



The Echo of Creation: Parallels between Old Norse Cosmogony and Eschatology¹

JAN A. KOZÁK

Charles University

Abstract

The article explores the idea of an echo, both literal and structural, that connects Old Norse cosmogony and eschatology. The motif of a bellowing sound or cry appears in cosmogony in the figure of Ymir, ‘Crier’, who is killed by the Æsir, and from his body the world is created. During the eschatological events the booming sound recurs when Heimdallr blows his horn shortly before the Æsir themselves are killed by their adversaries. A cry is also emitted by Óðinn when he sacrifices himself on the Cosmic Tree. The booming bellow is thus associated with death, especially in the context of implicit or explicit sacrifice. The structural resonance between cosmogony and eschatology is composed of a series of five motifs that reappear in the same sequence at both liminal moments. The eschatology seems to be structurally a repetition of the cosmogony, but with inverted roles: the victims are the gods, and the sacrificers are the giants, which is the inverse of the situation during the cosmogony. The present analysis sheds light on the sacrificial pattern hidden behind the two events, and helps contextualize the motif of the mighty sound that reappears at both moments in cosmic history.

Keywords: Old Norse Myth, cosmogony, eschatology, sacrifice, sound, murder, creation, Heimdall, Gjallarhorn, Ymir

In this article I will explore the parallels between Old Norse cosmogony and eschatology from two different but interconnected perspectives – first, by focusing on the motif of the bellowing sound or cry, and second, by focusing

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on the sequential structure of events. Both perspectives are thus united by the idea of an echo, in the first case a literal one, in the second a figurative one – the structure of creation being partly repeated in the structure of Ragnarok.

Sources

Before we delve into the topic itself, we must first briefly mention the issue of primary sources and previous scholarship. Old Norse mythology is preserved and reconstructed from a variety of literary sources, ranging from Classical Antiquity (Polomé 1992) to the Viking Age and Early Medieval Scandinavia (Harris 1985; Lindow 1985). The overwhelming majority of these sources comes from Iceland. They were either composed or recorded from oral tradition by Christians two hundred or more years after the official change of religion from the pre-Christian tradition to Christianity (999–1000 AD). The two main sources of our knowledge of Old Norse cosmogonic and eschatological narratives are the *Poetic Edda* and *Snorra Edda*. The *Poetic Edda* is a collection of anonymous poems of uncertain age containing mythological and heroic material, preserved in a single manuscript (GKS 2365 4to) from around 1270.² The poems seem to be a product of pre-Christian tradition, but as they are anonymous, and there is no precise way of dating them, there is an enduring scholarly debate about their age and authenticity, with various suggestions, disagreements, and issues (Thorvaldsen 2016).

While some scholars would like to see the poems as a window into the pre-Christian cosmology, others claim some or most are products of Christian authors who are interpreting or even in some cases parodying the pre-Christian tradition. The Old Norse religion varied widely, consisting of a constantly changing family of traditions (Brink 2007) that absorbed many motifs and inspirations from surrounding cultures, including the Sámi, Irish, Slavic, and Christian, and at the same time exerted its influence on them. Conflux, syncretism, and hybridization were ongoing throughout the Viking Age and even after Christianization, especially in Iceland, where the law was considerably more lenient towards the lingering elements of paganism. The Eddic poems should therefore be understood as an authentic product of Old Norse culture in all its syncretistic character.

2 In most editions and translations of the *Poetic Edda*, poems from GKS 2365 4to (*Codex Regius*) are the core of the collection, but other poems of a similar type (metrically and thematically) are added, taken from other manuscripts, including manuscripts of *Snorra Edda*. Two particular poems from manuscripts other than the *Codex Regius* contain important information regarding cosmogony and eschatology: *Hyndljúð* (*The Song of Hyndla*) and *Baldrs draumar* (*Baldr's Dreams*).

The second most important source for our study is the *Snorra Edda* as a prosaic (or rather prosimetric: containing many citations from Skaldic and Eddic poems) work by Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241), an Icelandic chieftain and scholar. The *Snorra Edda* is a complex work that summarizes the rules of the traditional art of poetry, including not only various metres, but also poetic diction, especially *kennings* – circumlocutions that in many cases point to mythology. The section named *Gylfaginning* (*The Beguiling of Gylfi*) contains the description of cosmogony and eschatology. In contrast with the *Poetic Edda*, Snorri's work is of clear authorship and relatively easy to date. It is the work of an educated Christian with antiquarian motivations and a love of the archaic art of poetry. Paradoxically, even if Snorri is such an expert on poetry and poetics, his *Edda* is very prosaic – not only literally, but also figuratively.

Snorri's effect on the material is manifold. He seeks to organize it more and to coordinate various versions, thus producing a kind of coherent cosmology. His thinking is formed by his Christian education. Henning Kure aptly summarizes Snorri's bias as follows:

Snorri is hardly reporting Christian influences in the Old Norse religious sources, but rather consciously seeking common ground between the heathen past and his contemporary Christian age. This is revealed by the distinctive medieval blend of Christian orthodoxy and neo-platonic philosophy of nature informing Snorri's representation of the myths. This is nowhere clearer than in the myth of Ymir (Kure 2003, 315).

