.15-19). The Grail can only be attained once heathen and Christian are reconciled (784.24-27), just as the encyclopedia is only possible through a marriage of heathen and Christian elements. The encyclopedic dimension of the reconciliation of heathen and Christian through and for the Grail is thus fourfold:

- 1) The Grail is not only accompanied by a plurality of encyclopedic discourses but is itself an *herbal* and a *bestiary*; since it contains “all that the earth is capable of bringing forth” and “whatever game lives beneath the sky, whether it flies, runs, or swims” (470.1.20)
- 2) The Grail grants command over an encyclopedic totality: the Grail King “shall have sovereign power over all that the air has touched” (252.5-8).
- 3) The Grail’s messenger, Cundrie, posses both encyclopedic learning of Heathendom and the ability to transpose that learning into Latin and the vernacular. (312.20-21)
- 4) The Grail thus integrates heathen elements, be they scientific discourses or heathen persons, into a Christian worldview.

Previous commentators have remarked on the nature of Wolfram’s Grail as a stone (distinct from the cup, plate, or even human head of other traditions), but they have failed to note that, in all crucial respects, Wolfram’s Grail is encyclopedic. The

³¹⁰ The journey of the three (now wise) figures to the Grail King, who is on the cusp of his spiritual rebirth, has an aspect of pilgrimage, and may hence recall the visit of the magi to Christ.

encyclopedism of the Grail solves what Ronald Murphy calls “the polar dilemma of the epic and frame[story]—how...the Chivalrous Christian knight balance[s] the ecumenical understanding of Islam with loyalty to Christ through baptism.”³¹¹

The heathen-Christian juxtaposition that guides the narrative from A to Z, culminating in the attainment of the Grail, is introduced with an invocation of encyclopedic totality in Book 1. Gahmuret, the errant knight, determines to serve none other than “that one whose highest hand held sway over all lands on earth” (*eines der die hœhsten hant trüege ûf erde übr elliu lant*, 13.13-14). He finds such a lord in the Baruch:

doch wânde der gefüege,
daz niemen krône trüege,
künec, keiser, keiserîn,
des messenîe er wolde sîn,
wan eines der die hœhsten hant
trüege ûf erde übr elliu lant.
der wille in sînem herzen lac.
im wart gesagt, ze Baldac
wære ein sô gewaltic man,
daz im der erde undertân
diu zwei teil wæren oder mêr.
sîn name heidensch was sô hêr
daz man in hiez den bâruc.
er hete an krefte alsolhen zuc,
vil küenege wâren sîne man,
mit kröntem lîbe undertân.
dez bâruc-ambet hiute stêt.
seht wie man kristen ê begêt
ze Rôme, als uns der touf vergiht.
heidensch orden man dort siht:
ze Baldac nement se ir bâbestreht
(daz dunket se âne krümbe sleht), (13.9-30)

[Yet that compliant man believed that there was no-one who wore a crown – king, emperor, empress – whose household he would join, except that one whose highest hand held sway over all lands on earth. That was the desire that lay in his heart. He was told that in Baldac there was a man so mighty that two thirds of the earth or more were subject to him. His name was held so high that

³¹¹ Murphy (2006), 106.

in the heathen tongue he was called the Baruch. So great was his grip on power that many kings were his subjects, crowned but subordinate to him. The office of the Baruch still exists today. Behold, just as Christian rule obtains in Rome, as baptism tells us, there heathen order is seen to prevail – from Baldac they obtain their papal law. They believe that to be unwaveringly straight (5).]

The decision of a Christian Knight to serve a heathen lord raises problems from a medieval Christian perspective.³¹² What has not been noted, however, is that with these three elements—a Christian knight, serving a heathen lord, whose power extends over nearly all the earth—the essential components of the encyclopedic Christian-heathen synthesis that will preoccupy, unify and ultimately “straighten” Wolfram’s “crooked” (805.14) narrative are already present in outline form. The prologue’s thematization of the heathen, the Christian, and “the world” provides a “prefiguration” of the encyclopedic synthesis of *Parzival*.³¹³

Both the typological and the encyclopedic traditions synthesize heathen and Christian culture, but they do so in fundamentally different ways. With its overt moralization of heathen science (following the practice established by Hrabanus Maurus), the encyclopedic tradition reconciles heathen and Christian synchronically, its elements presented a contemporaneous whole. As noted previously, for Wolfram the division between heathen and Christian is primarily one of space, not time: “There” and “Here,” as opposed to “Then” and “Now.” Heathens are part of a historical present; they merely occupy a different part of the globe than Christians. (As Wolfram’s Gyburc points out in *Willehalm*, “we are all pagans at birth.”) In comparison, for Snorri pagans are exclusively, and for Dante mostly, denizens of former times. Across the chasm of time, the task of harmonizing Christian and heathen is performed by biblical typology.

³¹² See Walter Haug, “The Literary-Theoretical Conception of Wolfram von Eschenbach: a New Reading of *Parzival*’s Prologue,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, 123 (2001-2), 211-236. Also see Groos (2004), 61-86.

³¹³ Cf. lines 699.28-30: *daz wurden wîtiu mære, / solt der kristen und der Sarrazîn / kuntliche dâ genennet sîn* [The tales would stretch far and wide if both Christians and Saracens were to be named in full there (223)].

Yet the harmonizing task of typology is not performed by authors of sacred texts but by commentators and readers. The establishment of typological relationships between the Old and New Testaments had been one of the foremost tasks of patristic thought. Wolfram, in providing his reader with the material to establish typological relationships within his own text, (a) imbues his own reader with an *auctoritas* analogous to that of the church fathers, and (b) imbues the romance of *Parzival* with an aura of authority proper to a sacred text, further blurring the lines between secular and sacred discourses.

Wolfram’s synthesis empowers a secular readership to combine two formerly distinct tools of clerical learning: the diachronism of the typological tradition and the synchronism of the encyclopedia. This set of relationships can be represented schematically as follows:

Typology

Past (Heathen) \diamond Present (Christian)

Encyclopedia

Past
(Heathen)

^

v

Present
(Christian)

Typology thus integrates heathen and Christian space/time horizontally, just as it does Hebrew and Christian; the encyclopedia, in contrast, integrates them vertically.

Typology salvages older traditions that would otherwise be condemned from a Christian standpoint; yet in so doing it denies them their singular validity. The “typological moment” may salvage the pagan past, but it *savages* it as well; it is a species of intellectual colonialism—an aggressive ecumenicalism in which all other

religions (which are always the religions of others) are merely imperfect, proleptic apprehensions of the one true faith.

