

The Lay of Vafthrúthnir

Vafþrúðnismál

This lay is frankly didactic in purpose, offering fragments of cosmogonic and mythological information which is brought out in the course of a *senna* or "flyting" between the king of the gods and the wise giant Vafthrúthnir.¹ The narrative frame chosen is not unskillfully handled.

Óthin has heard of the wisdom of Vafthrúthnir and, against the wishes of his anxious spouse, fares to see him in his hall, there to match his own lore against the giant's. After an initial test of the "wisdom" of his guest who has, so far, insisted on standing on the floor, Vafthrúthnir urges him to occupy the high-seat, there to continue the wager, with the loser's head as the stake. Óthin now becomes the interrogator and finally propounds the unanswerable question. Through it, but too late, the doomed giant recognizes his opponent.

The measure is *ljóðabáttur*, the typical vehicle of gnomic poetry. The regular dialogic form has, in this as in other cases, favored the preservation of the text, which is handed down complete in the *Codex Regius*, and in part in the *Hauksbók*. In addition, some nine stanzas of it occur in various connections in Snorri's paraphrase in the "Gylfaginning." There are no clues as to place of origin. The purely heathen tone has led scholars to assign the poem to the tenth century; but we may well suspect it to be a later, perhaps skaldic, effort.

(Óthin said:)

1. "Give rede now, Frigg,² as to fare me listeth
to wise Vafthrúthnir.
Much I wonder if in wisdom my like
the all-wise etin be."

(Frigg said:)

2. "At home had I Herjafather³ rather,
in the garth of the gods;
there's no match in might among thurses
to that all-wise etin."

(Óthin said:)

3. "Far have I fared, much afield have I been,
and have striven in strength with gods;
to view me listeth how Vafthrúthnir
lives in his high-timbered hall."

¹ "Strong in Entangling," that is, in questions.

² "Beloved," Óthin's wife.

³ "Father of Hosts," Óthin.

(Frigg said:)

4. "All hail to thy going! all hail to thy coming!
all hail to thee, hence and hither!
May thy wit not fail thee, Father of Men,⁴
when with words ye war."

5. ⁵[Went then Óthin his wisdom to match
with the all-wise etin:
fared to the hall of Im's father.⁶
In went Ygg⁷ forthwith.]

(Óthin said:)

6. "Hail, Vafthrúthnir! to thy hall I am come
to see thee, etin, myself;
to know me listeth if lore thou hast,
or art all-wise, etin."

(Vafthrúthnir said:)

7. "What wayfaring wight such words dareth
hurl at me in my hall?
Alive shalt thou never leave this hall
if thou showest thee lesser in lore."

(Óthin said:)

8. Gagnráth⁸ my name; as guest I come
to thy threshold thirsty, oh thurs!
Needful of welcome I wandered long;
to thy hearth hither I fared."

(Vafthrúthnir said:)

9. "Why then, Gagnráth, greet me from floor?
In the hall seat thee on settle!

⁴ Óthin.

⁵ As the only example of a narrative stanza in *ljóðabáttur*, this one looks like an (unnecessary) interpolation. The unannounced shift of scene is common to Eddic poems and the ballad.

⁶ Nothing is known of this son of Vafthrúthnir.

⁷ Óthin. See "Völuspá," St. 28 and Note 30.

⁸ "Giving Good Counsel," that is, for victory.

Moot then may we who most knoweth,
whether guest or grizzled thul."⁹

(*Othin said:*)

10. ¹⁰"In want who comes to a wealthy man,
let him say what is needful, or naught!
Too much babbling is bad for him
to cold-hearted host who comes."

(*Vafþrúðnir said:*)

11. "Say then, Gagnráth, since unseated thou wilt
match thy lore with mine:
how the horse is hight on high which draws
every day at dawn to mankind?"

(*Othin said:*)

12. "He is Skínfaxi¹¹ hight which skyward brings
every day at dawn to mankind;
of horses best he to heroes seems,
his mane glisters like gold."

(*Vafþrúðnir said:*)

13. "Say then, Gagnráth, since unseated thou wilt
match thy lore with mine:
how the horse is hight which the hallowed night
brings to the blessed gods?"

(*Othin said:*)

14. "He is Hrímfaxi¹² hight which the hallowed night
brings to the blessed gods.
As he fares, foam doth fall from his bit;
thence cometh the dew in the dales."

⁹ See "Hávamál," Note 2.

¹⁰ This stanza would seem to belong with the counsels on conduct in "Hávamál" rather than here.

¹¹ "Shiny-Mane," the sun-horse.

¹² "Rime-Mane."

(*Vafþrúðnir said:*)

15. "Say then, Gagnráth, since unseated thou wilt
match thy lore with mine:
how the flood is hight which flows between
the garth of the gods and the etins?"

(*Othin said:*)

16. "Is hight Ifing the flood which flows between
the garth of the gods and the etins;
will it ever and ay open remain:
on it never is ice."

(*Vafþrúðnir said:*)

17. "Say then, Gagnráth, since unseated thou wilt
match thy lore with mine:
how the field is hight where as foes will meet
Surt¹³ and the sacred gods?"

(*Othin said:*)

18. "Is hight Vígríth¹⁴ the field where as foes will meet
Surt and the sacred gods;
a hundred leagues in length it is;
was that plain appointed to them."

