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THE PAGAN INHERITANCE OF EGILL'S SONATORREK

Our expectations of Sonatorrek are probably too great, if it is originality we are looking for. To find that, we must first separate the original thought from the topos, the personality from the heroic archetype. Egill is too often cast in the roles scholars want for him - free-thinker, viking, modern romantic, magician. This is because Sonatorrek is styled to appeal to the best emotions and thus ennoble its own poet in the eyes of the beholder. Finding the individual poet, however, is another matter.

For the context we must rely on the prose of Egils Saga, chapter 78, of the 14th century Möðruvallabók, which tells how Þóðvarr, Egill's favourite son, drowned off the coast of Borg in Iceland. Egill found him on the beach, buried him, and took to his bed, making ready to die. By a ruse, instead, his daughter encouraged him to compose this poem in memory of Þóðvarr (and a son who had died years earlier). The date and authorship of Sonatorrek are still a matter of doubt, for there are some acute problems of preservation from the contextually assumed date of c. 960. But tentative attribution to Egill is best argued in Jón Helgason's Skjaldeveg. [1]

In 25 stanzas Egill's mood lightens from apathy to revival over a patchy ground of lament for dead family, frustrated revenge, and hate of the world. In the last four stanzas Egill gathers himself in an relatively clear reflection on Óðinn's gift of poetic skill and character as 'compensations' for Þóðvarr. Otherwise Sonatorrek appears so corrupt that it can even prompt sympathy from modern readers out of an illusion of the poet's mental distraction. This, and the random way Sonatorrek survived, has fostered ideas that in making Sonatorrek Egill was 'reasserting' his personality in a uniquely individual poem. [2]

I shall now try to show how much of this poet's voice is stylised. Egill has adapted his tragedy to a genre, not the genre to his tragedy. What that genre is, is best found by looking at Egill's faith, which is solidly pagan; and then at the structure of his poem, which is also traditional.

The inherited faith

Egill's devotion to Óðinn, god of poetry, is alleged chiefly on Sonatorrek 22: Áttak gótt við geirs dróttin. 'I was on good terms with the lord of the spear (Óðinn)'. The author of Egils Saga seems to have responded to this and other verse implications of Egill's cult of Óðinn, by overplaying the part of this god in Egill's career. However it is plausible that as much as other

mercenaries of the time, Egill looked to Óðinn as the reflection of his warlike and poetic life.

Sigurður Nordal suggests Egill had grown up in the Icelandic cult of Þórr, a farming god, before he moved off abroad and worshipped the light-footed Óðinn. At the end of E's life Óðinn allowed or caused Bǫðvarr's death and thus betrayed him. Hence Egill faced a critical choice between Óðinn and Þórr. [3] A Þórr-Óðinn antagonism probably existed, as Nordal shows, but Óðinn alone seems ultimately guilty for Bǫðvarr's death. Thus the immediate killers, the sea's aspects, may have acted under Óðinn's orders; or Óðinn may have deliberately failed to stay them from their course in drowning Bǫðvarr.

<u>Grimmt vorum hlið,</u>	Cruel to me
<u>Þats hrönn of braut</u>	was the gap Wave broke
<u>föðurs míns</u>	in my father's
<u>á frændgarði;</u>	family enclosure;
<u>veitk ófyllt</u>	I know it stands open
<u>ok opit standa</u>	and unfilled,
<u>sonar skarb,</u>	the son's breach
<u>es mér sár of vann.</u>	which Sea has made for me.

<u>Mjök hefr Rán</u>	Rán has shaken
<u>ryskt um mjök,</u>	me hugely,
<u>emk ofsnauðr</u>	I am too much
<u>at ástvinum;</u>	stripped of loving friends;
<u>sleit marr bond</u>	Ocean cut
<u>minnar sttar,</u>	the bonds of my family,
<u>[snaran] Þótt</u>	[the strong] strand
<u>af sjölfum mér.</u>	of me myself.

