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Jo Nesbø's *The Snowman* and the Myth of Týr: Addressing Contemporary Issues through Literary Tradition

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This essay explores the way in which the Scandi-noir author Jo Nesbø reimagines the Norse myth of the Germanic god Týr¹ (and also some other cognate mythological incidents) in his popular novel *The Snowman* (2007). With a focus which is especially addressed to Norway and to a limited set of local, targeted readers, Nesbø adapts these medieval myths to create allusive incidents and puzzles, and he exploits the intellectual play of medievalism to produce a dense semantic meaning. The novel is thus able to explore and debate contemporary issues including the value of truth versus perspective (and context), the flawed dichotomy of victim and offender, and the tensions between individual and society. This analysis demonstrates not only the semantic density of Nesbø's *The Snowman*, but also the relevance of the study of the cultural past for a proper understanding of modern society and of its literary production, a study favoring also a better grasp of its complex nature and issues.

Nesbø does not use the myth wholesale, but rather deconstructs it to combine and adapt various fragments. In doing so, he changes its meaning completely, in a way that is typical of intertextuality and rewriting processes. As Marina Buzzoni and Massimiliano Bampi suggest, "each target text contains a vision of the world and a hierarchy of values which vary according to both the socio-cultural context the manipulator belongs to, and his own artistic or ideological agenda."²

Nesbø's "ideological agenda" is characteristic of the Scandi-noir genre, which typically houses political discourse and an active interest in socially relevant issues.

¹ The Germanic god Týr sacrificed his hand for the benefit of the inhabitants of Asgard, as narrated in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* and referred to in other sources. See Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (Oxford, London, New York, et al.: Clarendon and Oxford University Press, 1982), chap. 34, 27-9. For a translation see Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda. Norse Mythology*, trans. Jesse L. Byock (London, New York, et al.: Penguin, 2005), chap. 34, 39-42.

² In their work, Buzzoni and Bampi draw upon Itamar Even-Zohar's concept of 'transfer', as outlined in "Polysystem Theory (revised)." See Marina Buzzoni and Massimiliano Bampi, "Preface," in *The Garden of Crossing Paths: The Manipulation and Rewriting of Medieval Texts. Venice, October 28-30, 2004*, ed. Marina Buzzoni and Massimiliano Bampi (Venezia: Libreria Editrice Cafoscarina, 2005), 8; and Itamar Even Zohar, "Polysystem Theory (revised)" in *Papers in Culture Research* (Tel Aviv: The Porter Chair of Semiotics, Tel Aviv University, [1979] 2005), 38-48. As Gérard Genette explains in his 1982 study of the relationships of a text with prior texts, "il n'existe pas de transposition innocente – je veux dire: qui ne modifie d'une manière ou d'une autre la signification de son hypotext." This modification largely depends both on the socio-cultural context of the target text and on the author's motives and purposes. On this topic see also Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006). On Medievalism, specifically, see Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl, "Medievalisms: The Magic of the Middle Ages," in their *Medievalisms. Making the Past in the Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013); and M. Jane Toswell, "Introduction," *Year's Work in Medievalism* 22 (2008). <https://sites.google.com/site/theyearsworinmedievalism/all-issues/23-2008>.

Set within the broader category of crime fiction, this genre—also defined as Nordic noir, or Scandinavian crime fiction—has been flourishing in Scandinavian countries since the 1990s, making an impact on worldwide literature with millions of books sold. Indeed, the numerous enthusiastic reviews, along with the genre’s “receipt of literary prizes,” demonstrate its popularity amongst both audiences and critics.³ Many of these crime novels belong to the police-procedural sub-genre.⁴ Distinctive features of these novels are a pessimistic sense of fate or doom, and a critique—often conveyed by the comments of sympathetic police investigators—of modern Scandinavian society, displaying huge contrasts between the apparent equality and social justice of the political system, and the reflections of neoliberalism on the most deprived layers of society.⁵

The manipulation of the past is also a typical feature of the Scandi-noir genre, as some writers—for example Stieg Larsson, Christian Dorph, Simon Pasternak and Jo Nesbø himself—“integrate police-procedural conventions with thoroughly researched, historically revisionist accounts of the past to question and challenge national myths and canonical national history.”⁶ Nesbø’s transformation of mythological stories is therefore neither surprising nor exceptional within the genre.⁷ His interest in mythology is already evident in *Flaggermusmannen* (1997), translated into English as *The Bat* (2012), which began his literary production. This novel, set in Sydney, Australia, draws heavily on aboriginal culture and myths.⁸ It began the detective Harry Hole series, a rather unconventional, offbeat but also shrewd and determined police inspector with a personal life troubled by love, alcoholism, and relational difficulties.⁹ There are presently twelve Harry Hole novels, set mostly in Norway with occasional visits to other parts of the world (Thailand, Hong Kong and Congo).¹⁰ When the action takes place in Oslo, Nesbø’s hometown, the author

³ Paula Arvas and Andrew Nestingen, “Introduction: Contemporary Scandinavian Crime Fiction,” in *Scandinavian Crime Fiction*, ed. Andrew Nestingen and Paula Arvas (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 1.

