

## BOOKS

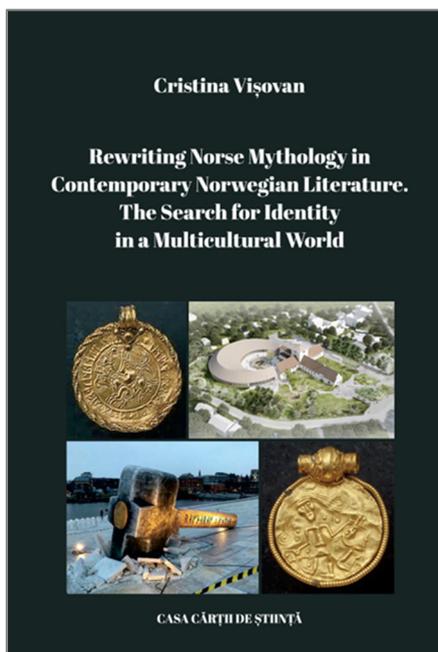
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### **Cristina Vișovan, *Rewriting Norse Mythology in Contemporary Norwegian Literature. The Search for Identity in a Multicultural World*, Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2021, 307 p.**

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The volume *Rewriting Norse Mythology in Contemporary Norwegian Literature. The Search for Identity in a Multicultural World* by Cristina Vișovan appeared at the publishing house Casa Cărții de Știință from Cluj-Napoca, Romania, in the collection "Nordica", the only one of its kind dedicated entirely to Nordic literature at a national level, and has at its basis Mrs. Vișovan's doctoral thesis that was successfully defended in 2019 at Babeș-Bolyai University under the supervision of the esteemed Professor Sanda Tomescu Baciu. Mrs. Vișovan is a graduate of the program English language and literature and Norwegian language and literature from the same university. Later, she continued her studies at the University of Oslo, where Mrs. Vișovan is a graduate of Viking and Medieval Studies.

Professor Sanda Tomescu Baciu explains in the preface to the volume that



Mrs. Vișovan does not focus on the literary form, but rather "on those aspects of the rewriting of Nordic myths that focus on current aspects of the polyethnic Norwegian society in a broader socio-political context of globalization and immigration" (11). In doing so, Mrs. Vișovan proposes her term, "multicultural rewriting", when analyzing novels, such as *Gudenes fall* (*The Fall of the Gods*) by Cornelius Jakhelln, *Jotnens hjem-*

*komst* (*The Return of the Jotun*, with references to the other novels from the trilogy about the god Tyr) by Andreas Bull-Hansen, and *Odinsbarn* (*Odin's Child*) by Siri Pettersen. From the twentieth century onwards, our contemporary period shifts its focus from postcolonialism to multiculturalism due to immigration and globalization.

The introduction offers concise explanations of the theoretical underpinnings that Mrs. Vișovan works with

within her study. The author gives an account of life as an immigrant in Norway and underlines the challenges faced by the current Norwegian society. While some feel fortunate to live in a multicultural place, others are more reluctant. This sheer duality mirrors the Norwegian socio-political life.

As Višován points out, the writing down of old myths is also a retelling. Each iteration can be seen as postmodern no matter the time period when these types of texts were created, as can be the case with the Greek tradition and Homer. In her own words, "a multicultural rewriting could be another term that can be associated with critical revisionism" (23), namely a critical reinterpretation of a canonical story.

In the first part, entitled *Decoding Rewriting*, Višován tackles the meaning behind a concept like 'identity narrative' interwoven with the idea of rewriting. Intertextuality is thus one of the main theories and Julia Kristeva's take on Bakhtin is carefully detailed, Višován adding that the author is not entirely responsible for how a literary work is perceived, but that the reader is also the creator of meaning: "The reader becomes the one who must discover the intertextual connections of the open text, so that what really matters is the text's destinations and its origins." (43). Likewise, Gerard Genette's hyper-textual practices of simple transformation and indirect transformation (labeled imitation) with their respective denominations like playful, satirical, and serious are key when understanding the tradition of retelling or rewriting. Of highest importance is transposition, or serious transformation, due to its 'aesthetic accomplishment' and/or 'ideological ambition' (45). Another key theoretical denomination is between 'formal transformations'

(which affect meaning) and 'thematic transformations' (that transform meaning).

Reading can be a mental exercise before rewriting myths and can serve as a catalyst for textual production. In this regard, as Višován eloquently points out, "The resulted text often emerges from a desire to adapt the original text to the poetics and ideology of the time, and to make it accessible to readers with similar backgrounds and ideologies" (47).

