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Marx, Engels, and Norse Mythology

Ursula Dronke

Politics and mythology have always been closely interlocked, and money — or *Kapital* — is the root of many a myth.

Hesiod blamed the gods for the poverty and misery of men: 'For the gods keep hidden the livelihood of men. Otherwise you might easily do enough work in a day to have enough for a full year with no further need to be working.'¹ Men earned the disfavour of the gods because of a trick Prometheus played on Zeus. He deceived him over 'money'. It was not literally money, but a money-equivalent, a sacrificed ox. By a deceptive division of the dead beast, Prometheus devised it that Zeus would get the bones and mankind the succulent flesh. Zeus in retaliation hid fire from men, but then Prometheus stole it for them. In exasperation Zeus bound Prometheus in torment and sent Pandora to men bearing all the curses of the gods, for 'all the gods who dwell on Olympos gave a gift to this plague for men who are eaters of bread'.² Dues, revenues, privilege, the power of punishment — in the tenacity with which they cling to these, Hesiod's gods mirror the ruling classes of human society: it is they who can make the condition of common man an inescapable prison. Prometheus was, for Marx, 'the most eminent saint and martyr in the philosophical calendar'.³

Myth can also embody a political hope. If men are bold enough to criticize and rebel against a cruel tyranny, or a foreign oppression, they may believe in the coming of a new ruler, a protector, just, magnanimous, potent with divinity, an incarnation of the god himself. In ancient Egyptian prophecies, the long-awaited sovereign will be a 'king from the sun' sent by Isis: the state of evil will be destroyed, the world will be transformed, and the 'king from the sun' will establish an eternal kingdom.⁴ Political hopes adopt the symbolism of myth and cling to the certainty of the return of *Sol Invictus*, rising from his conquest of the underworld of night and death.

Themes that we see in myth inspired much of the political energy of Marx and Engels: indignation at the human condition, admiration for the courage of the rebel, confidence in the historical inevitability of change. Marx described religion as 'the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world', and would abolish it with its 'illusory happiness' in order to bring men their 'real happiness':

The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the *demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions*. The criticism of religion is therefore *in embryo the criticism of the vale of tears*, the *halo* of which is religion . . . Thus the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of earth.⁵

As a young student preoccupied with idealism, Marx decided that the 'idea' was now to be sought in reality itself: 'If previously the gods had dwelt above the earth, now they became [for him] its centre.'⁶ As to the world's inevitable eschatological change, Marx saw it as 'an historical movement going on under our very eyes', and the human task as one of 'consciously participating in the historical revolutionary process of society which was taking place'. He felt the urgency of this Ragnarök and feared that *Das Kapital* would not be completed in time. He wrote to a friend: 'I am working like mad all through the nights at putting my economic studies together, so that I may at least have the outlines clear before the deluge comes'⁷ — *mælir Óðinn við Míms höfuð*.

In his passionate political writing, Marx shows great mythopoeic power. He was able to create a new mythology because he was deeply alive to the old. His doctoral Dissertation of 1841 (on the *Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*) and the notebooks compiled for the purposes of the Dissertation make his sensibility to the intellectual uses of mythology quite clear. He relished the wit in the decisive use of myth in ancient argument:

Aristotle reproached the ancients for their belief that heaven required the support of Atlas . . . Epicurus, on the other hand, blames those who believe that man needs heaven. He finds the Atlas by whom heaven is supported in human stupidity and superstition: so stupidity and superstition are Titans.⁸

At times, in certain contexts, Marx saw myth as the only possible expression for thought. With a certain exaltation of spirit he confronts the problem, 'why Plato,

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precisely when he expounds truths which are of the greatest moral and religious interest, at the same time presents them in a mythical form', and he offers his own answer:

In expounding definite questions of morality, religion, or even natural philosophy, as in the *Timaeus*, Plato sees that his negative interpretation of the Absolute is not sufficient; here it is not enough to sink everything in the one dark night, in which, according to Hegel, all cows are black; at this point Plato has recourse to the positive interpretation of the Absolute, and its essential form, which has its basis in itself, is myth and allegory. Where the Absolute stands on one side, and limited positive reality on the other, and the positive must all the same be preserved, there this positive becomes the medium through which absolute light shines . . . and the finite, the positive, points to something other than itself, has in it a soul, to which this husk is an object of wonder; the whole world has become a world of myths. Every shape is a riddle.

