

**studi
germanici**



3-4
English **2013**

Marcellus Emants' *Twilight of the Gods*. Allegories of reason & inconveniences of adultery*

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Strange destiny that of Norse mythology. Put forward yet again by academics and philosophers from the German and, in a more general sense, Germanic realm from the end of the 18th century onward as a complex of heroic and religious narratives opposed to traditional classical mythology so as to establish a cultural and national identity for the Germanic peoples,¹ even its most convinced supporters have repeatedly considered it unpresentable to modern audiences in the form in which it has been passed on from medieval sources. Friedrich Schlegel was particularly explicit in the judgment expressed in his article *Über nordische Dichtung. Ossian. Die Edda, Sigurd und Shakespeare*, published in "Deutsches Museum" in 1812:

Es bedarf hier, als Mittelpersonen solcher Dichter, welche Klarheit und Reichtum mit Tiefe verbinden, und dadurch im Stande sind, die geheimnisvollen Sagen und Lieder der EDDA in leicht verständlichen, und den äußeren Sinn wie das innere Gefühl ansprechenden Dichtungen allen anschaulich zu entfalten.²

We find a similar sense of admiration – albeit accompanied by an implicit judgment of a lack of literary merit – in the words with which the Dutch author Marcellus Emants (1848-1923) evokes his reading of the Norse mythological sources and his decision to write a poetic text inspired by them:

*Translation by Alexander Booth.

¹ As has been noted, in this sense the role played by Herder's essay published in 1796 is fundamental: *Iduna, oder der Apfel der Verjüngung*. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, edited by Bernhard Suphan (Hildesheim: Olms, 1994), vol. XVIII, pp. 483-502.

² Friedrich Schlegel, *Charakteristiken und Kritiken II (1802-1829)* [Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe, vol. III] (Munich: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh und Thomas Verlag, 1975), pp. 221-249, here p. 238.



Toen ik de Edda las vond ik in de gedachten, de begeerten, de verhoudingen, de strijden der goden zoveel dat mij volkomen scheen overeen te stemmen met de gedachten, de begeerten, de verhoudingen en de strijden der mensen, namelijk van de mensen gelijk ze naar mijn opvatting zijn en willen en lijden, dat het mij te moede werd, als had ik een ruwe diamant gevonden, die nog maar geslepen hoefde te worden om te schitteren van het licht, dat voor mij de waarheid inhield.³

Emants uttered this phrase during the course of a conference held in The Hague before a section of the League of Dutch Teachers (Bond van Nederlandse onderwijzers) in 1908, twenty-five years after the 1883 publication of *Godenschemering* (*Twilight of the Gods*). The time that had passed, however, had not diminished his reflections upon the Norse myths' actuality whatsoever. After the publication of the first edition, the author had, in fact, continued to work on the text, and already in 1885 had published a second edition (others would appear in 1910, 1916, and in 1921) of which a theatrical transposition entitled *Loki*⁴ appeared in 1906.

At the 1908 conference, Emants sketched a portrait of the motivations and objectives that Norse mythology had begun to assume

³ Marcellus Emants, *Hoe Loki ontstond*, in "Groot Nederland", 6 (1908), pp. 420-433, here pp. 425-426. ("Reading the Edda, in the thoughts, desires, relationships, and disputes amongst the gods I rediscovered many things that seemed to me to correspond perfectly to the thoughts, desires, relationships, and disputes amongst human beings – which is to say, human beings just as, in my conception of things, they are, desire, and suffer – so that I had the sensation of having found a diamond in the rough that only needed to be polished in order to make it shine with that light which for me is inherent to truth") [English translation from the Italian].

⁴ In the present work I refer – if not otherwise indicated – to the edition edited by Maarten Cornelis van den Toorn and published in 1966 with a broad introduction and notes: Marcellus Emants, *Godenschemering*, edited and with an introduction by M.C. van den Toorn (Zwolle: Tjenk Willink, 1966). Van den Toorn's edition is based on the last edition seen by the author and published in 1921. When necessary, that edition has been compared with the first edition (published by Pijttersen in Sneek in 1883) and with the dramatic version: Marcellus Emants, *Loki*, (Amsterdam: van Holkema & Warendorf, 1906). Information on other editions is taken from van den Toorn's introduction to the 1966 edition.



