

## RE-WRITING OLD NORSE MYTHOLOGY – SIRI PETTERSEN'S *ODINSBARN*

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**ABSTRACT.** *Re-writing Old Norse Mythology – Siri Pettersen's Odinsbarn.*

The article focuses on one of the contemporary Norwegian novels that re-write Old Norse mythology. It discusses the various myths or elements of the old mythology that are re-written in a new form, so that the author, Siri Pettersen, can create a mythopoeia which seems unfamiliar at first sight but which, on a deeper level, brings forth associations with the Old Norse mythology. The result is a fantastic world that has many of the characteristics of the world that we live in.

**Key Words:** *re-writing, Old Norse mythology, Odin, anthropogenic myth, Valhalla, Ragnarok, Huldra, Yggdrasil, Bivrost*

**REZUMAT.** *Rescrierea mitologiei nordice - romanul lui Siri Pettersen –*

*Odinsbarn.* Articolul se concentrează asupra unuia dintre romanele norvegiene contemporane care rescriu mitologia nordică. El discută diferitele mituri sau elemente ale vechii mitologii care sunt rescrise într-o formă nouă, așa încât autoarea, Siri Pettersen, să poată crea o mythopoeia care, la prima vedere, pare nefamiliară dar care, la un nivel mai profund, trezește asocieri cu vechea mitologie nordică. Rezultatul este o lume fantastică care are multe dintre caracteristicile lumii în care trăim.

**Cuvinte Cheie:** *rescriere, mitologie nordică, Odin, mitul antropogenic, Valhalla, Ragnarok, Huldra, Yggdrasil, Bivrost*

*Rewriting* is such a wide term that it is sometimes difficult to define. It was coined during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it describes practices that have been used for a long time under various conceptual definitions and in various cultures. Scandinavian literature is no exception.

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In its prime sense *re-writing* refers to the action of copying a text in order to create a duplicate but it also means to “write (something) again especially in a different way in order to improve it or to include new information” (*Merriam Webster Online Dictionary*). It encompasses everything from literal reproductions, transcriptions, translations, to more elaborate forms that seem to be characteristic of postmodern literature such as postcolonial, feminist or ideological rewritings.

In the following article I want to focus on one of the contemporary re-writings of Old Norse mythology in Norwegian literature, *Odinsbarn* (*Child of Odin*), and discuss the myths/parts of the Old Norse mythology that are re-written in order to find out what kind of re-writing they imply.

*Odinsbarn* is a contemporary fantastic novel written by the Norwegian author, Siri Pettersen. She has a background of designer and she frolics in different media such as web, cartoons, illustrations, movie and text. Siri Pettersen has also been active in protests against such organizations as WHO (World Health Organisation) and IMF (International Monetary Fund) as well as against attacking Afghanistan. These acts go hand in hand with her belief that our mission in life is ‘to minimize suffering’ (Søum 34) because we, as a society, are defined by the way we treat each other.

Since she was a small child, Siri Pettersen has been interested in drawing and writing, boxes and mysterious small things, ravens and crows. All these have shaped her first published novel, *Odinsbarn*, which came out in 2013. It won the Fabel Award (2014), while it was also nominated for The Ministry of Culture’s Debut Award for children and youth literature (2014), The Book Blogger’s Prize (2013) and The Norwegian Bookseller’s Prize (2013) as the first in the fantasy genre and the first youth book ever to be nominated for this award.