Elaborating further his use of the term 'myth' for the 'medium through which absolute light shines', Marx delivers a triumphant exposition of the creativity of dialectic, as, with the interaction of opposites, the negating force becomes positive, vital:

Death and love are the myth of negative dialectic, for dialectic is the inner, simple light, the piercing eye of love, the inner soul which is not crushed by the body of material division, the inner abode of the spirit. Thus the myth of it is love. But dialectic is also the torrent which smashes the many and their bounds, which tears down the independent forms, sinking everything in the one sea of eternity. The myth of it is therefore death.

Thus dialectic is death, but at the same time the vehicle of vitality, the efflorescence in the gardens of the spirit, the foaming in the bubbling goblet of the tiny seeds out of which the flower of the single flame of the spirit bursts forth.⁹

Written in 1837, this confident declaration of an archetypal religious paradox, in terms almost of personal discovery, would seem to have much in common with the rousing summons of Bakunin in his *Reaktion in Deutschland* (1842):

Let us put our trust, therefore, in the eternal spirit, who shatters and destroys only because he is the unfathomable and eternally creative source of all life. The desire to destroy is itself a creative desire.¹⁰

While Marx seems to rejoice in the expressive value of myth during his early philosophical studies, at other times, more detachedly, he sees myth as inadequate, outdated for modern uses. Comparing the historical function of mythology in ancient times with that of German philosophy in his own day, he is clear in his own mind that both side-step reality:

As the ancient peoples went through their pre-history in imagination, in *mythology*, so we Germans have gone through our post-history in thought, in *philosophy*. We are *philosophical* contemporaries of the present without being its *historical* contemporaries.¹¹

Mythology is a socially outmoded product of the mind:

All mythology overcomes and dominates and shapes the forces of nature in the imagination and by the imagination: it therefore disappears when these have been truly mastered. What becomes of Fama alongside Printing House Square?

While Marx recognized the general stimulus of the real world in the creation of myth — mythology is 'nature and the social forms themselves reworked by the popular imagination in an unconsciously artistic way' — and allowed that a conscious artist also might use a 'mythologizing relationship' to nature and society,¹² he does not seem to have considered mythology useful as evidence of ancient pragmatic thinking.

In this respect Engels was more perceptive. He adhered — as did Marx — to the long-standing theory that the forces of nature first inspired man to believe in supernatural, divine forces:

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All religion, however, is nothing but the phantastic reflection in men's minds of those external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of supernatural forces. In the beginnings of history it was the forces of Nature which were at first so reflected, and in the course of further evolution they underwent the most manifold and varied personifications among the various peoples. Comparative mythology has traced back this process, at least in the case of the Indo-European nations, to its origin in the Indian Vedas, and has shown its detailed evolution among the Indians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Germans and, so far as material is available, also among the Celts, Lithuanians and Slavs.

Yet he recognized that the developing world of men would bring changes to the nature of their gods:

But it is not long before, side by side with the forces of Nature, social forces begin to be active; forces which present themselves to man as equally extraneous and at first equally inexplicable, dominating them with the same apparent necessity as the forces of Nature themselves. The phantastic personifications, which at first only reflected the mysterious forces of Nature, at this point acquire social attributes, become representatives of the forces of history.¹³

Engels had read Jakob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie*, as his footnote on this page shows:

Comparative mythology overlooks this twofold character assumed at a later stage by the gods; it continues to pay exclusive attention to their character as reflexes of the forces of Nature, although it is this twofold character which is the basis of the confusion of mythologies which subsequently creeps in. Thus in some Germanic tribes the ancient Nordic war-god, Tyr, in Old High German, Zio, corresponds to the Greek Zeus, Latin Jupiter for Diu-piter; in other Germanic tribes, Er, Eor, corresponds to the Greek Ares, Latin Mars.¹⁴

Though he pursued this particular line of research no further, Engels did not forget what Grimm's mythological labyrinth had introduced him to: so, in his vivid article on the *Book of Revelation*,¹⁵ he compares the development of the Christian religion with that of the Germanic:

. . . Christianity in its undeveloped form [in the *Book of Revelation*] . . . stands in the same relation to the fourth century state religion with its fully evolved dogma and mythology as Tacitus's still unstable mythology of the Germans to the developed teaching of the gods of Edda as influenced by Christian and antique elements.

