Völuspa

The *Völuspa* is one of the poetic songs of the *Elder Edda*, which were first compiled and written down in the 13th century in Iceland. It is believed that many of the anonymous songs of the *Elder Edda* were composed and recited several hundred years before that, some perhaps as early as the fifth or sixth century CE. Since it was written in the Old Norse language and script, I have consulted several modern English and German translations to arrive at my version. *Völuspa* means “Visions of the Völva.” Völvas were clairvoyant prophetic seeresses in the pre-Christian Nordic culture. In this poem an unnamed völva is relating her visions in response to questions posed to her by Odin/Wodan, the knowledge-seeking god of shamans, warriors and poets.

Ever since I wrote about and quoted from the *Völuspa* in my book of *The Well of Remembrance* (Shambhala, 1994), I have admired this poem with its awesome visions of the origins of the world, the creative activities and conflicts of gods and humans, and the stunning prophecies of planetary destruction and renewal that seem to be coming true in our time. *(In the following, the section headings, in italics, are added by me to facilitate the following of the story. They are not part of the poem).*

*Invocation*

Hear me in silence,
Ye kin of the Holy Ones,
Both the higher and lower, the
Children of Heimdall.

You, Wodan, want me
To tell of the world
As well as I know,
From the earliest times.

*Origin of the Earth and Sun*

I know of the giants,
Primeval and great,
Who raised me and fed me
In times long ago.

I know of nine worlds,
And nine great roots,
Of that wonderful tree
So deep in the Earth.
There was only Ymir\textsuperscript{iii},
The primordial giant.
There was no land, nor sea,
Nor ocean waves.

No earth was there,
No heavens above,
No growing grass,
Only a gaping abyss.

The three sons of Bor\textsuperscript{iv},
Both giants and gods,
Uplifted the land, they
Made mighty Midgard.\textsuperscript{v}

The sun from the South
Shone bright on stoneground.
The sweet greening grass
Grew up from the earth.

In the South was the sun,
Great sister of moon,
Extending her arms
Along the edge of the sky.\textsuperscript{vi}

Neither sun nor planets
Were set in their places.
The moon did not know
Yet what powers she had.

To gather in council
The Holy Ones came.
The councilors met
To converse and to speak.

They gave names to the night,
To morning and noontime;
To twilight and evening,
The measures of time.

\textit{Aesir gods, giants, dwarves and humans}

The Aesir\textsuperscript{vii} came down
From the shining fields.
Altars and temples
Were built in the mountains.
They built the forges,
They hammered the ores,
Made metal tongs
And other fine tools.

Board games they played,
Content in their garden.
Nothing was lacking –
They found plenty of gold.

Three mighty females,
Daughters of giants,
Awesome and terrible
Came from their giant home.

To gather in council
The Holy Ones came.
The councilors met,
To speak and to ask:

Should dwarves make beings
From the rivers and rocks,
From the blood and the bones
Of Ymir the Earth?

Many forms they created,
Resembling humans –
The dwarves of the earth,
As they were commanded.

Then came three gods
From the clan of the Aesir,
They were mighty and merciful –
They came down to the shore.

On the beach they found lying,
Found an ash and an elm,
But listless and lifeless,
With no spark of life.

They had no souls,
No senses either,
No warmth of life,
And no living color.
Odin gave souls to them,  
Hönir their senses,  
Lodur brought warmth of life  
And bright, blooming colors.

**The World Tree and the Three Norns**

An ash-tree I know, called  
Yggdrasill, Odins Horse.\(^{xi}\)  
Sparkling moisture  
Lies on its leaves.

This is the dew that drops  
Down in the valley.  
Evergreen stands the World Tree.  
Urd’s well at its roots.\(^{xii}\)

From there come three maidens,  
Three women of wisdom,  
From the deep waters  
At the root of the Tree.

One is called Urd,  
Verdandi another,  
And Skjuld is the third.\(^{xiii}\)

They carve into wood,  
Deciding the lives  
Of the children of men,  
Choosing the runes.

**Gullveig the Golden and the Origin of War**

And this too I know –  
How war came to the world,  
When Gullveig the Golden\(^{xiv}\)  
Was speared by the sky gods.

Three times they burned her  
In the Warfather’s hall,  
The thrice-born goddess  
And still she lives on.
Heathen\textsuperscript{xv} the called her Wherever she wandered. Seeress, sorceress, In soothsaying trance.

She made seidr\textsuperscript{xvi} magic Wherever she could, and To contrary women Was always welcome.

