

# HÁVAMÁL – THE EXALTED SPEECH

A LOOK INTO THE COSMOS OF THE EDDA

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for the Study of Mysticism and Religious Experience.

## The Edda

The old Norse religious tradition, is today mainly preserved in what are called the Younger and the Elder Eddas. The younger Edda is a collection of narratives on the old Northern gods, written as a guide for poets by Snorri Sturluson in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Elder Edda is composed of what appears to be direct recordings of the ancient oral tradition, made by unknown writers, some time in the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century. It is a collection of poems, mainly following the strict forms of old Norse poetry. Both the Elder and the Younger Edda are written a few centuries into the Christian era, and their content may therefore have been subject to changes from the time they represented the central mythology of the Norse society. We can assume that the Elder Edda is more true to the ‘original’ meaning than the younger, as the latter are Snorri’s own retelling of the stories, while the former seems to be a direct recording of the oral tradition, and is in the verse which makes it more likely to remain stable during its oral life through out the centuries. I will therefore in this essay concentrate on what we can read from the Elder Edda.

We shall focus on one of the main poems of the elder Edda: Hávamál, and look at the poem as it appears in its original written form, without regard to whether this may differ from any ‘original’ oral form<sup>1</sup>. Hávamál, literally means ‘that which is spoken (mál) from a high or exalted position (háva)’. It is considered to be Odin’s words to mankind, giving advice to free men regarding honour, war, love, friendship, feasts and drinking. There is also a more esoteric part, regarding the relationship to the gods, the use of runes and magic, and their place in cosmos.

The Elder Edda can often be difficult to deal with, as the poems are constantly referring to each other. The poems of the Elder Edda form an interlocking system. They confirm each other, and give meaning to each other, they form their own cosmos, holding each other in place. Reading the Edda, is entering this cosmos, through out the reading, meaning emerges, gradually, as the different scenes or symbols colour each other and deepen each other. No phenomenon in this mythological cosmos stands by it self. They exists all in *relation* to the

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<sup>1</sup> As I regard any oral tradition or myth a living entity, there is no point in asking for any original form. As its nature is to be constantly changing with its culture, we would then have to ask the absurd question of which specific moment in time the tradition appeared in its original form, as if this was a static one.

whole cosmos, as parts, or rather aspects of it, and they are brought to life by it. Even a single word can reach unknown dimensions of meaning as the cosmos of the elder Edda unfolds from careful reading. Also the poetic style the poems are written in, uses what is called '*kjenningar*', which we can best translate as 'idioms'. Gods, people and other entities are given many different names, often referring to situations described in other parts of Edda, telling us about its origin and cosmological place. An example of this can be the art of poetry, which can be called 'Suttungs Mead' or 'the drink of Odrene', names only intelligible if one know the stories or situations they are referring to<sup>2</sup>.

In this way it is not easy to present one single poem here, or worse, only a few lines from this poem, as the key to their meaning lies in the whole Edda, and thus far beyond the narrow limits of this essay.

The solution to this problem will be to try to enter a single motif in the text, without referring to the rest of Edda. One will anyway have to start somewhere to break into the Edda cosmos. I will work from the assumption that I am able to grasp the meaning or at least some of the meaning of the text. The question is whether the symbols, motifs or situations, presenting this meaning without referring to other parts of the text, still are accessible to us now thousand years later. As we shall see, the motive that shall be our gate to the Edda cosmos, still seems to be 'alive' to day. We shall start by exploring the motive presented, trying to deepen the meaning inherent in it, just by contemplating what it actually is. We will then see how etymology can help us further in this task. At the end we shall see a glimpse of how the rest of the Edda cosmos, which we by then hopefully shall be standing on the threshold of, can deepen and orient what we have found. The elements from the rest of Edda, will be presented briefly as I have understood them, without any references to the primary sources or discussion of the interpretation, as they only will serve as examples of how our primary motif can be oriented in, and coloured by its cosmos. We will then, at the end, hopefully see how careful reading, or rather contemplation upon a single motif, can help us find a proper approach to understand the Edda cosmos, by putting us in a suitable mood.