(*Vafþrúðnir said:*)

19. "Wise art, wayfarer! welcome to bench!
let us sitting on settle hold converse.
Our heads be stakes, my hall within,
and wins he whose wisdom is greater."

(*Othin said:*)

20. "Say thou firstly, for sage thou art
and thou, Vafþrúðnir, dost wot:
whence came the earth and the heavens above,
at the outset, etin?"

¹³ The god of fire. See "Völuspá," St. 51 and Note 73.

¹⁴ "Field of Battle."

(*Vafþrúðnir said:*)

21. "Of Ymir's¹⁵ flesh the earth was shaped,
the barren hills of his bones;
and of his skull the sky was shaped,
of his blood the briny sea."

(*Óðin said:*)

22. "Say thou this second, for sage thou art
and thou, Vafþrúðnir, dost wot:
whence the moon did come who rides men above,
and the sun also?"

(*Vafþrúðnir said:*)

23. "Mundilferi¹⁶ is hight the Moon's father,
and the Sun's also;
they must daily wander the welkin about,
to tell the time for men."

(*Óðin said:*)

24. "Say thou this third, in thy thought if it dwells
and thou, Vafþrúðnir, dost wot:
whence the day springeth, in the dales which shines,
and eke the night and new moon?"

(*Vafþrúðnir said:*)

25. "Is one Delling¹⁷ hight, he is Day's father;
but Night was born to Nor;
Waxing and waning moon the wise gods made
to tell the time for men."

(*Óðin said:*)

26. "Say thou this fourth, if thou fathom it,
and thou, Vafþrúðnir, dost wot:

¹⁵ See especially "Grímnismál," Sts. 41-42; also "Völuspá," St. 3 and Note 5.

¹⁶ According to "Gylfaginning," Chap. 10, he had named his daughter after the sun, and his son after the moon. In order to punish him for his presumption the gods set them to drive the wains of the sun and the moon.

¹⁷ "The Shining." According to "Gylfaginning," Chap. 9, a god who with Nótt, "Night," engendered a son, Dagr, "Day."

whence winter came and warm summer,
in the beginning, for gods?"

(*Vafþrúðnir said:*)

27. "Is one Vindsval¹⁸ hight, he is Winter's father,
and Summer is Svásuth's son;
(but Vindsval was to Vásuth born:
cold-hearted all that kin)." ¹⁹

(*Óðin said:*)

28. "Say thou this fifth, if sage thou art
and thou, Vafþrúðnir, dost wot:
who the oldest etin of Ymir's kin
was in the world's first days?"

(*Vafþrúðnir said:*)

29. "Ages before the earth was made,
Bergelmir came to be;
Thrúthgelmir was that thurs' father,
but Aurgelmir²⁰ oldest of all."

(*Óðin said:*)

30. "Say thou this sixth, if sage thou art
and thou, Vafþrúðnir, dost wot:
whence Aurgelmir and all his sib
at the outset, wise etin?"

(*Vafþrúðnir said:*)

31. "Out of Élivágar²¹ spurted venom drops,
and waxed till there was an etin;
'tis thence our kin came altogether;
hence frightful and fierce our ways."

¹⁸ "Wind-Cold," a giant, as are Vásuth, "the Wet and Cold One," and Svásuth, "the Mild One."

¹⁹ Supplied with Bugge, after "Gylfaginning," Chap. 18.

²⁰ The meanings of these giant names are not certain.

²¹ "Stormy Rivers," imagined as "venom-cold" rivers in the far North ("Gylfaginning," Chap. 4).

(Óthin said:)

32. "As a seventh say, if sage thou art
and thou, Vafþrúthnir, dost wot:
how children gat the grim etin,
as misshapen she-thurs none was?"

(Vafþrúthnir said:)

33. "'Neath the ice-etin's arms, say they,
there grew both girl and boy;
one with the other, the wise etin's shanks
begat a six-headed son."

(Óthin said:)

34. "Say as an eighth, if sage thou art
and thou, Vafþrúthnir, dost wot:
what oldest of eld the earth above;
for all-wise, etin, thou art."

(Vafþrúthnir said:)

35. "Ages before the earth was made,
Bergelmir came to be;
that first I wot that the wise etin
lifeless was laid in the coffin."²²

Óthin said:

36. "Say as a ninth, if sage thou art
and thou, Vafþrúthnir, dost wot:
whence the wind cometh o'er the waves which blows,
yet is never seen itself?"

Vafþrúthnir said:

37. "One Hræsvelg²³ hight sits at heaven's end,
an etin in eagle's shape:
from his wings is wafted the wind which blows
over all who live."

²² The interpretation of this line is doubtful.²³ "Corpse-Gulper."*Óthin said:*

38. "Say as the tenth, since the sacred gods' fates
thou, Vafþrúthnir, dost wot:
whence came wise Njorth²⁴ among holy gods—
[temples and fanes full many hath he—]²⁵
yet was not begot among gods?"

(Vafþrúthnir said:)

39. "In Vanaheim²⁶ Vanir begat him,
and gave him as hostage to gods;
at the world's last weird he will wend again
home to the wise Vanir."

(Óthin said:)

40. "Say as eleventh where e'erliving men
slay each other with swords;
fighting they fall, then fare from battle
and drain goblets together."

(Vafþrúthnir said:)

41. "All the einherjar²⁷ in Óthin's garth
slay each other with swords:
fighting they fall, then fare from battle
and drain goblets together."