<u>Veizt, ðef þá sok</u>	You know that ?if I could
<u>averði of rökak,</u>	avenge this injury with a sword,
<u>vas ólsmið[r]</u>	?Ale-brewers' days
<u>allra tíma;</u>	would be over;
<u>hroða végs bræðr</u>	if I could ?fight
<u>ðef ðvega mattak,</u>	?wave-pusher's brothers,
<u>fórk andýfir</u>	I would go against them
<u>ok Egis mani.</u>	and Egir's wife.
(Sonatorrek 6-8, <u>ÍF</u> II 246-56)	

Wave, Sea, Ocean, Rán and Alebrewer occupy a half-stanza each and are probably sea numing; blame is allotted equally. Neckel suggested these personifications were a 'blosser rhetorischer Schmuck', but it is unlikely Egill imagined the powers from which his son died were lifeless and could only be animated as rhetorical figures. [4] Despite the corruption, it is clear that the personification of sea in stanza 8 reaches mythical proportions, with family ties in bræðr and man consistent with the family portrayed in Snorri's Skáldskaparmál; and an activity in ólsmið[r] and hrosta hilmir in stanza 19, 'lord of the mash' indicates a legend. [5]

Egill's difficulty in taking revenge against Rán, Egir and

family is that in reality, effective violence against the sea is impossible. This is not a problem Egill will define.

<u>En ek ekki</u>	But I didn't think
<u>egna Þóttumk</u>	I could muster the power
<u>sakar afl</u>	to fight the killer(s)
<u>við +sonar bana,</u>	of my ?son (MS <u>sub</u> s),
<u>Þvítt alþjóð</u>	for the old thegn's
<u>fyr augum verðr</u>	lack of support
<u>gamals Þegns</u>	is becoming clear to the eyes
<u>gengileysi.</u>	of the common people.

(Sonatorrek 9)

Gengileysi is strictly 'infirmity' or 'lack of a retinue'. This is a heroic image of the fading of strength or passing of friends, but it is no exact definition, by our terms, of Egill's difficulty in failing to combat powers in reality that he could personify in the mind. The doctrine of Christianity and modern science alike that nature phenomena are lifeless is not a category Egill recognises.

In Christian doctrine the sea, earth, sun and other phenomena are the inanimate creaturae that must be imputed to one Creator. This is evident in Martin of Braga, Pirmin, Alfric and Wulfstan. [6] Forms of this doctrine were probably taught to Egill's presumed English comrades in the 10th century; for of the old pagans and the creaturae they deified, Alfric says:

hi mihton tocnawan, gif hi cuban þat gescéad,
þat se is ana God þe hi ealle gesecep.

they could have recognised, if they had known
discernment of this, that only He who made all these
things is God.

This 'discernment' seems alien to Egill too. How, otherwise, could he have been able to deify aspects of the sea (stanzas 6-8), or at least animate it to the extent that his failure to fight it can be presented in the poem, and accepted in the Saga, solely in terms of a lyrical image of gengileysi? Egill was thus no 'free-thinker', in this respect, as Finnur Jónsson believed, nor could he have been in reach of the intellectual heritage by which he could question a belief implying that, barring bad health or an insufficient number of soldiers, one can sooner or later destroy the sea. [7] As this is not a Christian perspective on reality, it is inevitable that Egill, at least in his stylised voice, was thoroughly pagan.

Did this tragedy test his faith? In the way of modern 'doubts', after all, Egill might be thought to face a religious crisis - especially with Óðinn, whom he accuses in stanza 22 of breaking a longstanding friendship. This is appropriate for Óðinn, the figure behind Þórvarr's death. Therefore Egill's words:

<u>Blotka því</u>	I do not worship
<u>bróður Vílis,</u>	Víli's brother,
<u>göðjagar,</u>	the gods' protector,
<u>at ek gjarn sék,</u>	because I want to.

(Sonatorrek 23/1-4)

Their friendship was over, but the obligation stayed. In the next half-stanza Egill admits that Óðinn had given him 'compensations' for his 'horrors', bolva betr. 'if I count the better part', ef et betra tek.

