

Pouring Óðinn's Mead: An Antiquarian Theme?

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Skalds both pagan and Christian repeatedly invoke the myth of Óðinn's mediation of poetry from the supernatural to the human world: *Suttungar mjǫð gaf Óðinn Ásunum ok þeim mönnum er yrkja kunnu* (*Skáldskaparmál* 5). The kenning of the earliest skald Bragi, *drykkja Fiqlnis fjalla* 'drink of the mountain-Fiqlnir (Óðinn; giant)' follows the same pattern as that of the Christian Arnórr jarlaskáld, *hrosta brim Alfǫður* 'All-father's (Óðinn's) mash-surf (beer)' (Whaley, 220). The taste for cataloguing attributed to Snorri by Roberta Frank (1981) may have prompted over-elaboration in his version of the myth, but also reflects the formulaic practice of the skalds, whose intention amounts to the association of their craft – represented as a liquid of virtually any kind – with the supernatural, signified either by Óðinn, or by the dwarfs or giants, whether named or generalized, who are given roles in Snorri's story.

These kennings occur no more and no less in verses attributed to the poets of the poets' sagas than those of their supposed contemporaries. The proportion of seven attributed to Kormákr to one to Björn Hítðelakappi reflects the greater preponderance of mythological references in ninth-century poetry. These

invocations of the myth do nothing to identify the poetic persona of the speaker or to articulate beliefs about the nature of poetry and the process of composition underlying the mythic conception of poetry as a supernaturally-produced intoxicating drink. The characterization of these poets as marginal, aggressive characters, intimidating in appearance and temperament, has been taken to derive from the association of poets with Óðinn, but the link remains subliminal – or rather, is mediated by the much more overt interest in poetic characterization in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*.

The stereotype of the dark and difficult poet hinted at in other poets' sagas is fully explored in *Egils saga's* portrait of a violent, obsessive, moody man who was also a creative genius. The thirteenth-century author refashioned the model of the archetypal pre-Christian poet according to his own antiquarian prepossessions, giving final shape to an evolving body of legend that had added anecdotes and verses to the core of the poet's surviving longer poems and perhaps some occasional verses.¹ If the characterization of Egill was partly shaped by conventional ideas of what poets were like, the portrait is so strikingly individualised that it must have influenced the presentation of poets of more shadowy reputation in their sagas.

'Wolf-grey hat's stump'

At the thematic heart of the saga are two episodes narrating acts of poetic composition and affirming, in contrasting modes, the life-giving, indeed life-saving function of the art. Egill's third longer poem, *Arinbjarnarkviða*, lacks this vivid narrative placing, but incongruously devotes nine strophes, more than a third of its length, to an account of the *Höfuðlausn* episode. I suggest that the tradition of Egill's dark ugliness owes much to the account of his dangerous encounter in York in *Arinbjarnarkviða*, which alludes to his *dökkva skqr* (3; 258-9):

drók djarfhött
of dökkva skqr,
létk hersi
heim of sóttan.

I drew a bold hood
over my dark hair,
paid to the ruler
a visit at home.

This may be the kernel of the saga's veritable obsession with Egill's appearance, which is frequently mentioned in verse and prose. If *Arinbjarnarkviða* is Egill's own work, it vouches for his dark colouring as a matter of historical fact. The literary fact of the poet's strongly-marked looks serves a number of symbolic and practical purposes, and may have percolated from traditions about Egill into other poets' sagas with dark, ugly or rugged-

¹My working assumption is that Egill did compose the longer poems but that many *lausavísur* were added at a pre-literary stage, and some possibly by the author.

looking heroes. The emphasis on Egill's ugly head elaborates the conceit of *hofuðlausn*. This is the name given to the twenty-strophe *drápa* which Egill composed overnight to save his skin at the court of his enemy, King Eiríkr blóðøx.² The name is alluded to in Eiríkr's *ek gef þér hofuð þitt at sinni* and in Egill's rueful verse response which fittingly closes the ironic episode (193-4),³

Erumka leitt,
þótt ljótr séi,
hjalma klett
af hilmí þiggja;
hvar's sás gat
af gøfuglyndum
æðri gjøf
allvalds syni.

I am not unwilling,
ugly though it be,
the helmet-crag
from the prince to accept;
where is he who has received
from the generously-minded
a greater gift
(from) a mighty king's son?

but the word *hofuðlausn* occurs not in that poem nor the prose text, but in the account of the 'head to head' confrontation of Egill and Eiríkr in *Arinbjarnarkviða*. Both are represented almost as disembodied heads, the king by his terrifyingly glittering gaze, and the poet more disjointedly by a collection of features combining to make up his ugly head (vv. 5-9; 259-61):

Né hamfagrt
høðum þótti
skaldfé mitt
at skata húsum,
þás ulfgrátt
við Yggjar miði
hattar staup
at hilmí þák.

Not fair to look at
seemed to men
my poet's payment
in the generous man's hall,
when a wolf-grey
in exchange for Yggr's mead (= poetry)
hat-stump (= head)
from the prince I received.