This essay must therefore be regarded as an example of how we can explore the Edda cosmos by entering it via the motif presented in the verses that follow. The main emphasis will still be on our selected motif. We should further note that the Edda cosmos, like our own, seems to have many *layers* of meaning, this exploration is not concerned with all of them.

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<sup>2</sup> A very short hint to the story behind these names: Odin is able to give the gift of poetry to man because he has the mead from which the art springs. This is kept in the bowl *odrene*. A most dramatic story tells how Odin stole this precious mead from Suttung the giant, using all the magic and dirty tricks one could imagine.

## The Poem

Hávamál verse 137	Exalted Speech verse 137
Veitk at ek hekk vindigameiði á nætr allar nîu, geiri undaðr ok gefinn Óðni, sjalfr sjálfum mer, á þein meiði, es mangi veit, hvers af rótum rinnr.	I know that I hanged on the wind-swept tree nine whole nights with spear-point wound and given to Odin, myself to myself me upon that tree that no one knows whence its root runs
138	138
Vi hleifi mik sældu ne við horningi; nystak niðr, namk upp rúnar? æpandi nam, fellk aptr þaðan	With bread I was not satisfied, Neither with the drinking horn; At the hidden I gazed, I took up runes, Roaring took them, Back down from there I fell.

A few comments on the translation: As *Hávamál* is the spoken words of Odin, it is obvious that it is Odin hanging on the tree, but we can imagine that this is an act to be performed by mystics of that time, following Odin. He has hanged himself, sacrificed to himself. This offer culminates after nine days with him being able to ‘take up the runes’. This is a verse describing how the runes came to be known. The word *meiði* in *vindigameiði* is here translated as tree, but as there are many words for tree in Old Norse, this can mean both a living or dead tree, as long as it is standing, this word will be further explored below, as it shall be our main focus. ‘*Nystak niðr*’, is translated as ‘at the hidden I gazed’, it has also been translated as ‘down I starred’. It will hopefully be clear later (see note 7) why the former was chosen, but we should have this two level meaning in mind, as this might be a quality to the whole poem. The word ‘*nam*’, here in the form *namk*, means to learn, to take to one self, here translated as ‘pick up’.

### Entering the Motif

When people ask me where I am from, they really ask more than that, it is a way of asking *who* I am, which also is a question of *placing* me in the great order of things or cosmos. These two verses deal with the important question of where the runes come from, or rather, where they were ‘picked up’, which is not quite the same as their origin, but which maybe can point in the direction of their origin. This is not just a place, it is more of a mood, a certain situation or meaningful event, or as we shall see later, maybe a sphere.

We shall enter the text with the mission of making this ‘place’ known or find its meaning. With this in mind, we shall explore the motif of ‘the wind-swept tree’. This meaning is not the

kind of entity that should be explained, as the narrative actually *is* this explanation. An attempt to explain might actually take us further away from it. We shall therefore instead try to elaborate the motif presenting the meaning to make the meaning more explicit. We shall do this expansion of the motive in a direction which will continue answering the question of origin, and thus the nature of the runes.

*'I know that I hung on the windswept tree.'*

This beginning forms an opening scene taking us right into the mood where the runes are to be found. A wind-swept tree is not part of a forest, it is not sheltered among other trees, but standing alone where the wind really can reach it. This kind of tree one can meet in the mountain-plains where the land is barren, open to the wind, surrendered to it, giving the wind miles and miles to pick up speed. The wind-swept tree knows the wind better than anyone, standing there in an upright position, having the view over the land, where everything else is laying down, hiding from the wind. The tree is marked by the wind, grown crooked. It grows extremely slowly in these conditions or rather it grows carefully, and this makes it strong, it falls for nothing. Even a small tree can be hundreds of years old, it is almost like a part of eternity, standing there observing you from the centuries, as you pass by on your way over the mountain. The passing of such a tree is a ceremony, lasting for hours. The open land allows you to see the tree miles away. Slowly you approach it, closer and closer, step by step, enough time to contemplate the tree as the tree has patience to wait for you. When you meet, it is like you have known each other all the time, having observed each other for so long, as the only two things standing as far as the eye reaches. You have an understanding almost as if you are going to talk, but you remain in silence: you the mortal one, the twinkling of an eye taking a rest in shelter of the centuries. There is no use in talking, for silence is the language of the tree, the language of eternity. Leaning at its trunk, you feel how solid the wood is, it feels more like rock than something living, still you know it is able to grow. Leaving the tree, you are again looking towards the empty horizon. The tree remains standing. This is what a wind-swept tree does, it remains. It will remain after our time on earth, giving shelter to new generations, standing, watching the open space. How many lonely walkers has the tree sheltered? Men who have rested by its foot, maybe having the same thoughts as we, then walked on, lived their lives and died.