This is not to say that the heathens serve Wolfram as mere foreshadowings of redemption. Rather, Wolfram's synthesis of Christian and heathen is a mix of these two modes of integrating heathen and Christian culture—in time and in space—as represented by the typological and encyclopedic traditions, respectively. These two modes are not mutually exclusive, although Snorri (whose pagans occupy a distant past) privileges the former, and Dante (whose heathens share space in hell and even purgatory with Christians) the latter. The function of both the encyclopedia and of typology is essentially the same: to reconcile what at first appear to be incompatible traditions, and to make discourses of distant places and times available, useful, and subservient to a Christian worldview. Wolfram, perhaps uniquely, combines these two tools of Christian learning. He employs diachronic typological structures and, like the medieval encyclopedia, places heathen and Christian together synchronically and dialogically.

Wolfram's reliance on the exegetical tradition of biblical typology is well documented, in particular regarding the figure of Adam-Christ, and in his depiction of the young Parzival as another Adam,³¹⁴ later redeemed (in Christ-like fashion) by Parzival himself. The Gahmuret episode prefigures Parzival's adventures. As with all typologies, there is repetition and similarity, but also fundamental difference. Thus just as Gahmuret never again sees his mother, his brother, or his land (12.15-17), Parzival never sees *his* mother again, but is later reunited with brother and realm. Wolfram's use of typological relationship not only empowers a new practice of lay reading that avails itself of the intellectual tools of the church; it forms part of the puzzle Wolfram leaves his readers—the “crookedness” which they must set straight,

³¹⁴ Groos, (1995), 66-68, 108-9, 126, 142, 167-68, 186, 187, 193-94.

or, rather, *bend* like the bow of Wolfram's much-discussed bow-metaphor.

3. Wolfram's "Bow-Metaphor" (241,1-30) — a Codex-Metaphor?

Wolfram's bow-metaphor (*Bogengleichnis*) has been the subject of much critical commentary and debate.³¹⁵ Whereas "most commentators have interpreted the entire passage as statement of stylistic principles," Arthur Groos argues that "Wolfram's initial [241.1-30] and concluding [805.14-15] statements in the "bow-metaphor" are a presentation of his narrative technique in terms similar to those of the *ordo artificialis*" of classical rhetoric, as opposed to a "natural" ordering of the story that corresponds with the succession of events depicted, as I have already noted in the case of Wolfram's brief account of Loherangrin.³¹⁶ (Wolfram's "crooked" narrative, where, as noted, essential information is withheld, and events are introduced whose meaning only later becomes clear, distinguishes itself from a post-modern disciple of Wolfram's crooked, interwoven narrative only in so far as Wolfram's narrator announces his strategy and technique to the audience.) I do not wish to supplant earlier interpretations of the bow-metaphor, but merely suggest that they are incomplete, and that, in conjunction with the language of archery, there is a parallel series of puns on the vocabulary of medieval manuscript production.

Groos discusses the commonplace of the bow image in biblical exegesis in the early thirteenth century.³¹⁷ As an image of the typological relation between Old and New Testament, the bow is not only an image of the relation of two faiths, Judaic and

³¹⁵ Arthur Groos, "Wolfram von Eschenbach's 'Bow Metaphor' and the Narrative Technique of *Parival*," *Modern Language Notes*, 87 (1972), 391-408; Walter Haug, "Wolfram von Eschenbach's Literary Theory: *Parzival*, the Metaphor of the Bow, and the Self-Defense," *Vernacular Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: The German Tradition, 800-1300 in Its European Context* (Cambridge University Press, 2006); Bernd Schiroke, "Diu senewe ist ein bîspel. Zu Wolframs Bogengleichnis," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 115 (1986), 21-36. For additional bibliography, cf. Groos (1995), 392. On Wolfram's narrative technique in general, cf. Groos, 1995; Eberhard Neumann, *Wolframs Erzähltechnik: Untersuchungen zur Funktion des Erzählers* (Wiesbaden: Steiner Verlag, 1973). Alexandra Katerina Stein, *'Wort und werc': Studien zum narrativen Diskurs im 'Parzival' Wolframs von Eschenbach*. Mikrokosmos, Beiträge zur Literaturwissenschaft und Bedeutungsforschung 31 (Frankfurt, Berlin, and Bern: Peter Lang, 1993); Neil Thomas, 99-123

³¹⁶ Arthur Groos, "Wolfram von Eschenbach's 'Bow Metaphor,'" 392-3.

³¹⁷ Groos (1995), 396.

Christian, but image of the relation of heathen and Christian in Wolfram's text. Given its history in patristic thought, the bow is an inherently literary metaphor. Thus the *Bogengleichnis* already implicitly has a place in Wolfram's ongoing tongue-in-cheek dialogue with his audience on the status of his work (*arbeit*, 241.26) as *buoch*.

The metaphors of the book are far more pervasive in *Parzival* than Wolfram's denial of bookishness would suggest.³¹⁸ The bow unites the themes of heathen and Christian and the status of Wolfram's tale as "book" in unexpected and hitherto unnoticed ways. What has not been noted in the commentary on this passage is an ongoing series of allusions and puns based on the process of manuscript production and bookbinding in particular:

Wer der selbe wære,
 des freischet her nâch mære.
 dar zuo der wirt, sîn burc, sîn lant,
 diu werdent iu von mir genant,
 her nâch sô des wirdet zît,
 bescheidenlîchen, âne strît
 unde ân allez für zogen.
 ich sage die *senewen* âne *bogen*.
 diu senewe ist ein bîspel.
 nu dunket iuch der *boge* snel:
 doch ist sneller daz diu *senewe* jaget.
 ob ich iu rehte hân gesaget,
 diu *senewe* gelîchet mæren sleht:
 diu dunkent ouch die liute reht.
 swer iu saget von der krümbe,
 der wil iuch leiten ümbe.
 swer den *bogen* gespannen siht,
 der *senewen* er der slehte giht,
 man welle si zer biuge erdenen
 sô si den schuz muoz menen.
 swer aber dem sîn mære schiuzet
 des in durch nôt *verdriuzet*:
 wan daz hât dâ ninder stat,
 und vil gerûmeclîchen pfat,

³¹⁸ Obscure, learned book-metaphors constitute a genre in the Middle Ages. Cf. Jean-Marie Kauth, "Book Metaphors in the Textual Community of the *Ancrene Wisse*," *The Book and the Magic of Reading in the Middle Ages*, ed. Albrecht Classen (New York: Routledge, 1999), 99-121.

zeinem ôren îñ, zem andern für.
 mîn arbeit ich gar verlür,
 op den mîn mære drunge:
 ich *sagte* oder *sunge*,
 daz ez noch paz vernæme ein *boc*
 odr ein ulmiger *stoc*.
 (241.1-30)

[Who that man was – hear tidings of that later, and of the host, his castle, his land. These shall be named to you by me later, when the time comes, as is fitting, uncontentiously, and with no delay whatsoever. I tell the *string* without the *bow*. The string is an image. Now, you think the *bow* is quick, but what the *string* dispatches is faster still, if I have told you true. The *string* is like straightforward tales, as indeed meet with people’s approval. Whoever tells you of crookedness desires to lead you astray. If anyone sees the *bow* strung, he concedes straightness to the *string*, unless someone wishes to stretch it to the curve, as when it must propel the shot. If someone, however, shoots his tale at a man who is perforce *disgruntled* by it – for it has no staying-place there, and a very roomy path – in one ear, out the other – I’d be altogether wasting my toil, if my tale were to press itself upon him. Whatever I *said* or *sang*, it would be better received by a billy-goat – or a rotting tree-trunk.]

