



Reasonings on the Havamal

The [Havamal](#), or *Song of the High One*, is a collection of ancestral advice attributed to the Norse God of Wisdom, Alfater Odin. It is a poem that consists of 164 stanzas and is part of the Poetic Edda which, along with the Prose Edda makes up the Eddas, or scriptures of [Asatrú](#), one of the native religions of Europe.

It seems to have been a collection of advice from elders, wise people, and old people that was gathered and remembered by *skalds* (griots, or wandering poets and performers). It uses mnemonic devices like rhyme to facilitate memorization of the verses. Eventually these collectors of wisdom invented alphabets and wrote down their lore: the magical alphabet of the runes is attributed to Odin.

The Havamal refers to Odin (here known as *Hárr*, or the High One) as the prototype of the traditional oracular priests who were initiated via a grueling ritual. It also refers to him as *Fímbul-Thulr* or the Mighty Sage. Thules were the keepers of wisdom in the pre-historic era, a priestly, oracular, and philosophical caste. Not much else is known of the thules, other than they deliberated as judges when needed.

As almost invariably happens with ancestral lore and philosophy, the Havamal contains pearls of great wisdom embedded into a worldview and religion that practiced, among other things, human sacrifice, and that taught that when warriors die they go to Valhalla. Heathens claim that they do not need salvation, but this one salvific feature does reveal the underlying use of the credulity of common people by the ruling classes in heathen society, which were

frequently made up of warlords who needed to recruit warriors. My intention with blogging about the Havamal is:

to honor ancestral wisdom by sharing it with future generations

to secularize the Havamal and “separate the diamond from the dung hill”, as Thomas Jefferson did with the Gospels

to produce an Epicurean appraisal of the text and its context

With regards to this last point, I must begin with a criticism derived from Philodemus’ Herculaneum scroll [On Death](#), which criticizes ancient beliefs that favored death in battle:

Ancient men often worried about things like ... dying a glorious death as a result of the belief that a better afterlife awaits those who die in battle (for instance: as heroes in Valhalla, or as jihadists with virgin attendants in the Islamic heaven) while old ladies who die a natural death, presumably, end up in Hades with all the other ordinary dead people.

*Conversely, many people who deserve glory and fame, and are remembered for having lived noble lives, died natural deaths. If only a so-called “noble death” in battle makes one glorious, then most cultural heroes of humanity would have to be deemed ignoble. Therefore, **we should not deem heroic our deaths instead of our lives**. Living heroically is what has value and honor, says Philodemus. A dead person can perform no glorious deeds, and whatever glorious deeds are performed happen while we’re alive.*

*For a sensible person, the only way that dying in battle is desireable is if we are wounded and wish to be released from terrible pain. Philodemus derisively says that **soldiers in battle die like cattle**.*

Perhaps honoring dead warriors by imagining them in Valhalla is one way to purge our collective guilt about their sacrifice. But such beliefs have no foundation in the study of nature. There’s no reason to believe that a murderer or mercenary hired by the state, by a medieval king, or by Jabba the Hutt for that matter, survives his death, much less experiences greater bliss in the afterlife than the rest of us. Naturalists must put aside such infantile views and honor all those that came before us with gratitude.

Wisdom for Wanderers

The text begins with a section on hospitality and how to properly, compassionately, and warmly greet a guest who wanders in the cold. Later in stanza 134, we are advised:

*Growl not at guests, nor drive them from the gate
but show thyself gentle to the poor.*

Hospitality was one of the cardinal virtues of traditional Scandinavian society. Furthermore, skalds and other functionaries who transmitted the lore frequently found themselves in a situation where they needed the hospitality of others.

The Havamal was, among other things, a handbook for people who had an oracular role within Scandinavian and Germanic societies. They used the runes to advise others. Each runic letter had an oracular meaning, in addition to representing a sound. Odin says in the Havamal that, in order to give wisdom, a man must travel and see the world. A sheltered life produces little wisdom. True to his shamanic role, which has been frequently compared to that of a traditional psychotherapist, a rune-worker had to study people, become a kind of psychologist. Ergo, the wanderer is offered as a prototype for the wisdom seeker and keeper. In stanza 18 we read:

*He alone knows,
he who wanders widely
and has travelled a great deal,
what disposition
each man possesses.
He is knowing in commonsense.*

Another advise given has to do with associating with wise people (57, 133). Association with elders and with the wise is universally advised in all wisdom traditions.

