DUNCAN MACRAE-GIBSON

SAGAS, SNORRI, AND THE LITERARY CRITICISM OF SCALDIC VERSE

I owe an apology to those who receive this paper, because as it stands it is by no means as fully worked out as I would have wished. That is chiefly because for me, as a teaching don whose main duties are not in Norse, the only time which permits serious and continuous work on a subject such as this is the period after the end of the teaching and examining year, that is to say after the date by which papers for this Conference had to be submitted. Also, to get books and articles from outside Britain in my University is usually a slow business, sometimes downright impossible, so that there are likely to be places where I have wasted time on what is commonplace to better-instructed scholars though it has not come to my eyes, or on what has already been fully refuted.

I hope to be able to amplify the present form of the paper when I present it at the Conference, perhaps to correct it also, but in a way its present inadequacies may prove an advantage, if they prompt readers better acquainted than I with Scaldic verse to fill out its deficiencies and correct its errors, in the discussion, from their own learning. Many of its readers certainly will be better acquainted than I, and some may judge me impertinent in offering the paper at all, but my aim will be fulfilled if I encourage in anyone the conviction that the literary qualities of Scaldic verse are worth far more study, both in themselves and as an integral part of the saga tradition, than - in my country at least - they usually receive, and that for this study the priceless advantage of having available the developed views of a medieval Icelander, Snorri, should be much more highly regarded than it has generally been. E. O. G. Turville-Petre has all too accurately described how scaldic verse is presented to most British students of Old Icelandic:

> Many of us pay all too little attention to the scaldic poetry, perhaps giving rough translations of a verse or two while reading sagas about kings or Icelandic heroes; commonly we have the verse written out in prose by the editors in the footnotes, destroying most of its aesthetic value. (1)

"An integral part of the saga tradition." Not everyone would accept that. Scholarship has rather centred on scaldic verse as a, more or less reliable, source for the saga tradition; an important question has been whether the verses in a saga could have been the actual work of the historical personage who is its hero, or alternatively could have been written by the author of the saga.[2] Important certainly, but from a literary point of view it matters little whether the author treated the verses as source and built the saga round them, or whether he structured the saga fitting in or writing appropriate verses where they seemed called for; the fact is that he left a work of which they formed part, and can be presumed to have intended them to contribute to the total effect the work was to make. Sometimes indeed the contribution is no more than decorative, as with a number of the verses in Fóstbroeðra Saga, for instance that in which Þormóðr records the deeds of Þorgeirr,[3] and which adds nothing of consequence to the preceding prose. But that is certainly not always so; indeed my impression is that it is rather the exception. Sometimes the verse itself can be an important part of the mechanism of the plot: Glúmr's verse "Virkis spyrr at verkum..."[4] is an obvious case in point. The most important function of the verses, however, from a literary point of view, is in the revelation of character. It is a truism of saga criticism that the characters' inward feelings seldom explicitly appear; anything the reader is to gather of them he must infer. A typical comment is Peter Hallberg's in his excellent Den isländska sagan: "On the whole, the saga people are depicted from without, in their demeanour, actions, and words, or

---

1) "Scaldic Poetry: History and Literature" Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Studies (BONIS) 1969, p.9.

2) As in P. G. Foote's introductory essay to The Saga of Gisli, trans. G. Johnston (1963).

3) "Sex lét sævar faxa...", Fóstbroeðra Saga no. 7, ch. 8.

4) Víga-Glúms Saga no. 7, ch. 23.

in the judgment of others."[5] It is rare, moreover, for these words to declare inward feelings - Gunnarr's celebrated speech as he turns back to Hlíðarendi is largely famous just because of its rarity. But the verses which characters speak provide a major exception to this principle. In these direct expression of inward feelings is wholly acceptable. Gísli's grief for Vésteinn[6] or Kári's for the burning of Njáll;[7] Óláf's determined love for Þorgrímr even though she has been pledged to Ketill;[8] Glúmr's brooding awareness of the gloom at Þverá since the days of his father, split by the sudden flash of anger of the "munat enn..." parenthesis[9] - the whole essence of his character encapsulated. This type of character revelation has a function approaching that of a Shakespearean soliloquy, and the convention of the saga allows it only in verse. In prose, Sámr can be allowed to refuse gifts, saying "þá vera litla í skapi",[10] but we would be greatly surprised if he were made to add "glaumr verðr mér þorrinn." In prose, we can be told that Glúmr "unði illa við málalok", but for a direct presentation of how he felt, the author must offer us a verse.[11] In the saga-criticism I have read, it does not seem to me that this important aspect of presentation of character is properly recognised; Hallberg, for instance, does not in his chapter on style and character delineation[12] feel the need for a single mention of scaldic verse. But if I am at all right, one cannot respond properly to many sagas without being able to respond, as an instructed medieval Icelander might have responded, to the inset verses; they cannot safely be neglected by the literary critic.