From his teens Engels had been an ardent admirer of Grimm — his vast and specific knowledge, his critical acumen, stylistic power, and the political courage which earned for him exile from the Hanoverian kingdom (1838).¹⁶ In 1859, exiled himself, in Manchester, Engels wrote to his fellow exile, Marx, in London:

I am sitting now deep in Ulfilas, I must at last make an end of this damned Gothic . . . Then on to Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon — I've always had only half a foot in that. Up to now I am working without a dictionary or any other aid, just the text and Grimm — [i.e. his German Grammar] — but the old fellow is really marvellous [*wirklich famos*]. Grimm's 'History of the German Language' would be very useful for what I am doing now — can you send it back to me? (Kolb, p. 105)

Nearly six years later Engels wrote that he intended to study Old Norse in earnest:

Its poetry is a tough morsel [*ein harter Brocken*], because of the deliberate obscurity and the mythology with its innumerable names, and I see that it is 'no use' to work on it as a side-line; I must sometime, when I have little to do, devote four weeks just to that. (Kolb, p. 108, note 47)

Marx was less interested in the linguistic aspects of Germanic than Engels, but in principle he shared Grimm's conviction that through the medium of language one

would force one's way through to the facts: as Grimm had expressed his ideal in the Preface to his 'History of the German Language':

Research into language, which I practise, and which I make my starting point, could never so satisfy me that it was not with pleasure that I reached, through the words, the things themselves: I have never wanted just to build houses, but also to live in them. (Kolb, p. 107)¹⁷

Of Grimm's works, Marx's interest went most to the *Deutsche Rechtsaltertümer*, 'German Legal Antiquities' (Kolb, p. 108). Marx indeed believed that a truer understanding of revolution could be won from studying the time *before* the Middle Ages, because there one would find 'in the oldest, the newest things', that men were 'Egalitarians to a degree'.¹⁸ Both he and Engels intended, by detailed historical research, translating and interpreting the old Germanic texts themselves, to clarify their own theories and to give them material foundation, in order to get free from the 'empty abstraction' of Hegelian concepts (Kolb, p. 109). It was no doubt this determined ideal of scholarship, combined with Marx's own mythopœic power — bred of his early philosophical absorptions — that gave *Das Kapital* its unique strength:

Marx piles quotation on quotation from the reports of British factory inspectors and commissions of inquiry on conditions in the factories and factory towns of nineteenth-century England . . . The total picture that emerges out of Marx's careful collation of these accounts is a picture of total frightfulness. This explains the credibility to many of his mythic image of society . . . It is in great measure this documentation of myth with materials from economic history that made Marx an influential force in the world. (Tucker, p. 226)

The delight Marx and Engels took in Grimm's work sprang indeed not only from a shared interest in realistic learning, but, even more profoundly, from the fact that he was the first to reveal the existence of a culture that belonged to the people, distinct from the culture of the ruling class, which had been based, since the Renaissance, on classical tradition,¹⁹ and in which they themselves had been

brought up. Marx's researches into the 'culture' of the English working people were a startling development of Grimm's progress.

It is hardly surprising that neither Engels nor Marx made further use of mythological study in their exploration of the Germanic past. As Grimm emphasized, Norse records were invaluable for an understanding of the ancient Germanic religion — 'preserved for us in the remotest corner of the North, whither it had fled as it were for more perfect safety, — namely, in Iceland'.²⁰ But, as Engels emphasized, those Norse records were themselves incredibly difficult to understand. Many of the oldest and most significant texts — texts unsurpassed in range, brilliance and riddling allusiveness — are only now approaching elucidation. The Norse mythology they disclose represents centuries of reflective synthesis, constructed — and deconstructed — by generation after generation of swift-thinking poets, who subjected the fundamental mythological concepts they inherited to genetic permutations of every kind.