When the Holy Ones Gathered in council seats The sky gods debated Among themselves thus:

Should the Aesir gods First pay tribute, or Should all gods equally Offerings receive?\textsuperscript{xvii}

Odin hurled his spear At the enemy hosts – And so for the first time War came to the world.\textsuperscript{xviii}

The walls of Asgard Came crumbling and crashing The Vanir gods raging Trampled the ground.

Then the Holy Ones Gathered in council seats The sky gods debated Among themselves thus:

Who filled the air With the stench of betrayal? Who promised Freyja As a wife to the giants?\textsuperscript{xix}

Great Thor the Thunderer Fought fiercely the foe He seldom stays still When he hears of such deeds.
Now vows were broken
And binding agreements.
The gods’ solemn oaths
Were forgotten again.

*Mimir's Well, Odin's Eye*

I know where Heimdall’s
Horn is hidden:
Under the highest and
Holiest of trees\textsuperscript{xv}.

In high-foaming spray
Water falling I see
In the well, Odin’s eye.
Would you know still more?

Alone I sat, outside,
When the Old One came
That terrible Aesir god
And looked in my eye.

For what do you ask?
What seek you from me?
Odin, I know where
You’ve hidden your eye:
In Mimir’s marvelous well.

*Mimir drinks mead\textsuperscript{xvi}*
Every day in the morning
From the well, Odin’s pledge.
Would you know still more?

Necklace and bracelets
This Father God gave me
For my far-seeing visions
And words of wisdom.

Far and wide do I see
Throughout all of the worlds.
Balder's murder, Loki's punishment

Now Balder I see
The god who is bleeding,
His doom was determined –
As great Odin's son.

Growing slender and tall
Among the green trees
Is the mistle-toe shrub\textsuperscript{xxii}
So tender and fair.

This fragile sprig
So seeming harmless
Was horrible weapon
When hurled by Hödur.

Fair Frigga does weep
In her watery home.
Valhalla’s misfortune.
Would you know still more?

A prisoner I see
By the boiling springs:
The treacherous Loki’s\textsuperscript{xxiii}
Miserable form.

There too sits Sigyn
His unfortunate wife
With woeful demeanor.
Would you know still more?

Ragnarök

From the East flows a stream
Through poisonous lands\textsuperscript{xxiv}
Called River of Terror,
Cutting sharply with cold.

Wading waist-deep
Through watery torrents,
Are traitors and murderers,
Adulterers too.
There I see Nidhögg
Suck blood from the corpses
That man-eating monster.
Would you know still more?

A dwelling I see
Far away from the sun
Near the Land of the Dead
It’s gates to the North.

Here poisonous drops
Drip from the roof
And coils of serpents
Encircle the walls.

In the East an old hag
Sits in the iron wood.
There she bears Fenrir’s
Terrible brood.

One among these
In the form of a troll
Will one of these days
Swallow the sun.

She feeds on the flesh
Of fallen warriors
Spattering with blood
The seat of the gods.

The sun is turned black
In the summers thereafter.
Violent weather comes again.
Would you know still more?

Loud howls the wolf
At the mouth of his cave.
He tears off his fetters
And now he runs free.

Much do I know
Far distant I see
The conquering gods’
Terrible fate.
Brothers do battle  
And murder each other.  
The sons of siblings  
Break bonds of clan.  
Much woe’s in the world  
And treachery too.

It’s axe-time, sword-time,  
Time of shattered shields.  
Wind-time, wolf-time,  
Until the world breaks down.

No one anymore  
Considers the others.  
The gleaming Gjallarhorn  
Announces the end.

Loud blows Heimdall  
He lifts high the horn.  
And Odin murmurs  
With Mimir’s head.xxviii

Yggdrasil trembles  
The towering ash groansxxix  
The giant is loosened  
The underworld quakesxxx  
The flaming giantxxxii  
Devours the trees.

What ails the Aesir?  
What troubles the elves?  
The giants are roaring,  
The gods meet in council.

The gnomes are groaning  
By their gates of rock  
The wise spirits of stone.  
Would you know still more?

Loud howls the wolf  
At the mouth of his cave.  
He tears off his fetters  
And now he runs free.
This much do I know
Far distant I see
The conquering gods’
Terrible fate.

From East comes a giant
His shield he holds high.
The Midgard serpent coils
As raging rivers wind

And whip up the waters.
The eagle screams on high.
With cut-up corpses
Comes the deathship.

The giants are coming
In horrible hordes.
And the monstrous Wolf
Even Loki as well.

From the South comes Surt
Who scorches the plants
His flaming sword
Burns hot as the sun.

The mountains are cracking
The trollwomen reeling
To Hel go the humans
The heavens rupture.

As Odin goes forth now
To fight the great wolf
He thrusts his sword
Through its gaping jaws.