Við því tók,
en tvau fylgðu
søkk sámlit
siðra brúna
ok sá muðr,
es mína bar
hofuðlausn
fyr hilmis kné.

I accepted it,
and with it went two
dark-coloured gems
of wide brows,
and that mouth
which carried my
head-ransom
before the king's knee,

Þars tannfjöld
með tungu þák
ok hlertjöld
hlustum gøfðuð,

where a crowd of teeth
with a tongue I accepted,
and ear-tents
endowed with hearing,

² Except in W (185 n. 1). *Hofuðlausn* stories are also told of Bragi inn gamli (*Egils saga* 182), Þórarinn loftunga (*Knýtlinga saga* 125) and Óttarr inn svarti (*Flateyjarbók*). The metonymy 'head' for 'life' occurs in Óðinn's words in *Hávamál* 106, *svá hætta ek hofði til*; cf. *hafelan beorgan* (*Beowulf* 1372).

³ A further verse repeats the motif of the head as physical object, reporting Egill's success in keeping his *svartbrúnum sjónum* 'black-brown eyes' and regaining control of his *áttgøfguðum Ála hattar arfstóli* (194) 'noble hereditary seat of Áli's hat (the helmet)'.

en sú gjöf
golli betri
hróðugs konungs
of heitin vas.

but that gift
better than gold
of the glorious king
was considered to be.

This parodies conventional poems such as the shield *drápa*, of which Egill is credited with two, describing precious gifts for which the donor is thanked. The head's ugliness is rhetorically necessary to contrast with conventionally praised rings and shields. It is characteristic of the saga's use of thematic repetition that the 'ugly head' motif is further developed and bound up with other themes, but the idea of Egill's ugliness, together with the rugged appearance attributed to other poets, may be rooted in the poetic joke of *Arinbjarnarkviða*.⁴

Other references to Egill's dark, ugly head indicate his individuality, his savage temperament, his poetic articulateness, his inheritance from a dark supernatural strain linking his family with Óðinn. He is most fully described at Athelstan's court, out of sympathy with the celebration of a battle in which his brother has died (143-4):

Egill var mikilleitr, ennibreiðr, brúnamikill, nefit ekki langt, en ákafliga digrt, granstæðit vítt ok langt, hakan breið furðuliga, ok svá allt um kjálkana, hálsdigr ok herðimikill, svá at þat bar frá því, sem aðrir menn váru, harðleitr ok grimmligr, þá er hann var reiðr; hann var vel í vexti ok hverjum manni hæri, úlfgrátt hárit ok þykkt ok varð snimma skollótr; en er hann sat þá hleypði hann annarri brúninni ofan á kinnina, en annarri upp í hárrætr; Egill var svarteygr ok skolbrúnn. Ekki vildi hann drekka, þó at honum væri borit, en ýmsum hleypði hann brúnunum ofan eða upp.

The detail of Egill's grotesquely mobile brows may arise from a literal interpretation of a verse recording the easing of the hero's mood by the king's gifts, but perhaps originally intended as more general praise of a ruler whose generosity smoothes worry from his followers' brows:

Knáttu hvarms af harmi
hnúpgnípur mér drúpa,
nú fann ek þanns ennis
ósléttur þær rétti;
gramr hefr gerðihomrum
grundar upp of hrundit,
sá's til ýgr, af augum,
armsíma, mér grímu.

With grief the jutting peaks
of my eyebrows did droop;
now I have found one who righted
those unevennesses of the forehead.
The king has pushed up girdling cliffs
cliffs (=eyebrows) of the mask's ground
(= face) from my eyes,
he who is fierce to (= gives away) arm-rings.

Other features, 'wolf-grey' hair, dark eyes and wide brow, are all mentioned in *Arinbjarnar-kviða* and repeated elsewhere in the saga. This cameo of the dark and threatening hero is placed tellingly at the moment where he affirms his

⁴ The same joke occurs in the *hofuðlausn* story told of Óttarr inn svarti in *Flateyjarbók*, possibly in imitation of *Egils saga* (*Íslendingasögur* III, 2201-2): 'Þat mun ráð Óttarr að þú þiggir höfuð þitt í þessu sinni fyrir drápuna.' Óttarr svarar: 'Þessi gjöf þykir mér allgóð herra þótt höfuðið sé eigi fagurt.'

allegiance to the brother so unlike him in appearance and temperament.

Here the saga author accentuates for a specific purpose the theme of Egill's remarkable appearance, which goes back to his references to his own dark and ugly looks. The 'ugly head' verses following the *Höfuðlausn* story were probably an earlier replication of Egill's original conceit. The origin of this theme may be a poetic joke, in which the head is represented as a dubious poetic prize. It is more likely, given the widespread reference to the darkness and ugliness of other poets, that Egill himself was drawing on older beliefs about the temperamental characteristics of poets and the visible signs of these reflected in their appearance. The existence of a substantial body of pre-Christian poetry attached to *Egils saga* gives unique access to the kernel of tradition on which a thirteenth-century author, and earlier contributors to the development of the saga's material, built a substantial physical portrait.