*Odinsbarn* (Odin’s Child), the first novel in *The Raven Rings* trilogy, is a book that introduces us to a fantastic world that is built on Old Norse mythology but which mirrors in many aspects our real world. According to White, titles are usually the first point in a literary work at which a writer can introduce a mythological prefiguration (White 120). *Odinsbarn* is a name that refers to the anthropogenic myth of the creation of humans in Old Norse mythology. Odin, god of the rulers, of wisdom, of poetry, of death, the most powerful of the Æsir gods and as presented by Snorri Sturlason, head of all the gods of the Nordic mythology, created humankind together with Hænir and Lodur. One day “... they found on land Ash and Embla, / capable of little, lacking fate. Breath they had not, spirit they had not, / character nor vital spark nor fresh complexions; / breath gave Odin, spirit gave Hænir, / vital spark gave Lodur, and fresh complexions” (Larrington 6).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, *Odinsbarn* does

<sup>2</sup> The Old Norse text says: “... fundu á landi, lítt megandi, / Asc oc Emblo ørløglausa. / Qnd Pau né áttu, óð Pau né hqfðo, / lá né læti né lito góða; / qnd gaf Óðinn, óð gaf Hænir, / lá gaf Lóðurr oc lito góða.” (*Edda*, “Vqlospá” 17-18)

not elaborate the Old Norse creation myth into a motif-pattern.<sup>3</sup> The mighty Odin never appears himself in the novel but in a short story told by a puppeteer: “Who died puppeteer? The king and Odin. Wait. You saw the king and Odin die?”<sup>4</sup>

Odin is also said to have come from his world and stolen a pair of ravens from a king in Ymslanda, the fantastic world created by Pettersen in her novel. According to Old Norse mythology, two ravens Hugin (Thought) and Munin (Memory) are among the animals that accompany Odin. Their role is to fly all over the world and gather knowledge and news which then they impart with the god at dinner time, while sitting on his shoulders - “From this he gets the name raven-god” (Faulkes 33).<sup>5</sup> Significant in this context is to point out that the central god in Ymslanda is a raven. We get the sensation that Odin was a real person and the world of Ymslanda existed before him; he ‘stole’ not only the birds but also their attributes, since in Ymslanda, the ravens are ‘the eyes’ of the Seer, the central god, who finds out everything that happens in the world through his network of well trained ravens.

As a consequence, the title of the novel is only meant to create, in the reader’s mind, associations with the Old Norse mythology, since the main character in the book, Hirka, is a child of Odin, a daughter of Embla, the first woman mentioned in the anthropogenic myth, a *menskr*.<sup>6</sup> A totally new mythological world is created but its pillars are built from elements of the old mythology.

The name Ymslanda in itself is connected with the Nordic mythology. It basically means – ‘Ym’s Lands’. According to Old Norse mythology, Yme was the first creature in cosmos, a primeval giant. Some scholars perceive him as a masculine creature that was capable to create life on his own, while others consider Yme androgynous. Even his name seems to have the meaning of ‘twin’ (Steinsland 112). His offspring gave birth to a whole ancestry of giants. Another creature that emerged at the same time with Yme was the cow Audhumbla; her sons were Bure and Bor and they were of a different ancestry.

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<sup>3</sup> In his study about *Mythology in the Modern Novel*, White argues that almost all mythological novels with such titles refer again to the title-figure and follow the initial allusion with an extended motif (which designates the system of references to the prefiguration). Thus, the title is used to make us aware of the motif that is to come rather than to establish the prefiguration once and for all. They invite us to “speculate whether the rules of the game are going to be respected” (White 125).

<sup>4</sup> My translation of: “Hvem døde dukkemaker? Kongen og Odin. Vent. Du så kongen og Odin dø?” (Pettersen, *Odinsbarn* 364)

<sup>5</sup> The Old Norse text says: “Því kalla men hann Hrafn-gauð” (*Sturluson, Snorri. Edda* 39)

<sup>6</sup> In modern Norwegian, the word ‘menneske’ means human being, while in Old Norse ‘mennskr’ is an adjective and it means human.