⁴ Derived from American models and adapted to a Scandinavian context, the story features a detective going about his work. Examples include inspector Martin Beck, by the Swedish authors Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö (published 1965-75); Kurt Wallander, by the Swedish writer Henning Mankell (published 1991-2009); and Inspector Sejer, by the Norwegian author Karin Fossum (published 1995-2016).

⁵ Arvas and Nestingen, “Introduction: Contemporary Scandinavian Crime Fiction,” 9.

⁶ Arvas and Nestingen, “Introduction: Contemporary Scandinavian Crime Fiction,” 11. See also Karsten Wind Meyhoff, “Digging into the Secrets of the Past: Rewriting History in the Modern Scandinavian Police Procedural,” in *Scandinavian Crime Fiction*, ed. Nestingen and Arvas, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 63.

⁷ Nesbø is a versatile character, with interests ranging from rock music to finance, from football to literature. Financial analyst for work, the son of a librarian, in his spare time he sings with the rock band Di Derre and writes—among other things—lyrics, novels and children’s books.

⁸ For example, the serpent Bubbur, Walla and Moora.

⁹ Harry Hole can be defined as “a male anti-hero investigator”, typical of Scandinoir literature, which is “famous for its melancholy detectives who are silent, depressed, diligent, thirsty, and so on.” Arvas and Nestingen, “Introduction: Contemporary Scandinavian Crime Fiction,” 9-10.

¹⁰ The whole Harry Hole series presently includes: *Flaggermusmannen* (1997; trans. English 2012 as *The Bat*; *Kakerlakkene* (1998; trans. English 2013 as *Cockroaches*); *Rødstrupe* (2000; trans. English 2006 as *The Redbreast*); *Sorgenfri* (2002; trans. English 2008 as *Nemesis*); *Marekors* (2003; trans.

transfers his personal, specific, physical and cultural world into his fictional landscape. Whether these are local landmarks, such as the Akershus fortress, Holmenkollen ski jump, or the Fram museum, or neighborhoods like Bygdøy, Aker Brygge, Frogner, Majorstuen, Grünerløkka, and Holmenkollen, Nesbø's focus is on details for natives of Oslo. He even references specific pubs, restaurants and movie theaters in the story (for example, the Ekerbergsrestaurant).

Nesbø's cultural world also includes the mythological vestiges of the Scandinavian literary tradition even when the myths are not integral to his plots. Many of his Oslo novels include names and references that offer glimpses of Scandinavian mythological lore, but here he never provides detailed descriptions of mythological characters or events. These references, covert and overt, are certainly well understood by Scandinavian readers. Nesbø is very clear about his writing "locally,"¹¹ with most of his stories well rooted in Oslo and in Norwegian history and cultural tradition. In an interview with Nancie Clare, he admits:

When I'm writing I think about two friends of mine. They are my audience. I don't think of UK or Europe or the US as an audience. I write what I find interesting and what I think those two friends of mine find interesting. And I write really locally. I refuse to spend time analyzing those things because if you get seduced to start thinking about who reads and why that may lead you down the wrong way.¹²

For example, in *Nemesis* (chap. 48), Harry Hole's female colleague Beate Lønn possesses a decorative plaque in her house featuring a passage from the *Hávamál*, one of the poems of the *Poetic Edda*, that is one of the most important sources of Norse mythology.¹³ The *Hávamál* records Odin's wisdom in proverbs and maxims,

English 2005 as *The Devil's Star*); *Frelseren* (2005; trans. English 2009 as *The Redeemer*); *Snømannen* (2007; trans. English 2010 as *The Snowman*); *Panserhjerter* (2009; trans. English 2011 as *The Leopard*); *Gjenferd* (2011; trans. English 2012 as *Phantom*); *Politi* (2013; trans. English 2013 as *Police*); *Tørst* (2017; trans. English 2017 as *The Thirst*); and *Kniv* (2019; trans. English 2019 as *Knife*).

¹¹ Nancie Clare, "Jo Nesbø, Norway's Best-Selling Writer Talks to Nancie Clare", *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Nov. 10, 2013, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/jo-nesbo-norways-best-selling-writer-talks-to-nancie-clare/>.

¹² Clare, "Jo Nesbø, Norway's Best-Selling Writer Talks to Nancie Clare."

¹³ The anonymous *Poetic Edda* (or *Elder Edda*) is mainly found in the codex Regius, Ms 2365 4°, written in Iceland around 1270, although some of the poems are also found in other manuscripts. On the text and the manuscripts see Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda, Vol. I, Heroic Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), xi-xiii; Peter Hallberg, "Eddic Poetry," in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf (New York and London: Garland, 1993), 149-52; Terry Gunnell, "Eddic Poetry," in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Malden, MA, Oxford and Carlton: Blackwell, 2005), 82-100; and Judith Jesch, "Poetry in the Viking Age," in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 291-98. The title of the old poem is cited in the novel: "On the wall was a rose-painted wooden plaque with an old Hávamál poem" (*Nemesis*, chap. 48). All citations from the novels are drawn from the English translations by Don Bartlett, in electronic editions: Jo Nesbø, *Nemesis* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), and Jo Nesbø, *The Snowman* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012). References are

and Lønn's plaque echoes the first stanza of the poem.¹⁴ Odin also appears as the name of a drug dealer in *Gjenferd/Panthom* (chap. 8),¹⁵ and in the name of a police meeting room in *Panserhjerter/The Leopard* (chap. 48), a fitting choice for the god of wisdom and eloquence.