'Very ugly and like his father'

Egill's striking appearance contributes to the theme, based in another of his poems, of the importance of family ties. *Sonatorrek* locates the poet's distress in his outrage at the breaching of his *frændgarðr*, the cutting of his *ættar þond*. Egill's sense of family has a political dimension, opposed to the dangerous aspiration of service of a king which kills his uncle and brother. This contrast is articulated by the family's division into two strains: the dark, ugly, aggressive and individualistic, with hints of the supernatural, to which Egill belongs, and the fair, sociable and reasonable side represented by the two Þórólfrs (and Egill's son Þorsteinn). Whether this division originated with the saga or was already strong in tradition, it took firm hold and was generalised beyond the confines of *Egils saga*, as a passage in the last chapter of the saga, paraphrased in the earlier MS of *Gunnlaugs saga*, demonstrates (299-300):

Frá Þorsteini er mikil ætt komin ok mart stórmenni ok skáld mǫrg, ok er þat Mýramannakyn, ok svá allt þat, er komit er frá Skalla-Grími. Lengi helzk þat í ætt þeiri, at menn váru sterkir ok vígamenn miklir, en sumir spakir at viti. Þat var sundrleitt mjök, því at í þeiri ætt hafa fœzk þeir menn, er fríðastir hafa verit á Íslandi, sem var Þorsteinn Egilsson ok Kjartan Ólafsson, systursonr Þorsteins, ok Hallr Guðmundarson, svá ok Helga in fagra, dóttir Þorsteins, er þeir deildu um Gunnlaugr ormstunga ok Skáld-Hrafn; en fleiri váru Mýramenn manna ljótastir.

The names Úlfr inn óargi ('the un-cowardly'; by litotes, 'the ferocious'), Bjálfi ('animal skin'), and Hallbjörn háftroll sketch in these suggestions even before the more extensive accounts of the *mjök hamrammr* Kveld-Úlfr and Skalla-Grímr. Grímr is a cognomen of Óðinn, and *skalli* 'bald head' associates him with the berserks, who are said in some sources to be bald with unusually hard bones in their heads.⁵

⁵ Bjarni Einarsson 1976, 47-54. *Skalli* occurs as a wolf *heiti*; the saga uses it alongside a reference

Supernatural tendencies fade with the family's emigration to Iceland. Egill finds redress for his sons' and brother's death in the measures of the *Sonatorrek* rather than in animalistic rage. But a hint of savagery lives on, in Skalla-Grímr's violent attack (he is said to *hamask*) on his twelve-year-old son, and killing of a man, in a ball game *um kveldi eptir sólafall* (101). Egill's similar behaviour as a six-year-old is one of the saga's many structural repetitions, binding his temperament into the pattern established by his forebears. Elements of savagery in Egill's later history are not overtly supernatural; the wolfish strain is suggested by association, as in his fight against Atli inn skammi, killed when Egill *beit í sundr í honum barkann* (210), a possible allusion to Sigmundur's attack on his son/nephew in *Völsunga saga*.

These suggestions of supernatural and wolfish family traits probably existed in oral tradition in the form of names that the author is unlikely to have invented. But he was clearly concerned to weave Egill's personality and appearance inextricably into the legend. The family tradition of darkness and ugliness must have fed into the poet's creation of his own poetic persona, to be emphasised in his self-representation in the image of a grotesque, even threatening, head, which was the antithesis of the glittering prizes conventionally courted by poets, and which also embodied the mechanical means by which the poet conveyed his poetic creations.

Egill and Óðinn

The family's wolf-like qualities suggest their affinity with Óðinn,⁶ whose association with the wolf is developed in the iconography of warfare. The *berserkr* 'bear-shirt' was identified as Óðinn's warrior; the term and its synonym *úlfheðinn* 'wolf-skin' imply a belief that warriors adopted the physical forms of animals as well as their strength and ferocity. The idea of metamorphosis fits Óðinn's reputation as a shape-changer. Among the legendary heroes, some divine or semi-divine in origin, represented as Óðinn's protégés is Starkaðr, of whom there are confused accounts in Saxo and *Gautreks saga*. Poised uneasily between Óðinn's patronage and Þórr's enmity, he invites comparison with Egill in several ways. Of giant origin, he acquires the gift of poetry from Óðinn, and is represented as grey-haired, wolf-like, and

to his *úlfúð* (Bergljót S. Kristjánsdóttir 1997, 75-77). Nordal's view of the ideological and temperamental division within the family as a conflict of the values of farmer and viking within Egill's own character is over-simplified (1924, 154-5). Richard North sees the progressive humanisation from Kveld-Úlfr to Egill as 'part of the author's image of surreptitious transformation from pagan to Christian cultures' (1991, 148-9). From this perspective, the fair strain in the family is a 'modern' development, in contrast with the ancient pagan tendencies represented by the hints of wolfishness and monstrosity in their genealogy.

⁶ Despite the theory that Egill turned away from his family's earlier devotion to Þórr (Nordal, 1924), which was recently supported by Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson's proposed reading of *Sonatorrek* 22 (1999, 173-4).

old (*inn gamli*).