---

5) I quóte from Paul Schlauch's translation The Icelandic Saga (1962), p.76.

6) Gísla Saga Súrssonar no. 5, ch. 14.

7) Brennu-Njáls Saga no. 15, ch. 132.

8) Viglundar Saga no. 1, ch. 6.

9) Víga-Glúms Saga no. 1, ch. 7.

10) Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða, ch. 10 (Íslenzk Fornrit; other eds. ch. 20).

11) Víga-Glúms Saga no. 13, ch. 27. My point is really only a particularising of such a general statement as that of Peter Foote and David Wilson: "whatever indeed the Icelanders generally avoided saying in their laconic prose might find expression in verse," The Viking Achievement (1970), p.362.

12) op. cit.

"As a medieval...might have responded" - an impossible ideal, of course; and for most medieval literature we can get no evidence on how this might have been except what we can infer from the works themselves. In Old English verse we clutch at and dispute over such straws as "word oþer fand, sōþe gebunden";[13] we argue over how many stresses there should be in a line, and where they should fall - sometimes, some of us guess, not on a syllable at all but on a rest, marked only by a harp-stroke. I do not think Norse scholars sufficiently recognise how lucky they are in having available the actual critical views of a medieval Icelander. No scaldic scholar could be in doubt where the stresses fall, for Snorri's well-known account of the "stafir" and "stuðlar" of a verse[14] puts the matter beyond question, but in general far too little attention has been paid (as far as works available to me go) to Snorri's studies of poetic composition. That, I suppose, is largely because the excellence of his own story-telling has drawn attention away from the drier matter of his comments on poetics, especially in Háttatal, which is omitted by common consent of translators, and in which what I have just mentioned is probably the only thing that is well-known. Partly, perhaps, because the very title Háttatal[15] conceals from the student that there are any comments. Partly, no doubt, because those who attend to these comments at all see that Snorri's chief intention is rather to ensure that poets should write "correctly", with an awareness of what licences are and what are not permitted by the rules, than to offer critical comment on their choice of this or that possibility within these rules. Nevertheless, even in the by-going, he says a great deal of much value to the literary critic - such as scholars in other medieval fields would be overjoyed if they had the tenth part of.

Even on so unprofound a level as his comment that in vowel-alliteration this should preferably not be on identical vowels ("er þá fegra at sinn hljóðstafr sé hverr þeira"), and additional casual initial vowels are to be avoided even in such minor unstressed words as "er" or "um" ("er þat leyfi, en eigi rétt setning")[16] opens my

---

13) Bēowulf 870-871.

14) Háttatal, ch. 1; p.254 in Magnús Finnbogason's ed. (1952).

15) "list of verse-forms"; or "enumeration of poetic metres", to give two recent translators' renderings.

16) Magnús Finnbogason, pp.254-5.

ears to an elegance I should otherwise have missed; and in other cases the level is much deeper. Consider his comment on "hjástælt" construction - the device of concluding the whole half-stanza with a five-syllable sentence which by its isolation attracts importance to itself: "þær fimm samstöfur ... lúka heilu máli." This "hjástál" ought to be, he says, a "forn minni"[17] An odd prescription, and we may suspect him of having over-generalised from certain particular instances, but the observation of the special importance of a sentence thus placed is important, deserving more attention, for instance, than Lee Hollander gives it:

> Snorri ... adds a stanza to exemplify the (rare) dróttkvætt variety he calls hjástælt (having a stál as an extra), in which the last five syllables of lines 4 and 8 make up the words of an orðtak (proverb). His own, made-up ones are vapid enough ... It is to be regretted that Snorri does not otherwise expatiate on the nature of the stál..." (18)