*I counsel thee, Stray-Singer, accept my counsels,
they will be thy boon if thou obey'st them,
they will work thy weal if thou win'st them:
hold never in scorn the hoary singer;
oft the counsel of the old is good;
come words of wisdom from withered lips ...*

Most heathens see the runes as a prophetic tool and believe in prophecies like Ragnarok (the end of the world). Epicureanism, on the other hand, warns about deterministic views and, yet, many of the wise sayings of our Masters have been called *oracles*. When words of wisdom carry so much power that they transform, heal, and elevate the soul, they can be seen as oracular. I'd like to submit that the Havamal seems to coincide with this view when it advises against trying to divine the future or trying to know things beyond one's measure of what can/should be known in stanzas 54-56, in view of the belief that happiness is life's goal, and explaining that some knowledge is not conducive to a happy life.

*Wise in measure let each man be;
but let him not wax too wise;
for never the happiest of men is he
who knows much of many things.*

*... Seldom a heart will sing with joy
if the owner be all too wise.*

*... Who looks not forward to learn his fate
unburdened heart will bear.*

It may seem odd that a scripture tied to an oracular tradition would advise against learning our fate. Indeed, chance and fortune are the objects of profound distrust in the Havamal (77, 87) and men are advised to always plan ahead and secure their provisions. If we believe (what these stanzas suggest) that the runes are not to be used to divine one's future or things unknown, then consulting the runes is about consulting the wisdom of those that came before. We may instead see them as memory aids, as part of a system of techniques to efficiently transmit wisdom. Many of the runes relate to specific verses in the Havamal and remind us of advice given there (*Gifu*, or the gift-rune, reminds us of advice on friendship; *Kenaz*, or kindling fire, reminds us of wholesome association as it is mentioned in verse 57, etc.).

A similar system exists in the African oral scripture of *Ifá*, where 16 *odus* or letters carry within them particular proverbs, songs, stories, etc. The *babalawo* ("father of the mysteries") or priest must memorize them, and every possible combination of two of them, to give oracular advice based on the lore. This system uses a binary language (of ones and zeroes, like computer languages, which are conjured up by casting cowrie shells) to produce 256 combinations, which makes it reminiscent of the Chinese divination system known as I-Ching.

Training as an Ifá priest involves memorization of this huge body of knowledge, which is organized neatly in this manner for easy memorization. When a certain *odu* or letter appears in a reading, the *babalawo* recites what he has memorized from that portion of the oral scripture.

Runes are also letters and carriers of ancestral lore, and in fact the runes are drawn from the *Well of Mimir* (Memory). When the thule made use of the memory-aids given by elders and fully memorized the wisdom tradition, the wisdom would crown his head and it would always walk with him.

The Canon in the Havamal

From the onset, thules studying the Havamal were told to trust their senses, and in fact the God Heimdal was believed to have acute sight and hearing as one of his virtues, which explains how he became the Guardian of the entrance to Asgard. The seventh stanza accentuates the importance of having keen senses.

*Let the wary stranger who seeks refreshment
keep silent with sharpened hearing;
with his ears let him listen, and look with his eyes;
thus each wise man spies out the way.*

It's refreshing to find a reference to the senses this early in a text that proposes to take us on a journey to gather wisdom. The greater part of the Havamal concerns itself with this world.

Autarchy in the Havamal

Self-sufficiency is another one of the cardinal virtues celebrated in the Havamal. It is all-encompassing. A free man must have within himself esteem and praise (stanza 8), he must rely on his own wisdom (9) rather than on the wisdom born from the heads of others, must wake up early, be diligent, and supervise his business himself to ensure success (58-59). In Havamal 36-37 we read:

*One's own house is best, though it be small;
each man is a free man at home;
though he own two she-goats
and a bark-thatched hut,*

it is still better than begging.

*... With a bleeding heart will he beg, who must,
his meat at every meal.*

Self-sufficient men must have enough what is needed and never be ashamed of what they have even if it's little (61), and they must keep provisions for when needed (60), since wealth is sometimes an unreliable friend (77). Odin is the best embodiment of the virtues related to autarchy: he gets personally involved in managing all his affairs, is a great strategist, takes pre-meditated action, and makes provisions for the future.