It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that Nesbø revitalizes the myth of Týr, "making out of it a literary instrument" able to establish "new connections among visions of the past, analyses of the present, and perspectives on the future."¹⁶ He makes full use of that "process of recreating, reinventing and reenacting medieval culture in postmedieval times," which is the quintessence of medievalism.¹⁷

The choice of the Týr myth in particular links directly to the subject of *The Snowman* and the main themes the author intends to treat: unfaithfulness (i.e. a breaking of the marital vow) and subsequent punitive dismemberment. The novel tells the story of a serial killer who mutilates his victims by cutting up their bodies into pieces, usually by means of a hot metal noose-shaped instrument. The murders described in the book can be divided into two different categories: primary murders, the carefully planned and executed results of the psychotic urges of the serial killer, and secondary murders, the incidental ones, which derive from fortuitous circumstances. All the primary murder victims are married women with children. Their murders all occur during the first snow of the season and are accompanied by the presence of a snowman, which constitutes a reflection (or an alter ego, as declared by the killer) of the victims. The murderer usually adorns the snowman with an incrementally horrid

therefore to chapters rather than page numbers.

¹⁴ The plaque reads, "At every door-way, / ere one enters, / one should spy round, / one should pry round / for uncertain is the witting / that there be no foeman sitting, / within, before one on the floor" (*Nemesis*, chap. 48). The original text reads "All doorways before entering should be spied out, should be scrutinized, for it is not known for certain where enemies sit in wait in the hall ahead," which in Old Icelandic is: "Gáttir allar / áðr gangi fram, / um skoðaz skyli, / um skygnaz skyli, / þvíat óvíst er at vita, / hvar óvinir / sitia á fleti fyrir." Translation and original from *The Poetic Edda, Vol. III, Mythological Poems II Scandinavian Crime Fiction*, ed. Nestingen and Arvas, ed. and trans. Ursula Dronke (Oxford, New York, et al.: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

¹⁵ Leader of the Los Lobos, he presumably owes his name to the peculiar state of frenzy attributed to the god (hence the name: ie WAT- 'fury, frenzy' > Germanic **Wōðanaz* > ON *Óðinn*, OE *Wōden*, OS *Wōden*, and OHG *Wuotan*), as well as to his 'chosen warriors', the berserker. Note that Odin is said by Snorri Sturluson, to be accompanied by two wolves: Geri and Freki ("Gylfaginning", chap. 39). On Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, see Faulkes, ed., *Snorri Sturluson Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning*, xi-xxiii; Faulkes, "Snorra Edda," in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Pulsiano and Wolf (New York and London: Garland, 1993), 600-602; and Peter Orton, "Pagan Myth and Religion," in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. McTurk (Malden, MA, Oxford and Carlton: Blackwell, 2005), 308-11.

¹⁶ I am borrowing Fulvio Ferrari's words, which he applies to Volker Braun and Heiner Müller, but which also fit superbly, in my opinion, to the present context. See Fulvio Ferrari, "Correcting Traditions and Inventing History: the Manipulation of Mythology and of the Past in the Nibelungen-Literature of the 19th and 20th Centuries," in *The Garden of Crossing Paths*, ed. Buzzoni and Bampi (Venezia: Caoscarina, 2007), 57.

¹⁷ Leslie J. Workman, "Medievalism", *The Year's Work in Medievalism* 10 (1995), 227 and Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz, "Making Medievalism: A Critical Overview," in their *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2014).

piece of the victim: Birte's pink scarf; Sylvia's decapitated head; Eli's mutilated body. The horror escalates to the still-living body of the last victim, Rakel, whom Nesbø shows awaiting her fate, painfully balancing her body on a melting snowman with the sizzling metal noose placed dangerously around her neck. The secondary murder victims are killed because they pose a threat to the murderer.

The denouement reveals that all the designated victims are connected by the same moral stain: they have been unfaithful, betraying not only their husbands but also their children. According to the killer's logic, these adulterous women must be killed because they have not been loyal, true, or trustworthy: they have broken the sacred oath of marriage, and their deaths are punishment for their sins. A good indication of the killer's motivation and feeling is given by his comment after a phone call with the second victim, Laila Aasen:

"I hope you appreciate what I'm risking, and please don't mention this meeting to a living soul."

"Of course not! Trust me."

He was still holding the receiver to his ear after she had hung up. With his lips to the gray plastic, he whispered: "And why should anyone trust you, you little whore?" (chap. 33)

Laila Aasen will end up brutally mutilated, just like the other women:

The body lying in the snow had been cut into so many pieces that it was only thanks to a naked breast that they had been able to determine the gender. [...]