Among the names of the one-eyed god are Bileygr ‘Failing-eyed’, Blindr ‘blind’, Tvíblindi ‘Double-blind’, Helblindi ‘Hell-blind’, and several Odinic heroes share the god’s blindness. Starkaðr ends his life almost blind, Haraldr hilditǫnn, another semi-legendary king with Odinic connections, completely blind. Egill’s blindness in old age may seem more like a realistic element in the physical decline of an eighty-year-old man than a reminiscence of the hero’s Odinic attributes; but then, the emphasis on the hero’s old age itself recalls the depiction of the god himself (also known as Karl ‘old man’), and of heroes like Starkaðr.

Most significantly, Egill is a self-announced adherent of Óðinn, affirming his allegiance in plain terms in *Sonatorrek*. He refers to his past relationship with Óðinn and finds resolution for his grief in the present intention to offer reluctant sacrifices to the god. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson argues that ‘a poet with the temperament that the composer of *Sonatorrek* had would hardly have gone on sacrificing to a god who had let him down in times of need’ (1999, 173-4). This misreads the bleak resignation of the poem’s resolution. The poet’s progression from reluctant sacrifice to acknowledgement of divine gifts affirms that adherence to the god implies acceptance of his nature; Óðinn grants *bætr* on his own terms (*Sonatorrek* 24; 256):

Gofumk íþrótt
úlfs of bági
vígi vanr
vammi firrða
ok þat geð,
es ek gerða mér
vísa fjandr
af vélǫndum.

Gave to me
the wolf’s adversary,
accustomed to battle,
a craft beyond reproach,
and the faculty
to make for myself
true enemies
from plotters. (*af* emended from MS *at*)

Apparently modern in its psychological analysis of the process of healing set in motion by the process of composition, the poem has also been read as a genuine manifestation of pagan ritual. Joseph Harris (1999) suggests that the poet, as devotee of Óðinn, re-enacts the mythological ‘experience’ of to Óðinn himself, drawing out aspects of his mourning for his son’s death which parallel Óðinn’s loss of Baldr. Most famously parallel is the father’s inability to avenge his son, since the ‘slayer’ was the inanimate sea; this may be alluded to in the poem’s title. The poet’s identification with Óðinn is reinforced by the imagery of Ragnarǫk particularly at the end of the poem; Óðinn is referred to in terms invoking that conflagration (*úlfs bági*, *Míms vinr*). The poet represents himself as, like Óðinn, in need of friends and supporters, and includes what Harris calls a ‘satire’ comparable to the description in *Vǫluspá* of the world’s decadence as the last days approach.

The parallel with Óðinn’s mourning for Baldr probably weighed with the saga author in his firm identification of the poem with Þoðvarr’s death, despite

the plural *sona-* in the title and the poem's references to the deaths of at least two sons. The closing strophe, in which the poet, stripped of friends and kin, resignedly awaits the goddess Hel, seems so like the words of closure with which the saga should end that it is disconcerting to realise that, according to the conventional dating, Egill has another 30 years to live. Ironically, the stimulus for the series of loosely structured anecdotes about the poet's old age with which the saga continues may have been precisely the image of old age which Egill constructed for himself in *Sonatorrek*.

Óðinn and poetry

Another kind of re-enactment suggested by Harris's account of *Sonatorrek* is its representation of the poetic process. Despite its apparently modern endorsement of the therapeutic power of self-expression, a religious listener of the tenth century may have understood from the poem's opening that the poet, finding speech weigh heavily on his tongue, is forced by an act of will to re-enact Óðinn's mystical *þjóf* of poetry. The transformation of this theft into the *fagnafundr* 'joyful find' of v.3 presages the poem's progression towards the acknowledgement of poetry as Óðinn's gift. Its drawing out from the recesses of the mind corresponds to Óðinn's appropriation of the mead from the giant's cave. The link between intoxication and inspiration suggested by the metaphor of fermented drink for poetry remains subliminal; poets use it 'with no suggestion of ecstasis' (Dronke 1984, 55). Dronke finds in *Hávamál* 13-14 a play on the special nature of Óðinn's drinking; whereas men lose their *geð* 'wits' under the influence of drink, the god gained *geð*, a specific poetic faculty, from his drinking in the giant's home. Óðinn's vomiting of the poetic mead may be alluded to in stories of Egill's extravagant drinking feats: '*Síðan þeysti Egill upp ór sér spýju mikla, ok gaus í andlit Ármóði, í augun ok nasarnar ok í munninn*' (226).⁷ The verb *þeysa* is echoed in *Sonatorrek* 2, where poetry era *auðþeystr* 'is not easily made to rush' from the grief-stricken poet's mind. The image of vomiting for the production of poetry suggests effort and pain but at the same time the involuntary spasm of intoxication.