for him as the basis for a new narrative work in verse after the 1879 publication of *Lilith*, a poetic composition of a mythological-philosophical character based on Jewish and Christian legends that had undoubtedly been an innovative step forward in the literary scene of the Netherlands.⁵ Emant's testimony provides us with some undeniably useful points for the interpretation of *Godenschemering*. The distance from the moment of the work's composition and the need to present the reasons of its elaboration to a large audience of listeners, however, should bring about a certain prudence as to accepting the author's testimony as the only instrument of analysis.⁶ Emants' argument is above all centered on two thematic nuclei: first and foremost, to Emants, Norse mythology seems to cohere with his pessimistic vision of existence; secondly, the dynamic of the situations in which Loki is a protagonist renders this figure particularly adapted, in Emants' opinion, to allegorically representing human reason (*het verstand*). Emants' rage against society's lack of consideration of reason and, in particular, in the Dutch literature of his time, was the principle reason for creating an epic (*epies gedicht*) whose protagonist Loki would be the personification of reason:

Wat trof me in de Edda, terwijl de ergernis, waarvan ik sprak, in mij woelde?

Dat het verstand, in de Noorse godenwereld belichaamd in Loki, door de goden al net zo behandeld werd, als 't in onze hedendaagse samenleving behandeld wordt door de mensen.⁷

⁵ On *Lilith* see Pierre H. Dubois, Marcellus Emants. *Een schrijversleven*, second expanded edition (Gravenhage: Nijgh & van Ditmar's, 1980), pp. 105-119. For Emant's youthful work preceding the publication of *Lilith*, see Nop Maas, *Marcellus Emants' opvattingen over kunst en leven in de periode 1869-1877* (Arnhem: Uitgeverij Nova Zemblia, 1988).

⁶ Critical contributions to the study of *Godenschemering* can be counted on one hand and, at times, are limited to restating Emants' very interpretation from the 1908 conference. Ingrid Wasiak's recent participation in the IVG Conference of 2010 is an example thereof: Ingrid Wasiak, *Loki bij Marcellus Emants*, in *Vielfalt und Einheit der Germanistik weltweit* (Warsaw: Akten des XII Internationalen Germanistenkongress 2010, vol. III), edited by Franciszek Grucza (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 275-280.

⁷ Marcellus Emants, *Hoe Loki onstond*, cit., p. 431 ("What was it that struck me about the Eddas, while the rage of which I have spoken burned inside me? That reason, in



Loki is, in Emants' version, the one who, on the one hand, reveals the gods' hypocrisy and, on the other, clearly sees that their immortality is nothing but an illusion; he understands that everything that has a beginning must also have an end, and it is for this reason that he is punished. The process of allegorical interpretation involving the figure of Loki inevitably extends to the other characters of the cosmic drama. Odin is reinterpreted as the image of wisdom united with emotion (*gevoelvolle wereldwijsheid*), Thor with brute force, Baldr with youth, and Frigg and Sigrun with compassion.⁸

The same Emants, however, reveals how the divinities within his poem⁹ – as well as their interactions – cannot be traced back to a single and coherent allegorical system; for, during the process of composing the work, an awareness of the figurative meaning vanished and the characters took on a lively and autonomous life of their own, just like figures in a novel. *Godenschemering* should thus be considered the “kristallisatie-produkt van een onbewust proses in

the world of the Nordic divinities personified by Loki, was treated by the gods in the exact same way as it is by humans in our contemporary society”) [English translation from the Italian].

⁸ Cfr. Marcellus Emants, *Hoe Loki onstond*, cit., pp. 432-434.

⁹ In van den Toorn's opinion, *Godenschemering* was “kwalitatief en kwantitatief te mager” (“qualitatively and quantitatively too slight”) to be defined an epic; at most, it could be considered an “epos in zakformaat” (“a pocket-sized epic”. Maarten Cornelis van den Toorn, *Inleiding*, in Marcellus Emants, *Godenschemering*, cit., p. 54). Van den Toorn reintroduces the definition of “epic composition” proposed by Emants in *Hoe Loki onstond* (cit., p. 420). The question of the text's quality seems unessential to me, being that its affinity to a genre is determined by formal choices as well as content, and not by aesthetic success. The choice to compose in verse, the use of alliteration, the frequency of similes and descriptions to me seem to clearly reveal the assumption of epic models on Emants' part and the intention of giving form to a mythological poem. In addition, the question of the length similarly seems to me to be of little importance: with its 3209 lines, *Godenschemering* is a bit longer than *Beowulf* (3182 lines), which has itself been defined as an “epic poem” (cfr. Cecil Maurice Bowra, *Heroic Poetry*, London: MacMillan, 1952). According to Aristotle, the ideal epic poem had to be shorter than a Homeric poem, and last as long as the number of tragedies it was possible to enjoy in one sitting (*Poetica*, 24). That length, according to Hainsworth, would correspond to a number of lines somewhere between four- and five-thousand (John Bryan Hainsworth, *The Idea of Epic*, Berkley: UCPress, 1991) and, in any event, would not be much more than that of *Godenschemering*.