Odin himself was the result of the mixed marriage between Bor and Besla (Yme's offspring). Together with his brothers, the new gods killed Yme to create the world. Yme's bones became the mountains, his flesh became the earth, his blood – the sea, his head – the sky and his eyelashes – the clouds. In the second novel of the Raven Rings series, *Råta* (Rotten), we find out that Ymslanda is actually called after the blind, a feared race that was defeated thousands of years ago. Also known as *umpiri*, the blood of the ancestry, they are now believed to have returned to Ymslanda. In their history the world was created from the first raven – Um, which in time became Ym, so Ymslanda bears the name of the first raven; this hints to the fact that Ymslanda was initially inhabited by the blind who were then chased away, creating a conflict between the two races.

In Old Norse mythology, the world arose as the result of a murder and the giants have always had a reason for revenge, so there is no wonder that the fight between gods and giants is a motif of Nordic mythology. Ymslanda reminds us of the Nordic myth about the creation of the world. The tension that characterizes the relation between gods and giants is re-written in the tension between *menskr*, the blind and the inhabitants of Ymslanda who are of yme ancestry, hinting again at the first creatures that Yme created: “And it is said that when he slept, he sweated. Then there grew under his left arm a male and a female, and one of his legs begot a son with the other, and descendants came from them” (Faulkes 11).<sup>7</sup>

Ymslanda, is inhabited by people who have a common physical characteristic, they all have a tale. The implied reader makes again associations, this time with the Scandinavian folklore that is inhabited, among others, by some seductive forest creatures that are incredibly beautiful and have a tale as a distinctive feature – the *Huldra*. The *Huldra* appears suddenly and lures men in the forest in order to secure freedom or sometimes to suck life out of them. A similar folksong exists in Ymslanda, about a girl who once housed an ‘embling’ (Embla's offspring) and rotted, because according to people's sayings, one kiss from these ‘mysterious monsters’ could change the people from Ymslanda into a rotten body. “The song had many lines in which the taleless begged to sleep with the girl, but each time the girl said no. Up to the last line, when she couldn't take it anymore and said yes. She rotted in the forest, like a stump. Hollow. Unrecognisable.”<sup>8</sup> While the seductive *Huldra* is nowadays usually represented

<sup>7</sup> The Old Norse text says: “... en svá er sagt, at þá er hann svaf, fekk hann sveita, þá óx undir vinstri hendi honum maðr ok kona, ok annarr fótr hans gat son við gðrum, en þaðan af kómu ættir; ...” (*Sturluson, Snorri. Edda* 13).

<sup>8</sup> My translation of: “Sangen hadde mange vers der den halelause tagg om å få ligge med henne, men hver gang sa jenta nei. Helt til siste verset, da hun ikke orket mer og sa ja.” (Pettersen, *Odinsbarn* 132)

as a young girl with, long, blonde hair and a cow tale, in older traditions she looked like a rotten stump if seen from behind. When people met her, they first thought she was a normal woman, but then they saw her tale or her hollow back and understood that she was not human. Similar to the *Huldra*, *Hirka* looks like an inhabitant of *Ymslanda* and she has no tale. She does not look like a rotten stump, but according to folklore, she, a *menskr*, can turn the people of *Ymslanda* into a rotten body by kissing them and that's why they call Odin's children 'rotten'. *Menskr* is a race that is condemned and feared.

*Manfalla*, the capital city of *Ymslanda* that could house half of the world, is "a soundless sea of people, tamed by heat and sadness".<sup>9</sup> Due to its pronunciation, it reminds us of *Valhalla*, Odin's death realm, a realm dedicated to the ruler classes and warriors. Those who died on the battlefield were believed to continue their afterlife in *The Hall of the Slain*. Here, Odin gathered the best warriors in order to train them for the last cosmic battle, *Ragnarok*. Each morning, the *einherjar* awoke to a new life and fought until sunset when all were dead again on the battlefield. But Odin's death realm was a very promising afterlife and the young warriors longed after an honourable death on the battlefield so that they could join their mighty god. Not only was the afterlife in *Valhalla* a desirable place because of the wonderful food and drinks that were served to the warriors, but also because of the important mission they were trained for and the honour they gained by fighting alongside Odin in the battle at the end of the world. There are no negative connotations related to *Valhalla*; still we have to mention that the afterlife in this death realm was not to be perceived as a reward, since Odin chose himself those warriors whom he considered to be of greatest help at *Ragnarok*. Consequently, rather than being awarded victory in battles, the best warriors were chosen to die so that they could rise again in death and help the gods in their final battle against the giants.