If it is one thing man can not make, it is a wind-swept tree. How can you make a part of eternity? How can you make something which has waited for you, centuries before you meet it? Observing time change, like the wind changes around it. Like the Archimedes point, what is standing still in all the change, the point of reference that will remain, through both time and space. A tree like this is where eternity meets the temporal, the tree is both alive and dead. Looking at it, it is not easy to say if it is living or dead, it grows so slowly, its colour is grey like ash. When the wind-swept tree 'dies', it still remains standing for centuries, that firm is it. There is really no boarder between life and death in such a tree. Its dying is only a theoretical diagnose made by mortals, it has nothing to do with the wind-swept tree, which mediates life and death, transcends it as a bolt, running trough both. Still standing as a light-house to navigate by across the mountain-plains.

When night falls the whole landscape is transformed, from a place of peaceful loneliness to a place of frightening loneliness. People are indoor at this hour, in a cabin protecting them from the night. In here it is light, warm and safe. Stepping out now is really to learn what *outside* is, experienced in the contrast to the inside. The ice-could wind and the darkness are so present. The wind-swept tree is out here now, far away from the safety of the cabin, how would it be to be with the tree now? How would it be to hang upon the tree now, swaying in the wind?

It is for nine nights like this Odin hangs in the tree. Spending a whole night out here is a strong experience, watching the night grow darker as the day says goodbye, it is like being deserted by a friend, left alone exposed to the creatures of the night. They start coming as soon as the sky grows darker. Not one by one, but their whole world at once, transforming well known stones to alien beings, new strange sounds are heard, the wind howling in another voice, or is it another wind? The tree remains through this transformation, but we now see another side of it. Where we during daytime found safety and trust, we now realise how insignificant we are to this tree, how the frightening night is a much closer fellow of the tree. Hanging in the tree seems somehow safer, you are already dead, become part of the tree, joined the transformation into night. See Odin, hanging there, not really touching the tree, but still closer to it than anyone who has met it by daytime. He is as close to the centuries as one can get, but still restless swinging from the branch of his gallows, never let alone by the wind, spinning in the rope, nine nights he hangs here, in between life and death, wounded by spear, riding the pole right through all that change, through time, through life and death in his search of the runes. Is he facing death to have a look into eternity?

## Etymology

It is now time to explore the etymology of the ‘wind-swept tree’ ‘*Meiðir*’ is a tree, in modern Icelandic, it refers to a dead standing tree, in old Norse it might also be a living tree, it seems to refer to the ‘standingness’ of the tree rather than to its tree-ness, it can also mean a pole or stick. It is some times used as a metaphor for a man, one that does not bend. One that stands firm in battle, immovable. We can track the word back to Sanskrit ‘*methi*’ or ‘*medhi*’ meaning ‘pole’ or ‘stake’. From this we have the word ‘*minōti*’, which means ‘to ground’, ‘fortify’ or ‘build’. From the same root in modern English, we find the word ‘medial’ with the cluster of words connected to that, like ‘middle’, ‘medium’ or ‘mediate’, (Eliade’s exploration of the *axis mundi* throws light on this connection<sup>3</sup>). A word from the same root in modern Norwegian, is ‘*med*’, which is an ancient mark, either an outstanding natural formation, a raised stone, a pile of rocks or maybe a pole, standing along the coast, as a mark to navigate by for sailors and especially for fishermen who needs to position their boat at the exact spot on the fjord, where the fish go<sup>4</sup>.