het mengsel van gedachten”;¹⁰ and, as the author himself declares, “Loki volstrekt niet bloot het verstand is geworden”.¹¹

As regards the sources that Emants used, the 1908 conference also offers, even if only implicitly, essential information. On this occasion, the author cites two texts: the *Edda* – the title refers to Karl Simrock’s translation of the mythological and heroic Norse poems together with the *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson¹² – and the novel *Odhin’s Trost* by German writer Felix Dahn, published in 1880. To these indications Emants added, in 1885, in the preface to the second edition of the poem, a reference to Johann Wilhelm Wolf’s mythological compendium and to Laurent Philippe Charles van den Bergh’s manual of folk beliefs in the Netherlands.¹³ These latter two texts, however, contain nothing that the author could not already have found in Simrock’s translation.

What is of more significance is the importance of Dahn’s novel on both the shape of the mythological world Emants presented and on how he employed the medieval sources. From Dahn Emants took the idea that Loki was Odin’s son, born of an illicit relationship between the father of the gods and the giantess Laufey; and, with all probability, that he was also the god of fire.¹⁴ It is precisely the connection between Loki, fire, and the heavenly world in Dahn and

¹⁰ Marcellus Emants, *Hoe Loki ontstond*, cit., p. 432 (“the crystallization of an unconscious process in the mixture of thoughts”) [English translation from the Italian].

¹¹ *Ibid.* (“Loki has not whatsoever become simply reason”) [English translation from the Italian].

¹² *Die Edda. Die ältere und jüngere nebst den mythischen Erzählungen der Skalda*, translated and annotated by Karl Simrock (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1851).

¹³ Johann Wilhelm Wolf, *Die deutsche Götterlehre. Ein Hand- und Lesebuch für Schule und Haus* (Göttingen-Leipzig: Dieterichsche Buchhandlung-Friedr. Chr. Willh. Vogel, 1852); Laurent Philippe Charles van den Bergh, *Proeve van een kritisch woordenboek der Nederlandse mythologie* (Utrecht: L.E. Bosch en zoon, 1846). On the preface to the second edition of *Godenschemering* cfr. Maarten Cornelis van den Toorn, *Inleiding*, cit., pp. 17-19, 21.

¹⁴ A connection between Loki and fire was proposed for the first time by Jacob Grimm in his *Deutsche Mythologie* (Göttingen: Dieterichsche Buchhandlung, 1835), pp. 148-150. Wolf’s compendium, however, makes absolutely no mention of this connection and the figure of Loki is not mentioned at all in van den Bergh’s *Kritisch woordenboek*. On the question of the interpretation of Loki as a god of fire, see Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1970), vol. II, pp. 265-267.



Emants that explains an obscure passage from *Godenschemering*: at the end of the poem's first canto: after Iðunn's abduction, Odin sees "een star,/die snel verschoot" ("a star,/which quickly disappears", line 500-501) and exclaims "'t was Loki weer" ("It was Loki again", line 503). The image is clearly taken from *Odbin's Trost* (p.89): "da war seine [i.e. Loki's] Gestalt verschwunden: aber ein Feuerstern flog glührot durch den Nachthimmel auf die Erde".¹⁵ Emants also borrows some fundamentally important themes as to the action's construction from Dahn: as in *Odbin's Trost*, in *Godenschemering* too Loki's opposition to the gods is explained by his demanding of the right to inherit Odin's throne. Loki proclaims his intention to vindicate Laufey, the giantess Odin had seduced; the father of the gods, however, refuses to recognize Loki as belonging to the line of the Aesir because of the fact that Loki descended from the giants on his mother's side.¹⁶ Moreover, on the structural level, Emants takes the consequentiality between the death of Baldr, Odin's journey to the well of the Norns, and the sacrifice of an eye for wisdom from Dahn as well; just as he does the opening *in medias res* with the depiction of a war between the giants and the gods because of the former's rage against the latter's benevolence in relation to the human race.¹⁷

For a concise presentation of the entire discussion on the question, see Yvonne S. Bonnetain, *Der Nordgermanische Gott Loki aus literaturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive* (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 2006), pp. 59-62. Loki is a divinity of fire in the Wagnerian tetralogy as well, but Emants makes no mention of this at all.