Another term that pertains to this discussion is adaptation. Seen as an 'act of re-vision', the practice of adapting canonical texts can go beyond 'appropriation' by creating a stand-alone text with no intertextual awareness needed from the part of the reader. In this way, myths become more familiar to the general public by being creatively recontextualized and reformed.

Under the umbrella term of rewriting, there is a spectrum of textual transformations, such as translation, parody, pastiche, adaptation, imitation, and burlesque. To these, we add 'homorewriting' (a rewriting of the original text by the same author), 'hetero-rewriting' (a rewriting by a different author), 'iso-rewriting' (a rewriting for a different public or medium, such as cinema or dramaturgy), and 'microtextual rewriting' (an internal reduplication of the text). In this sense, "Rewriting becomes then not only a secondary process to writing but also a second-degree repetition" (53).

In the conclusion to part one, the purpose of the book is clearly stated: "In this book, it will be argued that the contemporary rewriting of Norse mythology is linked with the idea of sharing a cultural memory and an identity." (61).

The second part, *Rewriting Norse Mythology*, offers a concise history of how the Norse myths have been distributed

and rewritten from the Middle Ages and up to the twentieth-first century. The advent of writing was introduced with the coming of Christianity, something that made possible the recording of the Norse myths. It is well-known that Snorri's *Edda* is both a writing and a rewriting of Norse mythology. Some of the activities that are linked with the process of writing in that age are copying, translating, illustrating, rubricating, commenting, and glossing. In this way, we have access to "the ground stone of human culture" (80).

The reason behind this choice of topic for many Norwegian writers nowadays, namely the rewriting of Norse myths, is also the prestige their books benefit from. Generally speaking, myths are stories that are common for all (according to Mircea Eliade) and thus underline their usefulness in a multicultural setting. However, myths are also part of the so-called 'common' consciousness of a nation, where the 'we' is opposed to the 'Others'. In this case, the re-emergence of Norse myths in Norwegian literature is explained by the need to preserve the legacy of the nation for the younger generations.

The third part, entitled *Rewriting Norse Mythology in Contemporary Norwegian Literature*, deals with the socio-political climate in Norway and then analyses the proposed literary corpus.

Even though Norway can be considered multicultural for a long time (given the unions with Denmark and Sweden and the presence of the Sami ethnic minority), it has only recently been described as multicultural and multi-ethnic as more and more immigrants have moved to Western Europe. Their growing number has left its mark on the Norwegian socio-political scene, as far-right political discourses have flourished. This

culminated in the 2011 Norway terrorist attacks by neo-Nazi Anders Behring Breivik.

In the chapter dedicated to Cornelius Jakhelln entitled *The Distorting Mirror or the 'Imagined' Minority*, Vişovan points out the close relationship between authorship and life experience when it comes to Jakhelln. Indeed, the Norwegian author and musician has coined the term 'selfbiosophy' for his collection of essays with autobiographic content. Jakhelln has identified with Breivik's ideas regarding the new Norway and with the feelings of "fear, despair, rage, fury, exasperation, jealousy, greed, malicious pleasure" (154). He wishes for a revival of Norse mythology, wanting a Norse Renaissance. The presence of the other leads to Jakhelln feeling a loss of power and privilege, something that is mirrored in the construction of the god Odin. The fall of Odin is thus a reinvention of the white man, seen here as weak and thus fallen from grace: "Appropriating the image of the weak white man, Jakhelln re-contextualizes the Norse god Óðinn placing him together with the rest of the Norse pantheon in Underheimen, a location which is situated literally under the ground." (160-1). This paints a picture of a profane Odin as a decadent man, an echo of Jakhelln's own feelings towards the official policies put forward by the Norwegian state, which, in his mind, go further away from the nation's roots. Even if our Odin blends eastern Oslo urban dialect with a form of Norwegianized English, the god depicted in *Gudenes fall (The Fall of the Gods)* has more common traits with a "melancholic nationalist white man" (188) who goes from passive acceptance to aggression or radicalization. But probably the key to understanding this reinterpretation of Odin is the loss of honor, so valuable for the Norse gods. Subsequently, Jakhelln's Odin

undertakes a 'trans-formation' from the centre and into the periphery.

The next chapter, entitled *In the Name of Justice*, focuses on the Norwegian writer Andreas Bull-Hansen, a modern-day Viking, abiding by the old Norse ways of being. His novel, *Jotnens hjemkomst* (*The Return of the Jotun*) is a postmodern depiction of the god Tyr, an answer to globalization by going back to pre-modern pagan traditions. When dealing with questions such as racism, Bull-Hansen opts for a 'medial' position. In one of his blog posts, he argues that Vikings had no idea of the concept of racism and that Norse society was not as mono-ethnic as previously believed. The devaluation of the concept of honor is seen as a painful experience by Bull-Hansen: "As long as the modern man is weak, lacks integrity and is scared of living a life outside the mainstream, the Norse ideal has become a far better option for the Norwegian novelist" (208). According to him, living by the Viking philosophy implies self-reliance, perseverance, and individuality.