One of the side effects of his didactic style is that he turns the myths with all their polyvalence, metaphoricity, and suggestiveness into very concretely minded folktale-like stories of picturesque characters. In interpreting Snorri, we should therefore strive to see the polyvalent symbols behind his concrete and literal style of presentation. On the other hand, Snorri's work is of immense value. He is seeking to preserve his cultural heritage, and in many places (in contrast with his usual tidying-up) he is ready to sacrifice coherence to preserve various versions.³ Even if he sometimes tries to make rational sense of the surreal images he presents, in most cases he still presents them in all their weirdness.

³ For example, Snorri tends to quote original poems (*Dórsdrápa*, *Grottasöngur*) next to a prosaic retelling which contains contradictions of the quoted poems.

Old Norse cosmogony and eschatology

From the Eddic poems, with a little help from Snorri,⁴ we get these basic contours of the Old Norse cosmogony: in the beginning there was *ginnunga gap* (*Völuspá* st. 3),⁵ a giant gaping space. From primeval rivers Ymir was born, the first being, with an enormous body. Ymir was killed by the first gods (*Gylfaginning* ch. vii), and the world was created from his body (*Grímnismál* st. 40-41). His plentiful offspring died in the deluge of his blood, and only one giant, Bergelmir, survived in a wooden object called *lúðr* (*Vafþrúðnismál* st. 35). The land rose from the sea after the flood, and there the gods build their halls, play games, and live in a kind of golden age.⁶ They are then confronted by the first of a series of problems that disturb their playful happiness. The gods react to the problems by first creating the race of dwarves (*dvergar*), then by building a wall around their abode, and finally by creating the first human couple – Ask and Embla. The anthropogony closes the era of world building.

The cosmic eschatology is described in even more detail than cosmogony, but again, for the sake of brevity, I will present here only a basic overview: the enemies of the gods (giants and other beings from the borders of the cosmos) are getting ready, all the shackles and bonds that the gods put in their places are broken, and the Cosmic Wolf is set free (*Völuspá* st. 49). The god Heimdallr blows his horn to warn the gods and their allies (*Völuspá* st. 46). A great battle takes place – on one side the cosmic monsters, led by the trickster Loki: the Wolf, the Serpent, and the giant Surtr; on the other side the main gods: Óðinn, Þórr, and Freyr. The gods are defeated (while killing some of their foes). The sun is swallowed by a wolf, stars fall from the sky, a deluge engulfs the cosmos (*Völuspá* st. 57). One human pair survives the flood by hiding in ‘Hoddmímir’s wood’ – more on this below (*Vafþrúðnismál* st. 45). Some of the descendants of the gods and some previously dead gods reappear after the end of the deluge. The land again rises from the sea, and

4 It is important here to reiterate that using Snorri *prima facie* as a source for mythology is always risky, as he interprets traditional motifs through his lens, which is informed by Christian learning (Clunies Ross 1994, 29; Kure 2010, 20). Ymir’s myth was probably not the only myth of creation: alternative traditions can be spotted through allusions in various sources, e.g. *Völuspá* 4 (see commentary for the stanza in Dronke 1997, 115).

5 All references to the Poetic Edda are from the edition by Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn (1983).

6 Snorri adds a number of events and motifs to this basic sequence, including two primeval realms of Múspellheimr and Niflheimr, the cosmic cow Auðhumla, the process of licking out the ancestor of the gods from salty rocks, etc., but it is impossible to include all the details of cosmogony and eschatology, and we will focus only on the core events that link these two processes.

the survivors start living their life anew, playing games, and having an abundance of everything in a new instance of the 'golden age' (*Völuspá* st. 61).

The scholarship on these two topics is enormous, exploring all the various details and motifs found in cosmogony and eschatology, interpreting them both within the Old Norse symbolic system and comparatively linking them to analogous motifs in other Indo-European cultures – for example, the theme of cosmogonic sacrifice and the creation of the world from the anthropomorphic body has been studied by Bruce Lincoln (1975; 1986), and the Indo-European motifs in *Völuspá* specifically by Åke Ström (1967). The connection of Old Norse cosmology and rituals is explored in a number of monographs and collections in the series *Vägar till Midgård* edited by Catharina Raudvere, Anders Andrén, and Kristina Jennbert (e.g. Andrén, Jennbert, and Raudvere 2002, 2004). Others have studied the connection with Christian tradition (e.g. North 2003; Dronke 1992), as well as singular motifs or parts of the process (Lönnroth 1981 and 2002; Polomé 1969; Dörner 1993, and many others). The topic of Ragnarøk is treated and interpreted in all the basic and influential monographs of Old Norse mythology (de Vries 1937; Turville-Petre 1975; Clunies Ross 1994), as well as in monographs devoted specifically to the topic of Norse eschatology (e.g. Martin 1972), including the recent volume *The Nordic Apocalypse* (Gunnell and Lassen 2013).

In this article I want to try a slightly different approach, which combines the standard historical and comparative methods with a tinge of what is called amplification in analytical psychology, that is, following up associative connections expanding from a certain motif while still not losing the distinction of an intracultural versus a transcultural layer.

The sound of the shofar

I will start with the passage that originally inspired this entire endeavour, which is a psychoanalytical interpretation of the sound of the shofar by Theodor Reik (1975, orig. 1920) via Slavoj Žižek:

In a classical essay from the 1920s, Theodor Reik drew attention to the painfully low and uninterrupted trumpeting of the shofar, a horn used in the Yom Kippur evening ritual which marks the end of the day of meditations.