Wolfram says that his tale tells the “senewen âne bogen” (the string without the bow) (241.8). In addition to the “bow” of this much discussed metaphor, “bogen,” I would argue, can also refer to the folded vellum sheets gathered together in a “quire” or “gathering” (NHG *Bogen*; MHG *boge*) of medieval manuscript production. This *Bogen* would have been sewn together, sometimes using animal sinew (*senewe*),³¹⁹ and bound to form a codex or book.

There is no extant vernacular description of manuscripts or their production in Middle High German where one might look for *boge* used in this sense, nor would one expect there to be, since early thirteenth-century vernacular descriptions of craft labor are few and far between in German.³²⁰ Nonetheless, there must have been a name for

³¹⁹ J.A. Szirmai, *The Archeology of Medieval Bookbinding* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 147-8.

³²⁰ A possible instance is found in *Der Jüngere Titirel*, Stanza 417, Zeile 2 – 4:

man sach in all der kanzel bogen krumbe
 zwelfboten, bichtaer, meide, patriarke,
 martires, propheten. ir briefe seiten da materje starke.

[One saw in the chancellery folded volumes: apostles, confessors, virgins, partriarchs, martyrs, prophets – the pages of their letters weighty matters.]

“quire” in Middle High German and, in the absence of any counter-indication, there is no reason to suppose that it was not the etymological ancestor of Modern German *Bogen*. It is unlikely that *boge* in this sense would have found its way into print, as vernacular descriptions of literacy are rare in MHG literature. The monks of the scriptorium would have referred to it as *quaternum* (originally four sheets of paper folded into a quire, but later generalized to indicate gatherings of other quantities as well). But it would have been unusual for a vernacular variant not to exist alongside Latin usage, as Middle High German-Latin glossaries attest. While the Middle High German sources are not forthcoming, *Boga* meaning “quire” is indeed attested in Old English.³²¹ It seems likely that Wolfram had in mind a folk etymology that related *buoch* and *boge*,³²² an association that resonates in Wolfram’s use of *boge – gebouc* (4.13) – *boc – buoch* throughout the book of *Parzival*.

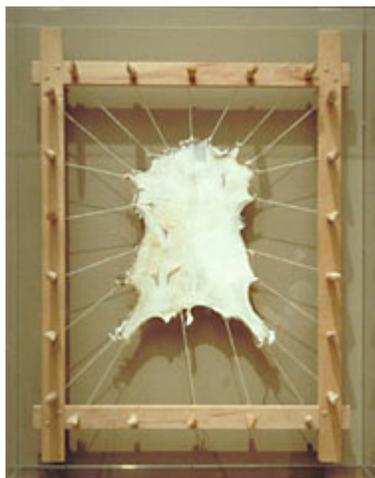
No one has ever adduced a rhyme or reason (or a reason other than the rhyme) for the enigmatic *boc* (billy-goat) and *ulmiger stoc* (rotting tree-trunk) that close Wolfram’s bow-metaphor. At first, they appear to be rhyming non-sequiturs, far-flung examples of the kind of insensate creatures and objects to which it would be fruitless to address a tale. On closer inspection, however, they appear to belong as well to Wolfram’s pervasive codical metaphor. The play on *buoch* is perhaps registered as a pun on *boc* (NHG *Bock*; Eng. billy-goat) (241.29). Phonetically, *boc* also calls to mind MHG *buoche* (NHG *Buche*; Eng. beech tree), which in Jacobsonian³²³ fashion calls to mind the forthcoming image of the *stoc* or tree-trunk in the following line. In addition, a *stoc*, *senewe*, and the skin of a *boc* would have all been familiar implements in the

³²¹ OE *Boga*: *folded parchment* [cf. *Ger. bogen*] -- Cine *quaternio*, *boga diploma*, *Wrt. Voc.* i. 75, 12. (Supplement to *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* by T. Northcote Toller, 192, 100).

³²² MHG *buoch* or *buch* or (dim.) *buchl* is also used for an unbound fascicle, a “booklet.” *buoch* in this sense is attested in medieval library lists and also in MHG text titles where it refers to the booklet format of the text. I owe this information, with thanks, to Sarah Westphal-Wihl (personal correspondence).

³²³ Cf. Roman Jakobson, *Lectures on Sound & Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1937).

production of vellum, from which the *bogen* of the medieval book were made.



In this illustration, the skin of a goat (*boc*) is stretched on a frame (*stoc*) by a series of strings (*senewe*) in the process of turning a *boc* into a *buoch*. Thus, the seemingly inexplicable *ulmiger stoc* (“rotting tree-trunk”) could refer to the besmirched stretching frame of medieval vellum production—a messy and olfactorily repugnant process.³²⁴

Illustration 4

Wolfram’s tale may indeed literally have been “received by a billy-goat” (*daz ez noch paz vernæme ein boc*, 241.29), assuming it was first written on vellum made from goat skin, which would have first been prepared on an *ulmiger stoc*.³²⁵ Thus the *grande finale* of Wolfram’s bow-metaphor excursus is bound together with his earlier deliberations on the status of *Parzival* as a “book,” which Wolfram famously denies:

swer aber dem sîn maere schiuzet,
des in durch nôt verdrizet:
wan daz hât dâ ninder stat,
und vil gerûmeclîchen pfat,
zeinem ôren î, zem andern für.
mîn arbeit ich gar verlür,
op den mîn maere drunge:
ich sagte oder sunge,
daz ez noch paz vernaeme ein boc
odr ein ulmiger stoc. (241.21-30)

[If someone, however, shoots his tale at a man who is perforce disgruntled by it – for it has no staying-place there, and a very roomy path – in one ear, out the other – I’d be altogether wasting my toil, if my tale were to press itself upon him. Whatever I said or sang, it would be better received by a billy-goat – or a rotting tree-trunk.]

³²⁴ “Here, the skin of a stillborn goat, prized for its smoothness, is stretched on a modern frame to illustrate the parchment making process.” <http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/making/> 8/5/2009.

³²⁵ The blood of a *boc* can melt the *adamant* of which Gahmuret’s helmet is made.