I take it that in Snorri's own specimen[19] the poetic intention is an implied comment on the magnitude of Hákon's fame, and the importance of his dwelling, placing them in the context of the great cosmic events: the hjástál acts as a pregnant comment on the matter of the preceding verse. That, then, is how one should expect to find this syntactic position used in other cases. Now the verse Víga-Glúms Saga no. 7, which I have already mentioned, contains what is syntactically a pure hjástál: "váru þau forðum", and Snorri's statements suggest to me that this should be viewed as having much more weight, as a concluding comment to the half-stanza, than I would otherwise have given it. The stress would seem to be one of regret for the great days done, a personal variant on Snorri's "forn minni". If this is the emotion presented as uppermost in Glúmr's mind, we can well then accept his continuing into a wish that nothing should be lost of his fame - a wish that evidently appeared in the last two lines, converting, one supposes, the statement "liggr talit gerva" from its apparent meaning that there will now be no more of the deeds referred to, to mean

---

17) ib., p.264.

18) "Observations on the Nature and Function of the Parenthetic Sentences in Skaldic Poetry" JEGP lxiv (1965), p.636.

19) Háttatal no. 13, Magnús Finnbogason p. 263.

instead that the tale has been reckoned (but misreckoned). Without this presentation of Glúmr's mind, his giving away in this verse of the truth about Þorvaldr Krókr is abrupt and unmotived, inserted after "sat nú Glúmr í virðingu" as a mere piece of contrived plot-mechanics. It is interesting to note that beside this suggestion of a stress on "váru þau forðum", nothing that Snorri says suggests (what one might well have supposed) that the isolated word preceding the stál receives by that fact special stress; we are not then to feel that special stress is laid on "morð" - if this particular word is significant, it is slipped in quietly.

Related to the true hjástælt form I take to be all others where the half-stanza is concluded by a more or less syntactically isolated phrase occupying most of the last line, as for instance Þormóðr's verse before Stiklastaðir "Ála þryngr at éli..."[20] in which the concluding "eða hér liggjum" ironically comments on the assurance of victory despite all odds which has occupied the rest of the half-stanza, by supplying the more likely alternative outcome. The degree of separation, and consequent stress, is rather less, but the poetic tendency is the same, and one gets a clear light on Þormóðr's character thereby. Again, no special importance attaches to "viggruðr". As you see, I am making use of Snorri's statements not simply as specifying the rules for a particular metre, but as guiding us as to the sort of use poets might make of a device, and I believe that it is in this way that he can be most useful to the literary critic. On the present point, incidentally, Snorri himself uses what is syntactically a hjástál for what is certainly not a "forn minni" in his "orðskviðuháttr" and "álagsháttr" verses.[21]

Similarly, in discussing diction Snorri is concerned that poets should cultivate an enriched vocabulary, "heyja sér orðfjölða".[22] It is not his main business to advise them how to use it appropriately, but in the by-going he says much that is valuable for the literary critic. His composition of a verse illustrating the "sannkenning", containing sixteen "appropriate" epithets in the eight lines, with

---

20) Fóstbroeðra Saga no. 34, ch. 24.

21) Háttatal nos. 26 and 27, Magnús Finnbogason pp.270-271.

22) Skáldskaparmál ch. 8, Magnús Finnbogason p.103.

the comment that it would however have been a much better verse if it had not been so single-mindedly constructed round that one figure ("en þó fegra þær mjök í kveðandi, et eigi sé svá vandliga eptir þeim farit")[23] can usefully draw our attention to the general principle that it is part of a scald's skill to be able to secure a variety of diction within a verse.[24] I should like to look at Egill's sea-storm verse,[25] to which Turville-Petre[26] gives high and justified praise. It is notable for five kennings, all involving what Snorri, if I understand the term aright, calls "nygørvingar" - metaphors. This is a good deal for one stanza to bear, but they are carefully varied, one being "tvíkennt" ("stafnkvígs veg"), one supported by a simple sannkenning "andærr", one doubly supported (probably what Snorri means by "tvíriðit") by "svalbúinn" and "eirar vanr", the first of which, incidentally, is very rich, for the "sval-" element goes with the solution to the kenning, "wind", but the conversion to a cold disposition brought about by the "-búinn" makes it fit the content of the kenning, the "(jörmun)gandr". The remaining two kennings of the verse, further, are of quite different logical structures: in "éla meitli" the squalls constitute the chisel, while in "Gestils ölpt" the ship appertains to Gestil as if his swan. Then we have one "nygørving" which is not "kennt", namely "þél", and one straight sannkenning "stórt". Then, to make a further variation, the biting squalls, kenned in the first half-stanza, appear simply described ("gustum") in the second. The verse thus illustrates in itself two of Snorri's "greinir skáldskaparmáls" (the first "at nefna hvern hlut sem heitir ... In þriðja málsgrein er sú er kölluð er kenning")[27], and his second "grein", "er heitir fornöfn", is not far from the use of various synonyms, not kenned, which is illustrated here in "stál",

---

23) Háttatal ch. 1, Magnús Finnbogason p.257.