Reik links the sound of the shofar to the Freudian problematic of the primordial crime of parricide (from Totem and Taboo): he interprets the horrifyingly turgid and leaden drone of the shofar, which evokes an uncanny mixture of pain and enjoyment, as the last vestige of the primordial father's

life-substance, as the endlessly prolonged scream of the suffering-dying-impotent-humiliated father.

In other words, the shofar is the trace of 'primordial repression', a kind of vocal monument to the killing of the pre-symbolic substance of enjoyment: the father whose dying scream reverberates within the 'non-castrated' Father-Enjoyment. As further proof of his thesis, Reik also calls attention to the similarity of the shofar to another primitive instrument, the 'bullroarer', which imitates the roaring of the stabbed bull dying in the arena: the bull-fight as the re-enactment of the murder of the primordial Father-Jouissance. On the other hand, the Jewish tradition conceives the sound of the shofar as an echo of the thunder that accompanied the solemn moment of God's handing over to Moses the tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments; as such it also stands for the Covenant between the Jewish people and their God, that is for the founding gesture of the Law (Žižek 1996, 149–150).

The shofar is an ancient musical instrument, usually made of ram's horn, used in Judaism for ritual purposes. Among other things it is used at the end of Yom Kippur, which is a moment when the old ritual year ends, and the new year begins.⁷ Symbolically and structurally, it is a moment when eschatology turns into cosmogony.

Reik's/Žižek's interpretation links several pairs of elements:

- 1) First, the sound of the horn with the bellow or cry of the sacrificed victim, 'Father'.
- 2) Second, the cosmogonic sacrifice with the creation of the Order through the 'vanishing mediator' of the shout or cry: the cry that is the last breath of the dying victim, but as it vanishes, it turns into a voice, the articulated language which establishes the Order.
- 3) Third, the sound of the shofar links the End Times with the Beginnings at the point of the New Year celebrations.

I would like to show that these motifs and their pairing also have their analogues in Old Norse mythology. I do not believe these analogues are products of any specific influence in this or that way, but they are both

⁷ The situation is more complicated: Yom Kippur closes a ten-day period of repentance which starts at Rosh Hashanah. Both holidays are connected with the trumpeting of the shofar (Rosh Hashanah even more intensely than Yom Kippur), and both are connected with the symbolism of the ending and beginning. While Rosh Hashanah is a repetition of the day of creation, human life is reinscribed in the book of life only at the end of Yom Kippur, ten days after Rosh Hashanah.

products of human cognition, which tends to resort to certain metaphors and associations when it is confronted with the ultimate questions concerning Beginnings, Ends, and their relationship. Of course, the diffusion and borrowing of ideas is never out of the question, but we must always ask why a certain culture absorbs this or that idea into their symbolic system. In many cases it is because it fits well in the system, and there was a need for a fitting image. The explanation then lies not with the historical origin of a certain motif, but in the role and function it assumes within the target system.

Besides Žižek/Reik's interpretation of the cosmic symbolism of the trumpeting and/or scream, one other main source of inspiration for the part of this article dealing with cosmogony is the ideas presented in the book *I begyndelsen var skriget* (2010) by Henning Kure (and his summarizing English article from 2014). The reader will find his work referenced many times in the following text.

The scream of creation

The association of a scream or cry with sacrificial killing is something that would appear natural for most archaic societies that practised animal sacrifice, as 'every animal finds a voice in its violent death' (Hegel 1967, 161).

A high-pitched shrill scream was produced by women in the Classical Greek animal sacrifice at the very moment the mortal blow was dealt to the victim (Burkert 2011, 94). The scream marked the emotional high point of the sacrificial process, while covering the unpredictable sounds the animal would make with an orchestrated 'ideal' scream (Burkert 1983, 5).

Our knowledge of the Old Norse sacrificial process is unfortunately much less detailed, and the very few descriptions of animal sacrifice we have contain little acoustic or aural information. One fortunate exception is a description of a human sacrifice (as part of a funerary ritual) by the Arabic traveller Ahmad ibn Fadlān, who produces a much more detailed description of a ritual process than our extant Old Norse sources.⁸

Ibn Fadlān describes a ship burial of a chieftain. As part of the ritual one of the slave girls who belonged to the dead chieftain offers herself to accompany him to the afterlife. She undergoes a complex process taking several days, and she is finally brought to the ship where the dead warrior lies. There

⁸ One issue with ibn Fadlān's description is that we are unsure whether the people he met were Norsemen or Slavs, or a syncretic tribe. However, as pre-Christian Slavic and Norse religions were typologically (and geographically) very close, we can in any case expect similarities in forms and motifs.

she is ritually killed. Ibn Fadlān writes that '[t]he men began to bang their shields with the sticks so that her screams could not be heard and so terrify the other slave-girls, who would not, then, seek to die with their masters' (Montgomery 2000, 19). The explanation for the ritual roar seems to be the product of ibn Fadlān's rationalization. However, the presence of heightened noise and screams at the point of the ritual slaughter is attested to here. There are therefore reasons to expect a scream or roar as an acoustic 'explosion' accompanying the very moment of ritual killing – either the natural sounds of the murdered being, or even the heightened clamour provided by the ritual script – but what is the connection between slaughter and cosmogony?