¹⁵ In *Odbin's Trost* Loki also appears in the form of a star on pp. 21, 151, and 296.

¹⁶ This last justification, in particular, appears in strident contrast to the Norse mythological system in as much as the opposition giants/gods does not in any way impede sexual union nor marriage (as long as the male partner is always a god and the female a giantess) between the two races: Odin himself is the son of the giantess Bestla; and, for example, Járnsaxa – who together with Thor created Magni – as well as the wife of Freyr, Gerðr, are giantesses too. On the relationship between the gods and the giants of Norse myth see, above all, Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes. Old Norse myths in medieval Northern society* (Odense: Odense UP, 1998), vol. I, pp. 103-143; and Katja Schulz, *Riesen. Von Wissensbütern und Wildnisbewohnern in Edda und Saga* (Heidelberg: Winter Verlag, 2004).

¹⁷ Here one can perhaps recognize the influence of the Christian conception of the rebel angels' jealousy toward human beings, God's preferred creatures. Cfr. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Satan. The Early Christian Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981).



Finally, Emants also takes from Dahn the vision of an endless succession of past and future universes, which are incessantly forming and disappearing. It is more difficult to establish the extent to which *Godenschemering* owes *Odhin's Trost* as far as the representation of the emotions that tie the characters of the poem together. It is precisely here, in van den Toorn's opinion, that one perceives the German novel's influence the most; but, even if in the Norse sources there is no trace at all of the sentimentalism that is undeniably present both in *Odhin's Trost* and *Godenschemering*, it is difficult to think that Emants, writing in the second half of the 19th century, could have created his narrative world with no consideration of his characters' emotions.¹⁸

Emants thus re-elaborates the mythological material he found in Simrock's translation and adds certain themes, connections, and explanations from Felix Dahn's novel. The principal lines along which this process of re-elaboration takes place are essentially two: on the one hand, Emants reorganizes the diverse myths narrated in the Eddic poetry and in Snorri's Edda, and creates a chronological continuity and causal consequentiality among them; on the other, he focuses the entire narrative on the conflict between Loki and his father Odin.

The poem opens with the defeat of the giants who, led by Þjazi, had attempted to reclaim their former lands that had been given over to the human race by the gods. Defeated and dejected, the giant is contemplating the ranks of the gods when Loki appears beside him. In order to console him, Loki promises to attract the beautiful goddess Iðunn – the custodian of the apples of eternal youth and wife to the god Bragi – to come outside the palace of Ægir where victory celebrations are to take place; there Þjazi will be able to abduct her. Loki then enters the palace uninvited and initiates an argument made up of provocations and insults, clearly inspired and taken in part from the Eddic poem *Lokasenna*,¹⁹ where Loki is eventually chased off by Thor.

¹⁸ Cfr. Maarten Cornelis van den Toorn, *Inleiding*, cit., pp. 53-54 and Id., *Marcellus Emants en de Germaanse oudheid*, in "de Nieuwe Taalgids", 49 (1956), pp. 100-112, here p. 105.

¹⁹ Emants almost literally reproduces even Loki's assertion of being Odin's blood-brother contained in stanza 9 of the *Lokasenna*: "Is 't ook alreeds / Den waakzaam wijzen ravengod ontzicht, / Dat hij en Loki eens, met duren eed, / Hun bloed



Before leaving, however, he mentions “an even more noble fruit” (“nog eed’ler offt”, Canto I, line 449) than the apples of Iðunn. Curious, the goddess follows him outside and is promptly abducted by Þjazi. Loki’s plan nevertheless calls for him to free the goddess and bring her back to Ásgarðr, so as to see his own worth recognized and to finally be accepted among the Aesir, which he feels he is entitled to as Odin’s son. In the meantime, in Iðunn’s absence, the gods begin to age, Baldr is troubled by bad dreams and, fearing for her son’s life, Frigg declares her intention to have all beings swear to not do her son any harm. At that moment, Loki returns to Ásgarðr with Iðunn. He is cheered by all of the gods except Odin. At this point of the narrative, a long discussion between the two gods of central importance in the construction of the overall sense of the work opens up: Odin has understood that Iðunn’s abduction was planned by Loki who, for his part, attempts to defend himself by claiming that the experience of aging has rendered the gods wiser and has also given them the opportunity to contemplate the fact that their lives too would one day have to cease. Furthermore, in the future, Odin would have to decide to whom he would cede power of the Aesir. Loki knows that he is undecided between his favored sons, Thor and Baldr, and suggests that a third son, one who combined the force of the giants and the wisdom of the gods, would be the best choice. Odin, however, rejects his son’s suggestion, once again, due to the fact that Loki had been born of a giantess: “Geen Asin was’t, die Loki ’t leven gaf; / Laufeja leefd’ in