(Óthin said:)

42. "Say as the twelfth how the sacred gods' fates
thou, Vafþrúthnir, dost wot?
Of the etin's lore, and of all godheads,
thou sayest but sooth,
thou all-wise etin!"

²⁴ The name of this Van god corresponds exactly to that of the goddess Nerthus, "*Terre mater*," whose rites are described by Tacitus in the famous 40th chapter of his *Germania*. Originally doubtless a fertility god, in Norse mythology Njorth rules over the wind and the sea.²⁵ This line is no doubt interpolated.²⁶ "The Home of the Vanir." As a return hostage, the Æsir sent Mimir ("*Völuspá*," St. 45, Note 65).²⁷ "Single Combatants" (?), the fallen warriors who are gathered by the valkyries into Óthin's hall, Valholl (Valhalla).

(Vafþrúðnir said:)

43. "Of the etins' lore, and of all godheads,
sooth, and but sooth, I say,
for I have seen all the worlds' neath the welkin.
Nifhel²⁸ beneath nine worlds I saw,
to which the dead are doomed."²⁹

(Othin said:)

44. "Far have I fared, much afield have I been,
have oft striven in strength with gods:
what wights will live when that winter is over,
to earth dwellers awful?"³⁰

(Vafþrúðnir said:)

45. "Líf and Lífthrásir,³¹ in the leafage they
will hide of Hoddmímir;³²
the morning dews their meat will be,
they will rear the races of men."

(Othin said:)

46. "Far have I fared, much afield have I been,
have oft striven in strength with gods:
how soars the sun on the smooth heavens,
when snatched by Fenrir's³³ fangs?"

(Vafþrúðnir said:)

47. "A daughter orb was to Alfrothul³⁴ born,
ere that snatched her Fenrir's fangs;
on her mother's path will the maiden fare,
the time the fair gods fall."

²⁸ "Dark Hel" or Nifheim, the realm of Hel, the abode of the dead.

²⁹ A difficult line.

³⁰ The so-called *fimbulvetr*, "Chief of Winters," foretold also in "Völuspá" St. 40, and "Völuspá hin skamma," St. 14, as preceding the end of the world. It consists of three winters with no summer between.

³¹ "Life" and "Longing for Life" (?).

³² This tree is probably identical with the world-tree, Yggdrasil, ("Völuspá," Sts. 2 and 19) and the "Tree of Mímir" ("Fjölsvinnsmál," St. 14 and Note 15).

³³ See "Völuspá," St. 39 and Note 54.

³⁴ "Alf-Beam," a kenning for the sun.

(Othin said:)

48. "Far have I fared, much afield have I been,
have oft striven in strength with gods:
what wise maidens, the wide sea over,
full many swiftly fare?"

(Vafþrúðnir said:)

49. "Three throngs of maidens³⁵ over Mogthrásir's
thorp do throw themselves:
good hap they bring where to homes they fare,
though of etins' kin they are."

(Othin said:)

50. "Far have I fared, much afield have I been,
have oft striven in strength with gods:
of gods that were who will wield the sway,
when Surt's fire is slaked?"³⁶

(Vafþrúðnir said:)

51. "Víthar³⁷ and Váli³⁸ will ward the gods' fanes,
when Surt's fire is slaked;
Móthi and Magni³⁹ will Mjólnir have,
when Thór has thrown it last."

(Othin said:)

52. "Far have I fared, much afield have I been,
have oft striven in strength with gods:
what wight will end Alfater's⁴⁰ life,
when draws near the dreaded doom?"

³⁵ "These maidens are norns who assist at childbirth. See 'Fáfnismál,' Sts. 12 and 13. 'Mogthrásir,' 'Desirous of Sons,' is a symbolic designation for mankind, 'Mogthrásir's thorp,' for the world" [F. Jónsson].

³⁶ See "Völuspá," St. 51 ff.

³⁷ See "Völuspá," St. 53 and Note 78.

³⁸ See "Völuspá," St. 32, Note 37.

³⁹ "The Courageous" and "the Strong," who both are sons of Thór and hence inherit his hammer *Mjólnir* (See "Þrymskviða," St. 1 and Note 2). Other divinities inhabit Itha Field according to "Völuspá," St. 61 ff.

⁴⁰ Othin.

(Vafþrúðnir said:)

53. "Will the Wolf swallow Valfather⁴¹ then;
will Víthar avenge him:
he will sunder the savage jaws
of fearsome Fenrir."

(Óðin said:)

54. "Far have I wandered, much afield have I been,
have oft striven in strength with gods:
what did Óðin whisper in the ear of his son,
ere Baldr on bale was laid?"⁴²

(Vafþrúðnir said:)

55. "No dweller on earth knows what in days of yore
thou said'st in the ear of thy son:
with fey mouth fondly I flaunted my lore
and spoke of the day of doom.
With Óðin now my insight I matched:
of all beings thou art born wisest."

⁴¹ Óðin.

⁴² See "Hávamál," St. 164 and Note 94.