Since the days of Marx and Engels, anthropology and comparative mythology have illuminated the realities that can underlie myth. Dumézil perceived the analogies that could be found in Indo-European records between the structure of divine society in the mythological texts and that of human societies in history. Lévi-Strauss, in considering the structure of myth in living societies, sought to 'reintegrate the anthropological knowledge acquired in the last fifty years into the Marxian tradition'.²¹ For the anthropologist there is no doubt that myth is relevant to reality.

Had Marx and Engels had modern scholarship before them to aid their research into the history of the past, what reality might they have found in Germanic myth, what 'secret track to the oldest lost history' in the mythological poetry? For, as Karl Philipp Moritz expressed it in 1795,²² such poetry 'retains weight from its inner interweaving with the oldest events, whereby it is prevented from dissolving into mere allegory'.

From the many themes that there are, I shall, as an experiment, choose two from Norse mythology and try to test their 'weight' as evidence of the actualities of the past.²³

I The earth as gold

In Norse cosmogony, earth emerges from water: it may be lifted by divine hands (*Völuspá*, 4), or rise serenely of its own nature (*Völuspá*, 59) like a new island — a green Surtsey — or it may start as a growth of icy spume cast up by the stormy waves of the primordial ocean (*Vafþrúðnismál*, 31). It is a sunken treasure from the ocean — a concept that would seem to survive in Germanic terms for treasure, ON *søkk*, OE *sinc* - and a 'bench of (sunken) jewels', *Søkkvabekkr*, over which the cold waves echo and where Óðinn and his consort drink joyously from golden cups (*Grímnismál*, 7). Earth is the necklace of the goddess who can renew life, Freyja: it was stolen by Loki, fought over in the waters, and rescued for posterity (*Húsdrápa*, paraphrased and cited by Snorri, *Snorra Edda*, pp. 98–99).²⁴ It is the gold whose 'fire' lights up the ocean in a myriad kennings.²⁵

When raised out of ocean, this gold becomes *aurr*,²⁶ the fertile mud of primordial land, which the roaring sea — *gelmir* — yields up (an image contained in the primordial giant's name, Aurgelmir, *Vafþrúðnismál*, 29–30). In Norse mythological poetry the term *aurr* has a specialized, originally perhaps sacral, use: it signifies the gleaming libation — *hvítaaurr* — of moist loam that laves the World Tree, whose branches fructify the valleys with dew (*Völuspá*, 19; cf. *Lokasenna*, 48).

The early legend of the origin of the island of Sjælland, which Snorri attributes to Bragi (*Snorra Edda*, p. 8), illustrates the pattern of the cosmogonic myth: that spacious 'island of meadows', dredged by giant plough through the sea from Sweden, is described as a 'gleaming roundel — a sun-disk — from the ocean depths' — *djúpröðull*: land from the sea with its golden promise.

The gold of the sky and the gold of the earth complement each other. In *Skírnismál*, when the bright god Freyr, looking from on high, is struck with love for a girl in Giant Land — that is, in the depths of the earth — his proper joy in the daily shining of the heavenly sun is eclipsed by the lustrous arms of the girl, which — like another sun — light up all the air and ocean. Scornfully she rejects the god's gifts of gold: 'I have no lack of gold in the courts of my father Gymir.' She has all the plutonian resources of the earth at her disposal, for she *is* earth and — in accordance with cosmogonic pattern — she dwells in the courts of Gymir — whose name means 'Ocean' — and is begotten by him, as earth may be said to be 'begotten' by water. The light that gleams from her is the light of the sunken treasure that is earth.