Similar to *Valhalla*, *Manfalla* is a desirable place for the people of *Ymslanda*. They all dream about being educated in *Eisvaldr* because "From the Council's schools came out the world's best educated in all arts, from warriors to writers of history."<sup>10</sup> All who are chosen under the annual *Rite* (Ritual) wear the scholar's robe until they have chosen their place in society; many dream about being an *augur*, the eyes of the Seer, a scholar of His words, or even a member of the Council, something for which many are willing to kill. *Manfalla* is a city divided in two by a huge wall. Behind the wall, there lies *Eisvaldr* which houses the hall of the Seer as well as the houses of all the important families in

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<sup>9</sup> My translation of: "Et lydløst folkehav, temmet av hete og sorg." (Pettersen, *Odinsbarn* 49)

<sup>10</sup> My translation of: "Fra Rådets skoler kom verdens beste lærde i alle kunster, fra krigere til historieskrivere." (Pettersen, *Odinsbarn* 37)

Manfalla. They live in opulent luxury, while many of the people outside the wall live from one day to another. The houses in Eisvaldr are built so that they can impress, and life behind the wall is characterized by corruption. The wall marks some kind of door from poor to rich, from dirty to sacred; while everyone in Ymslanda dreams about living behind those doors, only the 'gifted' ones stand a chance to get there. Still, the greatness of Eisvaldr is built on a lie that is kept alive in order to feed the greed for power of the ruling families:

Eisvaldr was built on a compromise. The city at the end of the city was the house of the Seer, an open place for prayer and work. Everybody's city. At the same time it was meant to protect the twelve families and the secrets they guarded. The Council's city. Fortress and market in a far-fetched embrace.<sup>11</sup>

The Council manipulates people so that the members of the twelve families appear more powerful and smarter than they actually are. They twist the laws in their own interest and play a strategic game so that they can win in the end. Friends help friends to reach desirable positions in society and young hopeful people are accepted at the schools of Eisvaldr in exchange for money. The ruling families do not choose the most gifted among people in order to offer them education and a better life, they choose them to take away their ability so that they can control people and justify their deeds.

The word *mannfall* itself exists in the Old Norse language where it means that several men/people fall ('die' at war). If we divide the name in two, we have two elements – *mann* which means 'man/human' and the verb *falla* which means to fall from a higher place to a lower one, or in a figurative understanding it can mean to fall into sin or to die. Manfalla could be consequently interpreted in the sense of 'the fall of the people', a meaning which fits the description of the city as a place of corruption where the desire to have power is stronger than any other principle of life. It also represents the place where the special ability of the people of Ymslanda, *evna*, 'dies', because the ruling family take it for themselves so that they can preserve their supremacy.<sup>12</sup>

Eisvaldr houses *Ritesalen* (the Ritual Hall) – the place where the annual election of the people with the strongest *Evna* (Ability) takes place. It is the biggest and most central building in Eisvaldr, built on three levels and with a spectacular dome where the Council has its meeting room. The whole world is

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<sup>11</sup> My translation of: "Eisvaldr var tuftet på et kompromiss. Byen i enden av byen var Seerens hus, et åpent sted for bønn og arbeid. Alles by. Samtidig skulle den beskytte de tolv familiene og hemmelighetene de vaktet. Rådets by. Festning og torg i en usannsynlig omfavelse." (Pettersen, *Odinsbarn* 451)

<sup>12</sup> Evna is a strong connection with the surrounding nature that gives people extra power.