<u>Gofumk íþrótt</u>	The wolf's foe,
<u>ulfs of bági</u>	used to combat,
<u>vígi vanr</u>	has given me a 'skill
<u>vammi firrða</u>	removed from fault',
<u>ok þat geð,</u>	and that 'quality of mind'
<u>es ek gerða mér</u>	by which I made for myself
<u>vísa fjandr</u>	certain enemies
<u>at vélonðum.</u>	into scheming men.

(Sonatorrek 24. /B MS ad)

The íþrótt and geð of these lines are probably not as original as they seem. Witness a parallel in Saxo's Gesta Danorum, Book VI, in which Othinus, wishing to kill Wicarus,

Starcatherus, inusitata prius granditate conspicuum,
non solum animi fortitudine, sed etiam condendorum
carminum peritia illustravit.

made Starcatherus, already renowned for his unprecedented stature, famous not only for his 'strength of mind', but also for his 'skill in composing spells'... [8]

In Egill's terms, therefore, Óðinn's gifts must now be seen as compensations for the tragedy he helped to cause. This exchange is pragmatic and preempts a crisis of faith.

The inherited structure

Egill's title in Sona-tor-rek at first shows 'a hard loss of sons'. Torrek or variant torreki in the other four instances denotes a loss not easily redeemed. [9] Nordal therefore glosses -torrek as 'loss (heavy to bear), grief', but admits the plausibility of 'hard administered vengeance', as in 'torrekna'r hefndir' (ÍF II 257). Árni Pálsson also indicates 'vengeance' in reka and -rek. [10] Consistent with this, Sonatorrek is probably 'hard to avenge my sons' (sona genitive after reka). A similar skjétt munat hefnt, 'this will not be quickly avenged', appears in a verse ascribed to Kvaldúlfur at the moment he hears the loss of his son Þórólfr (ÍF II 60). This line is probably late and derived from the title Sonatorrek, if not from stanza 8:

Veizt. -ef þá sok You know that ?if I could
gverði of rekak. avenge this injury with a sword.

But we have seen that revenge is impossible. In stanza 17 Egill goes on to consider, and apparently to reject, the fathering of another son. This is probably a stylised option on which the admission of impotence in lausavísa 58 could be modelled. The third and successful remedy to Egill's pain, in stanza 24, is his gift of poetry. Together these options amount to a structure.

Nor can Hrebel, in Baowulf, relieve himself of sorrow through revenge: one of his sons has missed a target and killed his own brother with an arrow. As if this 'boy', byra, had been hanged

from the gallows as a criminal, the old father, a gomel ceorl, is powerless to avenge him. Accordingly,

<u>Þonne he gvd wrece,</u>	then may he make a poem,
<u>sarigne sang,</u>	a sorrowing song,
<u>Þonne his sunu hangað</u>	when his son hangs
<u>hrefne to hrobre,</u>	as pleasure for the raven,
<u>ond he him helps ne meg,</u>	and he can't help him,
<u>sald ond infrod,</u>	old and wise inside,
<u>anige gefremman,</u>	can't help him whatsoever.

(Beowulf 2446-9) [11]

Hrebel remembers his son's loss each morning, expecting no more inheritors to replace him. The house is empty, with no joy or harp-play such as there was, and he takes to his bed. One man in memory of the other, Hrebel 'cries out a song of sorrow', sorhleob galeð, and thinks the place deserted.

<u>Withe ne meahte</u>	He could not in any way
<u>on ðam feorhbonan</u>	get feud-settlement
<u>feahbe gebetani,</u>	on the life-killer;
<u>no ðv ær he þone heaborinc</u>	

Nor any the sooner could he persecute
the man of battle
with hostile deeds,
though he wasn't dear to him.

(Beowulf 2464-7)

Revenge? Another son? Poetry. Hrebel's options follow the pattern of Egill's, though he dies despite this. Both eventually channel their grief into the very composition of a poem. A.G. van Hamel, though he follows a different idea, indicates this would be Egill's 'catharsis': by the same token it would be Hrebel's too. [12] Egill says he is now þryggv, 'sorrow-free', in stanza 25, and the prose says he brightened up, tdk at hressask, when the poem was finished (if II 256). Klaus von See believes Egill did not make this poem to console himself, but as a means of self-assertion (von See (1970), p. 32-3). However, this is not borne out by other records of Germanic elegy or even by Egill's words.