The implication seems to be that if oral transmission (*sagen* and *singen*) and aural reception (*vernemen*) fail, Wolfram would be better off committing his tale to a vellum skin (*boc*) and hence one of the much-maligned *books* of his earlier alphabetic rant (115,21-30). In addition, since classical times the *boge* of paper would have been known in Latin as a *plagula*.³²⁶ Latin *plagula* sounds like the (etymologically unrelated) MHG *plâgen*, “to afflict, oppress,” which, in turn, is very close to the *verdriezen* of 241.22. In preparation for binding, the gatherings would have been placed into a lying press and pressed (cf. *drunge* 241.27) before being sewn together.³²⁷

The most direct evidence for the association of *boge* and *buoch* is provided by the encyclopedic tradition itself. Wolfram’s specific debts to Isidore of Seville are well documented.³²⁸ According to Isidore, the word *codex* derives from a metaphor based on the “trunk” (*codex/caudex*) or what Wolfram calls the *stoc* of a tree.³²⁹

Codex multorum librorum est; liber unius voluminis. Et dictus codex per translationem a codicibus arborum seu vitium, quasi caudex, quod ex se multitudinem librorum quasi ramorum contineat.³³⁰

[A codex is composed of many books; a book is of one scroll. It is called a codex (*codex*) by way of metaphor from the trunks (*codex*) of trees or vines, as if it were a wooden stock (*caudex*, i.e., an older form of the word *codex*),

³²⁶ Grimms’ *Deutsches Wörterbuch*: “(9) böge papier, plagula, eigentlich gebognes, gefaltetes, zusammengelegtes papier.” Also “Bogenpapyr / plagula, ein Bogen in Quart / quaternio chartae” in the “Index V. Germanico-Latinus” to Michael Pexenfelder, *Apparatus Eruditionis tam rerum quam verborum per omnes artes et scientias*, 4th ed., Sulzbach: Martin Endter, 1704.

³²⁷ Wayne Harbert offers verbal evidence that Wolfram possessed detailed knowledge of at least one other esoteric technical art, namely blacksmithing, cf. “Some Technical Notes on Parzival’s ‘Leaded’ Sword,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 91 (1990), 1-7.

³²⁸ Groos (1995), cf. 28, 153, 158. Herbert Kolb, “Isidorische ‘Etymologien’ im *Parzival*,” *Wolfram-Studien*, 1 (1970), 117-135.

³²⁹ Similarly Hrabanus Maurus, *De universo*: “Codex multorum librorum est, liber unius uoluminis, et dictus codex per translationem a codicibus arborum seu uitium quasi caudex quod ex se multitudinem librorum quasi ramorum contineat” (ch. 5.5, “de opusculorum diuersitate”). Transcription of Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, MS Augiensis 96 and 68.

³³⁰ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, ed. W. M. Lindsay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911), VI.xiii.1, 142.

because it contains in itself a multitude of books, as if it were branches.^{331]}

Isidore also associates the word for the archer's arrow-case (*teca*) with the library or *biblioteca* (363).³³²

De faretris. Faretra sagittarum theca, a ferendo iacula dicta . . . 2 Coriti proprie sunt arcuum thecae, sicut sagittarum faretrae . . . 3 Teca ab eo quod aliquid receptum tegat, C littera pro G posita. Alii Graeco nomine thecam vocari adserunt, quod ibi reponatur aliquid. Inde et bibliotheca librorum repositio dicitur.³³³

[A quiver (*faretra*, i.e. *pharetra*) is a case [*theca*] for arrows, so named for its "carrying" darts . . . 2. *Coriti* are properly cases for bows, as quivers are for arrows . . . 3. A case (*teca*, i.e. *theca*), so named because it covers (*tegere*) whatever is held in it, with the letter *c* put for *g*. Others claim that *theca* is from a Greek word, because something is stored there – whence a storage place for books is called a *bibliotheca*.^{334]}

Thus, there is a precedent in the primary source of the medieval encyclopedic tradition for the association of arrows ("daz diu senewe jaget," 241.11) and books, tree-trunks (241.30) and codices,³³⁵ all of which Wolfram combines in an encyclopedic synthesis in the image of the *boge*. Ultimately, we are left with an elaborate series of puns based on the techniques of manuscript production, from the pen of an allegedly illiterate author.

The image of the bow spans the tale of Parzival's quest (241.1-30-805.14.15). What comes before and after is preface and postscript. The presence of the "bent" bow-metaphor at the beginning and end of Parzival's travails is suggestive not only of the archer's bow but also the bending-back-on-itself of the *Bogen* (quire) on which it

³³¹ Isidore of Seville. *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, ed. W.J. Lewis, Steven A. Barney, J.A. Beach, Oliver Berghof (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 142.

³³² Cf. Hrabanus: "Theca ab eo quod aliquid receptum tegat. C litera pro G posita alii Greco nomine thecam uocari adserunt, quod ibi reponatur aliquid, inde et bibliotheca librorum repositio dicitur" (Book 20.9, "de faretris").

³³³ *Etymologiae*, XVIII.vii.1-3.

³³⁴ *Etymologies*, 363.

³³⁵ A *liber* according to Isidore (XVII.vi.16) refers not only to a "book" but to the inner part of the bark of a tree, so called from its being "released" (*liberare*), i.e., set apart as a kind of medium between the bark and the wood.

is written. The bow as martial-literary metaphor is invoked even earlier, in the following passage:

hiest der âventiure wurf gespilt
und ir *bogen*³³⁶ ist gezilt,
wande er ist alrêst geborn,
dem diz maere wart erkorn. (112,9-12)

A great deal of manuscript variance in this passage suggests its problematic status in scribal transmission.³³⁷ Most manuscripts have a variant of *begin* (beginning) instead of *bogen*, but there is an argument to be made for the early variant “bogen” of Fragment 33 (Hs. G^s), which is clearly the *lectio difficilior*.³³⁸ The earliest Parzival manuscripts do not much predate the mid-thirteenth century. Dating from the end of the thirteenth century, Fragment 33 (Hs. G^s) is one of the oldest *Parzival* manuscripts; only three of the 16 complete manuscripts can be said to be older.³³⁹ MHG *zilen* commonly means to set a boundary (*zil*) or marking, and gradually acquires the sense of aiming at such a mark, as with a lance or by shooting at a target, as is clear from Wolfram’s own usage in *Parzival*:

sîn tjost hin wider wart *gezilt* (288.22)

er truoc drî tjoste durch den schilt,
mit heldes handen dar *gezilt* (300.3-4)

ein tjost durch sînen êrsten schilt
mit hurtes poynder dar *gezilt* (349.16-17)

wie stêt ein tjost durch mînen schilt,

³³⁶ Fr. 33 (Hs. G^s) Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Ms. germ. fol. 1394 (früher Bad Berleburg, Sayn-Wittgensteinsche Schloßbibl., ohne Signatur); Wolfram von Eschenbach. *Wolfram von Eschenbach*, ed. Albert Leitzmann, 1.-3. Heft: Parzival, 6th ed. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1959-1961).

³³⁷ With reference to manuscripts listed in Lachman (6th ed., pp. xxvii-xlvi) we find the following variants: *begin** *begind o*, *beginnens G I (L) R T*, *begynnes M (O Q)*, *beginne(n) U (V W)*, *begen Z*, *bogen Fr33*.

³³⁸ Emanuel Tov, “Criteria for Evaluating Textual Readings: The Limitations of Textual Rules,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, 75 (1982), 429-448, especially 439ff.