built around it while “It was from here that Mannfalla stretched its long arms.”<sup>13</sup> This is an image that reminds us of Yggdrasil, the world tree, of Old Norse mythology and of Mircea Eliade’s *axis mundi* that connects the three cosmic levels of earth, heaven and the underworld (Eliade 36-37).<sup>14</sup> Yggdrasil stands in the middle of the world and it is a cosmological symbol which is often depicted as the tree of life and fate. Many scholars have tried to draw a model that can encompass everything that the Old Norse myths tell us about the world tree. Among these, the Danish professor Finn Magnussen, who used to teach Old Norse mythology in Copenhagen early in the 19<sup>th</sup> C, tried to illustrate the Viking world image both on the horizontal and vertical plan. On the horizontal plan, the world is represented as a circle divided in three concentric circles – right in the middle of the world is the house of the gods, Åsgard and in its center grows Yggdrasil. Around Åsgard lies Midgård, the world of the humans and beyond that we find Utgård, the world of the giants. On the vertical plan, we have the roots of Yggdrasil on the first level, the three concentric circles (Åsgard, Midgård and Utgård) in the middle, and above, on the third level, the branches of Yggdrasil which spread out.<sup>15</sup> What is interesting is that the middle and the upper levels on the vertical plan are covered by some kind of dome that makes the image of Yggdrasil look very much alike Siri Pettersen’s *Ritual Hall*. Furthermore, in her analysis of the cosmology and society in medieval Iceland, the Danish social anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup places the world of the gods right on top of the world tree on the vertical plan, while the people are placed in the middle (Hastrup).<sup>16</sup> Siri Pettersen herself places the meeting room of the Council, whose members have a status similar to gods, in the dome of the building, so on top of the ceremonial hall, as a further sign of their power. At the same time, she creates three worlds inhabited by three races. They remind us to a certain degree of the division of races in the Old Norse mythology – the people of Ymslanda who believe that they are superior because they have the *Evna*; the blind, who are considered to be evil because they want to steal this special ability and keep Ymslanda for themselves; and the *menskr*, who are somewhere in the middle because the blind cannot enter Ymslanda without their help.

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<sup>13</sup> My translation of: “Det var her Mannfalla strakte ut sine lange armer.” (Pettersen, *Odinsbarn* 181)

<sup>14</sup> Eliade argues that many different myths, rites and beliefs are derived from this traditional “system of the world” and the *axis mundi* can appear in the form of a pillar, a ladder, a mountain, a tree etc.

<sup>15</sup> Image seen in Steinsland 103.

<sup>16</sup> It is worth mentioning that Steinsland argues that there is no evidence in the Old Norse myths that can lead to such a representation of the world of the gods above the world of the humans, in the sky. She means that Hastrup uncritically relied on Snorre’s Edda late information about the pre-Christian world view. (Steinsland 105)

Yggdrasil is also known under the name of ‘Odin’s hest’ because according to a myth, Odin once hang dying in the tree in order to obtain the runes from the giants: “I know that I hung on a windy tree/ nice long nights,/ wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin,/ myself to myself,/ on that tree of which no man knows/ from where its roots run” (Larrington 34).<sup>17</sup> The tree is also the house of the Seer, the raven god, where he hangs around waiting for news from the world. It grows right in the middle of the Seer’s Tower and it spreads its branches across the huge room. “Black as the night. Shining blank. Was it stone? Or burnt glass?”<sup>18</sup> But the Seer does not exist, it is just an invention of the members of the Council who drug common ravens so that they can stay unmoved for long periods of time, and thus manipulate people to believe and have someone to follow. Just as Odin uses the world tree to gain further knowledge, so do the members of the Council in Ymslanda use the tree and the Seer to ‘maintain’ their knowledge and power.

