

The Alchemy of Yggdrasil

by Stephen Flowers

I. Alchemy of the North

The Northern Tradition understands well the principles of alchemy. Its very cosmology, cosmogony, and eschatology are expressed in formulas any alchemist could understand -- if they have learned to ask the right questions. This methodical investigating of the mysteries (reyn til runa) of how things are created, developed, and transformed is keyed, like so much else of the Hidden Heritage, to the ninefold paradigm. This ninefold symbol, with significant variations, is also known in traditional Northern studies as the Valknut -- Knot of the chosen, or Slain, or among the Persian brethren as the Naqsh -- whence comes the Gurdjieffian "Enneagram."

Alchemy is a technology of transformation not limited to any one kingdom of existence -- it can transform mineral, vegetable, animal, or spiritual "substances." There is no one formula for this technology -- even the classical western alchemists of the Middle Ages and Renaissance used variations in their formulas. We will learn nothing of practical value if we simply impose the classic alchemical formulas upon data foreign to them. Independent data -- such as the traditional cosmogonic process of the ancient North -- can teach us new formulas if we proceed in a precise way informed by inspiration.

In a practical sense what appears here is a formula for the generation (creation) of any desired thing -- be it an object, situation, or state of being.

II. Northern Cosmogony

The ancient Germanic cosmogony is most clearly and continuously outlined in sections 2-19 of the Edda, written by an Icelander named Snorri Sturluson around 1222 CE. Although ostensibly a Christian, he was far more interested in preserving the heritage of his Northern ancestors than he was in any form of Church (or even Classical) teaching.

The Edda tells us that in the beginning there was nothing but Ginnungagap (magically charged void). This interpretation of Ginnungagap was offered by the great German philologist, Jan De Vries in an article published in 1930 in the *Acta Philologica Scandinavia* (vol 5). At the southern extreme of this void arose Fire (Muspellsheimr) and at the northern extreme arose Water (Niflheimr). These polar opposites were attracted to each other. As the Fire neared the Water, Space (Air) manifested -- through which sparks flew toward Niflheimr. But as the Water of Niflheimr neared the center, it hardened (and expanded) into Ice, which contains solid Salts and extrudes from its essence a Venom -- which is struck by sparks of Iron. These sparks activated a Yeast (living substance) in the liquefied Ice. [Note that the Ice contains three substances: Salt (solid), Venom (vapor), and Yeast (liquid).]

Where these elements converge in the mild midst of Ginnungagap, there arise two beings from the dripping Ice: first Ymir (a proto-humanoid form) and then Audhumla (the

cosmic bovine). Ymir lives on the milk produced from Audhumla's udders and she lives by licking the Salty Ice. Out of the Ice, Audhumla forms the shape of a second humanoid: Buri. Buri replicated himself asexually and thus Borr came into being.

In the meantime, Ymir also produced other humanoid entities: under his left arm grew a pair of humanoids, but his left foot engendered with his right foot a whole race of frost-giants (Old Norse *hrimthursar*).

A daughter of the "frost-giant" Bolthorn, named Bestla, mated with Borr. Borr and Bestla had three sons: Odhinn-Vili-Ve. This is really a threefold but singular entity, who is/are the first of the race of Aesir.

Odhinn-Vili-Ve rebelled and killed their maternal ancestor Ymir, and from the parts of his form they shaped the cosmic order -- arranging the earth in the middle and rationally ordering the rest of the cosmos. (The stars, sun, moon are appointed their places, etc.)

The Aesir actually created dwarves to complete the work of physical creation. (This point is clear only in the Elder or Poetic Edda.)

Odhinn then undertakes the ordeal of Yggdrasill -- he hangs himself on the World-Tree in order to gain Runic Knowledge. On the Tree he apprehends the ultimate Mystery, and returns to enact what he has learned.

Odhinn then undertakes the building of an enclosure of the gods (Aesir) -- called Asgardhr.

From Asgardhr, Odhinn ventures out (again in his threefold aspect) and discovers the natural bodies of human beings. In the text, these are symbolically represented as "trees" named "Ask" (Ash) and "Embla" (Elm?). Upon these, the threefold Gift is bestowed: Consciousness, Life-Breath, and Aesthetic Form.

This brief, and in some places simplified, recounting of the cosmogonic process outlined in Snorri's Edda and elsewhere in Germanic mythological texts will serve as a basis for further discussion. A complete study of all the details of the process (which has been undertaken) expands, but does not fundamentally alter, the "alchemical" and Enneagonic Formula.