³³⁹ Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, ed. Karl Lachmann, 6th rev. ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), xxvii-xlvi.

mit sîner hende dar *gezilt* (355.5-8)

dâ sach er blicken einen schilt:
dâ was ein tjoste durch *gezilt* (504.9-10)

zilen applies not only to *tjoste* (jousts) but also projectile weaponry like spears, as in *Dietrichs Flucht* (9455 – 9461):

ez wart durch halsperc und durch schilt
die scharphen gêre *gezilt*.

Und ir bogen ist gezilt is hence a double metaphor; it refers not only to Wolfram’s martial calling (the “schildes ambt”) but also to the arena of literary production and the technology of the book. Not only does it refer to the aiming of the bow at its target (*zil*), but also to the *demarking* (*zilen*) of a new section manuscript page (*boge*): “and its bow is aimed / and its page is marked.”

The bow-metaphor is bound up with the technology of the book in other ways

as well. From at least the twelfth century the stitching was done with the help of a sewing frame that is remarkably reminiscent of the archer’s weapon in

Illustration 6

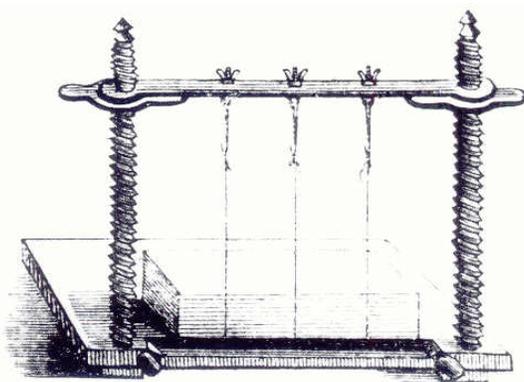
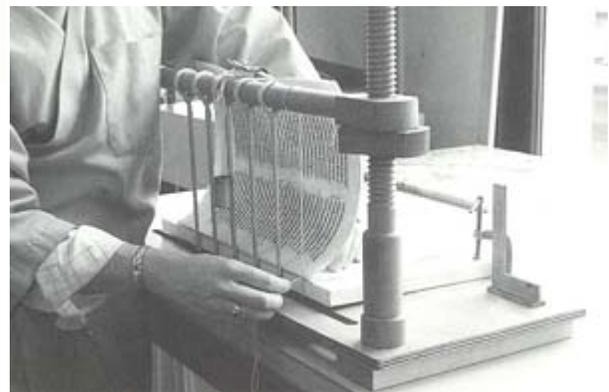


Illustration 5

appearance.³⁴⁰ The frame is a wooden contraption, rather like a gate, which stands upright on the bench. The bands for the spine are tied to it vertically,



³⁴⁰ Szirmai, 140.

suspended from the top and bottom of the frame. The first gathering of the manuscript is placed on the bench with its spine up against these taut bands and is sewn through its centre and around the bands. Then the next gathering is placed on top, tapped down with a block of wood to keep the result firm and tight, and is sewn around the bands,

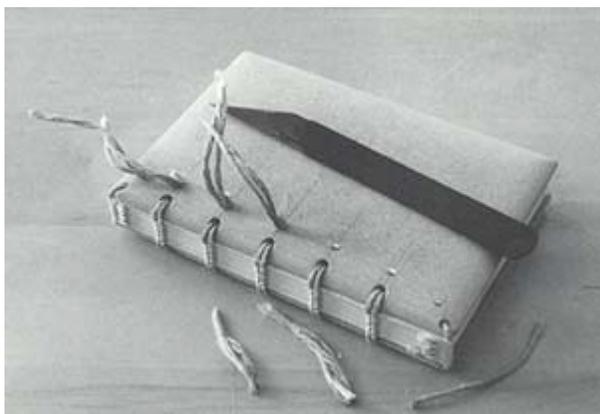


Illustration 7

“zeinem ôren in, zem andern für”

(241.25) could likewise refer to

and so on, one after the other, until all the book is there lashed by its spine to the frame.³⁴¹

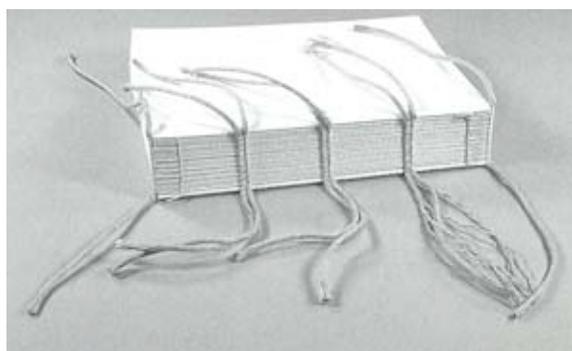


Illustration 8

contemporary bookbinding techniques. MHG *ôr* could refer to the sewing holes made in the quire prior to biding, which would have either been pierced with an awl or the sewing needle itself, prior to stitching “in one ear, out the other.”³⁴² The sewing needle itself has an *ær* (NHG *Öhr*), literally, an earlike small ovular opening on the head of

³⁴¹ Cf. Jonathan J.G. Alexander, *Medieval Illuminators and Their Methods of Work* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992); David Bland, *A History of Book Illustration: the Illuminated Manuscript and the Printed Book* (London: Faber, 1969); Giulia Bologna, *Illuminated Manuscripts: The Book Before Gutenberg* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988); Michelle P Brown, *Understanding Illuminating Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms* (London: The J. Paul Getty Museum and The British Library Board, 1994); David Diringer, *The Illuminated Book: Its History and Production* (London: Faber, 1967); Geoffrey Ashall Glaister, *An Encyclopedia of the Book: Terms Used in Paper-Making, Printing, Bookbinding and Publishing* (Cleveland: World Pub. Co., 1960); Christopher de Hamel, *Medieval Craftsmen: Scribes and Illuminators* (London: British Museum Press, 1992); Ludwig Brade and Emil Winckler, *Das illustrierte Buchbinderbuch* (Leipzig: Wilhelm Knapp, 1860). Illustrations from Abigail B. Quandt and William G. Noel, “From Calf to Codex,” *Leaves of Gold: Manuscript Illumination from Philadelphia Collections*, eds., James R Tanis et al. (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001).