For this rich earth to flourish, the divine gifts of the sky are indispensable. That is the moral of *Skírnismál*. To 'control the forces of nature', to ensure that the earth does not refuse the sky's gifts, the wedding of the pair was depicted on golden talismans. These were then buried as treasure-hoards — patterns of hope — in the soil of the fields, to bind a golden future to the ancient Norsemen's land. Their gods are bound, fettered — *bönd, höpt* — to the earth by such magic, to fulfil the needs of men.²⁷

Why should earth be gold? It is the source of human wealth: of food, shelter, clothing, metal — and of the surplus that creates capital and political power. To call earth gold is a symbolic short-cut to a host of pragmatic facts. The dazzling dexterity with which the heathen poets handle the concept does not conceal the reality it has for them in practical and political terms. For the farmer as cultivator, the priapic Freyr is the fitting mate for the all-producing Terra Mater. But Terra — the Norseman's *Jörð* — is also a political entity, the territory of a king and his people. The Norse farmer, who buries the gold talismans, is also a Viking, a lawman, a king's counsellor. For him, in his political persona, the husband of *Jörð* is symbolically Óðinn, the god of war, and of kings, and of creative intelligence: a god whose influence penetrates every social form. The imagery of war settles upon that of the cultivator's world: the iron showers of arrows swell the grain, and conquest — the sating of wolves and ravens with slaughter — is the ruler's instrument of fertility and peace. Re-enacting the role of the god of war, the Norse ruler then takes the land as his bride. The court poets of Earl Hákon the Mighty (who was murdered in 995) show him first as the conquering ravisher of the broad-faced, corn-tressed land of Norway, then as the legitimizing husband, sovereign consort of the 'sister of Wealth', his kingdom.²⁸

The heathen Norse image of the king as the sexual partner of his land reappears with remarkable clarity in a legend cherished by the Scandinavian settlers of northern England well into the Christian period. In the thirteenth-century romance of *Havelok the Dane*, the exiled heir dreams on his wedding night that he takes possession of Denmark as of a bride. Gazing down at the whole world, he sees Denmark within it and clasps it in his arms to possess it:

And mine armes weren so longe
That I fadmede al at ones
Denemark with mine longe bones. (ll. 1295–97)²⁹

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And when he tries to withdraw his embrace, he cannot — every living thing clings to him:

And þanne Y wolde mine armes drawe
Til me and hom for to haue,
Al þat euere in Denemark liueden
On mine armes faste clyueden. (ll. 1298–1301)

It is God's will that Havelok should be king. His own will is overridden.

The Norse heathen king, too, needed the will of the gods behind him, the good fortune — the *heill* — that the magic practices of the old religion ensured and Christian rule destroyed. Earl Hákon restored the heathen temples and the sacrifices, and for him the fertile seasons came back.

The poets expressed this royal *heill* in terms of gold. The good king makes 'golden grain' gleam on the arms of his warriors, while the bad king, like a miser, buries the grinding of that 'grain' in the flesh of the earth: the wealth he should have given his people moulders to waste like putrid bread.³⁰ Norse rulers, like the Frankish kings, must accede to 'kingdom and treasure' (*regnum et thesaurum*).³¹ The political realm must be the 'sister of Wealth' for sovereignty to be valid.

Beside the popular concept of the intimate and sacral relationship between ruler and land, another political theme — also with ancient mythological roots — develops and dovetails with it. This presents a thoroughly 'socialized' explanation of kingship, in which no 'force of nature' — other than divinity itself — is involved.

Men of all ranks are descended from a god,³² but it is only the child of the highest rank, the Nobleman, that the god explicitly acknowledges (appearing personally to tell him so, when indeed there are no witnesses by). To Nobleman the god gives the secret divine teaching and directives that alone can qualify a ruler. This fable of divinely legitimated kingship is told with effortless wit in the poem *Rígsþula*. At the centre of the fable are the two names of the king: *Konungr*, 'King', which he has by human baptism and noble human blood, and *Rígr*, 'Rex', an adoption of the Irish term for king, *rí(g)*, which is the name assumed by the god — with his mission in mind — when he treads on earth, and given by him to his noblest human son. The one name represents the worldly rank that human good-breeding entitles *Rígr Konungr* to hold, the other the inheritance of divinity from the god that bestows the divine right to rule. By the two names, the one native to the language, the other an exotic loanword, the king's 'two bodies' are neatly

distinguished. The Christian monarch, too, was a *gemina persona*, but by divine grace, not divine blood.³³

We may note that, in *Rígsþula*, the first directive the god gives to Nobleman is to gain land — other people's land — by war. Only then does he have wealth and precious treasures to give away 'to all', as a ruler should (*Rígsþula*, 38).