The Virtue of Moderation

This tradition of poet-priests goes back a long way and links Norse spirituality to Persian Zoroaster and even to the brahmin caste in India. It included shamanic practices related to ceremonial intoxication (Indian *soma*, Persian *haoma*, Norse *odroerir*) to induce trance-like states and inspiration. Naturally, there is a danger in these cultures of substance abuse. The ceremonial use of these substances is meant, in part, to separate them from ordinary states of mind, and to ensure that they are only used within ritual context and not abused. Alcohol and substance abuse have always gotten people into needless problems. It's not hard to imagine that rune-workers frequently had to advise people who got into trouble after drinking too much ale. We see the symptoms of this in the Havamal. The avoidance of alcoholism and of drinking too much is advised in numerous stanzas (11-14, 17, 19), and it's frequently associated with saying too much or speaking imprudently.

To the heedful comes seldom harm.

Verses 20-21 advise against eating too much. Moderation in speech gets an entire section (26-30), and there are parallel verses in many wisdom traditions, particularly in the oral scripture of *Ifá* from the Yoruba nation in West Africa. The African proverbs accentuate the role of age in social hierarchy: elders must speak first and foremost, and the young ones must listen. They must never speak over elders, and the wisdom of the old people must be treated with great care because they have lived longer. This structure helps to ensure the transmission of the wisdom traditions in oral societies.

It's likely that a (perhaps not-so-strict) version of this existed among ancient Scandinavians, and this can be understood within the context of preserving lore in an oral culture, and also

profiting from the wisdom of elders. It is important to know when to ask and when to speak when one is among the wise.

*He seems wise,
he who knows how to ask
and to speak likewise*

*He who is never silent
speaks plenty
of meaningless words;
the fast-talking tongue,
unless it have controllers,
often sings itself harm.*

Words are tools, and sometimes weapons. They can get us into irreparable trouble, or can get us opportunity, redemption and salvation. Our reputation also hinges on them (101). Once cast into the world, they can not be taken back. In every wisdom tradition, the moderate and prudent use of words is of extreme importance.

The runic tradition itself, in its barest form, can be broadly understood to be about the wise and effective use of speech and, in fact, the Four Cures and other powerful formulas used in Epicureanism have many of the features of rune-songs, particularly when they are treated as therapeutic, healing mantras. A rune, a *galdor* (enchantment), is a song, it's made up of words meant to have specific effects.

Laughter as a Revealer of Character

In [my book](#)'s chapter on developing a hedonic regimen, I cite research on laughter therapy that shows how it alleviates the suffering of terminally ill patients and other health benefits. However, over the years I've also noticed that we can judge a person's character by the things that he or she laughs at. We can also judge people's characters by the battles they choose (stanza 124), but that's another discussion. Odinism is one of the wisdom traditions that expands on this. In stanzas 22 and 127 we read:

*The wretched man
of bad character
laughs at all kinds of things.*

*On the other hand he doesn't know
what he ought to know,
that he is not lacking in faults.*

*... Rejoice not ever at tidings of ill,
but glad let thy soul be in good.*

Advice against mockery is revisited in stanzas 30 and 131. This is not just a matter of decency and good manners: a prudent person does not earn unnecessary enemies. Showing bad character attracts animosity and evil from others.

Laughter is a powerful tool and ancient cultures always thought of laughter as magical. We've all seen the derisive, haughty laughter of witches in films and folklore, and many of the wisdom traditions that still acknowledge magic (Voodoo, Santeria, etc.) still make use of ritual laughter. It acts as a charm, a kind of incantation that makes us feel powerful and superior over the situations, people, or difficulties that we encounter, and we should certainly make use of laughter in our art of living. But when we use it as an expression of hatred or ill-will, others will observe this and we will lose their trust or attract people of similarly rotten character to our side.

The virtues and wisdom of cheerfulness and sweetness are most eloquently embodied by the Goddess of love, Freya, in the heathen faith.

Pleasant Abiding

*The unwise man
is awake all night
and thinks of all sorts of things;
then he is tired
when morning comes,
and all the trouble is as it was.*

Ataraxia is a matter of prudence. Havamal 23 teaches us never to pre-occupy ourselves, and instead to occupy ourselves. We solve nothing by worrying. In stanzas 15 and 48, we also read that it's wise and proper to live fearlessly and cheerfully:

Joyous and generous let each man show him

until he shall suffer death.