³⁴² Szirmai, 142.

the sewing needle, through which the thread is secured.³⁴³

The esoteric codex-metaphor is bound up with the overt images of military technology, thus addressing the dual nature of Wolfram's role as knight and poet, and transmitter of clerical culture to the secular laity. Wolfram's "tree-trunk" or *stoc* (241.30) may also refer to the *stoc* (NHG *Stock*) of a crossbow. The female counterpart of a *boc* or billy-goat is a nanny-goat or MHG *geiss*; in NHG a *Geißfuß* is spanning mechanism for a crossbow, and *stoc* can refer to the "stock" or the long wooden shaft on which the firing mechanism is mounted. The *bow* of the primitive crossbow was attached to the *stock* by a bridle of *sinew*.³⁴⁴ (Since a traditional bow is not mounted on a stock, Wolfram's range of linguistic associations raises the question as to whether his famous bow-metaphor should perhaps be renamed "Wolfram's crossbow-metaphor.")³⁴⁵ Wolfram's bow-metaphor is surprisingly "flexible" indeed if we factor in these codicological terms in addition to the palpable surface meaning of "bow-and-arrow." The *senewe* which binds the sheets is straight or *sleht* even though the *bogen* themselves fold in on themselves on a curve. Thus although each leaf of vellum bends both forwards and backwards in on itself, they bring *daz diu senewe jaget* (that which the sinew chases), the arrow or story itself, hurling forwards at all times. Both the archer's weapon and medieval (and modern) book consist of bent "bows" held under tension by a taut string or sinew. In both cases the sinew or string is straight (*sleht*), while the bow is, by definition, bent. Bending a bow becomes an image for opening a book. The gatherings or quires (*bogen*) were ordered in their proper sequence and sewn together onto cords or leather thongs (*sinewe*) that served as supports. Once the sewing was finished, the ends of the supports were laced through

³⁴³ Ohr, das; -[e]s, -e [mhd. □r(e), ahd. ori, eigtl. = ohrartige Öffnung]: *kleines [längliches] Loch am oberen Ende der Nähnadel zum Durchziehen des Fadens* (Duden).

³⁴⁴ Ralph Payne-Gallwey, *The Book of the Cross-Bow* (1903; rpt., Mineola, NY: Dover, 1995), 66.

³⁴⁵ Wolfram uses the *armbrust* (crossbow) as an image for the lover's swollen breast (36.1) in the Gahmuret episode.

channels carved into the wooden boards that formed the front and back covers of the book.³⁴⁶ Thus the medieval codex, both in its basic physical structure and the vocabulary of its production, can be shown to be roughly homologous to the archer's bow.

The production of the medieval book was overseen by the *armarius* or master scribe.³⁴⁷ Both aurally and on the written page, there is not much difference between the *armarius* (master scribe) and the *arcarius* (archer) of medieval Latin.³⁴⁸ The near-pun is curious, to say the least. Through the metaphor of the bow, Wolfram playfully hints at his knowledge of the production of the written books he professes not to be able to read. When Wolfram claims that his story proceeds “âne bogen” (without a bow) he refers not only to the “bow” of the present metaphor but also to the status of his narrative as a book and his earlier claim that the tale proceeds “âne der buoche stiure” (without the guidance of books). Wolfram's covert indebtedness to the metaphoric of the book is no less than Dante's overt use of codicological imagery, as when he famously sees the entire universe in the image of a bound encyclopedic gathering of the scattered pages of the world book: “legato con amore in un volume, ciò che per l'universo si squaderna” (*Paradiso* XXXIII, 85-87).

“schildes ambet ist mîn art.”

The image of the bow/book is an apt symbol of the warrior/poet who officiates in the *schildes ambt* (“the shield's office”). “[S]childes ambt” (115,11) is an aptly flexible coinage, for it can combine the notions of martial service (*schild*) with

³⁴⁶ Cf. Michelle B. Brown, *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms* (Los Angeles: Getty Museum, 1994). Christopher De Hamel, *Medieval Craftsmen: Scribes and Illuminators* (London: British Museum, 1992).

³⁴⁷ William Whobrey, “Bookmaking and Production,” *Medieval Germany: An Encyclopedia*, Routledge Encyclopedias of the Middle Ages (New York: Garland, 2001), 70.

³⁴⁸ *Arcuarius* in Classical Latin. Such Latin wordplay is a common feature in medieval discussions of *grammatica*. See Suzanne Reynolds, *Medieval Reading: Grammar, Rhetoric and the Classical Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), ch. 6, esp. 85-87.

religious office (*ambt*), which together constitute Wolfram's authorial self-construction in *Parzival*. Wolfram turns a metaphor for the relation of the Old and New Testaments based on military technology into a metaphor for the operation of his text. He furthermore "bends" this overt military metaphor into a covert codical-literary metaphor which would only have been understood by a small elite—an elite to which Wolfram hereby signals his membership. Wolfram thus points his audience towards the vast literacy underlying his allegedly illiterate-martial persona.

Ambt/Ambet and its variants are commonly used to refer to both the mass and other sacraments ("gotes ambt") on the one hand,³⁴⁹ and duties, responsibilities, station in life, or position of political power on the other.³⁵⁰ Succinct examples of both senses of *ambt* are found in Hartmann von Aue's *Iwein*:

"mahtû mich danne wizzen lân,
waz crêatiure bistû?"
"ein man, als dû gesihest nû."
"nû sage mir waz dîn *ambet* sî."

[“Tell me, what sort of creature are you?” “A man as you now see.” “Now tell me what your *station* is” (my trans.).]

(*Iwein*, 486 – 492)

ir tôten truogen sî hin
ze münster, dâ manz *ambet* tete

[They carried their dead to the cathedral where the *sacrament* was performed.]

(*Iwein*, 1411 – 1412)

³⁴⁹ Cf. *Barlaam und Josaphat*, 15550, 5572; *Alexander* (Rudolf. von Ems.), 5393, 9924; *Deutschenspiegel*, p. 11, ch 3, par. 4, line 6; p.14, ch. 4, par. 2, line 15; p. 198, ch. 107, par. 21, line 8; *Der guote Gêrhart*, 5069; *Gauriel von Muntabel*, 2326; *Der Renner*, 9, 795, 2793, 7759; *Der Heilige Ulrich*, 1424; *Der Jüngere Titirel*, 391,4; *Silvester*, 556; *Der Schlegel*, 896; *Tristan und Isold*, 15638, 15652; *Wigalois, der Ritter mit dem Rade*, 4385; *Wilhelm von Wenden*, 6867, 8172; *Engeltaler Schwesternbuch*, p. 32, line 11,23. “Amt” is used in this archaic sense in Wagner's *Parsifal*.

³⁵⁰ Cf. *Tristan und Isold*, 3322, 4756; *Der Trojanische Krieg*, 181, 20455; *Wolfdietrich* (Hs. A), 193,3: 223,2; *Engeltaler Schwesternbuch*, 27, Zeile 5-6; *Der Renner*, 7392, 15154; Seifrits *Alexander*, 3897; *Kaiserchronik* (Anhang 2), 371-377; “daz heilige ampt” and variants thereof occur eighty times in *Priester Konrad*.