At the same time, The Ritual Room houses a portal between worlds. Also known under such names as ‘The Stone Doors’, ‘The Blind Ways’, ‘The Raven Rings’ and ‘Bivrost’, the shaking bridge between the worlds - the stone circles that have long been lost, are actually hidden in the building that represents the centre of the world. In the Old Norse mythology, Bivrost is an important means of transport that connects the world of the gods with other cosmic places. According to Snorre, it is maybe what we call rainbow; it has three colours and great strength but it will break at Ragnarok, when “Muspell’s lads go and ride it” (Faulkes 15).<sup>19</sup>

Siri Pettersen re-writes the bridge of the old mythology into a stone circle that actually binds the three races of The Raven Rings Series. According to oral tradition, the stone circle is an old ‘political’ assembly place (a *thing*) that was used in the Viking Age, wherefrom people exercised their judicial power.<sup>20</sup> A different theory says that the stone circles actually represent death memorials that are spread all over Northern Europe and the British Isles.<sup>21</sup> Steinsland

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<sup>17</sup> The Old Norse text says: “Veit ec, at ec hecc vindgameiði á / nætr allar nío / geiri undaðr oc gefinn Óðni / siálfir siálfom mér, / á þeim meiði, er mangi veit, / hvers hann af rótom renn.” (*Edda*, “Hávamál” 138)

<sup>18</sup> My translation of: “Svart som natta. Skinnende blankt. Var det stein? Eller brent glass?” (Pettersen, *Odinsbarn* 465)

<sup>19</sup> In Snorre’s mythology, Muspell is a warm place in the south where probably giants live, since also the Norse poet of “Vǫlospá” (The Seeress’s Prophecy) understands Muspell as a giant name. (*Edda*, “Vǫlospá” 51).

<sup>20</sup> The *thing* was a governing assembly made of the free people of the community and presided over by law speakers.

<sup>21</sup> Some of these stone circles have been excavated and the archaeologists have discovered that they represent graves that date back to the end of the Bronze Age and up to the end of the Iron Age (500 B.C. – 600 A.D.)



argues that in societies where the seasons limited the possibilities of people to travel, the same places were used for different purposes: they were both market places, thing places and cult places; so, the official cult should be seen in connection with other activities in society (269). Cult activities were performed on holy places that were usually marked in the landscape by means of an obviously delineated area that could be – a special stone, a grove, a waterfall or a stone circle around the grave. Consequently, a stone circle could have a three-fold function: it could be used as a cult place, a thing place and a market place.

The Ritual Hall in *Odinsbarn* seems to fulfil two of these functions. Under the annual Ritual in Ymslanda it has a cultic function and it assures that the ruling families preserve and increase their power. This function reminds of the significance of the performance of official cult during the Viking Age, namely to exert power and to delineate the territorial division of the society. The Ritual Hall also works as a 'thing place' since it houses the Council Room, the place where the powerful families in Ymslanda take all the important decisions about the country. Besides these two functions, it also hides a passage between the worlds.

During the Viking Age the graves were considered to be a passage between the world of the living and the world of the dead so they had a symbolic meaning for the afterlife. Archaeological excavations of Viking graves have shown that people were buried with goods that they were believed to need in the life that waited for them in the various death realms. Boats, carriages and sledges are the most common transport middles that have been found, indicating that the Vikings believed that their dead could travel between the worlds. The different stages in the use of the Ritual Hall, first as a stone circle and passage between the worlds and then as a ritual and *thing* place also fit well with our knowledge about how ritual places have changed their character in time. The Ritual Hall was thus first a ritual place and then a *thing* place.

Its very name, *Ritesalen*, is well chosen in accordance with the Viking practices of naming the official cult places by using such place designations as *hov*, *horg* and during the later period of the Viking Age – *hall* and *sal*. The place names were not just practical names but they rather contained references to the gods, indicated where in the landscape the rituals took place by referring to a consecrated area or hinted at human settlements or farmed lands (Steinsland 284). *Sal* is one of the elements that were used to designate such sacred human settlements and the *Ritual Hall* is both the 'house' of the Council and the place where the most important sacred ritual in Ymslanda takes place.