*Most blest is he who lives free and bold
and nurses never a grief,
for the fearful man is dismayed by aught,
and the mean one mourns over giving.*

The Havamal does not create a philosophical system that establishes happiness as the end, but it does recognize that a wise man lives joyously and generously, and it more than once tacitly (at times overtly) recognizes that happiness is the purpose of life.

Holy Friendship

*Young was I once, I walked alone,
and bewildered seemed in the way;
then I found me another and rich I thought me,
for **man is the joy of man.***

The subject of friendship in the Havamal is so vast and rich that it deserves an entire book. Like AC Grayling's Humanist Bible, which contains a [book on friendship](#) titled *Concord*, the Havamal also contains an entire wisdom tradition around the belief that friendship is sacred and essential for a happy, healthy life.

The key thing to understand is that, within the context of rune-workers who had to advise others who were confused or perplexed by betrayal or by not discerning clearly between who is a friend and who isn't, these matters had to be considered and explained frequently by the keepers of wisdom to their querents. We find parallel verses in many other traditions.

Havamal warns against flatterers (stanzas 24-25, 123) and against associating with those who are vile and ignorant (121-122), against confiding in people that haven't earned our trust yet (46, 63, 65, 116), and against choosing bad friends who will not stick around (51). It also teaches specific advice on how to discern between true friends and false ones: it teaches that true friends are happy to travel far to visit each other whereas false ones complain about the long journey (34), and that true friends do not betray us or befriend our enemies (43), that we should share our minds with them and seek them often (44, 118-120).

It then recommends that we visit our friends often and exchange gifts (39, 41-42, 52) as

tokens of appreciation. There is also mention of the wisdom of forming alliances (62) to advance common goals, so that choosing one's friends also incorporates strategy and mutual benefit.

Friendship is contrasted with cupidity and love, as in Epicureanism where we are told that a man is lucky if he doesn't harm himself when falling in love. Odin says that even men of wisdom are in danger of losing their heads over love (91-93), which is fickle in both men and women (83, 89, 100, 117), and yet love is still praised as superior to a loveless life. In the end, it is always better to have loved someone.

*Only the mind knows
what lives near the heart;
a man is alone with his own spirit.
There is no sickness worse
for any wise man
than to have nothing to love.*

The heathen God of friendship and fraternity is Frey, however there are many instances in which the Gods declare and honor their oaths of loyalty and love and engage in gift-giving.

Death is Nothing to Us

When it comes to death, the Epicurean teachers say that we all live in a city without walls. A similar idea is expressed in the Havamal, where he who fears death is deemed a coward.

*A coward believes he will ever live
if he keep him safe from strife:
but old age leaves him not long in peace
though spears may spare his life.*

If cowardice is a vice, then the remedy is the virtue of courage. Thor is the embodiment of courage among the heathen Gods. Living courageously means, also, confronting death without fear.

Throughout the Havamal, a philosophy for living is expounded so that, even if we do away with the other-worldly beliefs of our heathen ancestors, we still find in it a rich life-affirming literary and spiritual resource that helps to give meaning to this world.

*A man is not wholly wretched,
though he be in rotten health;
one is blessed with sons,
another with kinsmen,
another with plenty of money,
another with deeds well done.*

*More blest are the living than the lifeless,
'tis the living who come by the cow;
I saw the hearth-fire burn in the rich man's hall
and himself lying dead at the door.*

*The lame can ride horse, the handless drive cattle,
the deaf one can fight and prevail,
'tis happier for the blind than for him on the bale-fire,
but no man hath care for a corpse.*

Odin's Betrayal of Troth

We have come to the most controversial portion of the scripture. After the 100th stanza, the Havamal turns into a magical and religious text and no longer serves for moral guidance. It immediately shows a face of Odin that most heathens would rather not see.

Epicureanism teaches that it is blasphemous for mortals to attribute vices to deities instead of virtues, but here it's by Odin's own admission that we learn that he swore a sacred vow on an oath-ring and later betrayed it, causing grief to a woman he seduced in order to steal an entheogen known as *odroerir* ("soul-stirrer", a sacred drink that brings trance-like inspiration). In light of this, it seems hypocritical that Odin advises others to hold fast to their promises in stanza 129.