The only approximations of Wolfram's "schildes ambt" are found in the poetry of Ulrich von Liechtenstein and Thomasin von Zerclaere, which post-date Wolfram. Thomasin speaks of "rîters ambet" in the *Der welsche Gast*.³⁵¹ *Parzival* was almost certainly complete before *Der welsche Gast*, which is dated to 1215-1216. Ulrich says that his *ampt* is "ritterlich."³⁵² *Ambt* is thus a word with a foot in both worlds—the Here and the Beyond, the secular and the sacred.³⁵³ The "schildes ambt" hence authorizes Wolfram to dispense salvation in a secular (in the strict sense of non-

³⁵¹ *Der welsche Gast*, 7772-7784:

Jâ hât der gouch wol den sin,
 ob man im ein schellen bint zem vuoꝛ,
 daz er si hin tragen muoz.
 Swer wil *rîters ambet* phlegen,
 der muoz mêre arbeit legen
 an sîne vuor dan ezzen wol:
 mêr ze tuon er haben sol
 danne tragen schoene gewant
 und varen swingent sîne hant.
 Der mac niht *rîters ambet* phlegen,
 der niht enwil wan samfte leben.
 Swelich man müezec ist,
 der ist unmüezec zaller vrist.

³⁵² *Frauendienst*, 757,1-4:

Diu minen ampt sint ritterlich
 und sint doch da bi chumberlich;
 ez mac vil wol ein amtman min
 verliesen al die ere sin.

³⁵³ This split between between the two senses of secular or sacred office and station in life is exploited to comic effect, as in the following two examples:

Tristan, der niuwe spilman,
 sin niuwez ambet huober an.

[Tristan, the newly-made musician, began his new official duties.] (*Tristan und Isold*, 3566-3567)

man sol ez dem boesen tavernære
 lân, wan ez ir ambet ist
 daz si schallent zaller vrist.

[One should leave evil tavern-goers to their own devices, because it is their office in life to act like fools at all times.] (*Der welsche Gast*, 340-342)

clerical) tale told to a secular audience. Considering Wolfram's earlier description of his own knighthood as the "schildes ambt," by combining the languages of martial society and holy office, the metaphor of the *boge*—both the bow of the *arcarius* and the *boge* of the *armarius*—simultaneously invokes the spheres of an illiterate secular knightly class and of clerically-educated literary production, both of which Wolfram straddles in *Parzival*. Thus in the coinage "schildes ambt," Wolfram's philology recapitulates both his audience's and his own ontology. This novel conception of knighthood as a holy office is made all the more evident by reference in Latin sources to the Grail as a "scutella" or little shield, diminutive of Latin *scutum*, which was also part of the knight's "office."³⁵⁴ Wolfram thus combines the originally competing ideas of martial service and religious devotion in a way parallel with but—given his ecumenical-encyclopedic vision of heathen and Christian—counter to the contemporary ideology of the crusades.

Don't Call him Ishmael!

Finally, the bow-metaphor relates directly to the typology of heathen and Christian evident in the relationship of the Christian Parzival and his heathen half-brother Feirefiz. James V. Schall, in a review of Ronald's Murphy's recent book reading *Parzival* as a *plaidoyer* against the fratricide of the crusades, invokes the figures of Romulus and Remus, Cain and Abel, Eteolcles and Plynices, Ishmael and Isaac, and Parzival and Feirefiz as examples of the theme of fraternal struggle.³⁵⁵

Helen Adolf states that Wolfram "symbolizes East and West in the figures of two

³⁵⁴ Jean Frappier, "Perceval or *Le Conte du Gral*," in *The Grail: A Casebook*, ed. Dhira B. Mahoney (New York: Routledge, 1999), 185.

³⁵⁵ James V. Schall, S.J., "The Holy Grail: At the Liturgical Center of the Universe," *Telos*, 140 (2007), 177-187, cf. 180.

brothers and he divides the blessings of the Grail Castle between them.”³⁵⁶ Feirefiz, she notes, like Ishmael, is the elder brother, but likewise born out of wedlock. Adolf recognizes this parallel between Feirefiz and Ishmael, which even a religiously-minded critic like Murphy misses. However, more fundamental parallels between the line of Gahmuret and the line of Abraham have gone unmentioned.

According to *Genesis* 16, Ishmael was the son of the patriarch Abraham by the Egyptian handmaiden Hagar. When Abraham's supposedly barren wife Sarah finally bore Isaac, a rivalry developed between Sarah and Hagar and thus between the two half brothers, Isaac and Ishmael. Cast out into the wilderness, Ishmael was the ancestor of the nomadic Arabian Ishmaelites, arranged, like the Israelites, into twelve tribes. It is because Islam traces its lineage from Abraham through Ishmael and Judaism and Christianity trace their lineages through Isaac that Muslims, Jews, and Christians are all referred to as the spiritual “children of Abraham.”

In frame story one hears the prolonged echoes of a story and genre considerably more ancient than Chrétien's *Perceval*. The figures of Wolfram's tale line up quite neatly with their Old Testament antecedents: the patriarch Gahmuret as Abraham; Belcane as the foreign woman, Hagar; the first-born Feirefiz as Ishmael; and Parzival, the destined heir to the Grail, as Abraham's heir Isaac. Feirefiz takes a wife from the foreign land of “Tribalibot,” just as Ishmael takes a wife from Egypt.

And yet the two narratives do not line up precisely. Both Parzival and Feirefiz are born without their father's knowledge; their mothers, Herzeloide and Belcane are never direct rivals like Sarah and Hagar (although they do rival for Gahmuret's affection, and he abandons one for the other); unlike Ishmael, Feirefiz does eventually come to share in his brother's inheritance—indeed, the story of how he comes to do so

³⁵⁶ Helen Adolf, “Christendom and Islam in the Middle Ages: New Light on ‘Grail Stone’ and ‘Hidden Host,’” *Speculum*, 32 (1957), 103-115, cf. 113.

is perhaps more central to the meaning of *Parzival* than the Grail quest itself, which appears to be a mere precondition for this reconciliation. We would do well to keep in mind Jean Danielou's statement on the nature of all typology: "Equally with the parallelism, the narrative brings out the differences, the essential distinction between type and reality."³⁵⁷ Isaac "receives the inheritance, to the exclusion of his elder brother, born of a slave girl."³⁵⁸ Wolfram, by contrast, brings Ishmael-Feirefiz back into his father's inheritance, and gives him a new wife. There is repetition, but—critically—there is difference.

Hitherto unnoted, the parallelism between the fraternal pairs is reinforced by the centrality to both narratives of the image of the *bow*:

14 So Abraham rose up in the morning, and taking bread and a bottle of water, put it upon [Hagar's] shoulder, and delivered the boy, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Bersabee. 15 And when the water in the bottle was spent, she cast the boy under one of the trees that were there. 16 And she went her way, and sat over against him a great way off as far as a *bow* can carry, for she said: I will not see the boy die: and sitting over against, she lifted up her voice and wept. 17 And God heard the voice of the boy: and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, saying: What art thou doing, Hagar? fear not: for God hath heard the voice of the boy, from the place wherein he is. 18 Arise, take up the boy, and hold him by the hand: for I will make him a great nation. 19 And God opened her eyes: and she saw a well of water, and went and filled the bottle, and gave the boy to drink. 20 And God was with him: and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became a young man, an *archer*. 21 And he dwelt in the wilderness of Pharan, and his mother took a wife for him out of the land of Egypt.