The Lay of Grímnir

Grímnismál

Like the foregoing poem, the "Grímnismál" has a didactic purpose, instruction in the mythology, the heavenly geography, and the nomenclature of the Northern Olympus.¹ It is conveyed in Óðin's monologue, addressed first, as a reward, to young Agnar, who takes pity on his plight, and finally to his erstwhile favorite Geirrœth, to whom the god gradually reveals his dread identity. The epic framework has elements in common with a fairy story, still told in our days in northern Norway, of two brothers who sail to a monster-infested island where the one brother abandons the other to his fate in order to claim the kingdom for himself. And there is a striking similarity between the story of the rivalry of Óðin and his wife Frigg, as told in the Introductory Prose, and the legend about the origin of the Langobards as told in the Edict of their king, Rotharis (644 A.D.), and retold by the Langobardian monk and historian, Paulus Diaconus (ca. 800):

"The form of the narrative is very symptomatic. The reader is to gather that the old cotter has given Geirrœth the counsel to make away with his brother; from the conversation between Óðin and Frigg, that it was they who fostered the youths; again, that Frigg, in maligning Geirrœth as a miser had a double purpose—in the first place, to induce Óðin to visit the king whom by her emissary she renders hostile to the disguised god; in the second place, to destroy Geirrœth, since Óðin would of course not let his ill treatment go unavenged."²

The poem has suffered chiefly from accretions, which detract seriously from its æsthetic value: its monologic form no doubt tempted copyists to interpolate stray bits of lore—sometimes of great value—which they were anxious to have preserved within its framework. For the most part, these differ in form from the otherwise regular *ljóðabáttr* stanzas.

There are no positive indications as to time of composition (tenth century?) or place of origin. Certainly the poem is archheathen. It is handed down completely both in the *Codex Regius* and the *Hauksbók*; and some twenty stanzas are embedded in Snorri's paraphrase in the "Gylfaginning."

King Hrauthung had two sons, Agnar and Geirrœth.³ Agnar was ten years old, Geirrœth eight. One day they were rowing in a boat with their tackle, to catch small fry, when the wind blew them out to sea. In the darkness of night they were dashed against the land. They made the shore and found a cotter. They stayed there that winter. The goodwife fostered Agnar, the goodman, Geirrœth and counseled him in shrewdness. In spring he got them a boat, and when he and his wife led them down to the shore he spoke secretly with Geirrœth. They had a fair wind and came to their father's landing place. Geirrœth was forward in the boat. He leapt out on shore and thrust the boat back into the sea and said, "Now go where all

¹ Some scholars, to be sure, see in the poem an Óðin monologue of great impressiveness, with no breaks in its unity—one which originally had nothing to do with the King Geirrœth motif.

² Detter and Heinzel II, 172.

³ "Spear-Peace" (?), that is, peace gained by the spear.

trolls may take thee!" Agnar drifted out to sea; but Geirrœth went up to the buildings. He was warmly welcomed, and as his father had died he was made king and became a famous leader.

One day, Óthin and Frigg were sitting in Hlithskjalf⁴ and were looking out upon all the worlds. Then said Óthin: "Dost thou see Agnar, thy foster son, how he begets children with an ogress in a cave? But Geirrœth, my foster son, is king in the land." Frigg answered: "He is so grudging about his food⁵ that he lets his guests die of hunger when he thinks too many have come." Óthin said that this was a gross lie, and so they laid a wager about this matter. Frigg sent her chambermaid Fulla to Geirrœth to tell him to beware lest he be bewitched by a warlock who was then come into the land. She told him that the warlock could be recognized by this, that no dog was so fierce as to rush at him. But it was evil slander, to say that King Geirrœth was not generous about his food. Yet he had that man taken captive whom his dogs would not set on. He was clad in a blue cloak and gave his name as Grímnir,⁶ and said no more about himself though he was asked. The king tortured him to make him speak, by setting him between two fires; and there he sate for eight nights. Geirrœth had a son ten years old, who was named Agnar after his brother. Agnar went up to Grímnir and gave him a full horn to drink from and said that the king did ill to torture one who had done no wrong. Grímnir emptied it. By that time the fire had come so near him that his cloak began to burn.

He said:

1. Hot art thou, blaze, and too high, withal!
Get, fire, thee farther away!
My frieze coat is singed though I flung it aloft,
flares up the fur in the flames.
2. Eight nights famished 'twixt the fires I sate,
nor did anyone fetch me food,
but Agnar only who after shall rule,
Geirrœth's son, o'er the Goths.⁷

⁴ "Hall of Gates" or "Gate-Tower," Óthin's seat in Valholl. "When he seats himself in the high-seat he can see all the world and the doings of every man" ("Gylfaginning," Chap. 8).

⁵ A cardinal sin in a king, according to Old Norse conceptions.

⁶ "The Masked One," Óthin. He is frequently pictured as concealing his countenance by a wide cowl.

⁷ Here, as frequently, used in a general and honorific sense for "warriors."

3. All hail to thee, for happiness
is given thee, Agnar, by Óthin.
Better guerdon shalt never get
for one beaker of beer.
4. The land is holy which lies yonder,
near to Æsir and alfs;
in Thrúthheim,⁸ there shall Thór ay dwell,
till draws nigh the doom of the gods.
5. On Ydal's⁹ plains Ull hath reared him
his hall timbered on high.
For Frey's¹⁰ tooth-fee was fashioned of yore
Alf-Home, as gift by the gods.
6. A third hall still, all thatched with silver,
was built by the blessed gods:
in Vålaskjalf¹¹ hall did house himself
Óthin in olden days.
7. Sokkvabekk¹² called is the fourth, which cool waters
ripple round about;
there Óthin and Sága¹³ all their days drink,
glad from golden cups.
8. Gladhome is hight the fifth where golden shimm'ring
Valholl¹⁴ is widely spread out;
here Óthin chooses every day
weapon-slain warriors.

