

Skaldic Poetry: Making the World Fantastic

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Much of the art of skaldic poetic diction consists in taking ordinary objects, people or scenes and, by means of kennings, transforming them into marvellous creatures or mythical beings that operate in a fantastic landscape. Ships are transformed into horses speeding across the 'plain' of the sea; a battle becomes a surreal thunderstorm where spears, swords and shields become rain, clouds and flashes of lightning; and an arm is turned into a swinging-gallows. Thus the skaldic stanza is a place where reality becomes distorted, where the world can be turned upside-down.

This fantastic or surreal aspect of skaldic poetry has long been recognised by Old Norse scholars. 'Fantasikenningar' (kennings which require the operation of the imagination to be understood), was one of the classifications used by Erik Noreen in his 'Studier i fornvästnordisk diktning' (Noreen, 1921); and Einar Ól. Sveinsson says about the nature of the Old Norse kennings, 'These poets do not want to give reality but turn it into its opposite, phantasy. This is a dream, put together in the world of dreams' (Stefán Einarsson, 1962-65, 131). In his article "Natur" og "unatur" i skaldekunsten', Hallvard Lie argues that skalds deliberately used kennings as dissonant and unnatural as possible in order to imitate anaturalistic art (Lie, 1982), and Stefán Einarsson claims that 'the principle of un-natural distortion is just as alive and potent an artistic striving in skaldic poetry and medieval Icelandic *rimur* as it is in modern art', referring to Picasso and Dalí among others (Stefán Einarsson, 142).

What I would like to explore in this paper, however, is how the surrealist imagery and dreamlike quality which characterises skaldic poetry, functions in a context to which it is in striking contrast. The juxtapositioning of the poetry, with the realistic, laconic style of the prose text in which it is usually embedded, often highlights a point of dramatic tension in the narrative. In *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* these moments are frequently ones of acute emotional agitation (grief, love, rage etc.) where the poet expresses his lack of harmony with the world around him in the form of fantastic and sometimes even grotesque metaphors. My discussion of the function of the fantastic elements of skaldic poetry will be based on an examination of a stanza from *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* within its prose context.

While we can speculate on the 'authenticity' of skaldic *lausavisur* and the circumstances in which they were first produced, the fact remains that, with the exception of the Karlevi stanza and some runic verses carved on wood from the twelfth century and later, this poetry is overwhelmingly recorded in Icelandic manuscripts in a prosimetrum format. In historical and grammatical texts such as *Heimskringla* or *Skáldskaparmál*, the stanzas usually take the form of a quotation cited as evidence for a particular event or story, but in *Egils saga*, as in many of the *Íslendingasögur*, skaldic verse is for the most part presented as spontaneous speech, composed and uttered on the spot by Egill or another character. It is possible that at least some of the stanzas did originate in the way described in the saga, and were preserved and transmitted orally over a few hundred years, either as part of a longer poem, or as individual stanzas framed with accompanying prose. At some point,

however, the poetry was worked into a long prose narrative, which evolved into the saga as we know it. Whether this was a slow process involving several individuals or the work of a single author we will never know; all we can say for sure is that by the thirteenth century a fairly stable text of *Egils saga* had emerged, with a poetic corpus so thoroughly woven into the narrative that it is almost impossible to imagine *Egils saga* without its poetry, or indeed to imagine the poetry completely removed from its prose context.

This is not to suggest that prose and verse run seamlessly into one another, and indeed they are not meant to. In both medieval and modern copies of *Egils saga* a poetic event is signalled by textual and extra-textual markers. Within the narrative itself the quotation of a stanza is always introduced by prose formulas such as *þá kvað Egill vísu, hann kvað þá* or *hon kvað*, which prepare the reader/audience for what is to follow; but there are also physical signs. For instance, in the medieval Icelandic codex *Möðruvallabók* (which includes the chief witness to the A-redaction of *Egils saga*), the strophes are written out as continuous prose, but are readily identifiable by a large, capitalized initial letter and a small *v.* for *vísa* in the margin; in modern editions and translations the verse is even more clearly distinguishable, printed as it is in eight-line stanzas, surrounded by lots of white space and often accompanied by copious annotative and explanatory material.

Even if it were not for these physical and textual indicators it would be impossible to come across a *dróttkvætt* stanza and mistake it for prose; indeed the two genres could scarcely be more different both in terms of form and content. In skaldic verse the syntax is normally so grotesquely distorted that it stretches the limits of comprehensibility. Superabundant in fanciful metaphors and surreal imagery, its language seems excessive and even decadent in contrast to the realistic, laconic style of the prose text with which it is surrounded.