Egill has something to say about the psychological process of producing poetry, locating its raw material in the poet's *hugar fylgsni* 'hiding place of

⁷ Egill hooks out Ármóðr's eye, recalling an incident in *Sturlu saga* ch. 31, in which Hvamm-Sturla, Snorri Sturluson's father, is attacked and explicitly labelled an Odinic figure: *Þorbjörg, konu Páls í hljóp fram milli manna ok hafði kníf í hendi ok lagði til Sturlu ok stefndi í augat ok mælti þetta við, 'Hví skal ek eigi gera þik þeim líkastan, er þú vill líkastr vera, – en þar er Óðinn?' If Snorri wrote *Egils saga*, he must have drawn this detail, not corroborated in verse, from his own family history. At first sight the parallel is not close, since in *Egils saga* the Odinic character himself does the blinding; but forcing a victim into the likeness of Óðinn suggests a sacrifice to the god, as in the practice of hanging a sacrificial victim in tribute to the 'Hanging-god'. Likewise, during his spectacular vomiting feat, Egill makes Ármóðr vomit too by spewing into his mouth.*

thought', from which it must be dragged or driven. As fluency returns, he speaks of carrying the *mærðar timbr* 'timber of praise' out of the *orðhof* 'temple of words', suggesting a location within the mind of a sacred store of words and emotions, the potentialities for poetry, which have to be shaped and projected by the poet's craft. This transformation is worked by the two gifts of Óðinn which Egill acknowledges at the end of the poem, the *íþrótt vamma firrða* 'flawless skill' and the *geð* 'spirit' that enables him to unmask his enemies.

The idea of poetry as an *íþrótt*, a skill that has to be learned, fits Egill's metaphors of building and shaping. But *vamma firrða* 'removed from faults' makes a more mystical claim, echoed by the reference in *Arinbjarnarkviða* to the *grunlaust grepps æði* 'unsuspicious mind of the poet', and *lastalauss* 'blameless' in the corrupt *Sonatorrek* 3. *Geð* means passion, temperament, or a particular mental faculty; in the context of poetry, Richard North argues for a sense like 'poetic soul'. The inspirational mead of poetry operates on the poet's *geð*, 'the special parts of man this poetic mead reaches and rouses' (1991, 38-51). This is supported by the term *Óðrerir* 'rouser of the mind', interpreted by Snorri as one of the three vats containing the poetic mead, but most likely a name for the mead itself: 'As Óðinn therefore gave *Óðrerir* to men (*Hávamál* 107), so would he give Egill (and Starcatherus) a pure art, but at the same time a passionate spirit which the art had to stir for a poem to be composed' (North 1991, 51).

So *geð* is a temperament or state of mind special to poets. Unfortunately, Egill's definition, *þat geð, es ek gerða mér vísa fjáendr af vélǫndum* 'that temperament by which I made for myself true enemies out of deceivers', is not illuminating. Perhaps, together with the 'flawless' quality attributed to poetry and the claim to professional discernment in *Arinbjarnarkviða*, it suggests an authority based on honesty, which not only arrives at true judgements of the poet's subjects but can detect subterfuge in all his associates. But this claim for a poet's spiritual authority is not supported elsewhere. Alternatively, the words may refer to the aggressiveness proper to a follower of the god of war; Egill forces those who would scheme against him into outright confrontation. As North says, 'It is possible that in alluding to Óðinn as the "wolf's foe, used to combat", Egill shows that as a favourite, he still expected to train and fight for his god in Ragnarök, the Armageddon of the northern world' (1991, 51).

'I carve runes'

Egill uses a different divine gift, skill in runes, to uncover the treachery of Bárðr and Queen Gunnhildr, who have poisoned his drinking-horn. Egill carves runes on the suspect horn and reddens them with blood, whereupon the horn breaks (109). The accompanying verse mentions rune-carving but not the breaking of the horn, which is probably inspired by a story told in Gregory's dialogues of St Benedict, who broke a poisoned drinking-cup by making the sign of the cross

over it (Bjarni Einarsson 1975, 176). This could have been pressed into service by a learned author to dramatise the instructions given to Sigurðr by the valkyrie Sigrdrífa for the carving of *qlrúnar* (*Sigrdrífumál* 7-8). On another occasion Egill acts uncharacteristically as healer, curing a sick girl by detecting and correcting a bungled attempt to work on her with *manrúnar* ‘love runes’. This story was probably not the saga author’s invention, since it is clumsily told, giving two conflicting accounts of the girl’s illness (229, 238). But it looks like antiquarian reconstruction of the occult practices of paganism, and again Bjarni Einarsson may be right to see parallels in hagiographic (this time biblical) miracle stories (1975, 260-61).

Egill’s third essay in runes is the carving of a *formáli* ‘spell’, which he also pronounces, on his *níðstong* against Eiríkr and Gunnhildr (171). The runes are not mentioned in the two verses believed to paraphrase the spoken formula. While there is evidence elsewhere that the reciting of verses accompanied the raising of *níð*, the carving of runes is more doubtful.⁸ We may speculate that the magic power of the *níð* is inherent in the horse-decked pole and the spoken curse, and that the idea of its being reinforced by a written inscription is likely to be the addition of a later, literate culture.