⁸ "Land of Strength."

⁹ "Yew Dales." Ull, "Glorious," is the god of archery. His weapon, the longbow, was made out of the yew. He is, possibly, a hypostasis of Óthin, or of Týr, the god of war.

¹⁰ "Lord." He is the god of fertility and prosperity. Like Njorth (see "Vafþrúðnismál," Sts. 38-39), his father, he is said to be of Van origin. The "tooth-fee" is a gift to an infant when he cuts his first tooth.

¹¹ "Hall of Slain Warriors" (?), the first of Óthin's three halls.

¹² "Sunken Hall" (?). Compare with Fensalir in "Völuspá," St. 33.

¹³ "Seeress," Frigg. The name is etymologically connected, but not identical, with the Norse word for "history," "story."

¹⁴ "Hall of Slain Warriors." See Vålaskjalf, in St. 6 above, and, "Vafþrúðnismál," Sts. 40-41.

9. Easily known to Ygg's chosen
are the heavenly halls:
the rafters, spearshafts; the roofs, shield-shingled;
and the benches strewn with byrnies.
10. Easily known to Ygg's chosen
are the heavenly halls:
a wolf hangeth o'er the western gate,
and hovers an eagle on high.¹⁵
11. Thrymheim¹⁶ is hight the sixth, where Thjatsi dwelled,
the etin of awful might;
Njorth's bride there her bower hath,
Skathi,¹⁷ where her father before.
12. Breithablik¹⁸ the seventh; there Baldr the good
hath reared him his bright abode:
in that land it lies where least I know
falsehood and faithlessness.
13. Himinbjorg¹⁹ the eighth; there Heimdall, they say,
guards the holy hall;
there the gods' warder in goodly stead
the mead drinks, glad in mind.
14. Folkvang²⁰ the ninth, where Freya²¹ chooses
who seats shall have in her hall:
half of the slain are hers each day,
and half are Óthin's own.

¹⁵ Wolf and eagle, as scavengers of the battlefield, are symbolic of Óthin's warlike activities. Their carved images adorn the gable ends of his hall.

¹⁶ "Noise-Home."

¹⁷ "Scathe." She is Thjatsi's daughter and Njorth's wife. See also "Hárbarzljóð," St. 19 and "Lokasenna," St. 50.

¹⁸ "The Far-Shining"; properly the seat of Baldr, the god of innocence, justice, and light.

¹⁹ "Heavenly Mountains." Concerning Heimdall, see "Völuspá," St. 1, note.

²⁰ "Battlefield."

²¹ "Mistress," "Queen" (feminine of Frey), the goddess of love. She is the daughter of Njorth and the sister of Frey.

15. Glitnir²² the tenth, which with gold is propped,
and is shingled with shining silver;
there Forseti²³ unflagging sits,
the god that stills all strife.
16. Nóatún²⁴ the eleventh, where Njorth hath him
reared his bright abode;
the sinless god his seat there has
and rules in high-timbered hall.
17. Greenwoods grow, and grasses tall,
in Víthi,²⁵ Víthar's land:
from horseback leaps the hero, eager
to avenge his father's fall.
18. By Andhrímnir²⁶ in Eldhrímnir²⁷
Sæhrímnir,²⁸ the boar, is boiled,
the best of bacons; though 'tis barely known
what the einherjar²⁹ eat.
19. Valfather feeds Freki and Geri³⁰
on the flesh of the fallen;
but weapon-glad Óthin on wine only
lives forever and ay.
20. The whole earth over, every day,
hover Hugin and Munin;³¹
I dread lest Hugin droop in his flight,
yet I fear me still more for Munin.

²² "Shining."

²³ "The Presiding One," son of Baldr and Nanna.

²⁴ "Shipstead," "harbor."

²⁵ "Wide land" (?). As to Víthar, see "Völuspá," St. 53.

²⁶ "Sooty in the Face," the cook of Valholl.

²⁷ "Sooty from the Fire," the kettle.

²⁸ "Sooty Black" (?).

²⁹ See "Vafþrúðnismál," St. 41.

³⁰ Both names signify "the Greedy One." They are Óthin's two wolves.

³¹ "Thought" and "Remembrance," Óthin's ravens which bring him intelligence.

21. Thund³² roars loudly; sports Thjóthvitnir's
fish³³ in the foaming flood;
the strong stream seems too stiff to wade
for warriors to Valholl bent.
22. Valgrind³⁴ is the gate that wards the gods,
holy, nigh holy doors;
old is that wicket, nor wot many
with what bolt that gate is barred.
23. Five hundred rooms and forty withal
I ween that in Bilskirnir³⁵ be;
of all the halls which on high are reared
the greatest I see is my son's.
24. Five hundred doors and forty withal
I ween that in Valholl be:
eight hundred warriors through one door hie them
when they fare forth to fight the Wolf.³⁶
25. Heithrún, the goat on the hall that stands,
eateth off Læráth's³⁷ limbs;
the crocks she fills with clearest mead,
will that drink not e'er be drained.
26. Eikthyrnir,³⁸ the hart on the hall that stands,
eateth off Læráth's limbs;
drops from his horns in Hvergelmir³⁹ fall,
thence wend all the waters their way.