It is clear that the threefold entity known as Odhinn ("Master of Inspired Consciousness") is the first consciously creative entity in the process. He is the result of a synthesis of the polar extremes of Fire/Air and Water/Ice, and so contains all the potential present in the original magical charge of Ginnungagap. Odhinn then proceeds to act as the "first alchemist." He takes the base substance (Ymir) and subjects it to an analysis (solve) -- it is broken down into its component parts and rearranged (coagula) according to the subjective (semi-conscious) contents of Odhinn's mind and will.

A study of the meaning of the three names of Odhinn-Vili -Ve reveals the Secret here: Odhinn = "Master of Inspired Consciousness", Vili = "Volition", and Ve = "Sacrality"(i.e. the conscious division between sacred and profane - the quality of conscious discrimination). Odhinn is the first individual being with these three qualities: Transcendental Consciousness possessed of Will and able to Discriminate between "this" and "that."

III. Alchemical Principles

In the Germanic cosmogony presented above, certain features consistent with those we also know as alchemy clearly emerge. There is a movement from primal unity (a coagulated state) through an analytical process (dissolution) into a transformed re-coagulated state, each time under the guidance of an increasingly more awakened consciousness. This is carried out through confrontations between polarized qualities most simply explained as concepts of Form (Water/Ice, etc.) and Energy (Fire/Air, etc.).

The Germanic cosmogonic mythos provides a doorway to learning the Secret of how to bring things into being. This doorway can be unlocked by those who learn how to use the ninefold key which opens it.

The primal, or first, unity is Ginnungagap. In it all things are contained. It is beyond all limitations of time and space, in it are unified in a completely undifferentiated way all polar opposites -- Ginnung is the absolute unity of Form, Mass, and Energy. The cosmos emerges from this undifferentiated chaos and returns to it on a cyclical basis.

Before any conscious, or even living, beings can come into existence, four pairs of opposing elements must be manifested and activated:

Form Energy

1. Water - Fire
2. Ice - Air
3. Iron - Yeast
4. Salt - Venom

The first two pairs (1-2) manifest the concrete order of the cosmos, while the second two pairs (3-4) constitute the manifestation of living information in the natural cosmic order. Most of the cosmic ordering is made up of substances and processes restricted to the first two pairs. The living information (genetic code) dynamically, but still from our perspective unconsciously, evolves to a point where enough information (from Ginnung) has been cross referenced to make a mutation into a semi-conscious being possible. This is the first of the Aesir: Odhinn-Vili-Ve -- the first reunification of the spectrum of all the qualities present in Ginnung.

However, this (re-)unified entity is not yet a fully conscious (divine) being. His first impulse is to rebel - to destroy the root from which he sprang and to reorder it in a way more in accordance with his will. This is the first self-aware act of creation. The creation

is carried out under the guidance of a conscious and rational plan. Here all the hidden and mysterious laws of nature are laid down. Essential to the process is that the "old order" was deconstructed (Ymir killed and dismembered) and a new order established (from the parts of the old order) according to the subjective will of the creator.

Having established certain laws of nature -- that is, archetypal processes -- which take on lives of their own, the Aesir create a host of agents of formation (dwarves, or black-elves) which act as the craftsmen who bring into physical reality the ingeniously fashioned principles of the Aesir. The dwarves are well known in Germanic mythology as the craftsmen of the gods.

They are technicians who execute the plans of the gods, but who are also freed by their semi-conscious status to create all manner of forms (including mutations and manipulations of mineral substances, as well as vegetable and animal species). In this process the Aesir are absent, as they have withdrawn into another dimension to contemplate the next, most momentous alchemical work.

Odhinn emerges from his withdrawal to undergo the Ordeal of Yggdrasill -- in which he extends the essence of himself throughout the structure of the world order which he has fashioned -- he contemplates his own Self through the World-Tree which acts as a multi-dimensional mirror of that Self. The culmination of this act is the apprehension of the ultimate Mystery (Runa) and the gaining of real Runic Knowledge.

This moment of realization that there is something greater than that of which the Aesir were conscious when they first shaped the World is the result of their contemplation of the entirety of the Work. The possibility of something even greater than self-awareness arises -- and although the keys to this Mystery are imparted to Odhinn (in the form of the Runes), it is also clear that these are only keys and that an eternal Quest is necessary to actualize them.

All Knowledge gained in this Quest is then used as a program for further development as well as for the creation of further plans for the evolution of the original creation.