Male elegy: the genre

As early as the end of the first century, Germanic tribesmen seem to have ritually allotted duties of poetry and vengeance in funerals:

Lamenta ac lacrimas cito, dolorem et tristitiam
tarde ponunt. Feminis lugere honestum est, viris
meminisse.

Wailing and tears are quickly abandoned, sorrow and
misery slowly. It is proper for women to mourn aloud,
for men not to forget. (Germania ch. 27) [13]

Grief and the need to reduce it are shared, though means of coping differ between women and men. The ladies mourning in Finnsburh and at Beowulf's pyre would be proof of the first state (Beowulf 1117, 3150-55); and Beowulf's words to Hroþgar seem to

confirm the second (Beowulf 1384-5):

<u>Selre bið aghwan.</u>	It's better for any man
<u>Ʒæt he his freond wrece.</u>	to avenge his friend
<u>Ʒonne he felea murne.</u>	than mourn greatly.

Carol J. Clover has argued that female elegy in Iceland, if not generally, was linked to a tradition of women inciting vengeance; in the case of Jordanes, besides Tacitus, she finds 'the implied equation between female lament and male revenge'. [14]

Egill tries to 'avenge' his injury with a sword; declines to father another son. Now a woman, his daughter, induces him to make a poem. It was a slow composition, he says in the first stanza; the 'theft of Viðurr (Óðinn)' or poetic mead was hard to draw up out of his breast, the 'refuge of his mind'. hugar fylgendi.

<u>Esa auðþeystr.</u>	The joyful find
<u>Ʒvit ekki valdr</u>	of Frigg's kinsmen,
<u>hofugligr.</u>	long ago borne
<u>ór hyggju stað</u>	from the world of giants,
<u>fagnafundr</u>	is not easily driven
<u>Friggjar niðja.</u>	from the place of thought,
<u>ár þorinn</u>	for heavy sorrow
<u>ór Jötunheimum.</u>	is the cause of this.

(Sonatorrek 2)

Egill's ekki, 'sorrow', resembles fagnafundr, the term for the poetic mead, in as far as it must be driven from the breast. The author of Egils Saga seems to copy this use of peysa in describing the vomit at Ármóðr's in chapter 71: sífan þeysti Egill upp ór sér spóju mikla (ÍF II 226). Self-purgation is also invested in the Oíce myth of Óðinn's swallowing and vomiting the poetic mead; this would be the foundation of 'catharsis' in the making of Sonatorrek.

The cathartic pattern to Hreðel's elegy is shown in the OE vocabulary. There are other resemblances with Sonatorrek: like Egill, Hreðel takes to his bed, considers another son; his son is a 'boy', byra, Egill's þurr at Sonatorrek 18; he 'can get feud-settlement in no way', wihte faghbe gebetan, which is an English counterpart of Egill's bolva þetr and the same legal metaphor. Above all, however, the first term for Hreðel's elegy is the popular idiom giedd wrecan.

Wrecan, 'to drive', is cognate with -rek in Egill's title and reka in Sonatorrek 8. Institutions of vengeance and poetry were closely linked in this English word: (ge-)wrecan, 'to avenge', resembles Oíce reka; and (a-/ge-)wrecan, 'to compose', is found only with giedd, with one exception (spei, Beowulf 873).

Wrecað wraban, 'drives the angry thing', is apposed to waorpeð ut attor, 'throws out the poison', in the OE Nine Herbs Charm 16-17. A better sense here is 'purges'. This would clarify the rationale of vengeance as a catharsis of pain or obligation. In Eyrbyggja Saga, chapter 19, is a similar use of Oíce reka in the Máliðinkavísur: reka klámorð af mér, 'to drive out the shame of the obscene words against me', hence 'avenge myself' (ÍF IV 43).

Formal cognate of gíedd, 'song', is geð, i.a. 'temper, wits, passion, quality of mind' (cf. wedd, veð). Geð and gíedd are closely similar in meaning in Old Icelandic blanda geði and OE gieddum wrixlan, each of which denotes the exchange of confidences among friends (Hávamál 44, Maxims I 4). Geð is prominent in Sonatorrek 24 as the companion of Egill's íþrótt vamma firrð, his poetic skill 'removed from fault'.