vermengend, zwoeren aan geen drank, / Die niet tot beiden werd gebracht, hun dorst / Te zullen leschen?” (Canto I, lines 335.340). The Eddic text reads: Mantu flat, Óðinn, er við í árdaga/blendom blóí saman; / qlvi bergia léztu eigi mundo, / nema ocr væri báðom borit” (*Die Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, edited by Gustav Neckel. I. Text., 5. Revised and corrected edition edited by Hans Kuhn, Heidelberg: Winter Verlag, 1983, p. 98). In Henry Adams Bellows’ version: “Remember, Othin, in olden days/That we both our blood have mixed;/Then didst thou promise no ale to pour,/Unless it were brought for us both” (*The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Henry Adams Bellows. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/poe/poe10.htm>, accessed March 13, 2014). The motif of the blood-brotherhood between Odin and Loki, undoubtedly one of the most enigmatic and interesting of all of Norse mythology, does not come across as particularly compatible with the innovations introduced by Felix Dahn and taken up by Emants in which the two figures enjoy a father/son relationship.



Jotenheim” (“It was not a goddess who gave Loki life;/Laufey lived in Jotenheim”, Canto II, lines 473-474). When Loki, furious, declares himself envious of human beings’ condition, Odin responds that human beings only live an illusion (“op aard is ’t alles waan” [“upon the earth all is illusion”], Canto II, line 576) and that their only consolation is trusting in the gods, who in their turn remain impotent before that which has been established by destiny. Loki nevertheless scorns his father’s resigned pessimism and defiantly opposes the heavens declaring:

Maar siddert, hemelingen, als de dag
Is aangebroken, dat zich ’t mensch’lijk oog
Niet langer door een waan misleiden laat
En ’t aardsche schepsen van zijn schuld’loos leed
Den Asen-vorst om rekenschap zal vragen!²⁰
(Canto II, lines 670-674).

Loki leaves Ásgarðr, but nonetheless continues to observe what happens from afar and remains astonished by seeing the gods throw every possible weapon at Baldr, who nevertheless remains unscathed. He then assumes the appearance of an old woman, Hyndla, and asks Frigg just what sense that which is unfolding has. Frigg reveals that she has asked every being and every single thing capable of potentially causing harm to swear to not do anything bad to Baldr: that which the old woman sees is the demonstration of the effects of that oath. Loki takes a branch of mistletoe – one of those things that, according to Frigg, was incapable of inflicting damage, and therefore unbound to the oath – and offers to guide the hand of the blind Höðr in launching it. It immediately kills Baldr.

Before chasing Loki in order to imprison and punish him, the gods decide that their messenger, Hermóðr, must first go into the underworld in order to ask the queen of the dead, Hel, to let Baldr return to Ásgarðr. Odin then descends to earth with Thor, Víðarr,

²⁰ (“But you shall tremble, gods, when the day/Comes in which the human gaze/Shall no longer let itself be deceived by illusion/And for its innocent pain the earthly creature/Shall hold the prince of the Aesir to account!”) [English translation from the Italian].



and Váli; they capture Loki in a volcano and tie him to the world tree. While all are awaiting Hermóðr's return, Loki mocks the concept of the gods' justice and, with the death of Baldr, declares their immortality finished. In the dispute which follows, Odin is forced to admit that Loki is indeed ruthless, but no liar: "Wel harteloos is Loki en verhard; / Maar nooit ontlook een logen op zijn lippen" ("Heartless, and cruel, Loki is, it is true, / yet no single lie have his lips ever uttered", Canto IV, lines 300-301).

At this point, Hermóðr returns yet destroys all of the Aesir's hopes: Hel in the end will consent to letting Baldr return to Ásgarðr, but with the stipulation that all the beings in the universe will have to bewail his death. Not one moment after having left the netherworld, however, the messenger of the gods encounters Laufey, Loki's mother, who declares that she would never shed a tear for Baldr, no more than Frigg would shed one for Loki. Upon hearing Hermóðr's words, Loki rejoices: "Dank, moeder, dank; gewroken is uw zoon!" ("Thank you, mother, thank you; your son is vindicated!", Canto IV, line 414). Odin, holding himself responsible for all that has happened, asks to be judged and condemned by Forseti, the god of justice, who, however, refuses. Thus, Baldr's funeral rites begin. Thor, who has been entrusted with launching the boat that will carry the body away from the shore, cannot find the strength to definitively separate himself from his brother; therefore Laufey appears and launches the boat so as to complete the ceremony.