The stone circle in *Odinsbarn* bears resemblance to the so called *Stoplesteinan*, a stone circle found in Rogaland, Norway, if we take into consideration that both of them are made of 16 raised stones. But it also reminds of other stone circles around the world that have two or more stone circles set within one another.

The description of the stone circle also brings forth associations with the end of the world, Ragnarok in Old Norse mythology. It is a term that refers to the 'fall of the cosmic powers'.<sup>22</sup> The end of the world is a fight between all the powers in the world that ends in their destruction. Natural catastrophes are connected with this event such as a very harsh winter that lasts over three years, followed by huge fires that go up to the sky and wrap the world in smoke and heat. Friends and relatives fight each other and there is war all over the places. But in Snorre's account in *Gylfaginning*, cold and heat are also connected with the creation of the world from chaos.<sup>23</sup> Here, life is the result of a mixture between the coldness from Niflheim, a place of grim things in the north, and the heat and brightness of Muspell, a hot and bright place in the south. The first living creatures that emerged from the chaos were Ymir, also called Aurgjelme, and the cow Audhumbla (Faulkes 10).

The representatives of the three races in *Odinsbarn* meet to confront each other on the location of the stone circle. White butterflies fly between the stones at first and create the sensation of going through real snow. Then snow falls outside the stone circle and finally "The hill burst. A column of fire exploded up to the sky."<sup>24</sup> The mountain spits fire and red blood like a waterfall that flows in the wrong direction; "An incredible strength that looked up to a black sky where it spread like glowing rain. So was it that way that the end of the world looked like? And the world's beginning."<sup>25</sup> In these lines, Siri Pettersen refers to both myths, the creation of the world from chaos and the myth about the end of the world. She uses the common elements of these myths, the opposing pair of cold and heat, snow and fire, and rewrites them in a version about the old world where Hirka has lived her life up to now, and the new world that awaits here behind the stone circle. The natural elements used in the rewriting of the Old Norse myth bear resemblance to a natural phenomenon that we all know very well, the eruption of a volcano, but they are also meant to trigger memories of the old myths in the mind of the trained reader.

As mentioned above, friends and relatives fight against each other before Ragnarok, the world is at war. And the inhabitants of Ymslanda prepare for a war, a confrontation between the two opposing cities – Mannfalla, in the south, and

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<sup>22</sup> It is made of two words *ragna*, which means (cosmic) powers and *røk* – 'fate' or *røkk* – 'darkness'.

<sup>23</sup> Ginnungagap, the unpleasant gap filled of cosmic powers, is the Old Norse term for chaos.

<sup>24</sup> My translation of: "Så revnet bakken. En søyle av ild eksploderte mot himmelen." (Pettersen, *Odinsbarn* 563)

<sup>25</sup> My translation of: "En ufattelig kraft som slo opp mot svart himmel der den spredte seg som glødende regn. Så det var slik verdens undergang så ut? Og verdens begynnelse." (Pettersen *Odinsbarn* 564)

Ravnhov, in the north. I mentioned earlier that *hov* is an element which was used in place names to refer to a special consecrated area where rituals and other cult activities used to take place during the Viking Age. Alongside *horg*, *hov* is one of the elements used in forming place names that the written sources most often refer to in connection with cult places. Both terms have been widely discussed by scholars. According to older theories, the *hov* was understood as a separate sacred building especially meant for performing religious activities. Later on, this idea was challenged by the Danish archaeologist Olaf Olsen. He argued that the *hov* couldn't have been a separate sacred building based on the archaeological evidence. The gods were worshipped in sacred places under the open sky and the building devoted to the worship of god appeared only later, under the influence of the Christian church (Olsen).<sup>26</sup>

The name Ravnhov is therefore constructed similar to other theophoric names that remind of the gods that were worshipped such as Thorshov or Frøshov. It houses an old, almost circle-formed worship place carved in the mountain and open to the sky, with the image of a god in the middle of the field. The sculpture represents a voluptuous and naked woman riding a two-headed raven; she reminds us of the goddess Freyja, the great goddess of the Old Norse religion associated with love, sexuality and lust who rode a chariot pulled by two cats and also possessed a cloak of falcon feathers that she could use in order to fly.