Elsewhere geð or óðr is connected with poetry in being one half of the composing process; the part of man that the poetic mead must reach and rouse for poetry to be composed. In the following kennings for 'poetry', (1) is 'soul of the man' and (2) the 'mead' or 'skill' that rouses it to poetry:

1. Hildir hjaldr-geðis geð(1)-fjarðar ló(2)
 'current of the fjord (2)
 of the 'soul' of Battle's roar-encounterer [Óðinn] (1)'
 (Úlfr Uggason, Húdrápa 1, Skj B I 128)
2. grjótdaldr geð(1)-reinar gildi(2)
 'drink (2)
 of the land of the 'soul' of the rock-people [giants] (1)'
 (Hof-Garðar Refr, Skj B I 295)
3. Óð(1)-[h]ræris hafs alda(2)
 'wave of the ocean (2)
 of the rouser of 'soul' (1)'
 (Einarr Skálaglamm, Vellekla 5, Skj B I 117)

Erik Björkman suggests 'song, expression of soul' in gíedd developed from 'soul', a sense still current in Old Icelandic geð. He parallels this in the clear development of senses of óðr, in which 'poem' (postdating 1030) seems to have developed from 'soul'. [15]

If gíedd, therefore, was once a 'soul' or 'passion'-term, it is likely that 'to compose a song' in gíedd wreccan developed from 'to purge one's soul'. How do Egill's words bear this out?

Egill's poetry 'is not easily driven from the place of thought', Esa auðþevstr ór hyggju stað fagnafundr. This idea confirms the title tor-rek as 'hard purgation', and parallels my hypothesis of gíedd wreccan. Egill's íþrótt vamma firrð stimulates his geð, his passionate potential, to produce poetry. But because his geð is weighted with ekki, enormous suffering, this happens with difficulty: Sona-tor-rek. Not with impossibility: this poem is not entitled 'Cannot avenge my sons'. In þolva betr Egill admits that his revenge was in some way successful. For though Egill could not 'purge his injury with a sword', ... Pá sok sverði of rekak, he could do so with a poem 'purged' from his geð. To this extent, Egill's concepts of geð and reka are related to each other.

That Hreðel dies despite composing elegy might indicate a creeping Christian influence at the edge of his world: Godes leoht gecceas, 'he chose God's light' instead. His son is strictly 'un-purged/avenged', apeling unwreccan. But his hierarchy of options resembles Egill's to the extent that Egill's bargain with Óðinn now seems less his own philosophy than a tradition of catharsis

which he reaffirmed.

This tradition can be found elsewhere, in the God-given poetry celebrated in OE Maxims I III 169-70:

<u>Longað Þonne þy læs</u>	He languishes less who
<u>þe him con leoƿa worn.</u>	knows a number of songs
<u>oppe mid hondum con</u>	or can touch the harp
<u>hearpan gretani</u>	with his hands.

Likewise king Gelimer, sixth century king of the Vandals, who had no other means of self-therapy. [16]

Emperor Justinian's army was in Libya under Belisarius, mopping up the last resistance to their conquest of the country. Gelimer, according to Procopius, had fled to the mountains and was now on a hill-top besieged by General Pharas (Wars of the Vandals, Book II, ch. 6). Pharas wrote asking him to surrender; Gelimer answered with a request of his own:

και της συμβουλης ην μοι εποιησω, πολλην εχω
σοι χαιριν και πολεμικω αδικοουντι δουλευειν
οικ ανικτον οικκι, παροου αν δικην ελθειμην
λαβειν, ε μοι, ο θεος ελεως ειη, ες γε ουδεν πωποτι
εχαρι προς εμου ουδε εργω παθων ουτι λογω
ακουσας πολεμω μεν ατιων οικ εχοντι παρεσκετο ετηνην,
εμε δε εις τουτο μετηνεγκε τυχηρ, Βελισαριον οικ οιδω εδεν επινεγκων.