The two needs of kingship, divine acknowledgment and the physical support of land, are also clearly exemplified in a portrait of the Emperor Otto II (who, according to a Norse source, was once put to flight in battle by Earl Hákon the Mighty, *Fagrskinna*, p. 39). In a miniature in the Gospel Book of Aachen (c. 973), the hand of God comes down from above to the Emperor 'either to impose or to touch and bless the diadem on the emperor's head', while his throne, 'seemingly poised in mid-air . . . is carried by a crouching *Tellus*, Earth herself, whose hands support the feet of the footstool' (Kantorowicz, p. 61).

By distinct mythological and religious paths of development, heathen and Christian concepts of kingship come to resemble each other, in certain fundamental respects, quite closely. Marx and Engels would, I think, have found the parallels significant.

II *The system shattered and renewed* ³⁴

We have a clear and consistent picture of the Norse concept of the end and renewal of the world in one poem only, *Völuspá*, the 'Sibyl's Prophecy'. This poem represents Norse heathen eschatology in a way that emphasizes elements that have analogies in Christian thought, and thrusts out of sight whatever elements in either religion would conflict with the dignified harmony of the two. The poem contains all the Christianity that the poet, and the Norse community who enjoyed it, felt they could accommodate — or use with profit — while maintaining the structure of their ancestral religion. Nothing fundamental to heathenism is abandoned or rejected in the poem, yet, at the same time, the poet can introduce, as one of the 'signs of the end', the notorious Christian theme of the moral degeneration of man. It contradicts nothing in his native traditions and, for a well-travelled Viking society, brings the eschatology up-to-date. *Völuspá* would indeed seem to represent that 'developed teaching of the gods of Edda as influenced by Christian . . . elements' on which Engels meditated.

The fragments of eschatology in other Norse poems afford no evidence of the well-considered conceptual harmony apparent in *Völuspá*, but common to all are the

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four fundamental happenings, which are confidently expected of the future: the death of the gods in battle against the forces of giants and cosmic monsters; the collapse of the cosmos; the renewal of the cosmos; the return of the sons of the gods to live in the sacred halls of their fathers.

Expressed in these plain terms the cycle of the ending of the old world and the arising of the new appears as little more than an exemplification of a natural law of time, by which aged things die and new things are born. The giant forces seem to represent the external, attacking forces of death that come when the time is ripe. The cosmos has its seasons, its revolving aeons; no cause, no inner dialectic need be scrutinized.

The bare cycle, however, may become interpreted in numerous variations, as intellectual and emotional responses proliferate in diverse historical contexts: 'Mythical thought . . . is imprisoned in the events and experiences which it never tires of ordering and re-ordering in its search to find them a meaning.'³⁵

In the varying interpretations of the bare cycle of time, one theme keeps recurring that suggests a causal link between the end and the renewal of the cycle: the death of the world is a creative event, for is it not unfailingly followed by the birth of a new one? Death brings an increase of life: 'Unless a wheat grain falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest' (John 12. 24). So, too, for Marx, ' . . . dialectic is death, but at the same time a vehicle of vitality', and for Bakunin, 'the desire to destroy is itself a creative desire', and the destruction of the present order, with the victory of democracy, will bring 'not merely a quantitative change . . . but a transformation of quality — a new, living and genuine apocalypse, a new heaven and a new earth, a young and splendid world, in which all present discords will be resolved in a harmonious unity'³⁶ — *Böls mun allz batna*.