In Old Norse mythology (and a number of other mythologies) cosmogony is portrayed as a process of the killing (or sacrificial killing) of a being.⁹ Generally speaking (at least for the Indo-European and Semitic cultures), a typical animal or human sacrifice repeats the cosmogony, and the cosmogony is the archetypal sacrifice (Smith and Doniger 1989). Ymir's death at the hands of the first three gods (Óðinn, Vili, Vé) is a kind of primordial sacrifice, and the parts of the cosmos are created from Ymir's body parts:

40	Ór Ymis holdi var iorð um sçöpuð, enn ór sveita sær, biörg ór beinom, baðmr ór hári, enn ór hausi himinn.	From Ymir's flesh the earth was made, and from his blood, the sea, mountains from his bones, trees from his hair, and from his skull, the sky.
41	Enn ór hans brám gerðo blíð regin miðgarð manna sonom; enn ór hans heila vóro þau in harðmóðgo scý ǥll um sçöpuð.	And from his eyelashes the cheerful gods made Midgard for men's sons; and from his brain the hard-tempered clouds were all created.

9 There is some discussion concerning whether we should understand Ymir's killing as a sacrifice. While the primary sources do not tell us explicitly that the act is a *blót*, comparative studies point to a sacrifice (Lincoln 1975; 1986). In her monograph on Old Norse sacrifice Näsström also understands the act of the three sons of Búri as a sacrifice or even a prototype of it: '[d]essa tre utgör en förebild för offraren...' (Näsström 2002, 216). Her reasoning is that the act is performed by Óðinn, 'Extasy', Vili, 'Divine Will', and Vé, 'Sacred Space', which puts the whole operation into the sphere of the sacred and thus makes it a sacrificial act by definition.

The blood rushing from Ymir's veins becomes a cosmic flood that kills all his giant offspring, with the exception of one: Bergelmir, the 'Noah of the giants'.

However, where is the scream? Does it appear in the extant mythology? The answer lies in Ymir's name, which has a well-established etymology from the IE root **yem-*, with the meaning 'twin' (Lincoln 1975, 129). We find cognates with Ymir's name in the Indian *Yama*, Iranian *Yima*, and Latin *Remus* (West 2007, 357).¹⁰ These mythical beings are the first dead among human beings. They were killed or died in the process of cosmogony (in the case of Rome it is a process of 'Romo-gony').

Nevertheless, from the vernacular Old Norse perspective this ('twin') etymology of Ymir is not transparent. Nobody knew before the complex etymological studies of the twentieth century that in ancient times, thousands of years before the Viking Age, the probable original meaning of the name Ymir was 'twin'.¹¹ This etymology sheds no light on the connotations of the name for the people living in the Viking Age. What then was the apparent or semantic etymology¹² for its contemporaries?

The apparent relationship¹³ within the Old Norse language provides us with a clear association of the name Ymir with the verb *ymja*, 'to cry, howl', and the noun *ymr*, 'scream, noise, clang, groan', so for contemporaries the name Ymir would clearly mean something like 'Crier, Howler, Bellow' (Kure 2003, 312). Kure also points out that the meaning of *ymr* is '*uartikuleret lyd*' (Kure 2010, 135), which places it in contrast with articulated speech.

10 The Latvian deity Jumis also belongs to this group. He is connected with fertility and death, and associated with twins and things that come in pairs.

11 Ymir's hermaphroditic and parthenogenetic nature (his feet mate and can produce offspring, *Vafþrúðnismál* 33) may be a reflection of his originally dual or twin-like character. His position in cosmogony has a parallel with the figure of Tuisto, mentioned by Tacitus, who also appears to be parthenogenetic, and whose name also suggests duality or a twin-like character (Lincoln 1975, 137).

12 'Semantic etymologies are to be distinguished from historical etymologies. A historical etymology presents the origin or early history of a word. Semantic etymologies do something completely different. They connect one word with one or more others which are believed to elucidate its meaning' (Bronkhorst 2001, 147). However, Bronkhorst uses the term to speak of the conscious explanation of words by philosophers and learned authors of the past, while in the case of Ymir-ymja the connection does not have to be consciously theorized: it was probably an automatic association.

13 It is important to note that some scholars argue that the derivation from *ymja* is not a semantic etymology or folk etymology, but a direct derivation (standard historical etymology). The same etymology from *ymja* is still accepted for *ymir* as a heiti for 'hawk', and was a common opinion on Ymir before the connection with IE **yem-* was suggested. For the IE etymology to work, the 'remote r umlaut' must take place, which is not common (personal communication with Henning Kure).

The emic validity of this semantic etymology is further illustrated by the fact that Ymir has several other appellatives (*heiti* in Old Norse) which associate him with the same idea of shouting, howling, or resounding (e.g. the name *Brimir*, 'Roarer' (von See et al. 2019, 132), *Aurgelmir*, 'Sand Bellow' (de Vries 2000, 20) and others). It is difficult to tell in what exact sense the howling or roaring was connected with this primordial being – whether it was because of his dying howl, or because the oceans of blood gushing from his veins were roaring, but the close connection of a mighty sound with the primordial victim is undeniable.

One very intriguing interpretation of why Ymir's Scream is so fundamental for the cosmogonic process is offered by Henning Kure:

When the sons of Burr did *yppa* the world, they made it come into being from the parts of Ymir. As mentioned, *yppa* may also mean 'announce' and this, I am convinced, is what the gods did. They announced Ymir's flesh to be earth, his bones to be mountains, his sweat to be sea, etc. They created the world by naming it, by putting it into words, and thus defining it in a comprehensible way. The gods announced the world by transforming Ymir – the scream – into words.