"The killer murdered her and carved her up right here" (chap. 5)

The first victim is actually the murderer's mother, whom he kills at the age of thirteen after discovering that she was being unfaithful to her husband and that the killer himself was the fruit of this adulterous relationship (a situation he shares with the other offspring in the novel). Nesbø tells the reader that the frustrated, sociopathic child, who is also affected by a genetic disease and bullied by his peers, makes a snowman to use it as a target for his anger and the hatred he feels for his mother.

Nesbø, therefore, fully explains the motives of the killer, and somehow leads the reader to feel sympathy for him rather than pure hatred. In *The Snowman*, as Berit Åström observes, "the positions of murderer and victims as threats to society are reversed;" and "Just as the novel goes to some length to portray the victims as culpable and deserving of their deaths, the narrative presents the murderer as pitiable and absolves him of responsibility for his actions."¹⁸ Åström adds, again

¹⁸ Berit Åström, "'Because My Mother was a Liar and a Whore': Adulterous Mothers and Paternity Uncertainty in Jo Nesbø's *The Snowman*," in *The Mother-Blame Game*, ed. Vanessa Reimer and

referring to the murderer, “Thus he is not constructed simply as a cold and manipulative serial killer; rather he is a multidimensional and complex character that suffers from what unscrupulous women do to their families.”¹⁹

This sympathy for the murderer is a characteristic of Norwegian crime fiction, as noted by Andrew Nestingen:

[...] the Norwegian noirs emphasise weakness and fate as the source of murder, rather than venality and monstrosity [...] the figures tend to be rounded characters, who are let down by society and whose lives are thus negatively impacted by social forces; this characterisation prompts a sympathetic response from readers and viewers.²⁰

Nesbø will exploit this sympathetic approach to the full for his transformation and reimagining of the myth. A discussion of the adaptation process, however, must be preceded by a brief account of the medieval myth itself, in order to understand Nesbø’s choices and intervention policy.

The Scandinavian god Týr²¹ is well-attested in Germanic literary and archeological traditions. His name is linked to the Indoeuropean root for the divine—cognate to Old Indian Dyaus and Greek Zeus—which has led scholars to believe that he must have occupied a primary role early in the history of mythology.²² Týr is mentioned in the *Poetic Edda* and in Snorri’s *Edda*.²³ He is the god of war, whose weapon of choice is a sword (used by high-status warriors), and his power overlaps with that of Odin, the father of all deities (Alfaðir). Týr protects the general assembly or council of free men (Thing), where important judicial, legislative and executive decisions are made.²⁴ The idea of this specific role of his was certainly shared by the larger Germanic cultural area.²⁵

Sarah Sahagian (Bradford: Demeter Press, 2016).

¹⁹ Åström, “Because My Mother was a Liar and a Whore.” At the same time, though, she explains that “the individual actions of the serial killers are shown to be horrifically disturbing and seemingly at odds with what is acceptable in contemporary society”; they must therefore be stopped, either arrested or killed: Berit Åström, “Over Her Dismembered Body: The Crime Fiction of Mo Hayder and Jo Nesbø,” in *Rape in Stieg Larsson’s Millennium Trilogy and Beyond: Contemporary Scandinavian and Anglophone Crime Fiction*, ed. Berit Åström, Katarina Gregersdotter, and Tanya Horeck (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

²⁰ Andrew Nestingen, “Nordic Noir and Neo-Noir: The Human Criminal,” in *International Noir*, ed. Homer B. Pettay and R. Barton Palmer (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 160.

²¹ Germanic **Tiwaz* (OE *Tīg*, *Tīw*, OHG *Zīu*, ON *Týr*) from Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, trans. Angela Hall (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993), 337. See also Gianna Chiesa Isnardi, *I miti nordici* (Milano: Longanesi, 1991), 216-9 and 262.

²² As a plural noun: Old Indian *deva*, Lat. *dei*, ON *tívar*, Old Irish *día*.

²³ In the *Poetic Edda*’s *Lokasenna* (38 and 40), *Hymiskviða* (4 and 33), and *Sigrdrifumál* (6); and Snorri’s *Gylfaginning* (24 and 50) and *Skáldskaparmál* (9).

²⁴ ON *þing*, OE *ðing*, OS *thing*, OHG *ding*; Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 313.