The story of the word ‘*meidr*’ seems to match the picture of ‘the wind-swept tree’, with the ‘standingness, or ‘steadyness’ as a point of reference and further by its reference to ‘middle’ (regarding both to time and space), that which the world revolves around, like the hub of the wheel, its connection to the wagon which is still in its motion. We can also read that which the motion is centred around, or maybe that which it is about, if we see our physical middle as a middle of meaning.

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<sup>3</sup> We can also think of the *stumpa*, the pole forming the middle of the scene in traditional Indian theatre, with its reference to all the levels of reality.

<sup>4</sup> There is also another old Norse word, ‘*meiða*’ meaning ‘to change permanently’ ‘leave a mark’ or ‘hurt’. From this, we have the modern Norwegian word ‘*men*’, a permanent wound. In connection to this we can maybe place the English ‘maimed’ (and thus ‘mad’). These words are in the etymological dictionaries treated as a different group of words, as they can not be tracked back to the same source. Those who track them furthest go back to the Sanskrit ‘*methati*’, ‘to damage’. The close connection on meaning between ‘hurt’ or ‘leave a permanent mark’ and ‘*meidr*’ as the permanent, the marking pole, makes one wonder if there might be an etymological connection between these two words after all, maybe further back than the Sanskrit sources, and if the study of myth might be a tool for an archaeology of words which, like phonemic tracking, can bring etymology beyond the oldest written sources.

There is further one very specific use of the word '*meiðr*' in Old Norse, which is of the highest relevance for us, and most interesting regarding the connection between etymology and myth. It refers specifically to '*Yggdrasil*', the world tree in the Edda cosmos.

## The tree in its Cosmos

We shall briefly see how the rest of the Edda can deepen the picture we have seen so far. *Yggdrasil* is the ash tree in the center of the old Norse cosmos. No one knows from where it comes, as is also indicated in the verse we have just looked at, 'that tree that no one knows whence its root runs', the tree already was there when man came to this world, it was there even before the gods came. It will also remain standing after *ragnarokk*, the violent end of this world. Under this tree those who survive shall find shelter. *Yggdrasil* is a life giver, spreading dew to all the vallies of the world. It is also a source of wisdom and knowledge<sup>5</sup>. The well of wisdom is to be found at the root of *Yggdrasil*. From its top one can see to every corner and hidden place of the whole world. Knowledge and wisdom in the Edda cosmos is not like we think of it today, something we can create. It is there already, and one has to find it, earn it or steal it, often by mystical means. This knowledge and wisdom exists in close connection with power. Power also seem to just be there. One could get a share of power through knowledge and wisdom. This feature of 'Being there already' indicates that they are of an eternal character. The eternal quality of *Yggdrail* resonates with this as a source of knowledge and wisdom. Under its roots we find the *Nornes*, who spin the threads of destiny for every man on earth, weaving them together in a loom, forming the future of the world. Even the fate of Odin himself is already woven in this loom. It is important to note that the tree with the well and the *Nornes* are powers beyond all the gods. They are eternity and destiny. The gods might be full of power, wisdom and knowledge, but they are still temporal beings subject to destiny. Their power, wisdom and knowledge are limited, not eternal as is their source. Odin must humbly ask the *Nornes* to give him a glimpse of the future, he had to pawn his eye to gain wisdom from the well, and he certainly had to give himself to be able to pick up the runes from the tree.

## The mystic and the Tree

When we now have placed the motif of the wind-swept tree in the Edda cosmos, we shall have a short sweep through it, just to give an idea of the world in which the motif we just have explored takes place. We shall look closer at Odin and his relationship to *Yggdrasil*. He is the chief of gods, the ruler of loss and victory in battle, he is called 'the spear master', for his famous spear *Gaunne* by which he introduced the concept of war to the world, provoked change in the order of things and interestingly enough, seems to have wounded himself with in the scene we have just looked at. He is the god of rage. '*Odr*' means rage, ecstasy. Odin is the god of the berserks. He is also the god of poetry, but above all is he the one that is ever seeking knowledge and wisdom. Within the realms of knowledge is the use of the powerful runes, and '*seidr*', which best can be seen as a form of shamancraft. This is also a means by which he gains further knowledge, (the parallel between the novices death to be reborn as a shaman, and Odin's death on the tree to take up the runes is obvious). Odin is also called '*Ygg*' the ugly one. Maybe it refers to his looking like a dead man, a corpse on the battlefield, half way eaten by birds, with his eye hacked out. This must be seen in connection to his association with death and the dead. Odin is known to sit under hanged men, talking to them, gaining the kind of knowledge only the dead possesses. He is the god of the hanged, one