For the advice you have given me I am very grateful, but I don't think it tolerable to be slave to an enemy and criminal, on whom, if God were kind to me, I would pray to get justice. For though he never yet suffered any deed nor heard of any word from me that was unfavourable, he gave himself a pretext for a war without any cause and brought me to this state of misfortune by bringing Belisarius up from God knows where.

Gelimer heartily wished disaster on Justinian - he could not expect to touch him.

εγω μεντοι περαιτηρω πι-γραφειν οικ εχω. εφελειτω
γαρ με την εννοιαν η παρευσα τυχη. αλλα
χαιρι μοι, ω φιλι Φαιρα, και μοι κιθαραν τε και
ερετον ενα και σπογγον δεομενω τειριπε.

And now I can't write any more to the point. The present misfortune has robbed me of my mind. But good-bye my dear Pharas, and send me urgently a lyre, one loaf of bread and a sponge.

Pharas could grasp all the letter but the end, and so the messenger explained that Gelimer wanted a loaf because he was hungry; a sponge to clean up his face; and lastly:

κιθαριστη δε αγαθω εντι ωδη της αωτης ες ευφοραν την παρουσαν
πειποιηται, ην δε προς κιθαραν θρηνησει τε και απολαουσαι επισιγεται.

As a good player of the lyre Gelimer has made an ode on the present disaster afflicting him, which he is in haste to sing at the lyre with lamenting and mourning.

It is clear from the letter that Gelimer, as if from habit, had first considered revenge on Justinian, though he was out of reach in Byzantium. His elegy seems to be the next way he can purge

himself of grief.

Egill's progression from vengeance, to another son, to poetry, is a structure of face-saving options. But as he resembles Hrebel and Gelimer, in this way, so his poem is stylised and probably belongs to a Germanic genre of male elegy.

Conclusion: the 'individual' voice

Egill's so-called personal thoughts in Sonatorrek are stylised to a surprising extent. He describes the sea's breach in his family wall, then says, in stanza 4, 'for this reason my family stands at its end', Pvi ett mín á enda stendr. Yet he is thought to have descendants today. His family survive in the Saga, and his son Þórsteinn is also attested in Íslendingabók once, in chapter 5; and twice, in Landnámabók chapters H55 and S109. His sister Þórgerðr is also mentioned in S105. [17] Egill alludes to neither in the Sonatorrek left to us. F. Niedner focused on Þórsteinn's absence and assumed Egill left him out of this poem through a quarrel reported in Egils Saga, chapters 79-84. [18] But it is more likely that a tradition entitled Egill to exaggerate his loss, and that verbal honesty was less important than truth of mood.

Probably most of his models or precedents are lost, but parts of Sonatorrek resemble Hávamál, as von See shows, and Hamðismál 5 in which with more reason Guðrún compares herself, bereft of all kinsmen, to a lonely and withering aspen. In a similar conceit Egill styles himself, his wife and Þoðvarr as forest timber in Sonatorrek 4 and 21.

Egill also seems drawn to the Oice topos of Baldr's death and the end of the world (cf. Gylfaginning ch. 49). This was perhaps inevitable: Eyvindr Skáldaspillir presents Hákon inn góði in a similar way, in Hákonarmál 21; Arnórr Þórbarson likewise Þórfinnr in Þórfinnssdrápa 24; and this was no doubt proper for Þoðvarr too, in the similar pattern of Óðinn begetting Váli to avenge Baldr, in Sonatorrek 17; and Egill's creeping references to Ragnarøk in stanzas 23 to the end. Óðinn is the 'friend of Mímr' in stanza 23, Míms vinn; this resembles Óðinn's council with Mímir as the gods gear up in Voluspá 46 for the last battle: malir Óðinn við Míms hofub. Óðinn is ulfs of bági in Sonatorrek 24, 'the wolf's foe'; as when he dies fighting Fenrir in Voluspá 53 and Vafþrúðnismál 53. Had he lived longer, Egill says in Sonatorrek 11, Þoðvarr might have been taken to Valhøll. This motif explains the unlikely inference in stanzas 13-14 that Egill could still be found in 'raging battle', as hildir Þrósgk. But with these and other lines he probably indicates, at least in a stylised voice, that he looked forward to fighting on Óðinn's side in Ragnarøk.