Tormented by guilt and uncertainty surrounding the gods' future, Odin descends to the underworld to reach the well of the Norns and consult them. In order to receive a response, the god must sacrifice one of his eyes;²¹ but, in return, he is granted a dark and dis-

²¹ According to the Norse sources, Odin sacrifices an eye in order to be able to drink from Mímir's well and thereby attain wisdom. Mímir's well is to be found below one of the roots of the world tree, while the dwelling of the Norns was below another root of the same. According to Snorri's Edda, this root was in heaven, but below it was Niflheim, identified by Snorri himself with the realm of Hel: Snorri Sturluson, Edda. *Prologue and Gylfaginning*, edited by Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005), pp. 17-18, 27. Emants – here too following in Felix Dahn's footsteps – for his part states that the Norns' abode was to be found in the kingdom of



orienting vision: he sees a cosmic war, the end of both the gods and the giants, but also sees the birth of a new cosmos, and a new Odin crowned by thorns. In this new cosmos, Loki is present among humankind and encourages them to renounce the new god as well. The process of the worlds' creation and destruction continues, and, in a distant future, Odin sees Loki reigning over humankind:

In Midgaard maakt' u 't menschdom tot zijn vorst.
Doch voerd'uw voorhoofd ook een kroon, uw voet
Omsloten ijz'ren boeien, wijl ge slaaf
Van 't menschdom waart, waarvan g'u meester dacht.²²

Once back in Ásgarðr, when Odin tells the gods – and Loki, still tied to the world tree – about his own experience at the well of the Norns, he concludes his tale summarizing in the following way what he has seen:

En zeide dan: «Zoo zullen d' Asen dus
Ten onder gaan en 't is een gods-kind, dat
In onvervaarde haat hen vallen doet.
Dan zullen nieuwe gode zegerijk
In Asgard wonen, tot het andermaal
Een Loki listig ten verderve leidt.
Zoo woekert eeuwig Odiens schuld en wischt
Geen boetedoening uit de booze daad.²³
(Canto V, lines 294-301).

the dead. The mythological poem *Baldrs draumar*, also known as *Vegtamskviða*, talks about a trip of Odin's to the kingdom of the dead to learn Baldr's future after his son had been troubled by dreams of doom. Here, however, the journey takes place before, and not after, Baldr's death and Odin descends into the underworld not to enquire of the Norns, but of a dead prophetess. Cfr. Rudolph Simek, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie* (Stuttgart: Alred Kröner Verlag, 1984), p. 41.

²² “In Midgard humanity chose you as its sovereign./But though you wore a crown upon your head, your foot/Was imprisoned in iron chains, as you were a slave/Of that very humanity you thought yourself lord” [English translation from the Italian].

²³ “And [Odin] then said: ‘So this is how the Aesir/Shall perish, and it shall be a son of god/With fearless hate to make them fall./Then new gods victorious/Shall reside



Odin no longer has any faith in either the justice or the wisdom of the Norns; yet, even if existence is only an illusion, it is nonetheless necessary that those who seek to do good be honored and that those who seek to do evil be punished. He orders Loki to be tied to a rock with the intestines of his own son, Narfi, and to have a snake suspended above him that with its venom will cause him terrible pain. The poem thus ends with a depiction of Loki's torture. Loki, however, – while priding himself on having vindicated his mother – once more begins to proclaim the illusory character of wisdom, justice, and compassion; and denounces the hypocrisy of both the gods and of humankind.

This concise presentation of the myth's rewriting already brings to light, I believe, both the principal strategies of re-elaboration as well as an ambiguity at the heart of the construction of its meaning. Firstly, Emants reduces the multiplicity of the mythological narratives preserved within the medieval texts to one single, coherent narrative line. In order to achieve this, he chooses some of the principal Norse myths – the creation of humankind, the abduction of Iðunn, the death of Baldr, the sacrifice of Odin's eye, the cosmic battle at the end of time – and connects them to one another in a chronological and causal manner, modifying them whenever and wherever necessary in order to make such connections possible. The rest of the Scandinavian mythological patrimony is cited in short flashbacks that allow the author to better qualify the figures in action. This is the case, for example, in the myth of the stealing of Sif's golden hair (Canto I, lines 101-103) with which the motive of Loki's cunning is introduced; or of the myth of the construction of the wall of Ásgarðr, mentioned by Loki himself to demonstrate how he had been of help to the gods on multiple occasions (Canto II, lines 451-453). The resulting cohesive and coherent story illustrates the unfolding of an entire cosmic cycle, from the creation of humankind until *Ragnarök*, the dramatic succession of catastrophic events that leads to

in Ásgarðr, until once more/A Loki will lead them to ruin through cunning./Thus Odin's guilt shall continue for all eternity/And no act of expiation will wipe away the evil act" [English translation from the Italian].