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<sup>5</sup> These words might not have exactly the same meaning as in old Norse, but we shall not deal with that problem in this essay.

sacrifice, or gives to him by hanging (which also is the way he gave to himself). Odin demands human sacrifice. His horse, the eight legged *Sleipnr*, is a special one. It is grey like ash, the colour of death and indeed the colour of a *meiðr*<sup>6</sup>. He is able to ride down to the underworld, jump over the wall to the world of the dead. To 'ride *Sleipnr*', was in the Old Norse poetry a *kjenning* or an idiom for being hanged. Interesting enough, it can seem like *Yggdrasil*, despite its standing there before time, has waited just for Odin, as the name 'Yggdrasil' actually means *Ygg's* or Odin's horse. *Drasil* is the word for a great horse. This closes in a way the circle, as Odin mounts his ash grey horse and rides off, towards eternity. At the same time it gives us an example of how the poems of the elder Edda are interlocked, disclosing and waking to life the Old Norse cosmos.

## Conclusion

We shall now return to our point of departure, regarding the origin of the runes. We have explored these lines of *Hávamál* in a way that has taken us to the depths of the Edda cosmos. One might argue that we should have stopped a long time ago, as speculative thought might have taken us out on the most unsafe waters, but as this essay is meant to give an example of an exploration of the Edda cosmos, we should keep on in the exploring spirit. We might go wrong, blinded by the drive to fit this whole cosmos into our own narrow but fancy conceptions of reality. But putting together the treads we already have collected, forces us to draw the conclusions that will follow, so if we go wrong, we really already have done it. We have dealt with the scene where Odin is able to take up the runes, having the question about their origin in mind. We have focused on the wind-swept tree. Exploring this, gave us the impression of a fixed point in the world of change, a touch of eternity. Bringing this mode to *Yggdrasil* in the Edda cosmos, give us a picture of something quite more than a tree. It is a part of eternity, or rather an aspect of eternity, as there can be no *parts* of eternity. It is the centre around which the world spins, the stillness in all change, the eternity in which time can unfold. We might say it is the pole from which the cosmos evolves, it is certainly the fix point to which we should look to see where we are in this world.

This gives us a different view than just Odin hanging in a tree, sacrificed to gain the knowledge of the runes and picking them up from the ground after nine days. We now see Odin giving up his life as mortal in the world, entering 'the tree' which is to step out of the world of change, into the sphere of eternity, where *truth* is to be found, the mystical point of reference, from where one can see how things really are, almost as 'the sphere of eternal forms' to use a Platonic term. The sphere where knowledge, wisdom, and maybe also power and life stems from or are representations of. *Here* where the runes picked up<sup>7</sup>, this gives us a glimpse of the power they possess or represents, like the Archimedian point from which you can move the whole world, the runes possess the power of eternity, the stuff the world originates from and revolves around. The answer to our initial question regarding the origin of the runes, certainly has told us something about their nature and place in cosmos.

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<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to notice that *Yggdrasil* is an *ash* tree, and *Sleipner* is gray like *ash*. I should also note that the first man in the world, created by Odin among others was named *Askr*, meaning *ash*. Is there an etymological connection here?

<sup>7</sup> We should note that the line; 'nystak niðr', which notoriously is translated 'down I starred', a translation which makes sense in the motif of Odin hanging from a tree, encloses this latter meaning of a place in eternity. The word 'niðr', can mean 'down', but I will argue that it also can have the meaning 'to a hidden or secret place', as the form 'niðri' actually both refers to 'down under' and 'in secrecy' or 'hidden'. If this is so, Odin is stirring not down, but to what is hidden.

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