24) It also establishes that he is willing to write an inferior verse in order to illustrate a metrical point, a fact hostile critics of his own poetic art should remember.

25) Egils Saga Skalla-Grímssonar no. 32, ch. 57.

26) Origins of Icelandic Literature (1953), pp.42-3.

27) Skáldskaparmál ch. 7, Magnús Finnbogason p.102.

"stafn", and "brand".

This remarkable richness and variety of diction is disciplined by having the first and last lines linked together by word and structure echo ("stáli"/"stál"; "fyr stáli"/"fyr brandi") - compare Snorri's recommendation of "langloka" as one poetic device, though the method here is quite different - and containing chiefly literal diction, the simple physical prow of the ship buffeted fiercely, with the more ornate formulations enclosed between these lines. This seems to me how the impression of "controlled energy" which Turville-Petre receives from the verse is created. I don't know, of course, if he would agree. Certainly the translation he offers[28] does not seem to see these features of diction as important. The enclosing is quite altered, with the fourth line of the original removed to the first, and the verse now concluded with two unkenned lines, making a quite different rhetorical progression; the variation of kennings is lost, so that, for instance, the first lines of the two half-stanzas now have identical structures, importing a degree of "tilsagt" construction not in the original; the unkenned nygørving "þél" becomes another kenning "a file of breakers", and so on. It is a diversion from my main theme, but I suggest that although translation of scaldic verse is peculiarly difficult, Snorri can be a very useful guide as to what significant devices to look for in the original, and the more of these one recognises, the better one will be placed to decide what can be kept or found equivalent for, what must be let go. I have tried a rendering of this stanza, keeping its features of diction in mind:

By prow a rasp, savagely
(as bulls boat ever on)
and ever recut with squall's flying
knives, flung by forest-bane;

and cold as cruelly he willow
lays low, so files fierce
with gusts the proud storm-swan
his foe, on prow, by bowsprit.

---

28) The angry troll of tree-trunks
the tempest's chisel wieldeth,
around the bull of bow-sprits
beats a file of breakers;
the freezing wolf of forests
files the swan of the sea-god,
grinds the beak of the galley,
grimly batters the forecastle.

I make no claims for its poetic quality, but it is a very different rendering from Turville-Petre's, and may serve to suggest the sort of lines of translation that a more competent poet than I might try.

To return to my main theme, the importance of this verse in the saga as a whole is less directly obvious than some, but important it is, and accurate poetic response to it enriches response to the saga. Egill has angrily left the land, after raising his "níðstöng" against Eirík and Gunnhildr. It is very proper, according to the literary convention usually, though oddly, called the "pathetic fallacy", that the sea should catch his mood with a storm. The verse describes the storm as seen through his mood, with the abrasive image of the file, and the fierce one of the wind as a hostile giant, appropriate and powerful - the effect could not be got in prose. To imply his control of the situation arising from his anger by ascribing to him a verse imposing such discipline on its ferocity is a stroke just as effective, and subtler; even less could anything like it be achieved in prose. The verse, then, in its place, is far more than just an example of Egill's ability to "depict nature as no other scald could do",[29] though it is that, of course.

Obviously, not every saga verse has diction so rich and varied. There are some very simple ones, and Dr. Page draws my attention to cases "where the terms of a poem are framed to reduce variety of diction, as in Hallfreðar Saga no. 14." This one, however, is a very special case; a poetic tour de force in answer to a challenge to work a sword-reference into every half-line of a verse, quite different from verses such as I am discussing, whose content is organic to the sagas in which they stand.

Another important point to which Snorri draws attention, one which in a way balances the previous one, is the desirability that a metaphor, once established, should be maintained consistently through the verse: "Þá þykkja nýgørvingar vel kveðnar, ef þat mál, er upp er tekit, haldi of alla vísulengð".[30] At least this much principle of unity should hold together the diversity of diction in

---

29) Turville-Petre, loc. cit.