[14 surrexit itaque Abraham mane et tollens panem et utrem aquae inposuit scapulae eius tradiditque puerum et dimisit eam quae cum abisset errabat in solitudine Bersabee 15 cumque consumpta esset aqua in utre abiecit puerum subter unam arborum quae ibi erant 16 et abiit seditque e regione procul quantum potest *arcus* iacere dixit enim non videbo morientem puerum et sedens contra levavit vocem suam et flevit 17 exaudivit autem Deus vocem pueri vocavitque angelus Domini Agar de caelo dicens quid agis Agar noli timere exaudivit enim Deus vocem pueri de loco in quo est 18 surge tolle puerum et tene manum illius quia in gentem magnam faciam eum 19

³⁵⁷ Jean Danielou, S.J., *From Shadows to Reality. Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers* (London: Burnes and Oats, 1960), 120.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

aperuitque oculos eius Deus quae videns puteum aquae abiit et implevit utrem deditque puero bibere 20 et fuit cum eo qui crevit et moratus est in solitudine et factus est iuuenis *sagittarius* 21 habitavitque in deserto Pharan et accepit illi mater sua uxorem de terra Aegypti.]

At the beginning of Parzival's tale (241.1-30, 805.14-15), the image of the bow marks a transition from a state of joy to woe (when Parzival fails to ask the redeeming question), and at the end of his tale the same image marks a transition from a state of woe (the discovery of the dead Sigune) to a state of joy (the final journey to Munsalvæsche) occasioned by Parzival and Feirefiz, respectively. The transition from woe to joy is indeed original to the Old Testament narrative, in which God reveals to Hagar that he will not let Ishmael die, but rather make him the progenitor of "a great nation." The image of the bow in Book 16 of *Parzival* also immediately precedes a narrative turn towards the salvation of Parzival's half-brother, Feirefiz, just as it precedes the salvation of Isaac's half-brother, Ishmael. The image of the bow not only contains within it the image of the book, but also the basic structure of all typology, which Wolfram, in line with but in excess of any theological precedent, mobilizes in an attempt to reconcile the two rival brothers—one heathen, the other Christian—just as his encyclopedic book attempts to reconcile their sibling traditions.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁹ If Wolfram's bow is indeed a *crossbow*, I would note that this weapon, like Biblical typology itself, is an instrument whose only permitted use is *by* Christians *against* heathens: In 1139, Pope Innocent II condemned and forbade the use of the crossbow by Christians against Christians, saying that this weapon is "deathly and hateful to God and unfit to be used among Christians." Heathens, on the other hand, were fair game.

EPILOGUE: From Knowledge to Knowing (and Back)

The reorganization of knowledge in the age of Wikipedia, Google, and their kin points to a fundamental change in the technology and techniques of the storage and retrieval of cultural information. Fast, convenient access to cut-and-paste clusters of scattered cultural pasts is only the latest expression of an encyclopedic impulse that can be documented as far back as the invention of the codex itself.

As opposed to the scroll, the codex enabled quicker access to information by favoring the primacy of discrete units (numbered pages, paragraphs, etc.) over a narrative flow that could only be scrolled up or down. The apparatus of the codex, which furthered the work of forgetting fostered by writing itself,³⁶⁰ has in Google *et al.* an assemblage of heirs (e.g., the “links,” “bookmarks,” and “favorites”) which come from the same family of short-cuts, indexes, and cross-references. The encyclopedic literatures that have been the subject of this dissertation are the product of an attempt to reconcile the encyclopedic and the narrative impulse, which—therefore and since—have remained fundamentally estranged.

The glossaries of late-Antiquity, medieval exempla, maxims, proverbs, aphorisms, and dictionary entries split knowledge into smaller units. Modernity and its technologies of information, from Gutenberg to Gates, have resulted in the further articulation of such units in comprehensive assemblages (e.g., the *Adagia* of Erasmus, *L'Encyclopédie*, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, *Le Grand Robert*, *Wikipedia*, etc.). Since late antiquity, encyclopedism has been a movement away from narrative and towards the storage and retrieval of discrete units (*statim invenire!*), torn out of the context of their culture and its stories. But this was not always the case; nor is this movement

³⁶⁰ “Writing is that forgetting of the self, that exteriorization, the contrary of the interiorizing memory, of the *Erinnerung* that opens the history of the spirit.” Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 317

dictated by any sort of inner necessity.

In our era the encyclopedist has been replaced by the casual “surfer” and the aptly named “browser.” To sort out the melancholy generated by the disappearance of the encyclopedist from the enthusiasm that quickens the net-surfer’s rapid mouse-clicks would require a complete discussion of historical personages and episodes far afield from the long thirteenth century of this study. An incomplete list would include Isidore of Seville, Alanus ab Insulis, Baltasar Gracián, the eighteenth-century encyclopedic works, Kant, the age of grand projects—Hegel, the nineteenth-century Indo-Germanists and historiographers, Darwin, Marx—leading up to the work of fragmentation in the twentieth century, especially as seen in the works of Jorge Luis Borges and his literary and philosophical heirs.

Such a project, if one were foolish (or slowly-wise?) enough to undertake it, might focus on the relations between practices of concentrating, collecting, and sampling information, and the status of cultural information (*à la* Benjamin and Eco) in various historical settings, including and beyond those discussed here. Such informational techniques entertain complex relationships with the framings of culture at different points in time, our era being typified by a generic techno-framing which has replaced the mythical and epic narratives that dominate older medieval and nostalgic modern ones.

This study has aimed to show that the medieval encyclopedia—a privileged locus for the dialogue of such seeming irreconcilables as “heathen” and “Christian”—served some of the most influential authors of the thirteenth century as a metaphoric frame-of-reference that mediated a broader set of binary oppositions at the heart of their own literatures, histories, myths, and ideologies: Latin and vernacular, sacred and secular, courtly and clerical, foreign and native. The anthropological situatedness of “Encyclopedic Literature” allowed such authors to formulate a new literary discourse

of knowledge, whose status was distinct from the static and dislocated state of knowledge in the encyclopedia *per se*. This novel form of narrative “knowing” belongs to that bygone episteme of mythical and epic narratives, which receded in the face of the increasingly fragmented nature of encyclopedic knowledge from early modernity to the present.

The writers of encyclopedic literature of the thirteenth century thus appear as the great aberration in the cultural history of Western encyclopedism. Dante, Snorri, and Wolfram attempt—against the grain of their classical forerunners and modern heirs—to reforge a fragmented, shattered knowledge in the crucible of its creation—in *narrative*. All three would lead us from knowledge to *knowing*: a knowledge that is always *for whom* and *for what*; one that answers the first ontological question of Judeo-Christian culture: “ubi es?” *where are you*—not the web-surfer’s, reference librarian’s, or archivist’s question: “ubi est?” *where is it?* Subsequent history, including that of our own post-humanist age, has led us back—for the time being—from *knowing* to mere knowledge.

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