The scream is the raw material of words (Kure 2014, 10; 2010, 133).

Kure's interpretation connects well with the Reik/Žižek quotation at the beginning, which describes from a slightly different angle the same process of an inarticulate scream becoming the words of language that bring law and order into the universe by segmenting the primordial continuous organic unity into distinct *articuli*, or 'limbs'.

From Kure's perspective the expression 'Ymir's scream' would be a pleonasm and misunderstanding, as Ymir himself already *is* the Scream, automatically becoming a character by the personifying discourse of myth.¹⁴ While myth does this by itself playfully and poetically, mythographers like Snorri do it literally, thus producing a row of literal personages who ultimately inhabit stories not so different from our superhero comic books.

The Ymir/Scream is not only a mediator between the inarticulate animal sounds ('nature') and the articulate sounds of language ('culture'), but also between life and death. It is the dying of Ymir that opens up the space for the cosmos.

14 I will be less strict with the understanding of Ymir and will allow the personification to play its part in the image so the reader can find the screaming Ymir in the text below.

The cry on the tree

The moment of sacrifice and scream also appears at another point in Old Norse mythology – during the high mystery of Óðinn’s self-sacrifice, when he hanged himself on the cosmic tree Yggdrasil to obtain runes:

13:8	Veit ec, at ec hecc vindgameiði á nætr allar nío geiri undaðr oc gefinn Óðni, siálfr siálfom mér, á þeim meiði er manngi veit hvers hann af rótom renn.	I know that I hung on a windswept tree nine long nights, wounded with a spear, given to Odin, myself to myself, on that tree of which no man knows from where its roots run.
13:9	Við hleifi mic sældo né við hornigi, nýsta ek niðr; nam ec upp rúnar, œpandi nam, fell ec apr þaðan.	With no bread did they refresh me nor a drink from a horn, downward I peered; I took up the runes, screaming I took them, then I fell back from there.

Here the scream marks the high point of sacrifice, the point when death turns into life.¹⁵ Óðinn hangs on a rope for nine nights, dead, but at the same time like a foetus hanging on an umbilical cord for nine months. At the end of the process, when the gestation is complete, he is born into his initiated state with a scream that is again analogous to a new-born child’s cry, and he falls down: like a baby from the mother’s womb when being birthed in a traditional squatting position.¹⁶

It is also important to note that the scream comes at the very moment that he grasps the runes. Runes have the double meaning of secret knowledge, but they simultaneously mean letters, markings, and graphemes that distinguish and carry meaning.¹⁷ Here again, therefore, we find the system

15 Thus, the scream also appears at the border of life and death, as in the case of Ymir, but inverted. There will be more on the sacrificial and initiatory symbolism of Óðinn’s act in my forthcoming article (Kozák 2021).

16 The birth symbolism of the hanging myth has been recognized by a number of scholars at least since the Gering-Sijmons commentary on the Eddic poems (Gering and Sijmons 1927-31, 147; cf. also Hunke 1952 and Fleck 1971).

17 There has been a longstanding discussion of the possible semantic facets of the word *rún*, with scholars stressing either the aspect (and proposed etymology) of ‘written marking’ (Antonsen 2011, 140:40) or the aspect and etymology of ‘whispering’ and ‘secrets’ (Price 2019, 61; Schjødt 2008).

of marking and meaning being born at the moment of the scream, and as a sacrificial victim Óðinn is in a parallel position here with Ymir.¹⁸

The difference is that in the cosmogony the entity is split into two opposing sides: the Óðinic triad (Óðinn, Vili, Vé) versus Ymir. The Óðinic triad is the performers and beneficiaries of the sacrifice, while Ymir is the victim. In the case of the hanging on Yggdrasill both sides are fused into one: Óðinn is his own sacrificer, beneficiary, receiver, and victim (Schjødt 1993, 270). Accordingly, these may be seen as two realizations of one background structure, and both contain a moment of a scream followed by the appearance of a symbolic system – either the system of an ordered and named cosmos or the system for ordering and describing – that is, writing.

The roar of Ragnarøk

While in the case of cosmogony we had to resort to an interpretation of stanzas and an analysis of Ymir's name to get to the scream itself, in the case of Ragnarøk the space is literally filled with noises and voices. It starts with a series of mythical cockerels crowing loudly to wake all the various hosts (*Völuspá* st. 42–43). The *Völuspá* refrain for the Ragnarøk section of the poem starts with '*Geyr nú Garmr mjök...*' (*Völuspá* st. 58), 'Garm bays loudly...', reminding us again and again of the constant barking and howling that is the basis of the soundscape of the end times. Yet there is more – the eagle shrieks ('*enn ari hlaccar*', *Völuspá* st. 50:6), the dwarves groan ('*stynja dverggar*', *Völuspá* st. 48:5), and the rocks are clashing ('*grjótbjörg gnata*', *Völuspá* st. 52:5) in tumult.