³² "The Noisy" (?), a river probably thought to flow around Valholl.

³³ "The Great Wolf," Fenrir; his "fish," is possibly the Mithgarth Serpent. But the whole stanza presents great difficulty.

³⁴ "The Gafe of the Battle-Slain."

³⁵ Of uncertain meaning. It is the hall of Thór, who is a son of Óðin.

³⁶ Fenrir. See "Lokasenna," Note 24, and "Völuspá," St. 52.

³⁷ Læráth seems to be identical with the tree Yggdrasil, which suffers still other harm. See Sts. 26 and 33 ff.

³⁸ "Oak Antlers" (?).

³⁹ A well at the foot of Yggdrasil.

- 27.⁴⁰[Síth and Víth, Sækin and Eikin,
Svol and Gunnthró, Fjorm and Fimbulthul,
Rín and Rinnandi,
Gipul and Gopul, Gomul and Geirvimul,
they flow by the garth of the gods;
Thyn and Vin, Tholl and Holl,
Gráth and Gunnthorin.
28. Vína is hight one, Vegsvinn the other,
the third, Thjóthnuma;
Nyt and Not, Nonn and Hronn,
Slíth and Hríth, Sylg and Ylg,
Víl and Ván, Vond and Strond,
Gjoll and Leiptr, flow in the land of men,
but hence flow to Hel.]
29. Kœfimt and Ormt and the Kerlaugs twain,
Thór does wade through
every day, to doom when he fares
'neath the ash Yggdrasil;
for the bridge of the gods⁴¹ is ablaze with flames—
hot are the holy waters.
30. ⁴²[Glath and Gyllir, Gler and Skeithbrimir,
Silfrintopp and Sinir,
Gísl and Falhófnir, Golltopp and Léttfeti—
these steeds ride heavenly hosts
every day, to the doom when they fare
'neath the ash Yggdrasil.]
31. Three roots do spread in threefold ways
beneath the ash Yggdrasil:
dwell etins 'neath one, 'neath the other, Hel,
'neath the third; Mithgarth's⁴³ men.

⁴⁰ The following catalog of rivers is plainly interpolated. Their names refer, some to swiftness, others to coldness and depth. For Leiptr, see "Helgakviða Hundingsbana" II, St. 30.

⁴¹ Bifrost, "The Quaking Bridge" (see St. 45). The bearing of the passage is not clear.

⁴² The catalog of steeds likewise is interpolated. Their names refer to speed, bright appearance, and similar qualities.

⁴³ "Middle World" or "The Enclosure."

32. "(An eagle sitteth on Yggdrasil's limbs,
whose keen eyes widely ken;
'twixt his eyes a fallow falcon is perched,
hight Vethrfolnir, and watcheth.)
33. Ratatosk⁴⁵ the squirrel is hight which runneth ay
about the ash Yggdrasil:
the warning words of the watchful eagle
he bears to Níthhogg⁴⁶ beneath.
34. ⁴⁷[Four harts also the highest shoots⁴⁸
ay gnaw from beneath:
Dáin and Dvalin,⁴⁹ Duneyr and Dýrathróf.]
35. [More worms do lie the world-tree beneath
than unwise apes may ween:
Góin and Móin, which are Grafvitnir's sons,
Grábak and Grafvolluth;
Ofnir and Sváfnir⁵⁰ ay, I fear me,
on that tree's twigs will batten.]
36. The ash Yggdrasil doth ill abide,
more than to men is known:
the hart browsing above, its bole rotting,
and Níthhogg gnawing beneath.
37. Hrist and Mist the horn shall bear me,
Skeggjold and Skogul;
but Hild and Thrúth, Hlokk and Herfjotur,
Goll and Geironul,

⁴⁴ This stanza is lacking in the original. We are able to reconstruct it from Snorri's close paraphrase ("Gylfaginning," Chap. 15). The eagle and the falcon possibly symbolize the watchfulness of the gods.

⁴⁵ "Rat Tusk."

⁴⁶ See "Völuspá," Note 46. The dragon is here conceived as gnawing the roots of Yggdrasil. See St. 36.

⁴⁷ The following two stanzas are very likely interpolations.

⁴⁸ Conjecturally.

⁴⁹ These are, rather, dwarf names.

⁵⁰ Several of these names have reference to the burrowing activities of worms and snakes. The last two are names of Óðin; see St. 55 and note.

- Randgrith and Ráthgrith and Reginleif,⁵¹
to the einherjar ale shall bear.
38. Arvagr and Alsvith,⁵² they up shall draw
the sun's wain wearily;
but under their bellies the blessed gods
have hidden the "icy irons."⁵³
39. Svalin⁵⁴ is hight, the Sun before,
a shield from the shining god.
Would smoke and smolder both sea and land,
if from him it ever should fall.
40. Skoll the wolf, in the sky dogs him
to the warding woods;⁵⁵
but Hati⁵⁶ the other, Hróthvitnir's son,
follows the fair orb too.
41. Of Ymir's⁵⁷ flesh the earth was shaped,
of his blood, the briny sea,
of his hair, the trees, the hills of his bones,
out of his skull the sky.
42. But of his lashes the loving gods made
Mithgarth for sons of men;
from his brow they made the menacing clouds
which in the heavens hover.

⁵¹ The names of the valkyries indicate their warlike activities, like those of "Völuspá," St. 30.