²⁵ Further evidence derives, for example, from the Germanic interpretation on which the names of the week are based: OE *Tīwesdæg*, ON *Týsdagr*, Frisian *Tīesdi*, OHG *Zīostag* “Týr’s day” (cf. Lat. *dies Martis* “Day of Mars” and ModE *Tuesday*) but ModG *Dienstag*, “Day of the Thing”, which may be a

The connection between the Thing and Týr as guarantor is presumably based on the myth of the binding of the gigantic wolf Fenrir, one of Loki's monstrous offspring. The myth is laid out in Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning*, the mythological section of his prose *Edda*.²⁶ Snorri describes Týr as a courageous, determined, and altruistic god who sacrifices his hand—a punishment traditionally given for deception—while helping the other deities chain the wolf they fear so much. Fenrir is bound with a robust chain, which he easily breaks; he is tied twice more and escapes each time. To contain Fenrir, the deities of Asgard turn to the magic powers of the elves/dwarves (the distinction is not clear in Snorri's *Edda*), and obtain a magic ribbon made of non-existent things (which are impossible to break).²⁷ The wolf understands that this harmless-looking ribbon must have been wrought with magical craft, and refuses to prove his strength on it. The gods try to convince the wolf that he is not in danger, and that were he unable to free himself they would immediately release him. But Fenrir does not trust the gods and refuses to let them tie him with the magic ribbon, unless one of the Æsir offers his hand as a pledge: "why not let one of you place his hand in my mouth as a pledge that there is no treachery in this offer?"²⁸ Týr is the only god willing to sacrifice his right hand, and inserts it into the mouth of the wolf. When Fenrir sees that the gods have tricked him and will not set him free, he eats Týr's hand, and so "They all laughed, except Týr; he lost his hand."²⁹ Thus, Týr becomes 'the one-handed' and 'the feeder of the wolf,' but also the guarantor of the given word, because he lets the wolf eat his hand as promised.

It is immediately evident that the stories have the two main themes in common: the breaking of a vow and subsequent punitive dismemberment. Nesbø disseminates other links and parallels throughout the book, often as small details, with the aim of flagging the connection for the attentive reader, proving that these convergences are not a coincidence. For example, the description of the first two snowmen appearing in the book differs in one tiny but significant detail: the number of hands. The first snowman, the one Sara Kvinesland sees in front of her lover's house (chap. 1), has two hands:

metonymical expression referring to Týr by means of the Council he protected ("Day of [the god of] the Thing"); Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 335-6. See also his discussion of the inscription "Deo Marti Thingso," at 203.

²⁶ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes, chap. 34, 27-9, and *The Prose Edda: Norse Mythology*, trans. Byock, chap. 34, 39-42.

²⁷ These things include: the footfalls of a cat, the beard of a woman, the root of a mountain, the sinews of a bear, the breath of a fish, and the spittle of a bird.

²⁸ Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda: Norse Mythology*, trans. Byock, chap. 34, 41. The original: "þá leggi einhverr hönd sína í munn mér at veði at þetta sé falslaust gert;" Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes, chap. 34, 28.

²⁹ Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda: Norse Mythology*, trans. Byock, chap. 34, 41. The original: "Þá hlógu allir nema Týr. Hann lét hönd sína"; Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes, chap. 34, 28-29.

The face was white, with eyes and a mouth made with black pebbles, probably from the driveway. And arms made of twigs from the apple trees. "Heavens," she gasped. "It's only a snowman." (chap. 1)

The second snowman, the one Jonas sees in front of Birte Becker's house (chap. 2), has only one hand:

Its eyes and mouth were made with pebbles and the nose was a carrot. The snowman had no hat, cap or scarf, and only one arm, a thin twig Jonas guessed had been taken from the hedge. (chap. 2)

No reason is given in the novel for the second snowman to have only one arm; however, in light of the mythological adaptation, the lack can be explained as a symbolic representation of the punishment that is about to take place. The snowman is simultaneously an alter ego of the murder victim, who broke a vow, and of Týr, who deceived the wolf (probably also of the killer, who is a judge and also a victim). For this reason the killer will take a piece of the deceased, as Fenrir took a part of Týr, and the snowman outside of Birte's house signals his intent. Thus, the snowman only has one arm (a twig) because the wolf/killer has cut off the other arm as a punishment for his/her untrustworthiness.³⁰

The myth of Týr is therefore very well suited to the subject of the novel, perhaps even a source of inspiration, and it allows the author to add a subplot and focus the reader's attention on further themes. The presence of several storylines is indeed a feature of Nesbø's novels, providing them with greater narrative richness,³¹ and allowing the author "to address problems in society."³² In the 2013 interview by Nancie Clare he declared, "I think that's the thing about Scandinavian crime writers, [they] have this mandate of addressing problems in society. All books are political—whether the writer is aware of it or not."³³ Nesbø adapts the medieval myth in a manner that allows him to address issues that are relevant to his modern audience, particularly the value of generic truth vs. individual perspective; the flaws of the victim/offender dichotomy, with well-defined roles and clear-cut distinctions; the tension between the interests and the well-being of the individual vs. those of society conceived in its entirety. Nesbø focuses his attention on the relationship between Týr and Fenrir and challenges the traditional view of a good and generous god saving society from a dangerous monster. He reverses roles, as Týr is now seen mainly as

³⁰ Another hint pointing in the myth's direction is the name of the bar where Harry Hole and Katherine Bratt (and other police officers) hang out to discuss the case: the Fenris bar (chaps. 16-18, 23 and 29).