30) Háttatal ch. 1, Magnús Finnbogason pp.258-9.

every verse. In the verse I have been considering, this principle is duly adhered to. The storm-wind is called "jötunn" in the first half-stanza, and the metaphor is preserved when it is called "gandr" in the second - understanding this as meaning "jörmungandr"; the Miðgarðsormr is of jötunn-kind. Snorri might accuse a translation which shifts from "troll" to "wolf" of having "nykrat" the verse (though there is a defence if we think of a monstrous wolf-being rather than a natural animal). As Snorri presents it, this, like others, seems a rather mechanical rule, but it suggests a line of enquiry that gets well past the mechanical, when we find a particular metaphoric thread held through a verse not only in allusion to one referent but to several, for this establishes a characteristic tone in the verse, which will bear on the effect it makes as placed in the saga. Once more I illustrate from a poem of Egill's; he supplies a fine and varied corpus of verse, easy to choose all sorts of examples from, and my remaining illustrations are heavily concentrated on his poems, though I shall hope to be able to illustrate more widely when the paper is discussed.

His "dunhenda" verse, no. 10 (ch. 44), establishes a weather-metaphor, "dew" ("ýring"), for "ale" in the first half-stanza (associated with a weapon-kenning for "horn": "atgeirr ýrar"), which continues in the second with "rain" for "battle" ("regn(bjóðr)" - associated with a weapon and weather kenning for "valkyrie": "oddský"), and for "poetry" ("regn Hávars þegna"). This sustained metaphor has much to do with the close structure of the stanza. Egill, who asks for ale in the first line ("öl ber mér"[31]) is linked with Bárðr, who, as "regnbjóðr", is represented as asking for "oddskýs regn"[32] in the last; the weapon-content in the first kenning anticipates the weapon-threat developed in the second; and while the overt reference of the

---

31) This reading is an editorial reconstruction, of course. The alternative "ölvar mik" establishes a different linking. Egill is "drenched" with ale in the first line, as Bárðr is to be by a different sort of "drink" by the end.

32) Assuming the sense "invite" for "bjóða" to be present. The other sense "offer" is also there. In offering drink, Bárðr is also "offering" battle, though he does not know it. My analysis of the structure is little disturbed if "offer" is felt to be the only sense present.

third is doubtless to the verse now being uttered, the implication that the rain which Bárðr is inviting is about to set in (as it does as soon as the verse is over) is surely also present. Here the rhetorical progression is quite different from that in the storm-verse; as the implied threat develops so does the complexity of the diction. And in this case the verse is absolutely central to the presentation of the character and thought of Egill - as indeed are the whole series of verses at this point in the saga. His cold anger at the lying trick played by Bárðr in his ill entertainment of his guests; his penetration of and contempt for the attempt at poisoning; the controlled development of his vengeful intention in the verse I have been discussing; his derision for those who try to stop his escape, and who die for it - all these things are presented in the verses, with the prose as restrained and external as ever.

Even more obviously central, of course, to presentation of character and thought is Sonatorrek; and this illustrates continuity of metaphor strikingly, over a longer span than can be accommodated in a drottkvætt verse. The familiar tree-figure for "man" not only keeps reappearing for Egill's sons, in stanzas 4 ("sem hlynir marka"), 11 ("randviðr"), 21 ("ættar ask ... kynvið"), and perhaps by implication 20, where the fire-figure for "sickness" ("sóttar brími") may suggest the common figure of fire as the enemy of trees ("sviga læ"); but it is also used for the poem itself in stanza 5 ("mærðar timbr máli laufgat") - a powerful figure of living trees in contrast to the dead trees of the previous stanza, a contrast sustained by that between the bearing out of the material body from the physical hall ("köggla berr frænda hrǿrs af fletjum niðr") and the bearing out of the "materials of verse" from the metaphorical hall ("berk út ór orðhofi mærðar timbr"). Not only a contrast, however; because scaldic practice is to continue a metaphor for the same referent an implied link is established in which the "trees" of stanza 5 in effect are the sons, brought alive again in their father's "mærð" (one thinks of the famous Hávamál line "enn orðstírr deyr aldregi"). This progress, of course, parallels the return of Egill from despair which constitutes the "action" of the saga at this point; one cannot possibly, in criticism, divorce the one from the other. That is not the only extended line of imagery in Sonatorrek, the "sea"-line,

opening in stanza 3, I shall mention below, in the course of the next, and last, main section of this paper.