While the prose narrator maintains an objective distance from the text (or creates the illusion of doing so) and rarely, if ever, supplies any inside information on the opinions or motives of the characters, the *lausavísur* can be intensely personal, providing almost our only access into the psyche of the characters. It is no accident, therefore, that these stanzas tend to occur at those moments in the narrative which are most emotionally charged. The form of the skaldic stanza, perhaps because of its indirect style, allows the speaker a degree of verbal self-expression which might be inappropriate in prose, and the disparity between prose and verse increases the air of theatricality in the scene as we shall see in the example below.

In chapter 54 of *Egils saga*, Egill's brother Þórólfr is killed fighting for King Æthelstan at the battle of Wen Heath. When the battle is over, Egill washes his brother's body and buries him in full armour, putting two gold rings on Þórólfr's arms before covering him with earth. He delivers two stanzas in praise of Þórólfr, then goes to see the king. In the scene that follows Egill expresses his anger and grief in the most extraordinary way. Upon entering the hall, Egill is placed in the high-seat facing the king; he refuses to look at him, but instead bows his head and starts to slide his sword in and out of its scabbard. This eccentric behaviour is complemented by a description that emphasizes Egill's physical oddities. He is portrayed as being uncommonly tall (taller than other men) and well-built. His forehead, nose, and jaws are extremely large and we are also told that when he was angry his face was *harðleitr*

ok grímligr (hard-looking and fierce). All of these features, combined with his thick, wolf-grey hair, contrive to create a picture of a man who is menacing and dangerous with perhaps some supernatural characteristics as well.¹ This scene is made all the more uncanny when Egill begins to scowl or wink by alternately raising his eyebrows up to the hairline and down onto his cheek. Egill's facial contortions are not explained in the prose,² although his unhappiness is plain and his behaviour suggests impatience.

Finally the king responds. He removes a ring from his arm and slips it on to his sword which he then holds out to Egill across the fire in the middle of the room. Egill takes the ring on his sword and behaves as though he is satisfied by the king's gift. We are told that he sits down, slips the ring onto his arm, his eyebrows resume a normal expression, he lays down his sword and helmet and accepts a drink (*Egils saga* 144). The skaldic stanza he then recites, however, reveals a state of mind in stark contrast to the poet's apparent outward calm.

Hrammtangar lætr hanga
hrynvirgil mér brynju
Hǫðr á hauki troðnum
heiðis vingameiði;
rítmœðis knák reiða,
ræðr gunnvala bræðir,
gelgju seil á galga
geirveðrs, lofi at meira.
(*Egils saga*, 144)

Prose word order (according to Sigurður Nordal, *Egils saga*, 144):

Brynju Hǫðr lætr hrammtangar hrynvirgil hanga mér á hauki troðnum
heiðis vingameiði; knák reiða rítmœðis gelgju seil á galga geirveðrs;
gunnvala bræðir ræðr at meira lofi.

Translation:

Hǫðr (god) of mailcoat > WARRIOR has a clinking-noose of a gripping-tong (hand) > RING hung upon me, on hawk-trodden swinging-tree of hawk > ARM; I do put the band of the pole of the shield-wearer (sword) > arm > RING onto the gallows of the spear-storm (battle) > SWORD; the prey-feeder of battle-hawks (ravens/eagles) > WARRIOR does not have more praise.

The reference to *Hǫðr* in the warrior kenning *brynju Hǫðr* (*Hǫðr* of mailcoat > WARRIOR/MAN) is the only incontrovertible allusion to a supernatural being in this stanza. This type of kenning, where a god (qualified by 'battle' or some other term associated with warfare) denotes a warrior, is extremely common in skaldic poetry and although the generic terms *reginn* or *áss* are sometimes used, the base-word is much more frequently the name of a specific god such as *Njǫrðr*, *Týr*, or *Freyr*. While it is obvious that a skald could select any god from the Old Norse pantheon to create this

¹ His extreme size and wolf-grey hair echo the scene in chapter 59 where he is described as 'mikill sem troll' (as big as a troll).

² It has been suggested that Egill identifies himself with the one-eyed god Óðinn here. The references to the gallows in the stanza, particularly the term *vingameiðr* also evoke Óðinn.

kind of kenning and the basis for that selection may have been purely metrical, I believe that in this instance the choice of Hǫðr is also semantically significant.