³¹ "In Nesbø's texts, the reader follows several storylines": Meyhoff, "Digging into the Secrets of the Past," 69. Berit Åström, for example, interprets the killer in *The Snowman* as an illustration of "western society's patriarchal obsession with paternity, and the concomitant need to control women's sexuality;" Åström, "Over Her Dismembered Body."

³² Clare, "Jo Nesbø, Norway's Best-Selling Writer Talks to Nancie Clare."

³³ Clare, "Jo Nesbø, Norway's Best-Selling Writer Talks to Nancie Clare."

an untrustworthy deceiver, a perjurer, who loses his hand because of his deceptive behaviour, the breaking of his oath.³⁴ The narrative's perspective is now that of the victim, the deceived. Nor is Týr's recasting as an oath-breaker a modern example of sympathy for evil: the medieval *Lokasenna*, one of the texts of the *Poetic Edda*, shows Loki accusing Týr of being a bad judge and guarantor:

Loki said:

“You be quiet, Týr! You never knew how
to judge fairly between two factions.
Your right hand I'll mention, the one
that Fenrir tore from you.”³⁵

Fenrir thus becomes a victim of deception, and his ferocity turns to be the result of the wrong suffered.

Nesbø elaborates on this idea by reversing the roles in his novel. He transforms Týr—the ancient god of the Thing, the guarantor, the ancient protector of judgment—into a deceptive culprit, a snowman that the killer associates with the unfaithful women. The women are mutilated, like Týr, because they have broken their oaths of marriage. The murderer uses their mutilated limbs and body parts to form a dead creature, which might, as Berit Åström suggests, “be interpreted as a symbol of

³⁴ Simek notices how “The loss of the hand used for swearing oaths is documented in many cultures as a punishment for perjury,” Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 337.

³⁵ “Loki kvað: / “Þegi þú, Týr, þú kunnir aldregi / bera tilt með tveim; / handar innar hægri mun ek hinnar geta, / er þér sleit Fenrir frá” (*Lokasenna* 38). Richard North, “Loki’s Truth-Game. *Lokasenna*,” in *The Longman Anthology of Old English, Old Icelandic, and Anglo-Norman Literatures*, ed. Richard North, Joe Allard, and Patricia Gillies (London: Pearson, 2011), 622. See also his footnote 38, 622: “Týr is cast here, one of his few surviving appearances, as a judge presiding over civil lawsuits.” For text and translation see also *The Poetic Edda, II, Mythological Poems*, ed. and trans. Ursula Dronke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 341. Another mythological reference to Loki, father of Fenrir, appears in the aspect of the dead body of detective Gert Rafto, when he is found lying in a freezer with a carrot in place of his nose: “However, the grin was not formed by the mouth, which was sewn up with coarse, hemplike thread zigzagging in and out of the lips. The grin traversed the chin and arced up to the cheeks and was drawn with a line of black nails that could only have been hammered in. What caught Harry’s attention was the nose. He forced down the rising bile out of sheer defiance. The nasal bone and cartilage would have been removed first. The cold had sucked all the color from the carrot. The snowman was complete. (chap. 14) The way in which his lips have been sewn together echoes the punishment of Loki for losing his bet with the dwarfs Brokkr and Eitri, as recounted by Snorri in *Skaldskaparmál* 35: “Þá tók dvergrinn þveng ok kníf ok vill stinga rauf á vörum Loka ok vill rífa saman munninn, en knifrinn beit ekki. Þá mælti hann at betri væri þar Alr bróðir hans, en jafnskjótt sem hann nefndi hann, þá var þar alrinn ok beit hann varrnar. Rífaði hann saman varrnar ok reif ór æsunum;” Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London, 1998), chap. 35, 43. For a translation see Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda: Norse Mythology*, ed. Byock, chap. 5, 94: “The dwarf then took a narrow strip of leather and knife. He intended to cut holes in Loki’s lips and to sew his mouth shut, but the knife would not cut. The dwarf said that it would be better if his brother Awl were there. No sooner had he mentioned it than the awl was there, and it punched holes through the lips. He then stitched the lips together before ripping away the outer edges.” See also the Snaptun stone.

social decay.”³⁶ Simultaneously, Nesbø transforms Fenrir from a medieval victim of deception into a modern serial killer who is culprit, victim, and judge at the same time. All the murdered women know their killer: he is their trusted doctor. Thus, when Mathias (the murderer) betrays them, he breaks their trust and violates his own oaths: Mathias is both Fenrir (victim) and also Týr (judge, betrayer). The Norwegian audience is aware of the fact that Týr breaks his promise with the aim to protect his fellow deities; though this cause is good, in a Machiavellian sense (i.e., the end justifies the means), Týr pays for his crime in a legal *wergeld* settlement.³⁷ Victim and offender, wolf and god, therefore, reflect each other, in an illusionary, never-ending game of mirrors. The idea of a set truth vanishes, and the reader of *The Snowman* is left with two diverging perspectives, equally valid, and made to grapple with a Pirandellian relativism³⁸ that blends victim and offender, with the good of society becoming a threat for the freedom of the individuals (and vice versa).