Two sounds mentioned in *Völuspá* deserve more attention, because they are linked with entities of cosmic importance. First, the cosmic ash Yggdrasill itself groans:

47:1–4	Scelfr Yggdrasils ascr standandi, ymr iþ aldna tré, enn jötunn losnar;	Yggdrasill shudders, the tree standing upright, the ancient tree groans , and the giant gets loose.
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Note that the verb used is the same *ymja* we discussed above in connection with Ymir. The cosmic tree forms the centre and axis of the current cosmos; its branches stretch throughout the whole world, and its roots lead to various realms. In its function this living tree is as central to the current cosmos as Ymir's living body was central to the era of giant's dominion before the

18 Näsström (2002, 245) mentions the case of the Orphic Dionysus as a comparandum for Óðinn's self-sacrifice. Dionysus was torn apart by the Titans and later reassembled by Rhea. To me this seems closer to the myth of Ymir, in which his body is also cut up and reassembled.

rise of the gods. The tree – at the moment of its imminent doom – emits a groan, *ymer*, as Ymir presumably did.¹⁹

However, this is not the most noticeable sound connected with Ragnarøk. The loudest sound marking the end times is Heimdallr's horn blowing:

46:5–6	hátt blæss Heimdallr horn er á lopti	Heimdall blows loudly, his horn is in the air
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Snorri tells us that the blast of Gjallarhorn will be heard throughout all worlds:

Hann hefir lúðr þann er Gjallarhorn heitir ok heyrir blástr hans í alla heima.	He has a trumpet called Gjallar- horn, and its blast can be heard in all worlds
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Snorri uses the word *lúðr* to describe the instrument. Curiously, the same word also describes the object which Bergelmir used to survive the flood of Ymir's blood at the beginning of time.²⁰ *Völuspá* uses the word *horn*, which we would expect, as Gjallarhorn, 'the Resounding Horn' is its traditional proper name.

Heimdallr's theriomorphic representation seems to be a ram.²¹ His various *heiti* point to a ram, and even the mysterious fact that 'Heimdallr's sword' (*Heimdallar hjorr*) is a *kenning* (poetic circumlocution) for a head makes sense when we realize that rams use their heads as 'swords' – their horned heads function as their weapons. We may therefore perhaps imagine that the horn marking the end times of Ragnarøk is a ram's horn, like the shofar mentioned in the Žižek/Reik passage above, the ramshorn that marks when the old year ends and the new one begins.

19 The parallelization of the (cosmic) tree and (anthropomorphic) body of Ymir is not as far-fetched as it may seem: the first humans were created from trees (*Völuspá* st. 17-20), the standard circumlocution for humans in skaldic poetry is based on trees, and the first man is called *Askr*, 'Ash Tree', while the cosmic tree is called *Askr Yggdrasils*, 'The Ash of Yggdrasill' (*Grimnismál* st. 32).

20 We will discuss the issue of *lúðr* more thoroughly below in the section 'The sequence', in which we will explore the semantic facets of *lúðr* in the context of its use as an 'arc' or sanctuary used during the Flood.

21 This is the traditional understanding expressed in Turville-Petre (1975, 171). It has recently been critically discussed by Cöllén (2015, 259).

The echo of creation

We thus see a kind of echo of the motif of a magnificent or terrible sound both at the beginning and at the end of time. It is not literally the same sound or the same event. It is a structural rhyme, not an absolute rhyme slavishly repeating exactly the same motif. This booming and enormous sound fills the air at the moment the old order is disintegrating, and the new one is yet to be born.

This idea of repetition, the eschatology echoing the cosmogony, is not a scholarly construction. It is clearly expressed by the tradition itself, by repeating the same images, formulas, and verse structures, even saying explicitly that the events are happening again:

59:1–4	Sér hon upp koma ϥðro sinni iϥrð ór ægi, iðjag rœna	She sees, coming up a second time , earth from the ocean, once again green;
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After the bloody battle of Ragnarϥk, the same process of land emerging from the sea is happening as in the beginning. The scene of the gods playing a boardgame with golden pieces, is happening again as well:

61	Þar muno eptir undrsamligar gullnar tϥflor í grasi finnaz, þær í árdaga áttar hϥfðo.	There will be found again in the grass the wonderful golden chequers, those which they possessed in the bygone days.
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These are some of the very concrete instances of the end times repeating the beginnings, but I would like to examine several motifs which are much more difficult to spot, as they are – like the motif of the roaring sound – not explicit and literal repetitions, but structural and motivic rhymes or echoes.

The sequence

According to both Snorri and *Vϥluspá* in the beginning there was an immense gap or abyss called the *ginnunga gap*, which, according to Snorri, gaped wide between the two extremes of fire and ice. Then the primordial giant Ymir emerged, who was later killed by the first gods (the divine triad

Óðinn, Vili, and Vé), and his blood caused the cosmic *diluvium*, as has already been mentioned. The flood drowned all the giants except Bergelmir and his family, who survived it in or on an object called *lúðr*. *Lúðr* can mean several things, like trumpet (originally made of a hollowed out wooden branch) or flour bin (a wooden vessel used for collecting flour under the mill), but other possible interpretations presented by scholars include a coffin, cradle, or non-specifically, a wooden box or vessel, which Bergelmir then used like a dugout boat, if we want to paint a literal image. The common denominator of these various concrete instruments is the principle of a hollow wooden object or a hollowed-out tree trunk.²²