We may argue that it was the poets who wrote the Havamal, and not Odin himself, who made these accusations of betrayal, however some of the other things we see in Odin elsewhere might be considered consistent with a personality profile that will do anything to gain greater wisdom (and power), and to have new experiences. In this case, *odroerir* represents experiments with altered states of consciousness through which certain knowledge or experiences can be gained. Odin seems to have long-term goals and perspectives that are not immediately obvious to the layman, but for which he sets off on journeys that involve

gathering intelligence and means to increase knowledge. These perspectives may help to explain some of his apparently anti-social behavior.

We must also keep in mind the eternal hostilities between the civilizing Aesir (Gods) and the Frost-Giants who embody raw forces of nature that must be tamed, and Gunnlod was of this race of beings. We learn that his seduction of the giantess through sweet and soft words, only to later betray her, was pre-meditated from his admission that he wore a mask or disguise of some sort, and that he would not have been able to escape the realm of the frost giants if he had not won Gunnlod's love (stanzas 102-108). The entire affair could be considered an act of infiltration of enemy territory during times of war to gain intelligence.

Troth-breaking was one of the worst and most dishonorable crimes in ancient Scandinavian society. This is not a trivial matter in Scandinavian ethics, and whatever explanation one comes up with for Odin's behavior with Gunnlod must bear greater weight than the taboo against troth-breaking.

It is this aspect of bandit that earns Odin the title *Bolverkr* (evil-worker) and casts him as a morally ambiguous character. The most we can say about this portion of the *Havamal* is that 1. it's true that there are instances where certain people are willing to cause great harm if they're confident that they will not be caught in the act and 2. there are no "thou-shalt-nots" set in stone in heathen morality and context is everything.

We will see in the next section that Odin drinks the *odroerir* which he has stolen from Gunnlod as part of his initiation into the runes. Some initiatory ceremonies require an initial trial where the novice must break certain taboos or accomplish certain tasks prior to initiation. Perhaps the Gunnlod affair was that: a preamble required for his initiatory ordeal. In Santeria, for instance, initiates who are receiving the great initiation of *kari-ocha*, where their patron deity is crowned on their heads, must first perform certain tasks, one of which has to do with stealing candy or other goods in imitation of the child-like trickster God Elegua.

The Runamal

The final portion of the *Song of the High One* is the *Runamal* (Song of Runes), which tells the story of how he won the runes through a difficult initiation. Here, Odin reveals himself as a shaman. We see the Dionysian and Nietzschean aspects of Odinism: through trance and altered states of consciousness, through the constant gathering of knowledge, the God of Wisdom comes to own the runes, the magical letters by which he has the power to give people

meaning. He comes to own sacred language, the very semantics of the spiritual reality of the tribe and the community and the people. It is this power that makes him a shaman capable of oracular pronouncements on behalf of his querents. This is extremely powerful imagery.

Odin's initiation incorporated a fast and self-sacrifice while hanging from a sacred tree for nine days and nights, and later drinking the sacred mead (*odroerir*) to achieve an ecstatic state. Anyone who has consumed an entheogen (or even alcohol) on an empty stomach understands that fasting makes the experience much more powerful. Some entheogens (like Amazonian ayahuasca and the Tainos' cohoba) also induce an initial period of purging, where the initiate must first vomit his impurities. By fasting, the initiate avoids these unpleasant effects.

After his initiation, Odin soon "bore fruit" and waxed in wisdom. The *Runamal* goes on to share the song of magical spells, each one of which is tied to a rune. As is the case with all scripture, the *Havamal* is a matrix of cultural traditions and we find stanzas at the root of ceremonies like the heathen baptism (which is born out of the thirteenth rune). The poem closes with blessings upon all.

*Now the sayings of Har are spoken
in Har's hall,
very needful to the sons of men,
harmful to the sons of giants.
Hail to him who spoke!
Hail to him who understands!
Let him benefit who took them!
Blessings on those who listened!*

The *Havamal* is one of the most brilliant examples of the West's intellectual, philosophical, and spiritual legacy and should not be a secret known only to a few lovers of folklore and antiquities. I greatly advise the study of this underrated and fascinating piece of wisdom literature.

Further Reading:

[The Olive Bray translation](#) from the University of Pittsburgh webpage is the most widely used
This [Havamal translation and original](#), from beyondweird.com, helps with clarity