Nesbø shows how these roles interchange and merge in a long description of an African tribal mask. Half human, half animal, it is a power mask: whoever wears the mask becomes a judge because there is no set role or identity:

“What’s a power mask?”

Ane [i.e. Sylvia’s sister] answered. “In Africa masks like these are not just empty symbols. A person wearing this type of mask in the Lo community automatically has all executive and judicial power bestowed upon him. No one questions the authority of the wearer; the mask confers power.” (Chap. 11)

The wearer of the mask, half human and half animal, is the ultimate authority: half Týr and half Fenrir, half deceiver and half victim, half protector and half killer. No one is innocent, no one is pure, and everyone is entitled to compensation or revenge. This is Ragnarøk, where “No man will have mercy on another” (*Völuspá* 44)³⁹

Ragnarøk is another significant mythological theme that Nesbø borrows from Norse tradition. The killer makes the snowmen with the first snow of the season, a foreboder of the coming winter, and, in Norse mythological terms, also a reminder of the Apocalypse awaiting gods and humans alike at the end of times, which, according to Snorri, will be preceded by *fimbulvetr*, an “extreme winter.” The passage pairs breaches of family ties (*sifjasliti*) with climate extremes:

³⁶ Áström, “Over Her Dismembered Body”.

³⁷ According to Germanic law, a sum of money paid by someone as compensation for the life of a person he/she had killed. It was generally paid to the family of the deceased, to atone for the killing and avoid further violence.

³⁸ Pirandellian relativism, emerging from a few of the Sicilian author Luigi Pirandello’s works—especially the play *Così è, se vi pare* (‘So it is, if you think so’) and the novel *Uno nessuno e centomila* (‘One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand,’)—opposes the idea of the existence of a single, absolute truth in favour of different, equally valid perspectives.

³⁹ Dronke, *The Poetic Edda, II, Mythological Poems*, 19: “Mun engi maðr / qðrom þyrma.”

First will come the winter called Fimbulvetr [Extreme Winter]. Snow will drive in from all directions; the cold will be severe and the winds will be fierce. The sun will be of no use. Three of these winters will come, one after the other, with no summer in between. But before that there will have been another three winters with great battles taking place throughout the world. Brothers will kill brothers for the sake of greed, and neither father nor son will be spared in the killings and the collapse of kinship. (*Gylfaginning* 51).⁴⁰

Sifjasliti is a “breach of family ties,” a composite word that can also be translated as “adultery.”⁴¹ Ragnarøk’s attack on family loyalty includes an explicit reference to adultery: “It is harsh in the world, / whoredom rife.”⁴² The myth as recorded in *Völuspá* and in *Gylfaginning* connects adultery to the disruption of family ties, violence against other family members, and even the end of times. Nesbø transports all this apocalyptic imagery into his novel, where the consequences of unfaithfulness are first disruption of families and then gruesome death.

Nesbø displays a particular type of medievalism. Umberto Eco describes diverse conceptions of the Middle Ages that can be imported into modern texts, “each of which captures a particular trope of post-medieval re-creations of the medieval past.”⁴³ Authors blend these medievalisms in personal combinations. I argue that Nesbø’s novel contains at least three (or four) of the perceptions described by Eco, most prominently the idea that the Middle Ages are primitive (Eco’s 3rd perception). Nesbø’s novel absorbs the barbaric Dark Ages, which are well suited both to grim crime fiction and political critique. As Pugh and Weisl observe,

Whereas medievalism in many areas of cultural production is ultimately a positive fantasy of inclusion and unity, of benevolent magic and the triumph of a transcendent Golden Age, in politics, such medieval fantasies are often inverted into an horrific nightmare, a

⁴⁰ Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda: Norse Mythology*, trans. Byock, chap. 51, 71. For the original see *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes, chap. 51, 49: “Þau in fyrstu at vetr sá kemr er kallaðr er fimbulvetr. Þá drífr snær ór ǫllum áttum. Frost eru þá mikil ok vindar hvassir. Ekki nýtr sólar. Þeir vetr fara þrír saman ok ekki sumar milli. En áðr ganga svá aðrir þrír vetr at þá er um alla verǫld orrostur miklar. Þá drepask bræðr fyrir ágirni sakar ok engi þymir fǫður eða syni í manndrápum eða sifjasliti.”

⁴¹ “sifja-slit and sifja-spell, n. pl. violation of the law of affinity, adultery” from Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874), s.v. *sif*, 526; Available from http://lexicon.ff.cuni.cz/html/oi_cleasbyvigfusson/b0526.html.

⁴² Dronke, *The Poetic Edda, II, Mythological Poems*, 19: *Völuspá* 44, the first poem of the *Poetic Edda*: “Hart er í heimi, / hórdómr mikill.” See also, for example, Marcello Meli, transl., *Völuspá. Un’apocalisse norrena* (Roma: Carocci, 2008), 174 and Carlo Alberto Mastrelli, *L’Edda. Carmi norreni* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1951), 7. See also the lemma *hór-dómr* as “adultery”: “hór-dómr, m. [whoredom], adultery” in Cleasby and Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874), s.v. *hór-dómr*, 281, http://lexicon.ff.cuni.cz/html/oi_cleasbyvigfusson/b0281.html.