The novel *Jotnens hjemkomst* (*The Return of the Jotun*) presents a dystopic Oslo, of 2042, where Norwegians as an ethnic group are barely visible in the multicultural composition. This is thus reflected in the police brigade that fights criminality in the region. The police superintendent and investigator, Petter Tyrar, is "no other than the Norse god of war and justice who was sent to Midgard as a result of a pact with Odin" (211). The demystification of the Norse god can be traced back to the end of the pagan times when it seems that he lost some of the previous importance. But in the novel, Tyrar keeps some of his original attributes, being hard-working and dutiful. However, these traits serve more for making

money and accumulating wealth, indicators of the shallowness of human life.

Tyrar is an anarchist, thus not abiding by the social rules, as he does not declare his Muslim ethnicity when entering the Police Academy, even though it represents the majority now. However, Bull-Hansen distinguishes between 'criminal Muslims' and 'ordinary honourable Muslims', a sign that the Norwegian author takes the *aurea mediocritas* when portraying minority groups, thus adding nuances to his oeuvre. By rewriting the Vanir of Norse mythology, Bull-Hansen bestows them with a negative connotation, sharing characteristics with the Muslim criminals. This is reflected in the depiction of Tyrar, who is used as a double symbol in the trilogy. On the one hand, he represents the modern man as a slave of work, and, on the other hand, he is seen as a fighter, dying an honourable death and awakening in Asgard as his former self, Tyr. Criticizing the present society and the political practices of contemporary Norway, Bull-Hansen offers a depiction of a dystopic future as a direct result of globalization by reinterpreting Norse mythology.

The last chapter, *The 'Other' in Me*, offers a close reading of the fantastic novel *Odinsbarn* (*Odin's Child*) by Siri Pettersen. The main theme is the relationship between the outsider and the insider, between order ('we') and disorder ('they'). This theme resulted from a feeling of exclusion on the part of the novelist, due to her interest in the escapist fantasy genre. Later on, she finally felt included in her own group, with the same interests and common identity, based on "cooperation, mutual understanding, and acceptance" (240). Her own inkling is that there is no real dichotomy, an 'us' and a 'they', and that we all should learn how to empathize more.

Even though fantasy was perceived as a secluded genre (especially in Norway), this situation changed due to increased readership and scholarship in this area. The fantasy genre is based on the distinction between a real world and an imaginary one, and, in this way, there is a subtle 'interconnection' between the 'Other' and 'evil', as the novel also indicates. Fantasy also becomes an attractive medium for telling a story that would otherwise be perceived with skepticism.

The publication of *Odinsbarn* (*Odin's Child*) in 2013, the first novel in the *Raven Rings* (*Ravneringene*) trilogy, broke the conventions of the fantasy genre that previously existed in Norway. It "plays on the anthropogenic myth of the creation of humans in Norse mythology" (249). The Eddic poem *Völuspá* references 'an unfinished pair of humans': Ash and Embla, Odin being the one who gave them breath. An innovative element in Pettersen's account is that the existence of humankind is only a myth in the imaginary world of Ymslanda created in the novel. What triggers the story is the existence of a little girl called Hirka who is a *menskr* (a human) without her knowing.

When the truth is revealed, she is perceived as being abominable. In actuality, the representatives of the ruling families propagate this myth by holding onto power and constantly twisting the laws. By creating this world, Pettersen puts the mirror on us, the humans, and holds it back to our society, with all its hidden truths – a commentary on multiculturalism by means of rewriting.

In conclusion, the present volume deals with rewritings of Norse mythology in contemporary Norwegian literature by highlighting some key traits of the present political discourses on immigration, multiculturalism, and ethnicity, and how these types of discourses create imaginary worlds on Norwegian soil. By depicting three portraits of Norwegian literary figures on different sides of the spectrum, whether ideological (Cornelius Jakhelln), moderate (Andreas Bull-Hansen), or humanist(ic) (Siri Pettersen), and by offering a close reading of novels from the aforementioned writers, Cristina Vişovan succeeds in rendering a global picture of contemporary Norwegian society as transformed by globalization.

**Paul-Daniel GOLBAN**

*Ph.D. student, Faculty of Letters  
Babeş-Bolyai University  
Cluj-Napoca, Romania  
Email: paul.golban@ubbcluj.ro*