the end of the universe.²⁴ Taking up and expanding the end of the Eddic poem *Vǫluspá*, in which the formation of a new cosmos after the destruction of the present one is announced, Emants introduces the perspective of a cyclical repetition of the world's formation, evolution, and destruction.²⁵

The conflict that pits Loki against his father Odin is the joining link between the diverse myths and the motor of the poem's entire action. To ensure that Loki can assume this central function in *Godenschemering*, Emants had to significantly modify the contradictory and enigmatic figure described in the medieval sources.²⁶ In the poem, Loki's psychology is thus complex and credible, his actions and reactions are always explicable in the light of his desire to be recognized as Odin's son and a legitimate aspirant to his inheritance. His machinations are comprehensible as strategies for winning his father's approval, his crimes as expressions of the rage and frustration caused by being excluded from the pantheon of the Aesir. Even his relationship to humankind seems to be determined by an oscillation between identification and opposition: Loki intervenes to help save human beings when the gods ignore their cries for help, but when confronted by their ingratitude he is devoured by a destructive and cruel fury.²⁷ Emants extends this process of psychological depiction, which simultaneously confers both coherence and

²⁴ Cfr. Gianna Chiesa Isnardi, *I miti nordici* (Milan: Longanesi, 1991), pp. 186-192 and Rudolf Simek, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*, cit., pp. 321-322.

²⁵ As mentioned previously, Emants also borrows the vision of the formation and destruction of infinite worlds from Felix Dahn's novel (Felix Dahn, *Odhin's Trost*, cit., pp. 433-450). In *Odhin's Trost*, however, the revelation of this eternal cycle reconciles Odin to the laws of the universe and fills him with ecstatic joy. Nothing of the sort is to be found in the dark prophecy that concludes Odin's prophetic vision in *Godenschemering*.

²⁶ On the figure of Loki in the medieval Norse sources, above all see Yvonne S Bonnetain's *Der nordgermanische Gott Loki aus literaturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive*, cit.

²⁷ In relation to this point, see the episode in the context of the dialogue between Loki and Odin in Canto II, lines 608-647: moved by the plea for help of a sick mother whose child is dying of cold and hunger, Loki – in as much as he is the god of fire – causes the fire to return to the fireplace, but when the frightened woman pushes him away and implores Baldr, Thor, and Odin, he sets the entire house aflame, killing both mother and child.



credibility to the character, to include Loki's interlocutor and primary antagonist, Odin. Nothing remains of the powerful, but also unpredictable and substantially ambiguous as well as unsettling, figure described in the medieval sources²⁸ in *Godenschmering*. Emants' Odin is a sovereign well aware of the fact that his power is illusory, and that all decisions rest in the hands of destiny. Moreover, he is a sovereign tormented by guilt, by the awareness of being responsible for the conflict with Loki and, as a consequence, for the actions with which Loki destroys the harmony of the gods and of the cosmos:

't Was niet de mistel in des moordn'aars hand,
't Was niet mijn Frikka's argelooze haast,
't Was Hoder niet, zoo heilloos wreed misleid,
Ook kan 't Laufeja's felle zoon niet zijn.
Want hij alleen is aanvang aller schuld,
Die zwerwend over 'd aard', in 't zwaak gemoed
Der reuzenbruid den minne-brand ontstak
En, als de stormwind, die met blind geweld
De reinste bloemen van haar stengsel rukt,
De liefde losscheurd' uit het maagd'lijk hart,
Dat hij met listig vleiwoord had misleid.
Ja, Loki's vader draag'alleen de schuld,
En... Odien was 't, die hem in 't leven wekte.
(Canto III, lines 367-379).²⁹

²⁸ For a thorough treatise on the figure of Odin in the medieval Norse sources, see Annette Lassen's recent study: *Odin på kristent pergament. En teksthistorisk studie* (Copenhagen: Forlag Museum Tusulanums, 2011).