⁴³ Pugh and Weisl, “Medievalisms: The Magic of the Middle Ages,” 2.

symbol for pessimistic, primitive, violent, tribal, barbaric, and irrational actions, tyrannical systems of government, and uncivilized ways of living.⁴⁴

This is a vision David Matthews calls the “gothic or grotesque Middle Ages,” different from a “romantic” view.⁴⁵ Nesbø thus exploits the way in which medieval can stand for the “barbarous ‘other’, the dark age from which the reformation had liberated a newly nascent culture,”⁴⁶ a “primitive, violent and [...] painful”⁴⁷ “dark time, when irrationality ruled,”⁴⁸ “involving threat, violence and warped sexuality.”⁴⁹

Secondly, *The Snowman* also demonstrates how Nesbø combines national identity with tradition (Eco’s 6th and 9th perceptions) to claim continuity with the literary past and insist on cultural identity. Nesbø explicitly centers his work in his localities, setting most of his stories in Oslo, Norwegian history, and Scandinavian cultural traditions. In the interview with Nancie Clare, he says:

With writing you can’t go visit people where they are—you have to invite them to your home—have them come to you. That’s what I’m doing. For every country where we’re doing well, I’m surprised because I’m writing about this guy who’s living in Oslo. To me it seems really farfetched that anyone outside of Oslo would be interested.⁵⁰

This creates an obvious division in the reception of Nesbø’s novel, a distinction between the readers who are familiar with Norse traditions and Norwegian culture, and those who are not. Not every reader can follow every element of his storylines. This is particularly true for the embedded mythological references, which are not explicitly discussed. Readers must read between the lines. They must solve a puzzle within the detective story, one that requires a special effort and special knowledge to decode. Finally, the anxieties of the expectation of the Millennium (Eco’s 10th perception), are also present in the novel, leading the readers to apocalyptic views of contemporary society through appropriation and relaboration of the Ragnarøk, and thus providing that sense of fatalism and doom, which is again typical of most Norwegian noirs.⁵¹

⁴⁴ Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl, “Political Medievalisms: The Darkness of the Dark Ages,” in *Medievalisms. Making the Past in the Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 141.

⁴⁵ David Matthews, “Taxonomies,” in his *Medievalism. A Critical History* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2015).

⁴⁶ David Matthews, “Introduction,” in his *Medievalism. A Critical History*.

⁴⁷ Pugh and Weisl, “Political Medievalisms: The Darkness of the Dark Ages,” 140.

⁴⁸ Pugh and Weisl, “Political Medievalisms: The Darkness of the Dark Ages,” 140.

⁴⁹ David Matthews, “Taxonomies.”

⁵⁰ Clare, “Jo Nesbø, Norway’s Best-Selling Writer Talks to Nancie Clare.”

⁵¹ Nestingen, “Nordic Noir and Neo-Noir: The Human Criminal,” 159. The apocalyptic tones might be prompted also by a preoccupation with such contemporary issues as Climate Change, Neoliberalism, Neonazism, etc.

Michael D.C. Drout describes a pattern of textual adaptation and transformation strategies.⁵² Of the three distinct types he identifies, the third—where an author deliberately disguises their sources—is relevant to *The Snowman*. Nesbø seems to covertly urge the reader, particularly in chap. 33, to collect the relevant pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of various references to Norse mythological lore and connect them to see the hidden picture. The instructions are put in the words of the narrator, expressing the killer's thoughts and plans:

Previously he had worked undercover, and now it was time to exhibit his life's work. To do that he would have to leave clear clues, show them the connections, give them the bigger picture. (chap. 33)

When the mythological “bigger picture” is revealed, the reader will be rewarded with a bonus subplot and a whole new perception of the novel and of its complex characters, motifs and ideas.

Thus, Nesbø's reuse of mythology in general, and of the myths of Týr and Ragnarøk in particular, allows him to weave the imagery of the barbaric and apocalyptic past into the pattern of his novel, enriching it with their atmospheres and nuances. It also lets him position himself within the familiar boundaries of Norwegian tradition, signalling continuity with the past and adhesion to Scandinavian cultural identity.⁵³ Finally, by refunctionalizing Germanic myths and traditions through allusions, Nesbø absorbs and interprets the past,⁵⁴ providing those knowledgeable in Norse lore with a bonus storyline and further reflections on contemporary society and modern philosophical and socio-political issues, concerning truth, the complexity of reality, perspective, relativism, evil, and the idea of what is beneficial and what is detrimental—for society, on the one hand, and the individual, on the other.

⁵² Michael D.C. Drout, “The Problem of Transformation: The Use of Medieval Sources in Fantasy Literature,” *Literature Compass* 1 (2004) ME 101, 5.

⁵³ This aspect might hide a reaction towards globalization and the centrality of English and American culture in modern literary discourse.

⁵⁴ On the concepts of absorption and transformation of past texts see Julia Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue and Novel,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 37.