The first act Odhinn undertakes with this new Knowledge is the building of Asgardhr -- a separate, shielded fortress in which the experiment in divine evolution can be carried out.

But this separate fortress, which transcends the mundane universe, must be grounded. It must have a form or vehicle in the mundane universe for purposes of its own evolution, and it must also have a direct connection with the mundane, or horizontal, universe itself.

In order to effect this link, the threefold Odinic entity ventures out from Asgardhr and takes the natural bodies of human beings (really nothing more than ape-like creatures) and endows them with the threefold Gift of Consciousness, Life-Breath, and Aesthetic Form. Perhaps the reason why they are symbolized as trees is that these humanoid creatures were, at that point, purely creatures of appetite -- serving a function little more significant than eating and excreting.

But endowed with the divine Gifts, humans (mannaz) become Agents of Consciousness in the horizontal plane. What the dwarves were to the creation of the natural cosmos -- helpers and allies -- human beings are to the continuing creation of the non-natural realms.

IV. Angular Alchemy

Angles are complex entities. They are essentially defined by two lines which converge at a given point in space and which can be further defined by the precise quality of the relationship one line has to the other (e.g. the number of degrees between the two lines). There are also many hidden dimensions behind each angle.

Those who have studied the Seal of Runa will have suspected the nature of the ninefold key to unlocking this alchemical process: an aperture between the original unity of Ginnungagap and the realms of manifestation is created by the first angle (chaos). This chaotic unity is broken by the second angle (order) which describes the manifestation of the four principle elements (Water-Fire-Ice-Air). The third angle (knowledge) manifests the patterns of life and establishes the pathways of information.

A second unity is established in the fourth angle (being) as the life/coded information process engendered in the third angle is completed in the form of the first beings capable of self-knowledge. The ring of nature and the trapezoid are completed with the forging of the fifth angle (creation) as the Aesir rebel against the established order, overthrow it, and create the cosmos anew in their own images. The sixth angle (death/sleep) is a moment of stasis for the Aesiric creators as they allow their demiurges, or craftsmen -- the dwarves - - to finish the physical cosmos according to the principles established by the Aesir in the creation of the dwarves themselves.

In the seventh angle (birth/awakening) the Ordeal of Yggdrasil is completed wherein Odhinn becomes conscious of something greater than himself, and something which laid outside his consciousness when he reshaped the World (in the fifth angle) -- this something is the Mystery (Runa). This initiatory experience transforms Odhinn into a god among gods. He is conscious, as is no other god, of his own limitation and even ignorance, he learns to see more and more clearly and to dream yet more inspired visions of what the divine realm could be. This leads him to design, and have constructed, the Enclosure of/for the Gods, Asgardhr, as an idealized community of conscious entities. This is a place where he plans for them to evolve and develop, and is indicative of the eighth angle (re-creation). The re-creation is not a carbon copy of the first creation, it is now informed by a Sense of Mystery (Runa) and other information gained in the experience of the seventh angle. Asgardhr is, however, the ultimate staging ground for Becoming throughout the Worlds.

The process first set into motion from a previously unknown, or unarticulated, original point begins to come full circle when the threefold Gift is bestowed upon a natural creature -- Mannaz. However, this process, the subject -- the enactor -- of which is the

Flame, cannot come full circle until the Gifted Race brings it full circle of their own volition -- through initiation. This ultimate realization of the source of consciousness, the Flame, closes the cycle and in doing so shall create a new race of gods.

V. Conclusions

One of the essential Runic messages of the exploration of this process is the alchemical Necessity of returning to the roots of things in order to transform them. The exhortation *Reyn til Runa* mandates a return to the essential, original Forms of things, constantly synthesizing them with the subject's present state of Being. This often necessitates the periodic, and perhaps only temporary, rejection of tradition for its own sake. This process creates a moment of pure Wakefulness, and having awoken, the initiate sees, and having seen, the initiate acts effectively with knowledge.

In this article we have presented the outlines of a guide to the successful completion of a complex creative process -- any complex creative process -- whether it is building a house or creating a new universe.

The alchemical theory presented here is not only a key to the creation and transformation of things/phenomena in the "objective universe," but also a structural map to certain aspects of the subjective universe -- the self which is the true subject of initiation.

This study is far from a complete discussion of the alchemical Mysteries present in the Enneagonic Formula of Yggdrasil. What you have before you is not an end, but only an eternal beginning. With so much more to discover than what we already know about the process, what lies in Skuld looks to be full of power and wonder.