Couched in the social and economic terms of Marx's political vision, the inevitable downfall of the world of capitalist society will lead to the emergence of the new world of the socialist order. So excellent will be the outcome of such a downfall — as one school of thought argued — that even the appalling signs of it are to be welcomed: 'the worse things are, the better' (Wetter, p. 81). We may rejoice in Eve's guilt when she ate the forbidden apple and brought death into the world: it was a 'happy sin' that led to the incarnation of God. The Tree of the Fall became the Tree of Redemption.

While in the fragments of eschatological allusion in Norse poems other than *Völuspá* it is hardly possible to discern any variation upon the bare cyclic theme of time, in the fuller evidence of *Völuspá* we can see the workings of a 'dialectic of

death', which is at the same time 'a vehicle of vitality'. For we are shown in the poem events that precede the end of the world, and because these events are 'unfortunate' — the gods' loss of the golden game of chequers, the swearing of solemn oaths to a giant, which then must be violated, the poignant, 'accidental' killing of Baldr — they emerge in the poem like fatal steps to Ragnarök. They are, in fact, steps that mark the waning luck of the gods. As the time of their sovereignty approaches its proper end, their auspicious fortune, their *heill*, deserts them. To epitomize most clearly this loss of luck, the poet has chosen three events that have an element of sporting hazard — the board game, played, no doubt, with dice; the wager with the giant; the game of 'hit-the-target' in which Baldr is — against all the odds — killed. As Ragnarök approaches, we watch a comedy of divine errors, painful, but still a comedy, because the outcome is joyful. Baldr's death, the last 'event' before Ragnarök, is the foundation of the new life of the world after Ragnarök. He is the sacrifice — *tívvurr* — that ensures the world's renewal. While cosmic, and historical, change are inevitable, there must be an act — a sacrifice, a revolution — that accompanies it to fulfilment: there must be *participation* (Tucker, p. 229). Only Óðinn and Loki know this secret: they are old blood-brothers and play a double game. The sacrificial killing is in Óðinn's treacherous style — so it has his blessing. The indispensable holding of Baldr in Hel is Loki's devious task. Imitating the Christian sinner who refuses to make restoration for his crimes, Loki will not weep to get Baldr back into the life of the old world. His death is needed for the new.

Bound in torment for his defiance of the ignorant gods — as Prometheus was — Loki breaks his fetters to join with the giants in the necessary, creative, destruction of the world. The 'dialectic of death' was clearly understood by the Norsemen.

To set Norse eschatology beside that of Marx and Engels and study each in the light of the other is to gain some inkling of the intellectual energy and urgent, casuistic subtlety of mind that men have devoted to their search to find a meaning in the events and experiences of the real world.

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NOTES

- 1 'Works and Days', *The Poems of Hesiod*, translated by R. M. Frazer (Norman, Oklahoma, 1983), ll. 42–44.
- 2 'Works and Days', ll. 81–82; see also 'Theogony', *The Poems of Hesiod*, ll. 521–616.
- 3 Foreword to the Doctoral Dissertation (1841), translated by Dirk J. and Sally R. Struik in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works* (London, 1975–), I (1975), 31.
- 4 See John J. Collins, *Sibylline Oracles of Egyptian Judaism* (Missoula, Montana, 1974), p. 13.
- 5 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction', in *Collected Works*, III (1975), 176. The translator is not named. I retain Marx's italics where the editors have done so.
- 6 'Letter from Marx to his Father in Trier' (1837), translated by Clemens Dutt, *Collected Works*, I, 18.
- 7 See R. C. Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (Cambridge, 1961), p. 225, and bibliography in notes 7, 9, 10.
- 8 Doctoral Dissertation, *Collected Works*, I, 67–68.
- 9 'Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy', translated by Richard Dixon, *Collected Works*, I, 497–98.
- 10 In *Deutsche Jahrbücher*, 17 (1842), 1002; cited Gustav A. Wetter, *Dialectical Materialism: A Historical and Systematic Survey of Philosophy in the Soviet Union*, translated from the German by Peter Heath (London, 1958), p. 9.
- 11 'Contribution' (see note 5, above), *Collected Works*, III, 180.
- 12 See S. S. Praver, *Karl Marx and World Literature* (Oxford, 1976), p. 279, and references to *Grundrisse*, with translations, p. 280, note 15, for the first two citations; for the third, see Robert Weimann, *Literaturgeschichte und Mythologie* (Berlin and Weimar, 1971), p. 368.