Now comes another
Thor, Son of Earth
This mighty warrior
Battles the Serpent.

Protector of Midgard
He fights with fierce rage.
Terrified people
Are fleeing their homes.
The sun turns black
Land sinks into the sea
And the radiant stars
Fall from the sky.

Hot flames engulf
The all-nourishing tree
The searing heat rises
High in the heavens.

Loud howls the wolf
At the mouth of his cave
He tears off his fetters
And now he runs free.

Much do I know
Far distant I see
The conquering gods’
Terrible fate.

Resurrection

Now again I see Earth
Rising up from below
Up out of the waters
With all greening plants.

Falling waters are foaming.
High over the mountains
The eagle flies
Hunting for fish.

The Aesir gods meet again
In the shining fields.
They speak once again
Of that terrible snake.

They remember the great
And awesome end-time,
And ancient rune secrets
Of the High Father-God.

Lying in grass, they find them
Again, the golden tablets
As they had them before
In the ancient times.
The fields will grow high
Without being sown
All harm will be healed
As Balder returns.

Hödur and Balder
Will dwell once again
In the halls of the high gods.
Would you know still more?

Now a hall I see
More bright than the Sun
With a red-golden roof
Gimlé is its name.

There dwell the noble
And kind ones, forever.
Their lives free of guilt
And with gracious ease.

Down from above
The mighty Lord comes
To the council of gods
And rules over all.

The sun has a daughter
This maiden will ride
On the paths of her mother
After the fall of the gods.

Who are these maidens
Of wisdom and sense
That we see hovering
Over the wide ocean waves?

The throngs of maidens
Daughters of giants
Descend on the villages
Protecting the humans.

The End
i Heimdall is the name of the celestial gate-keeper of the Aesir gods, akin to the Roman Janus; but here he is also regarded as the progenitor of the human race. His form is white and luminous, and he has a horn, the Gjallarhorn, that can be heard around the world.

ii Among the many epithets for Wodan or Odin is Walvater – Chooser of the Fallen – pointing to his choosing of warriors killed in battle, who get to go with him to Valhalla. It was also said that fallen warriors could, if they wished, go to Feyja’s domain after dying.

iii Ymir is the name of the primordial giant, formed from rivers and ice, in the beginnings of the Earth, before life. From his arms and feet came male mountain and female river giants.

iv Bor or Bur is the name of the giant who, with the giantess Bestla, fathered the first three Aesir gods – Odin, Vili and Vé. The race of primordial giants precedes the gods on planet Earth.

v Midgard, the "garden in the middle", is the temperate zone in the biosphere, with its plants, animals and humans.

vi This verse and the next describe events from the pre-history of the planet – the course of the sun at the solstices and the origins of the moon.

vii The “shining fields” are the supra-earthly domains, the higher worlds where the Aesir sky gods dwell, before the creation of humans – and also where they go after the end of the world.

viii Jötunheim, the realm of the giants, is situated to the East and Northeast of Midgard. In modern terms, Midgard is Central Europe, and Jötunheim are the cold and icy realms to the East and North.

ix The three Aesir gods who created the first humans are Odin, Hörnir and Lodu, who are named further below. In other parts of the Edda, the three creator brother-gods are listed as Odin, Vili and Vé. Only Odin plays a further significant role in other mythic texts and poems, including the Völuspa.

x Ask refers to the ash tree and Embla possibly to the elm tree. This would therefore be a mythos of creating humans from trees. This is one possible interpretation of these obscure lines.

xi Yggdrasil, or “Odin’s Horse”, is one of the names of the World Tree. The name points to its function as the axis for shamanic traveling to the upper and lower worlds.

xii Urd is the name of the well at the foot of the world tree, as well as the name of one of the three norns. Urd also refers to the web of life and destiny, and thus is future-oriented.

xiii The name Skjuld relates to the German words for guilt (Schuld) and debt (Schulden), and thus refers to the karma associated with our past actions. Verdandi is related to the German verb werden, becoming, and thus is related to the present.

xiv The name Gullveig means something like “the power of gold”. Her story, referred to in these verses, tells of the origin of the war between the invading Aesir gods and the indigenous Vanir deities, of whom Gullveig is one. In The Well of Remembrance, I interpret these obscure lines as follows: the Aesir motivated by lust for gold, attack Gullveig. But she was a goddess with powerful magic and the Vanir struck back – “and still she lives on.”

xv Heathen is another name for the seeress, but also for the heath and the heathen pagans.

xvi Seidr is the name for the divination ceremonies of the völvas.
The dispute is over which group of deities, Aesir or Vanir, should be paid first – i.e. the origin of the conflict, as always, was over gold!