In this I want to discuss a question important also in other areas of medieval literature, namely, whether we are to suppose that scalds felt imagery as a purely self-contained thing, to be valued for its internal accuracy and elegance; or whether we can suppose them responsive also to possible resonances outside the image - to implications which would affect, and should relate to, the larger context in which the image occurs. Many critics would take the former view. Anne Holtsmark, I take it, reflects an accepted opinion in saying that for most poets "er kjeningene blitt sjablon og valgt tilsynelatende tilfeldig", and that even exceptional ones achieve no more than "å brukke teknikken så de får fortalt to ting på en gang."[33] And certainly I can find no hint of support for the latter from Snorri. When he tells poets that "brjóst skal svá kenna at kalla hús eða garð eða skip hjarta, anda eða lifrar, eljunar land, hugar ok minnis",[34] a modern sensibility would assume that there was a large poetic difference between "hús lifrar" ("the house of the liver"), "skip anda" ("the ship of the spirit"), and "minnis land" ("the land of memory"), but Snorri makes no suggestion that a scald should discriminate as to where he uses which.

A modern student will tend to approach scaldic verse with modern preconceptions on the point. When I introduced my students this year to Þormóðr's verse "Á sér at vér várum..."[35], they at once assumed that the kenning "hildr hvítings" was chosen to make a comparison between the woman with the ketill of hot water and a noble lady with a drinking horn. In this particular case, of course, the very existence of the kenning is in doubt,[36] but as a principle should

---

33) Article "Skaldedikting" in Kulturhistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid, xv, (1970) 386-90. Not. of course, the only accepted opinion. It will become clear that I share rather that represented by Foote and Wilson's warning against, for instance, too readily treating kennings that denote men as "mere stereotyped periphrases for 'man'" (Viking Achievement, p.330).

34) Skáldskaparmál ch. 87, Magnús Finnbogason p.225.

35) Fóstbroeðra Saga no. 36, ch. 24.

36) The Íslenzk Fornrit edition accepts "heldr", not "hildr", and takes "hvítings" with "sár" as giving "sword-wound".

they be warned that any such apparent significance is spurious? Turville-Petre says:

> A great number of the scaldic poems commemorate battles, and the poet has to say that the sword struck against the shield. If the sword is called "Óðinn's grey rainbow" and the shield "the stormy sky of the Valkyrie" (37) the bald statement may be worth making." (38)

But "worth making" on what test of worth? Simply as an ingenious and well-wrought decoration around the simple sense, or because of the suggestion that while battle has been conceived as a way to heaven the bridge the warrior crosses is no bright Bifröst, and because of the alarming image of a rainbow which does not celebrate the end of a storm but strikes lightning-like at the height of it? A new suggestion and a new image in this poem, if I can rely on the fact that the Lexicon Poeticum[39] records no other use of "regnbogi" in a sword-kenning - or indeed at all. I should gladly think the second, even though here Snorri lends me no support. One cannot, of course, validly argue from that negative, but if one does take the view that he was probably unaware of any desideratum but the logical propriety of images ("þat er rétt..."), and that in this he correctly reflected the concern of the poets he analysed, it would be exactly the same view that Rosemary Woolf takes of another literary type of comparable date, the Middle English religious lyric, and it would be close to the view of Old English verse taken by some of the formularists. Rosemary Woolf says that such images as appear in the lyrics

> have ... been invented for their logical rather than for their imaginative appropriateness. This method of using imagery is peculiar to the Middle Ages, in that whilst in later periods imagery might be chosen primarily for its logical force, an imaginative congruence was required as well; otherwise, as in Metaphysical poetry, the disparity was deliberately exploited. But medieval poetry is austere in its elimination of subordinate associations and in its precise adherence to intellectual resemblances. (40)

As applied to the Middle English lyric, however, I'm inclined to

---

37) Ólafr hvítaskáld, 2, 11.

38) Origins of Icelandic Literature, p.31.

39) Sveinbjörn Egilsson Lexicon Poeticum Antiquae Linguae Sepentrionalis, second edition Finnur Jónsson (1931).

40) The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages (1968), pp.12-13.

answer that against this, in certain verses, res ipse loquitur, and I shall attempt to do the same for scaldic verse.