Ravnhov had fought against the blind and held them back but paid with blood. While they lost land, leaders and lives, the power of Mannfalla grew stronger and stronger. Put down by diseases, lack of water and food, the leaders of Ravnhov were forced to accept the help from Mannfalla as well as their conditions. Ravnhov had to impart their inherited knowledge about the ravens and also to give up their gods and dedicate themselves to the Seer, a story which resembles the one of the conversion of the Vikings to Christianity. After hundreds of years of paying back the debt to Mannfalla, Ravnhov has now become again a free city and a strong rival power in Ymslanda. The time to win back their kingdom has finally come and in order to do that they defy the twelve ruling families of Eisvaldr as well as their rules. Mannfalla feels threatened and so Ymslanda prepares for war, a war in which friends and relatives fight each other for survival.

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<sup>26</sup> Nowadays, due to several other archaeological finds scholars seem to incline again towards the belief that the pagan Vikings who afforded it had such separate buildings to officiate their cultic activities. (Jennbert et al.)

### Conclusions

*Odinsbarn* is one of the contemporary Norwegian novels that re-write the Old Norse mythology. Rather than re-writing the old myths explicitly or adding new information, Siri Pettersen uses them as a mould for creating a new mythology, a mythopoeia that echoes the old one. Especially through the use of names but also through her descriptions of certain places/events/creatures, the author awakens in the implied reader memories of the Old Norse mythology. Pettersen herself underlines in an interview that her intention was to create something special that sounded familiar at the same time: "As a believable world parallel to ours. A place that can be imagined to have given birth to things in our own culture."<sup>27</sup>

The title is the first link to the Old Norse mythology and the myth of the creation of the human race by the central god Odin. Ymslanda, the fictional world of the novel, sends us to the primordial creature of Old Norse mythology, the giant Yme and the myth about the creation of the world; the people of this fictional land remind us of the *huldra* from the Norwegian folklore; Mannfalla has a similar pronunciation to the desirable death realm, Valhalla; The Ritual Hall and its location in the middle of the world creates associations with Yggdrasil, the tree of life and fate, while the stone circle, Bivrost, the portal between the worlds, calls to mind the famous bridge that connects the Norse gods with the other cosmic powers of the Norse mythology. The other important city in Ymslanda, Ravnhov, bears a name that in its composition is similar to several place names of the Viking Age that are often considered to have been sacred places where cultic activities used to take place. Last but not least, the final battle between the gods and the giants, Ragnarok, is echoed in the confrontation between the three races of the Raven Rings – the inhabitants of Ymslanda, menskr and the blind.

Siri Pettersen creates new places and names that she fills with the meaning and content she desires. Thus we enter a world that bears similitude with the real world even if it looks totally unfamiliar at first sight. The author herself believes that the book has touched a cultural nerve precisely because it is not true to the Old Norse tradition. She means that Norwegians feel proud about their own culture but there are not only good reasons about it since the fear of the unknown also makes Norwegians hang to what they perceive as Nordic culture (Nordbø par. 19). Therefore Ymslanda is a land where the desire to achieve a better status in society, corruption, conflicts for power and supremacy and the fear of unknown races all find their place.

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<sup>27</sup> My translation of: "Som en troverdig verden ved siden av vår. Et sted som kan tenkes å ha gitt opphav til ting i vår egen kultur." (Bekkebråten par. 6)

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