So this is the war started: the Aesir argue with the Vanir about gold, unsuccessfully try to kill Gullveig and then Odin throws the first spear.

A second cause of war is added: the treacherous Loki, who belongs to the Aesir gods, had promised Freyja, Vanir goddess of love and beauty, to one of the giants – without her permission, enraging her.

The seeress now leaves her stories of the past – origin of the world, origin of the wars – and describes the visionary task that Odin has asked of her, in exchange for his pledging one eye into Mimir’s well (also a waterfall). The well, the waterfall and Heimdall’s horn are situated at the foot of the world tree Yggdrasil, the axis mundi. Through his payment of one eye, Odin has gained access to visions of the past and the future.

Mimir, the Giant-Spirit of the World Tree, the Keeper of the Axis, enables the visionary seeing into all worlds and all times. The seeing is made more vivid through the drinking of the visionary mead. The seeress mediates the connection and the dialog between Odin and Mimir.

Balder’s mother Frigga had persuaded all trees and all plants not to be part of any harm to her beloved son in the combat games the Aesir liked to play. But she had overlooked the seemingly harmless and fragile mistletoe. The cunning Loki exploited this oversight – turning a twig of mistletoe into a spear, and putting it into the hands of Hödur, Balder’s blind brother. The unconscious fratricide is the catalyst for the collapse of the world order.

In this story, the cunning Trickster Loki acts as an enemy of the gods, though in other stories he helps them. He is the instigator of Balder’s murder, which in the end leads to the ragnarök. As punishment, the Aesir gods bind him to a rock (like Prometheus). The drops from a venomous snake are collected by his wife Sigyn, instead of falling of to his face.

Is this only a mythic image, or could the vision of poisoned lands in the East also refer to the Ukrainian town of Chernobyl, near the Pripyat River, poisoned by radioactivity in the 20th century?

Nidhögg is the name of the death dragon, that devours human corpses. Elsewhere it is the name of the giant serpent, gnawing at the roots of the World Tree until it collapses.

In The Well of Remembrance I related the prophecies of the Völuspa with cataclysmic earth changes in the late Middle Ages and/or in the 20th century. Such visions are not specific as to dates. “Poisonous drops from the roof” refer perhaps to volcanic eruptions and/or to industrial “acid rain”.

Fenrir or Fenriswolf is the monster whose offspring bring about the destruction of the world. It is a symbol of the voracious greed that fuels the runaway exploitation and destruction of our biosphere.

The decapitation of Mimir, whose name is related to the Latin memor, symbolizes our species loss of memory. Odin preserved his skull for oracular purposes, “Odin murmurs with Mimir’s head.” Divination with a skull was/is the custom among some Asiatic shamans.

The Yggdrasil tree is the world axis. Thus, when it trembles, the whole Earth starts shaking.

The giant in the underworld is probably the Fenriswolf – when he breaks out of his fetters, we get earthquakes.
The flaming, fiery giant, elsewhere called Surt, burned large areas of forests: in Russia in 2010, in Northern California in 2017, increasingly in many areas of the planet.

Surt, the fire giant, brings fiery heat from the south, nearer the equator, to the northern lands.

Trolls are furry, hairy female giants, who are unpredictably hostile and dangerous to humans.

Another predictive vision of the Earth’s feverish over-heating in the 20th century, the so-called “greenhouse effect.”

The golden tablets, with divine instructions, were given by the creators at the beginning; and here again now, at the beginning of a new cycle of creation.

Here is a vision of the spontaneous regeneration and healing of the Earth, through Balder, the green vegetation deity.

Hödur is the blind brother of Balder, who through Loki’s treachery, threw the mistletoe branch that killed Balder. Here they are the two brothers who will inherit the realm of the Aesir gods, after the current cycle.

Gimlé is a golden hall that can’t be touched by fire. That means it is an other-worldly place, what esoteric traditions call the astral realm, where the virtuous deceased find themselves.

Some commentators believe the “mighty Lord” refers to Christ, whose teachings started to spread in the Nordic lands around the 10th century.

The last three verses, from the Vaftrúdnismal, another poem of the Edda, elaborate on the post-ragnarök world. After the sun had been devoured by a volcanic ash-cloud, it became invisible for a time – and then reappeared, as her “daughter”, moving in the same orbital pathway.

Does this perhaps refer to the spirits of whales and dolphins, “hovering over the ocean waves”? Will humans have deeper alliances of understanding and mutual support with them in the coming in the post-apocalyptic time?

The wise giant maidens remind us of the three “mighty women” who appeared in the early part of the Völsunga.