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- 13 *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science (Anti-Dühring)*, translated by Emile Burns, edited by C. P. Dutt (London, 1935), pp. 346–47.
- 14 See *Deutsche Mythologie* (Göttingen, 1835; fourth revised edition, Berlin, 1875–78); translated by J. S. Stallybrass as *Teutonic Mythology* (London, 1880–84). See *Deutsche Mythologie*, ch. IX, especially p. 167; *Teutonic Mythology*, p. 202.
- 15 In *Progress*, 2 (London, 1883).
- 16 See Herbert Kolb, 'Karl Marx und Jakob Grimm', *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, 206 (1969–70), 103. In citations drawn from Kolb, I translate the German text.
- 17 On Marx's debt to Grimm, see especially Kolb, p. 107, note 45.
- 18 Kolb, p. 110 and note 54. The citation is from a letter to Engels in 1868.
- 19 See Louis L. Hammerich, cited Kolb, p. 107, note 45.
- 20 *Deutsche Mythologie* (see note 14, above), 'Einleitung', p. 8; translation, p. 9.
- 21 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, translated by Clair Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 345.
- 22 *Gesichtspunkt für die mythologischen Dichtungen*, in *Götterlehre oder mythologischen Dichtungen der Alten*; cited in *Die Eröffnung des Zugangs zum Mythos: ein Lesebuch Herausgegeben von Karl Kerényi*, Wege der forschung, Band 20 (Darmstadt, 1967), p. 7. This volume provides a valuable introduction to early nineteenth-century views on mythology, especially in Germany.
- 23 For the sake of speed I present my interpretations of the Norse mythological material in dogmatic form, though several are, of course, speculative. Fuller argument and documentation will be published elsewhere. References to Eddic poems are to the edition of Gustav Neckel, revised by Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg, 1962). Etymological suggestions will be found in Jan de Vries, *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Leiden, 1957–61).
- 24 *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, edited by Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1931).

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- 25 Rudolf Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden* (Bonn and Leipzig, 1921), pp. 229–33.
- 26 Perhaps etymologically connected with Latin *aurum*, 'gold'.
- 27 On fettered gods see Karl Meuli, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Basel and Stuttgart, 1975), II, 1035–55.
- 28 See Folke Ström, 'Poetry as an instrument of propaganda. Jarl Hákon and his poets', in *Speculum Norroenum. Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, edited by Ursula Dronke, Guðrún P. Helgadóttir, Gerd Wolfgang Weber, and Hans Bekker-Nielsen (Odense, 1981), especially pp. 448–56. For fullest documentation and discussion see Daphne Davidson, *Earl Hákon and his Poets* (unpublished D. Phil. thesis, Oxford University, now in final stages of preparation for publication), especially pp. 196–200.
- 29 *Havelok*, edited by G. V. Smithers (Oxford, 1987).
- 30 *Fagrskinna*, edited by P. A. Munch and C. R. Unger (Christiania, 1847), p. 29. See Davidson, pp. 205–06.
- 31 See P. Grierson, 'Commerce in the Dark Ages', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 9 (1959), 131–38.
- 32 The earliest testimony to this theme in Germanic is in Tacitus, *Germania: Terra produces a god, Twisto* (presumably an androgynous, 'two-fold' being, who can produce offspring from himself alone), who becomes father of *Mannus*. In *Rígsþula* the theme of Heimdallr as father of all ranks of men is combined with that of Óðinn as father of royal dynasties.
- 33 See Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies. A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, 1957), pp. 46–50.
- 34 The title is borrowed from the final chapter of the illuminating book of Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London, 1966).
- 35 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind (La Pensée Sauvage)* (London, 1966), p. 22.
- 36 Cited Wetter, *Dialectical Materialism* (see note 10, above), p. 9.