In the mysterious myth of *Hávamál* 138-45, Óðinn hangs himself on a ‘windy tree’; he snatches up *rúnar*, and acquires nine mighty spells, wisdom from the ‘son of Bǫlþórr’ (a giant, apparently Óðinn’s grandfather), and a drink of the precious mead. Here, poetry and runes are closely allied among the esoteric wisdom Óðinn gains from the giants and the realm of the dead. Egill is the only poet of the poets’ sagas given skill in runes. This aspect of his persona probably developed to strengthen the poet’s affinity with Óðinn, and the mystical powers claimed for poetry itself. Egill’s exploits as rune-master are extraneous to the main themes and narrative of the saga, and the idea may be a comparatively late, antiquarian development.

Other poets

Generalized references to ‘the characteristic depiction of the skalds of [the poets’ sagas] as dark, with crooked or ugly noses, pale complexions and heavy eyebrows’ (Clunies Ross 1978, 4) are influenced by the ‘Egill effect’; the strong visual picture of Egill in his saga colours our impressions of lesser poets. Only Kormákr (*svartr á hár ok sveipr í hárinu*; *KS*, 206) can be described as dark, though Gunnlaugr also has dark eyes, and Pormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld is *svartr á hárslit* (*FS*, 124). The others are all red- or chestnut-haired; Björn Hítðælakappi is *mikill maðr vexti ok vænn ok freknótt, rauðskeggjaðr, skrúfhárr* (*BS*, 197; Hallfreðr is *jarpr á hár, ok fór vel* (*HS*, 141); Gunnlaugr *ljósjarpr á hár, ok fór allvel* (*GS*, 59).

⁸ Another *níðreising*, including the carving of a *formáli* in runes, is described in *Vatnsdæla saga*, but may be borrowed from *Egils saga*.

The stereotype of the red-haired poet competes with a tendency for poets to announce themselves in verse as dark or dark-eyed, perhaps a convention established by Egill himself or in his time.⁹ This accounts for Gunnlaugr's unlikely combination of light chestnut hair and black eyes, which is based on his reference in a verse to *svört augu mér* (*GS*, 96). Darkness is also a prerequisite for Gunnlaugr in a saga which is closest to *Egils saga* in its contrasting of dark and fair characters. Like Egill, Gunnlaugr is contrasted with a more easy-going brother; but more significantly with the father of his beloved, Þorsteinn Egilsson, already established in *Egils saga* as belonging to his family's fair strain. Gunnlaugr mocks him in a verse as *hǫldr inn hvíti* (*GS*, 90). This is reminiscent of Björn Hítðlakappi's two sneering verse references to his rival Þórðr Kolbeinsson as *sveinn inn hvíti* (*BS*, 140, 144),¹⁰ and Hallfreðr's address to his rival Gríss as *halr enn hvíti* (*HS*, 182). A jibe equating fair colouring with cowardice would hardly be effective unless spoken by a dark man; and Kormákr uses an opposing epithet of himself: *sveinn enn svartí, sonr +gmundar, skáldit* (206). *Kormáks saga* opposes dark and fair only in a verse in which the poet boasts that despite his *svört augu* and *allfǫlr* complexion, he has had as much success with women as *drengr enn fagri* (211). No rival in love other than this hypothetical fair man has emerged at this point, but the reference may be based on an opposition in an older version of the story between a dark poet and his fair rival.

The tradition of the dark poet underlies, and sometimes conflicts with, the superficial physical descriptions of their heroes constructed by thirteenth-century saga authors. The rhetoric of contrast between dark and fair surfaces incompletely in most of the poets' sagas, but is not realised thematically as in *Egils saga*. It is impossible to say whether the theme of the dark poet originated with Egill himself, or was an early tradition about poets in general; but the fact that it is clearly articulated by Egill himself, one of the earliest of these poets, credits him with an important role in the development of the idea.

Some descriptions of poets do share with *Egils saga* the suggestion of striking and strongly marked appearance, which supports, better than the dark colouring she asserts, Clunies Ross's point that the poets' physical appearance mirrors their temperamental turbulence. Hallfreðr is *skolbrúnn*¹¹ *nokkut ok heldr*

⁹ Sighvatr Þórðarson refers in verses to his *svört skǫr* and *þessi augun íslenzk en svörtu* (*Heimskringla*, II 62, 140); his poet nephew Óttarr is nicknamed *inn svartí*, as are other poets.

¹⁰ Þórðr's appearance is not described in the (incomplete) saga, but the taunt implies fair colouring, like that against Þorsteinn Egilsson (*allra manna fríðastr sýnum, hvítr á hár ok bjartr álitum*) in *Egils saga*: 'Rennr þú nú, Þorsteinn hvíti?' (291). In *Laxdæla saga* (90), Kjartan is referred to as *hvítan mann ok huglausan*.