Egill's mistrust of 'common folk' is frequent; they watch his growing weakness in stanza 9; they seem to argue with him in 12; in 14 he misses his brother, as an ally 'against men working against me', +of +Þv+ergorum. Egill even finds the peace of common folk displeasing in 18. In essence:

Mjök es torfyndr,
sás trúa knegum
of alþjóð
Elgjar galga,
(Sonatorrek 15/1-4)

Extremely difficult it is
to find a man we can trust
among the common people
of Óðinn's gallows [the world].

There seems to be a personal edge to these complaints, but all of them could just as well have been styled on the character of Starkaðr, an arch-Odinic hypostasis of Egill's mythology. [19]

What might be 'individual' in Sonatorrek is Egill's use of the same Odinic topos in stanza 24.

Egill says in this stanza that his geð or character was a gift from Óðinn; and the prose and verses of Egils Saga show the appropriate perversity. Egill fights lawsuits in Norway and Iceland (chh. 56, 82), but raids lawlessly from coast to coast. His is avaricious without end, keeping back his father's silver, burying his own (chh. 56, 85). He is loyal to his friends, a soft touch for women; but still wild and irrational - vomit, mutilation of Ármóðr and his threat to murder Einarr Skálaglamm (chh. 71-2, 78). Implicit in Sonatorrek 24, therefore, could be the popular reaction to his character:

ok þat geð,
es ek gerða mér,
vísa fjandr
at vélondum.

and that quality of mind
by which I made for myself
certain enemies
into scheming men.

Most scholars have emended MS ad to af in attempts to make geð as positive as the accompanying íþrótt that saves Egill's life.

Klaus von See says that translation according to the MS is 'weder lobenswert noch nützlich' (von See (1970), p. 29).

Turville-Petre, for instance:

The manuscript reading might stand, but 'I made certain enemies into tricksters' would make poor sense. The meaning is rather that because of his gifts, Egill could unmask those who plotted against him. [20].

But MS ad is where an interpretation of 'individuality' can start. I suggest Egill has used an Odinic topos to express the real-life suspicion that he is surrounded by people plotting to bring him down. Compare Sonatorrek 18/1-4:

Erumka þekkt
Þjóða sinni,
Þótt sér hverr
sótt of haldii

The company of commoners
is not pleasing to me,
even if each man keeps
the peace about him.

The pattern of this suspicion can be paralleled in Egils Saga, chapter 9. There the Hildiríðarsynir, born into enmity with Egill's uncle Þórólfr, approach him for their mother's inheritance; but when styggliga, 'in an ugly manner', the otherwise benign Þórólfr denied them and claimed they were slave-born, they quietly proceeded to plot against him. This would be an instance of what Egill could be alluding to in Sonatorrek 24.

Egill's provocative geð was probably a 'compensation' - at least in his soldiering days. But as far as the laws of the

Icelandic Republic were designed to avert bloodshed. Egill in later years found himself out of place. Accordingly his contempt for the stability of the Alþing is so great, in Egils Saga chapter 84, that he plans to throw it into riot by scattering his silver on the Law Rock. Egill is over ninety at the time. His niece Þórdís puns on this anarchy as a Þjóðráð, 'plan for the people' but also 'excellent plan'; but to her husband Grímr Egill's idea is criminal folly. Grímr was already connected to the Alþing and became a lawspeaker himself in 1002. Perhaps the alþjóð now shared more power than before and Egill found himself isolated as an autocrat of the old Norwegian style. Hence the parancia which may or may not speak through the traditional wording of Sonatorrek 24.

Separating personal from stylised thoughts in Sonatorrek is therefore difficult. It may be the chance survival of this poem that has given the impression that Egill's poem is a spontaneous cri de révolte, but it is likely that his images are largely traditional. Against modern expectations, Egill has no religious crisis to face. His pagan beliefs are helpful and not questionable. They permit him the catharsis of elegy - apparently a female genre - as an alternative to revenge. Accordingly in Sonatorrek Egill follows an inherited structure with outbursts which are appropriate and rarely original in detail. His personality may never have differed from the stylised one he presents to us, but if it did, however, there is little way of knowing from this poem. Instead it is probably his high quality of diction that ensured Sonatorrek's survival to modern times.