The very existence of extended lines of metaphor suggests surely an ability to look outside the immediate construct. From Egill's "tree" line it would be unsafe to argue, since this image for "man" is so very common, but I should like to look at another kenning which Turville-Petre chooses to illustrate the rich pictorial quality of scaldic diction:

> When Egill called the sea "the wounds or blood of the giant's neck" (jötuns hals undir) we see vividly a stage in the formation of the world, the dying giant Ymir, blood gushing from his neck to form the roaring sea." (41)

Richly pictorial certainly, but is the image to be valued merely in itself, a piece of self-contained decoration, or is it also significant because it is appropriate to its particular context at a certain point of a certain poem - namely in stanza 3 of Sonatorrek? All the poet requires to do here is to refer to the sea; can we really suppose that it was tilfeldig that he found an image with the sea dark as blood when his mind was on death, an image in which the sea issues out of a personal death for a poem in which the sea is to be presented later as a personalised killer, and yet an image in which that death is part of creation for a poem which is eventually to rise from despair to a re-creation? If so, it is an extraordinarily happy chance, and I call it more likely that the image marks poetic sensibility.

Similarly, though the purpose is different, I much prefer the view[42] that the kenning "hlátra ham" near the end of Egill's Höfuðlausn was deliberately chosen for its precise effect. The poet needed a kenning for "breast". To fit the immediate structural context he needed a rhyme on "gram", for which "ham" was an obvious choice - "hamr" is not in fact recorded in, or given by Snorri for, breast-kennings, but it is as natural as the "hús" and "garðr" which are. He also needed a word to fit h-alliteration. So "hjarta ham", or perhaps "hugar ham" (to suggest words which Snorri gives)

---

41) "Scaldic Poetry..." BONIS 1969, p.18.

42) Discussed, for instance, by Lee Hollander The Skalds (1945), p.73. I am here merely expanding a little what he says and implies.

would do very well. When instead he produces the produces his unique "hlátra ham", are we to suppose it completely outside his and his hearers' scheme of thought that anyone might look beyond immediate logicality and be reminded of the phrase "hafa at hlátri"? Or do we suppose the implication well present in his mind; do we see the phrase as reflecting bravado on Egill's part as he composed the poem, trusting that in delivery the point would not be taken critically against him - as we are told that it was not, though well might Eirfkr have looked at him sharply, and commented only "bezta er kveðit fram flutt"? Surely the second supposition is better. This is not the only possible piece of irony that can be found in the Höfuðlausn, of course, but it is the most striking, and the one that most sharply illuminates the character of Egill. That is to say, the character of Egill the hero of our saga; his connection, if any, with an historical poet Egill is for the present purpose beside the point.

Finally, may I indulge myself by mentioning yet another figure from Sonatorrek which I find impressive, though I would not found argument on it because of the textual difficulties. In the first stanza the tongue appears to be likened to the arm of a steelyard, a poem-weigher ("ljóðpundari"; cf. "lögpundari", "legal steelyard"), reluctantly moving the heavy weight of the air ("loptvætt") as it measures out the grieving verses that are demanded of it. I should be sorry to give up the belief that this is a moving and strikingly effective presentation of Egill's state as he begins to utter his lament; and if it be admitted that some scalds, sometimes, used imagery with sensitivity to its emotional implications, I shall feel no need to give it up, and my response to the character of Egill as presented in a saga which includes the poem will be the deeper.

In this last section of my paper I have had to do without any guidance from Snorri; but not, I am sure, because I had exhausted all the guidance he could give. A line which I have not had time to pursue, for instance, concerns "refhvörf" construction. Snorri's verse "sfks glóðar verr soekir ..."[43] is explicitly a demonstration

---

43) Háttatal ch. 1, Magnús Finnbogason p.265.

piece, to point out the possibilities of the device (just as the sannkenning-verse is), and I would not expect to find actual poetic examples using it with this density, but as a special development of the general tendency of Germanic verse to use favourite types of alliterative collocations, including, for instance, a frequently opposed pair fȳr and flōd in Old English verse,[44] I should be surprised if I found that Snorri had not guided me to another feature of effective scaldic composition, another basis for fuller response to these verses, and hence to the sagas of which they form part. And there will be other lines. I cannot guess where the limit may be to the amount of guidance the medieval Icelandic response can give to a modern one; but to this single paper an arbitrary limit must now be set.

---

44) See T. A. Shippey Old English Verse (1972), pp.103-4.