²⁹ "It was not the mistletoe in the assassin's hand,/It was not the innocent haste of my Frigg./It was not Höðr, fatally and cruelly deceived./It cannot even have been the fierce son of Laufey./Since he alone is the origin of every sin/He who, wandering across the earth, within the weak spirit/Of the giantess lit the fire of love/And, as the tempest's wind with blind fury/Tears the purest flower from its stem,/So he tore love from the virgin's heart,/which with cunning words of flattery he had deceived./Yes, the father of Loki alone is guilty,/And...it was Odin who gave him life" [English translation from the Italian].



These procedures of reorganization and of modification of the mythological narrative give rise to a reading on two levels. The explicit reading, expressed by the author himself, is a mythical-allegorical one. The divine figures are “draggers van ideën” (“vehicles of ideas”)³⁰ and the myth’s re-elaboration offers a picture of existence and the world meant to express the author’s own rationalistic and pessimistic convictions. The narrative arc in this sense traces not only a process of degeneration and progressive catastrophe; but, above all, a process of the becoming aware of the illusory character of all that exists.³¹ This dual process nevertheless seems to be marked by an inherent ambiguity: the unveiling of the non-sense of living, on the one hand, indeed represents the triumph of reason; yet, at precisely the moment reason appears triumphant, it shows itself to be a monstrous bringer of destruction. The enigmatic image of Loki – squire and slave of a humanity marching toward the darkness of Hel – with which Odin’s vision at the well of the Norns ends, appears to be an attenuation of the picture presented in the poem’s first edition where he is simply defined as a *monster*: “Rampazaal’ge! Ja, ik heb uw beeld herkend/In ‘t monster, dat aanbeden werd op aard” (“O wicked one! Yes, I recognized your face/In the monster venerated upon the earth”).³² In any event, the desolate scene of the end of all times that opens to Odin’s sight does not appear to be all that compatible with the rationalization that the author, in the 1908 conference, carries out *ex post* of his own creative method.

But then again, as the author himself underlined in that conference, the poem’s characters do not simply act as “vehicles of ideas”, but as authentic literary figures; and, as such, have to be psychologically credible. And this is the second level of reading, implied in the first, of *Godenscherming*. The conflict that generates the chain of ac-

³⁰ Marcellus Emants, *Hoe Loki ontstond*, cit., p. 432.

³¹ In *Godenscherming* Emants again takes up a theme he had considered in his earlier poem *Lilith*, whose protagonist – Lilith – is the depiction of both desire and illusion; and, as such, is also referred to by the Sanskrit name of Maya. Cfr. Pierre H. Dubois, *Marcellus Emants. Een schrijversleven*, cit., pp. 112-113.

³² Marcellus Emants, *Godenscherming* (Sneek: H. Pijttersen, 1883), p. 118 [English translation from the Italian].



tions that, on the mythical-allegorical plane, enacts the tragic finale is determined by a constellation of motives itself determined by bourgeois society and literature at the end of the 19th century. The father of the family, esteemed and respected within the context of his elevated social milieu – the society of the gods, in our case – in his youth committed an erotic transgression of which his friends are ignorant, even if his wife is not, having intuited the whole affair, but having decided to remain silent in sympathetic compliance.³³ At this point, the claim of the illegitimate son – born of that blameworthy and covered-up affair – to have his paternal heredity recognized, initiates a series of reactions that shatters the familial and social harmony: the son so scorned and marginalized vindicates himself by killing his father's favorite son, and thereby forcing his father to accept his guilt without any chance of repairing the damage inflicted.

Thus the values, customs, and obsessions of an entire age become visible through a work of universal ambition that sees itself as a literary testament to reason and pessimism. The Nordic mythological tradition, employed once again – after Wagner's colossal creations – as a means of expressing both a thought and a vision of the modern world, becomes a vehicle of an entirely new meaning, a meaning that nonetheless is unable to establish a compact and consistent discourse; and with that, in this multiplicity of tensions and contradictions, it opens itself up once more to interpretation, and to further play within the chain of the myth's re-readings and re-writings.

³³ “Aan Frikka's scherpen blik was Odiens schuld/Niet lang ontgaan; maar 't godd'lijk Asenrecht;/Vergeven had haar goedheid nooit verzaakt” (“From Frigg's pointed glance Odin's guilt/Was unable to flee for long; but her goodness,/Never neglected the divine justice of the Aesir: the pardon”, Canto III, lines 390-392). The first edition's formulation was more precise and direct: “Zijn schuld was niet aan Frikka's blik ontgaan,/Maar zij had al zoo lang vergeven” (“His guilt could not flee Frigg's glance,/But he had already been long forgiven”), Marcellus Emants, *Godenscherming* (1883), cit., p. 70.