¹¹ The suggestion that *skolbrúnn* means 'dark-browed', since Egill is also *svartbrýnn* (vv. 35, 49), is improbable since it often applies, as in *Hallfreðar saga*, to otherwise fair men. It often goes together with the suggestion of ugliness or large, strongly marked features, occurring alongside *mikilleitr*, *skarpleitr*, *ljótr* and *heldr ósýniligr*, and specifically with ugly or large noses in *Hallfreðar saga*, *Egils saga* and elsewhere.

nefljótr (HS, 141); Gunnlaugr, in a description probably modelled on that of Hallfreðr, is *noðkut nefljótr ok skapfelligr í andliti* (GS, 59).¹²

Although no other poet's saga characterizes its hero as purposefully as *Egils saga*, the heroes of all four poets' sagas sharing the love-rivalry theme have instability or aggression or both in their make-up. Instability is built in to the overall theme in the form of tension between the hero's love and his desire to make his reputation abroad. In addition, all (except *Bjarnar saga*, the lost beginning of which probably included an introductory description of the hero) comment explicitly on the hero's temperament.

Kormákr is described as *áhlaupamaðr í skapi, forzmaðr* and *óráðþægr* (206, 235). As in *Egils saga*, his brother's moderate disposition is a foil for the poet's difficult temperament (206). Beyond these explicit comments it is difficult to determine how far inconsistency is intended to be characteristic of Kormákr, since the saga's imperfectly assembled overlapping narratives themselves create arbitrariness. Kormákr's abrupt and complete abandonment of his wedding suggests extraordinary instability, but the saga author does not wholeheartedly attribute it to Kormákr's temperament, offering the justifications of the witch's curse and disagreements over settlements. Multiple strands in the saga's sources have not been fully reconciled. But the mention of inconsistency as a characteristic of the hero suggests that this was the basic explanation of his behaviour; it is easy to imagine later transmitters of the material feeling the need to rationalize, adding elements such as the witch's curse which, as a supernatural phenomenon, could be seen as a metaphorical expression of irrationality.

It has been said of characterisation in the work of Snorri Sturluson that 'a man's character is basically the sum of his acts' (Bagge 1991, 187). In some sagas this tendency may be partly result from the author's attempt to construct a biography from traditional narratives that themselves privilege 'acts' over description. A saga made up of a composite of inconsistent traditions, such as *Kormáks saga*, or one with a compressed, laconic style, such as *Hallfreðar saga*, may give the impression of arbitrary, irresolute behaviour, and the question whether the author intended this to reflect on the hero's personality must be carefully considered.

Hallfreðr is described as *margbreytinn*. This is not borne out, as in *Kormáks saga*, by his failure to marry; he is robustly consistent in separating love from marriage in his treatment of Kolfinna. The poet's marriage, framed by the beginning and end of his affair with Kolfinna, does suggest inconsistency. His

¹² Their rugged looks do not in themselves mark them out as poets; the same link between physique and temperament is made with characters who are not poets, such as Skarpheðinn in *Njáls saga*: *Hann var jarpr á hár ok sveipr í hárinu, eygðr vel, fólleitr ok skarpleitr, liðr á nefi ok lá hátt tanngarðrinn, munnljótr noðkut ok þó maðr hermannligastr* (*Njáls saga*, 70). Skarpheðinn, if not a skald, is a producer of *níð* (303-315). The older Reykjabók MS (c. 1300) adds *ok skáld gott* (70, n.4), and some late MSS attribute verses to him.

love is introduced in the same words as his first fancy, but leads, this time, to marriage: *Hallfreðr lagði hug á Ingibjörgu ok bað hennar* (176). His sorrow at his wife's death is summarily related just before the adulterous interlude with Kolfinna (179). This inconsistency reflects the saga's divided structure and laconic style rather than the hero's capricious temperament. The term *margbreytinn* probably reflects Hallfreðr's embodiment of the conflict between Christianity and paganism. His resistance to the new faith, defiant espousal of pagan versifying and his apostasy in Sweden demonstrate the independence of spirit commented upon by both Jarl Hákon: *Líkligr ertu til at vera hofðingjadjarfr maðr; þann veg ertu í bragði* (151) and King Óláfr: *Þann veg værir þú í bragði, at fás myndir þú svífask ok mart láta þér sóma* (153-4). Some inconsistency is directly attributed to the Conversion theme: Hallfreðr gives up a duel with his rival Gríss because of distress at King Óláfr's death (and under his tutelage, the king having appeared to him in a dream), and his plan to attack Jarl Eiríkr is also abandoned at Óláfr's posthumous command.

Gunnlaugr is called *óráðinn* because of his simultaneous ambitions to marry and to go abroad. Over and above what may be a mere fault of youth, though, the saga explicitly calls him *hávaðamaðr mikill í öllu skaplyndi ok framgjarn snimmendis ok við allt óvæginn ok harðr* (GS, 59). Several episodes – his precocious defiance of his father's authority, his brawl with a shepherd, his encounter with a berserkr in England – seem designed to confirm this element in Gunnlaugr's character, and it is likely that this saga in particular, later than the others and with obvious connections with Egill's home at Borg, was directly influenced by *Egils saga* in its depiction of the turbulent hero.