⁵² "Early-Awake" and "Very Swift," the sun horses. See "Vafþrúðnismál," St. 12, and "Grímnismál," St. 17.

⁵³ Snorri, in his "Gylfaginning," Chap. 10, has the following prosy explanation of these: "Under their shoulders the gods placed two bellows to cool them, and in some lays these are called 'icy irons' (?)."

⁵⁴ "Cooling."

⁵⁵ This passage, as well as the following, is of doubtful meaning.

⁵⁶ "Hater," the son of Hróthvitnir, "the Famous Wolf," that is, Fenrir (who according to "Vafþrúðnismál," St. 46-47, himself swallows the sun).

⁵⁷ See "Vafþrúðnismál," St. 21.

43. Will Ull⁵⁸ befriend him, and all the gods,
who first the fire quenches;
for open lie to the Æsir all worlds,
when kettles are heaved from the hearth.⁵⁹
44. [In earliest times Ivaldi's sons⁶⁰
Skíthblathnir, the ship, did shape,
the best of boats, for beaming Frey,
the noble son of Njorth.]
45. [The ash Yggdrasil is of all trees best;
Skíthblathnir, the best of boats;
of holy gods, Óthin; of horses, Sleipnir;⁶¹
of bridges, Bifrost;⁶² of skalds, Bragi;⁶³
of hawks; Hábrók;⁶⁴ of hounds all, Garm.]⁶⁵
46. Now my looks have I lifted aloft to the gods:⁶⁶
help will come from on high,
from all the Æsir which in shall come
on Ægir's benches,
at Ægir's feast.⁶⁷

⁵⁸ See St. 5 and note.

⁵⁹ The words of the second part of the stanza seem clear, but their meaning has so far resisted convincing explanation.

⁶⁰ According to "Gylfaginning," Chap. 42, they are skilful dwarfs who make a present of the ship Skíthblathnir, "the Thin-Planked," to Frey. "It is so large that all the gods may find a room in it with all their equipment." Also, it has a favorable breeze whenever its sail is raised, and can sail both on sea and over land. It may be laid together like a cloth and put in one's pocket. Stanzas 44 and 45 are evidently interpolated.

⁶¹ "The Runner," Óthin's horse. It has eight feet. According to the story in "Gylfaginning," Chap. 41, it was begotten on Loki by the stallion of the giant who built the wall around Ásgarh. See "Völuspá," St. 25 and Note 24, and "Völuspá hin skamma," St. 12.

⁶² See St. 29, note.

⁶³ The god of poetry and eloquence. Bragr signifies "poetry." It is uncertain whether Bragr is Boddason (ninth century), the first skald whose name and verses have come down to us, or the prototype of the god.

⁶⁴ "High-Leg." ⁶⁵ See "Völuspá," St. 43.

⁶⁶ The translation here offered is somewhat of a guess, no interpretation being altogether acceptable.

⁶⁷ As in the "Hymiskviða," St. 1.

47. Grím⁶⁸ is my name, and Gangleri,⁶⁹
Herjan⁷⁰ and Hjálmbéri,⁷¹
Thekk⁷² and Thrithi,⁷³ Thuth and Uth,
Helblindi and Hár.⁷⁴
48. Sath⁷⁵ and Svipal⁷⁶ and Sanngetal,⁷⁷
Herteit⁷⁸ and Hnikar,⁷⁹
Bileyg,⁸⁰ Báleyg,⁸¹ Bolverk,⁸² Fjólnir,⁸³
Grím and Grímnir, Glapsvith, Fjolsvith,
49. Síthhott,⁸⁴ Síthskegg,⁸⁵ Sigfather,⁸⁶ Hnikuth,⁸⁷
Alfather,⁸⁸ Valfather,⁸⁹ Atrith,⁹⁰ Farmatýr:⁹¹
by one name was I not welcomed ever,
since among folk I fared.
50. Grímnir my name in Geirreth's hall,
but Jálk in Ásmund's.⁹²
Was I Kjalar hight when the hand sled I drew,
but Thrór⁹³ at Things,
Vithur in wars,
Óski and Ómi, Jafnhár, Bifindi,
Gondlir⁹⁴ and Hárbarth⁹⁵ among gods.
51. Svithur and Svithrir⁹⁶ at Sokkmímir's was I,
when the old etin I hid,

⁶⁸ Grím is short for Grímnir (see the Prose above). A number of the following names cannot be satisfactorily explained.

⁶⁹ "The Way-Weary." ⁷⁰ "War God" (?).

⁷¹ "Helm-Bearer." ⁷² "The Welcome One."

⁷³ "The Third," (with Hár, below, and Jafnhár in St. 50). This trinity seems to betray Christian influence.

⁷⁴ "One-Eyed"; but, as evidenced by Jafnhár, "Equally High" (St. 50), the name was at an early time confused with the homonymous word meaning "high."

⁷⁵ "The Truthful." ⁷⁶ "The Changeable." ⁷⁷ "Truthfinder."

⁷⁸ "Glad in Battle." ⁷⁹ "[Spear-] Thruster." ⁸⁰ "One-Eyed."

⁸¹ "Fiery-Eyed." ⁸² "Bale-Worker." ⁸³ "The Concealer."

⁸⁴ "Long-Hood." ⁸⁵ "Long-Beard." ⁸⁶ "Victory Father."