Now let us compare the above sequence with the sequence for the end times: at the start of the Ragnarøk the universe begins to decay, and all the bonds and shackles disintegrate, which leads to the freeing of the representatives of destruction – especially the cosmic Wolf, who, according to Snorri, has an enormous maw, which gapes wide between the two extremes of the heaven and the earth (as the *ginnunga gap* gapes between the extremes of heat and cold):

<p>En Fenrisúlfr ferr með gapanda munn ok er hinn efri kjöptr við himni en hinn neðri við jörðu. Gapa mundi hann meira ef rúm væri til.</p>	<p>But Fenriswolf will go with mouth agape, and its upper jaw will be against the sky and its lower one against the earth. It would gape wider if there were room.</p>
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Then comes the final battle, in which all the principal gods, the divine triad (this time they are named Óðinn, Þórr, and Freyr), are killed, the forces of destruction prevail, and the world is first scorched by fire, followed by the flood, which kills all human beings except one pair, *Lífþrasir* and his wife *Líf*, who survive the diluvium hidden in *Hoddmímis holt*, the Wood of Hoddmimir:

<p>45:1–3</p>	<p>Líf oc Lífþrasir, enn þau leynaz muno í holti Hoddmimís</p>	<p>Life and Lifþrasir, and they will hide in Hoddmimir's wood;</p>
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²² 'Die immer wieder gesuchte gemeinsame Grundbedeutung könnte "ausgehöhlter Baumstamm" sein' (von See et al. 2000, 874). According to Holtsmark the word is derived from the IE root *lu- or *leu-, to cut (1946, 49–65).

We know little about this mysterious place. Some scholars believe that Hoddmímir's Wood is the cosmic tree Yggdrasill itself under a different appellative: '[Hoddmímis holt] should not be understood literally as a wood or even a forest in which the two keep themselves hidden, but rather as an alternative name for the world-tree Yggdrasill' (Simek 1993, 189).

Mímir lives under Yggdrasill, and a variant name, *Mímameiðr*, is attested for the cosmic tree (*Fjolsvinnsmál* st. 20), which both seem to connect *Hoddmímir* with Yggdrasill. The word *holt* (cognate with German *Holz*: 'wood', 'timber') normally denotes a small patch of wood or a grove, but in this case, it would mean synecdochically (*totum pro parte*) simply one giant tree. The last human beings would then survive the flood inside the cosmic tree, hidden in the *axis mundi*. It seems that the general idea of 'hollow wood' makes it a similar image to the instrument used by Bergelmir to survive the first flood.

Now we can see the entire echo pattern consisting of a series of analogous images between cosmogony (C) and eschatology (E):

- 1) First, a giant **gap** yawns between the two extremes (C: fire/ice; E: sky/earth).
- 2) Second comes the **killing** of the representative(s) of the previous dominant order (C: Ymir of the giants; E: Óðinn and the company of the gods).
- 3) Third, at some point around the killing, either before or during it, we hear the mighty **sound**, whether it is a scream, roar, or blast.
- 4) Then comes the **flood**, which drowns most of the remaining representatives of the previous dominant order (C: giants; E: humans and other beings under the gods' protection).
- 5) The **last pair** survives the flood, or the universal destruction, hidden in a hollow wooden object (C: giant; E: humans).

The interesting thing about this sequence is the changed nature of the representatives of the dominant order: whereas in the previous age it was Ymir who was killed, and his giant offspring drowned in the flood, in the mythically present age it is the gods who are killed, and their human offspring and worshippers who are drowned in the flood.

Structurally, they are parallels, but the process is valued inversely: while the killing of Ymir is necessary for the creation of the ordered cosmos for the gods and humans to inhabit, the killing of the gods is a sad and tragic moment. They are perceived differently, because the cosmological drama is described from the perspective of the gods and their human worshippers. The rulers of the previous age are conceptualized as giants and monsters,

because they are opponents of the rulers of the current age. We could say it is the same story, only in the first case described through the eyes of the victors, and in the second described through the eyes of the vanquished. The cosmogony of the gods is the eschatology of the giants. We thus arrive at an interpretation of Ragnarøk as structurally the same process as creation, only seen from an opposite, that is complementary, perspective: as if we returned to the same place on the Möbius strip, but now we are standing on the opposite side of the ribbon.

This interpretation would also explain the well-known fact that during the heroic last stand of Ragnarøk two of the gods – Þórr and Víðarr – perform deeds that have their comparative parallels in Indian or Mesopotamian cosmogony, not eschatology:

Þórr, after killing the Serpent, before dying of his venom, strides for nine steps.²³ This could be seen as a parallel with Viśnu's cosmogonic three steps, which measure the space for *triloka*, the Three Worlds, that is, the entire cosmos.²⁴ The Indian Three Worlds would then correspond to the Old Norse Nine Worlds, the complete number of worlds.

However, it is Víðarr's act during Ragnarøk that is more commonly compared with Viśnu's steps (Mallory and Adams 1997, 183). Víðarr steps into the open maw of the cosmic Wolf, and with his heavy boot and strong hand he tears the Wolf's jaws apart.²⁵ The motif of tearing apart a monstrous antagonist during a cosmic battle also appears in the Babylonian *Enûma Eliš*, for example, in which Marduk/Bēl tears apart the monstrous Tiāmat, 'like a dried fish' (*Enûma Eliš*, Tablet IV, iv 32, 137–140 in Lambert 2013, 92f.). Both Marduk's act and Viśnu's act happen at the very beginning of cosmic history in their respective mythologies, while the similar acts of Þórr and Víðarr take place at the end times, in the case of Þórr even as he himself is dying.