No other saga develops the poet's relationship with Óðinn as explicitly as *Egils saga*. There are seven references to the myth of poetry in the 64 verses attributed to Kormákr: *skald, sás orkar ásar ólverki* (v. 68) 'the poet who does the god's ale-work', *hefk yðr of aukit Aurreks drykk* (v. 81) 'I have augmented the dwarf's drink for you', but the prose makes no suggestion of the poet's religious attachments or identification with Óðinn. Björn Hítðælakappi, chronologically the latest of the poets, his religious beliefs defined by his devotion to St Óláfr (notwithstanding the one conventional declaration *vinnk bjór Háars inna* (v. 32) 'I work to produce Óðinn's beer'), recites a dream verse strangely mingling Christian and pagan images, in which he is invited *heim* by a *hjalmfaldin armleggjar orma Ilmr dagleygjar hilmis* 'helmet-covered Ilmr of arm's serpents of the prince of day's fire'. The valkyrie bidding him to Óðinn's hall is associated with *dagleygjar hilmir*, a kenning for the Christian God. Animal imagery is also used of Björn in the form of puns on his name, but does not involve shape-changing or Óðinn's animal, the wolf. Both animal imagery and the valkyrie suggest an attachment of the hero to Óðinn as warrior, rather than poet.

The poet's dedication to Óðinn is an issue in *Hallfreðar saga* in the context of Conversion, the saga's most consistent theme. He recites a sequence of

verses in which, having received baptism, he renounces his old pagan allegiance for the new religion. The renunciation grows in scope until all the major deities are rejected, but begins with the poet abandoning his initial preference for Óðinn (*HS*, 157):

Fyrr vas hitt, es harra
Hliðskjalfar gatk sjalfan,
skipt es á gumna giptu,
geðskjótan vel blóta.

It used to be that to the lord
of Hliðskálfr I myself –
men's fortune has changed –
to the quick-witted one, sacrificed.

also referring to Óðinn as the poet's patron (*þvítt vel Viðris / vald hugnaðisk skaldi* 'for Viðrir's (Óðinn's) rule well-pleased the poet', and renouncing *nafni hrafnbólts goða ór heiðnum dómi, þess es ól lóm við lof lýða* 'the name of the priest of raven sacrifice from the heathen religion, who produced deceit in exchange for men's praise'. The reference to Óðinn's deceit, his demotion from god to priest, and the use of the past tense, mark the end of Hallfreðr's hankering for the old beliefs.

Margaret Clunies Ross (1978) overstates the extent to which the saturnine view of the poet's temperament developed in *Egils saga* is perceptible in the shorter sagas. Nevertheless, the poets share certain features. Their striking, even grotesque appearance reflects the individuality revealed in traits of aggressiveness and instability. The sagas attain the common end of poetic individualism in varied ways, so that, although the similar descriptions of Gunnlaugr and Hallfreðr suggest influence from *Hallfreðar saga* on *Gunnlaugs saga*, no close relationship amongst the sagas in the characterization of the poets can be shown. Rashness or changeability of temperament is so variously interpreted that it is difficult to categorize it as a common feature, but it may ultimately derive from the association of poets with Óðinn. It is perceptible even where, as in *Bjarnar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*, there is a competing impulse to mellow the hero's character. In *Bjarnar saga*, this impulse arises from the inclusion of an explicitly Christian vein, at odds with much of the narrative material; in *Hallfreðar saga*, the traditional relationship of poetic skill with pagan values is more directly dealt with.

The idea of the dark and dangerous poet is far more consciously developed in *Egils saga*. To some extent this must be the work of the antiquarian-minded saga author, who probably deepened and emphasized features such as Egill's intimidating appearance, and may have added elements such as the hero's skill in runes, which would have seemed appropriate to an author learned in mythological lore such as Snorri Sturluson as an extension of the poet's indebtedness to Óðinn. This paper has endeavoured to show, however, that the most important elements of Egill's characterization are present in embryo in his own words, in the three long poems associated with the saga. During the two-century gestation period between the hero's death and the ultimate writing of the saga, this model was evolved by some of the processes of repetition and

accretion described here, reinforcing and adapting the themes expressed by Egill himself. In the course of this process some of the mead of inspiration would undoubtedly have spilled over and mingled with the stories of other poets which must have started evolving at the same time. It is impossible to assess how much of the myth of poetic identity was Egill's own invention, and how much he drew on pre-existing conceptions of the Odinic hero and the poet's personal identification with Óðinn, but our understanding of them is largely shaped from his articulation. Only in the late *Gunnlaugs saga* are there obvious signs of direct literary influence from *Egils saga*, but the persona of the most famous Icelandic poet must have been influential in creating the literary model for how a skald should look and behave.

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All texts cited are those of Íslenzk fornrit editions unless stated otherwise, with the following abbreviations: *BS* = *Bjarnar saga hitdælakappa*, *FS* = *Fóstbræðra saga*, *GS* = *Gunnlaugs saga*, *HS* = *Hallfreðar saga*, *KS* = *Kormáks saga*. Unspecified references are to *Egils saga*.

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