⁸⁷ "[Spear-] Thruster." ⁸⁸ "Father of All."

⁸⁹ "Father of the Battle-Slain." ⁹⁰ "Attacker by Horse" (?).

⁹¹ "Lord of Boatloads." This epithet shows Óthin in his role (historically earlier) as god of the merchants. Compare with Mercury-Hermes with whom he shares other important characteristics.

⁹² None of the several adventures of Óthin here alluded to are known.

⁹³ "Inciter to Strife" (?). See "Hárbarzljóð," St. 24 and Note 18.

⁹⁴ "Bearer of the [Magic] Wand." ⁹⁵ "Graybeard."

⁹⁶ Both epithets signify "the Wise."

and when Mithvitnir's, the mighty one's,
son I slew alone.

52. Thou art muddled, Geirrœth! Too much thou hast drunk;
of much art robbed since rashly thou lovest
 Othin's and the einherjars' favor.
53. Full long I spake, but little thou mindest:
 faithless friends⁹⁷ betray thee:
before me I see my foster son's sword,
 its blade all dripping with blood.
54. A death-doomed man will soon drink with Ygg:⁹⁸
 not long the life left thee.
The norns wish thee ill: now Óthin mayst see;
 come thou near if thou canst.⁹⁹
55. Now Óthin's my name. Ygg was I hight,
 Thund was my name ere then;
Vak¹⁰⁰ and Skilfing, Váfuth¹⁰¹ and Hroptatýr,¹⁰²
 Gaut¹⁰³ and Jálk among gods.
Ofnir¹⁰⁴ and Svafnir,¹⁰⁵ they all have become
 one with me, I ween.

King Geirrœth was sitting with his sword on his knees half unsheathed. But when he heard that it was Óthin who had come to him, he arose and wanted to take him from between the fires. His sword slid from his hands with its hilt downward. The king stumbled and fell forward, the sword pierced him, and so he lost his life. Then Óthin vanished; but Agnar was king in that land for a long time.

⁹⁷ Probably Frigg and her minion who, we are to understand, had made Geirrœth go counter to Óthin's instruction, given him the time he was fostered by the god, to be hospitable to guests.

⁹⁸ That is, in Óthin's (Ygg's) hall.

⁹⁹ After these words Óthin probably vanishes as, in a similar situation, he vanishes in the hall of King Heithrek, *Hervarar saga*, Chap. 9. The last stanza, which botches this excellent ending, is no doubt a later addition.

¹⁰⁰ "Wakeful."

¹⁰¹ "Wayfarer."

¹⁰² "God of Gods."

¹⁰³ "The God of Goths"; that is, of men (?).

¹⁰⁴ "The Entangler," that is, in questions (see the translation for Vafthrúthnir, in "Vafþrúðnismál," Note 1).

¹⁰⁵ "He Who Lulls to Sleep or to Dreams."

The Lay of Skírnir

Skírnismál

Hardly any other poem in the *Edda* so appeals to modern, and probably to universal, taste. Indeed, here we see the epic-dramatic technique of the North at its best—and the subject is a romantic love-myth that speaks to us all. The workmanship is excellent. Though entirely dialogic, the poem never leaves us in doubt of either place or drift of the action—the explanatory prose might well be dispensed with—and with surprising skill the poet makes us visualize the appearance and divine the character of the actors.

Beginning and ending with lovesick Frey, the poet delegates all the action to the god's alter ego, his devoted follower and friend, Skírnir, who with intrepidity accomplishes his mission, overcoming the resistance of the fair giant maiden with the threat of his rune magic, after both promises of gifts and threats of force have failed.

In the arrangement and the handling of his material the poet probably owes little to the myth. It has been urged with some plausibility that in this lay we actually have the dramatized rites of a Frey cult, celebrating the god's annual union with the fertility goddess. We can, however, discern the consciously working author in frequent verbal reminiscences of other Eddic lays and in his struggle with the material to be fashioned. Most interesting is his treatment of the *ljóðabáttir* stanzas which, regular at the beginning, become swaying and incoherent, with barbarous assonances, when the terrific imprecations fill them to overflowing, but which resume their regular gait toward the tranquil end.

The tradition is, on the whole, fair. Only some of the curses defy certain interpretation. The poem is found complete in *Codex Regius*, whereas *Codex Arnarnagæanus* (*Hauksbók*) breaks off after Stanza 27. Snorri's paraphrase is significantly brief: for his purposes, the lay seemed deficient in epic details.

Norway is (doubtfully) assigned as the home of the lay, because of the mention of the thistle, a plant not indigenous to Iceland. There are no definite clues as to the time of its origin (tenth century?).

Frey,¹ the son of Njorth, one day had seated himself on Hlithskjalf² and looked over all the worlds. Then saw he in the world of etins a fair maiden as she went from the hall of her father to her bower. And that sight made him heavy of heart. Skírnir³ was the name of Frey's servitor. Njorth bade him to make Frey speak out.

*Skathi*⁴ said:

- "Arise now, Skírnir, and ready make thee
 to summon my son,
and find out this from the wise youth,
 whom he doth hate."

¹ See "Grímnismál," St. 5, Note 10.

² See "Grímnismál," the Prose Introduction and Note 4.

³ "The Resplendent"; possibly an epithet (or hypostasis) of Frey himself.

⁴ Frey's stepmother. See "Grímnismál," St. 11.