NOTES

1. Ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslensk Fornrit II (Reykjavík, 1936). Jón Helgason, Skjaldeveg (Copenhagen, 1961), p. 29-33.
2. Georg Misch, Geschichte der Autobiographie II.1 (Frankfurt, 1955), p. 163-77 (175-6). M.C. van den Toorn, 'Egils Sonatorrek als dichterische Leistung', Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie 77 (1958), 46-59 (55). Klaus von See, 'Sonatorrek und Hávamál', Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum 99 (1970), 26-33. Ralph Bo, 'Om tillkomsten av Sonatorrek', Arkiv för nordisk filologi 91 (1976), 53-65.
3. Sigurður Nordal, 'Átrúnaður Egils Skallagrímssonar', Skírnir 98 (1924), 145-65 (160-3).
4. Gustav Neckel, 'Egill und der angelsächsische Einfluss', Beiträge zur Eddaforschung (Dortmund, 1908), p. 367-89 (375).
5. Finnur Jónsson, Edda Snorra Sturlusonar (Copenhagen, 1930), p. 175. Skj B I, 387-8, 1-3.
6. Martin's Opera omnia, ed. C.W. Barlow (New Haven Ct., 1950), De Correctione Rusticorum, p. 159-203 (186). Gail Jecker, Die Heimat des hl. Firmin (Munster W., 1927), p. 36. J.C. Pope, Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection, 2 vols, Early English Texts Society 260 (London, 1968), II 667-724 (680-1). D. Bethurum, The Homilies of Wulfstan (Oxford, 1957), p. 221-4 (221-2).

- 7 Finnur Jónsson, Den oldnorske og oldislandske Litterature Historie, 2nd ed., 2 vols (Copenhagen, 1920-3), I (1920), 479: 'Egill var én af de fritenkere, som ikke just kun stolode på deres egen "kraft og styrke" og fuldstændig forkastede den gamle Asatro, men han har stillet sig frit overfor mange af de gamle dogmer'.
- 8 Saxo's Gesta Danorum, ed. J. Olrik and H. Ræder, 2 vols (Copenhagen, 1931-57), I (1931), 152.
- 9 Sigvatr Þórðarson, Skj B I 251, 13, 22, GulaÞingslog, ch. 255, Norges Gamle Love, ed. R. Keyser et al., 5 vols (Christiania, 1846-95), I (1846), Um rannsak. Hálfðanar Saga Svarta, ch. 8, ÍF XXVI 92, Árna Biskups Saga, ch. 16, Biskupa Sögur, 2 vols (Copenhagen, 1858-78), I (1858), 699-700.
- 10 Árni Pálsson, 'Sonatorrek', Skirnir 99 (1926), 153.
- 11 OE ed. The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, ed. G.P. Krapp and E.V.K. Dobbie, 6 vols (Columbia, 1931-53).
- 12 A.G. van Hamel, 'IJslands Odinsgeloof', Mededeelingen der kon. ned. Akademie der Wetenschappen, Afd. Lett. 82 B (1936), 147-88 (151-2).
- 13 The Germania of Tacitus, ed. R.P. Robinson (Middeltown Ct., 1935), p. 302.
- 14 C.J. Clover, 'Hildigunnr's lament', Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature, ed. John Lindow et al. (Odense, 1985), p. 141-83 (159).
- 15 Erik Björkman, 'Wortgeschichtliche Kleinigkeiten', Beiblatt zur Anglia 30 (1919), 318-20.
- 16 Prokop: Werke, 5 vols (Munich, 1961-77), IV (1971), 208-11.
- 17 ÍF I.1 12, 55, 143, 146
- 18 F. Niedner, 'Egils Sonatorrek', Zfda 59 (1927), 217-35.
- 19 Cf. Gautreks Saga, ch. 7: Leibr skal hann eipóðu allri.
- 20 E.O.G. Turville-Petre, Scaldic Poetry (Oxford, 1976), p. 41.