It would make sense to interpret the existence of these cosmogonic motifs in eschatology as signs that eschatology is cosmogony, only viewed

23 *Gylfaginning* ch. li: 'Þórr berr banaorð af Miðgarðsormi ok stígr þaðan braut níu fet. Þá fellr hann dauðr til jarðar fyrir eitri því er ormrinn blæss á hann' (Snorri Sturluson 2005, 50) / 'Thor will be victorious over the Midgard serpent and will step away from it nine paces. Then he will fall to the ground dead from the poison which the serpent will spit on him' (Snorri Sturluson 2008, 51).

24 The motif appears first already in *Rig Veda* (RV 1.22: 16–18 and other places), and then reappears many times in later sources, Brahmanas, Upanishads, epics, and Puranas.

25 *Gylfaginning* ch. li: 'En þegar eptir snýsk fram Víðarr ok stígr qðrum foeti í neðra keypt úlfsins. (...) Annarri hendi tekr hann inn efra keypt úlfsins ok rífr sundr gin hans ok verðr þat úlfsins bani' (Snorri Sturluson 2005, 50–51) / 'And immediately after Vidar will come forward and step with one foot on the lower jaw of the wolf. (...) With one hand he will grasp the wolf's upper jaw and tear apart its mouth, and this will cause the wolf's death (Snorri Sturluson 2008, 51).

from the inverted structural position of the losers. The same battle can be a glorious victory or a terrible defeat, depending on which side describes it.²⁶

However impressive it would be to see the cosmogony fit the eschatology exactly as its inversion, in the end this is not the case. Sadly (or not!), mythology is not a machine perfectly constructed for a production of a single exact meaning or correspondence. It is a chamber of echoes and crystal of reflections, natural, with many structural flaws and idiosyncrasies, selected by the tradition to produce as many meanings and interpretations as possible. One of the typical features of myths – and dreams – is their condensed nature. The mythical images are so strange and surreal, because they try to squeeze in several independent meanings at once. Ragnarøk is no different in this respect. There is a sketch of a corresponding and partly fitting analogy between cosmogony and eschatology. It is not a literal repetition of the same motif; it is an echo.

Conclusion

The intention of this article was to explore the idea of echo – both in the literal and metaphorical senses – in connection with Old Norse cosmogony and eschatology. The literal echo is the resounding call or shout that fills the whole world at the very beginning and at the very end. The metaphorical echo is the structural reminiscence in the sequence of motifs in cosmogony and eschatology which are somehow concomitant with the motif of the booming sound.

The sequence of motifs that repeats itself during cosmogony and eschatology, including the shout of the dying Ymir and the trumpeting of Heimdallr, connects the end with the beginning in a circle as the trumpeting of the shofar in Jewish tradition connects the end of the last year with the beginning of the new one. The psychoanalytical interpretation links the trumpeting of the ram's horn with the shout of the cosmogonic victim, thus fitting the two cosmic sounds we find in Old Norse mythology remarkably well: the *ymr* of Ymir and the trumpeting of Gjallarhorn.

26 We could illustrate the idea with 'auto-antonyms', words that mean two opposite things. In some cases the opposites are just two perspectives of the same thing, so e.g. the Latin *altus* means both 'high' and 'deep', and *altitudo* is both 'depth' and 'height': if you stand below a cliff, it is 'high'; if you are on top of the cliff, the chasm before you is 'deep', but it is the same cliff, the same precipice, and the same height. Similarly, e.g. the German *ausleihen* means both 'to lend' and 'to borrow', and the Swahili *kutoa* means both 'to add' and 'to remove', because in both cases it is the same process merely viewed from this or that perspective.

The background structure which connects

- the Reik/Žižek interpretation of the trumpeting of shofar ('killing of the Father'),
- the scenes of cosmogony and eschatology in Old Norse mythology, as well as
- Óðinn's martyrdom on the Cosmic Tree

is the structure of sacrifice. Something (a giant figure, father figure, God or gods) is sacrificed so that the ordered cosmos can be created or recreated anew. The dying body is turned into things, the dying scream is turned into words. The psychoanalytical God-Father figure parallels the position of Ymir, the primordial giant who must be killed so that the uncontrolled spontaneous organic unity of the beginnings is transformed into a controlled ordered grid of names, things and laws.

Psychoanalytical images and concepts again prove useful tools with which to think, but their position is closer to mythological images than to scholarly theories and concepts. However, this is precisely their strength – they translate mythological motifs to a language closer to the contemporary ideation and thus serve as mediators for creative thinking about mythology.²⁷

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JAN A. KOZÁK, PhD, is senior lecturer at Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Charles University, Czech Republic. E-mail: jan.kozak@ff.cuni.cz

27 It was by design that I did not produce a psychoanalytical reading of Old Norse cosmogony and eschatology (and was only inspired by one insight brought from that area), because that would change the nature of the article. I firmly believe that psychoanalysis (or analytical psychology for that matter) should be used in small doses, as a source of inspirations and suggestions, but these must then be explored using the standard philological, historical, and comparative methods to provide firmer ground for the psychoanalytical insight. If we stick to psychoanalysis alone, we are in a different discourse, with different means, goals, and rules.

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