Hǫðr was one of the Æsir, a son of Óðinn and brother of Baldr. We know very little of Hǫðr except that he committed the most infamous fratricide in Norse mythology. Through the machinations of Loki, this blind god inadvertently slew his brother Baldr with an arrow of mistletoe, setting in motion the series of events which will lead to *ragnarǫk* and the demise of the Æsir. It may be that the name of Hǫðr is prompted by a feeling on Egill's part that he was in some way responsible for his brother's death. If he had not acceded to the king's plan to separate the brothers in battle, and allowed Þórólfr to take the place originally assigned to him, his brother's death could possibly have been averted. At the time, Egill did feel that this was a decision he would live to regret: *þessa skiptis mun ek opt iðrask* (*Egils saga*, 140), and indeed his sense of foreboding was justified. Perhaps Egill is simply reminded of another instance in which a brother was killed in tragic circumstances; but if he consciously identifies himself as the one responsible for Þórólfr's death, then his feelings of guilt, shame and dishonour must be unbearable.

Whatever the motive, a close examination of the imagery of the stanza reveals a mind in turmoil and anguish and that Egill is anything but reconciled to his loss. In the kenning *hrynvirgill hrammtangar* for instance, the ring which Æthelstan presents to Egill is envisaged as the 'clinking-noose' of a 'gripping-tong', hardly the most positive response to the king's gift. Outside of a poetic context *hrammr* refers to an animal's paw, especially that of a predatory animal which uses its claws to clutch at or grip its prey. In this kenning however, the paw is fantastically combined with the metal tool (*tǫng*) to create a grotesque representation of a human hand. The 'noose' (*virgill*) of that hand is a ring, which presumably made a clinking noise as it was passed from one sword to another.

The theme of the gallows (suggested by the noose) is continued in the next phrase of the sentence as an arm is metamorphosed into a *haukr troðnum heiðis vingameiðr*, or 'hawk-trodden swinging-tree of hawk'. The word *vingameiðr* occurs in a number of Old Norse poems, probably most famously in *Hávamál* st. 138, where it is the tree upon which Óðinn hangs himself in his search for wisdom:

Veit ec, at hecc vindgameiði á
nætr allar nío,
geiri undaðr oc gefinn Óðni,
siálfr siálfom mér,
á þeim meiði, er mangi veit,
hvers hann af rótom renn.
(*Edda*, 1962, 40)

I know that I hung on a windy tree
nine long nights,
wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin,
myself to myself,
on that tree of which no man knows
from where its roots run.
(*Poetic Edda*, 1999, 34)

Although the MS reads *vingameiðr*, in the edition cited here this has been emended to *vindgameiðr*, which is glossed as 'the wind-stirred or wind-exposed beam' (Kuhn, 1968). Indeed most editors and translators agree that *vingameiðr* is derived from *vindgameiðr* or *vindugr meiðr* and should be glossed as 'windy tree', 'wind-exposed, or wind-blown tree' (Finnur Jónsson, 1966; Fritznér, 1973; Evans, 1986). Sigurður Nordal offers an alternative explanation, however, based on a comparison with the Icelandic verb *vingsa* 'to swing around', and the movement the falconer makes with his arm to launch a bird into the air (*Egils saga*, 144). The idea that the

meiðr (tree, pole, or possibly even branch) is flexible or moveable makes sense in the context of a kenning for an arm, which also shares these characteristics, but can only work if we remember that the earliest gallows were trees as in our example from *Hávamál*. A pair of stanzas from Eyvindr Finsson skáldaspillir's *Háleygjatal*, which are quoted in *Ynglingasaga*, give another account of a tree-hanging (*Heimskringla*, 2002, 44). In the first of the stanzas we are told that Goðlaugr *tamði Sigars jó* 'tamed Sigarr's (Óðinn's) stallion', i.e. 'rode' the gallows, and in the following one that *náreiðr vingameiðr drúpir á nesi* 'a corpse-laden swinging-tree droops on the peninsula'. It seems clear that when the men were hung on the tree, its branches 'drooped' with the weight of the bodies.

When *vingameiðr* 'swinging-tree' is determined by *heiðir* 'hawk' and qualified by the adjectival phrase *haukr troðinn* 'hawk-trodden' (or branch) it becomes the arm, of course, as we have seen above. The effect this produces is similar to that of a hologram. Depending on how we read the complete sentence we see either a ring being hung on an arm or the enactment of a morbid scene: the noose being hung on the gallows. Or perhaps it is more correct to say we see both simultaneously, for it is difficult to say where one image starts and another ends. The fact that the arm is not only a gallows but is also the perch of a hawk, introduces a third dimension to this helming, and it is worth pointing out here that Egill is the first Icelandic poet to use the word 'hawk' in a kenning for hand. According to Björn Þórðarson this indicates personal experience on the part of Egill, who probably first became acquainted with the art of falconry at the court of King Æthelstan (Björn Þórðarson, 1959, 152-54).

Two further allusions to the gallows occur in the kennings *galgi geirveðrs* 'the gallows of the spear-storm' (sword) and *ritmæðis gelgja* 'shield-wearer's pole' (arm). In the first of these, *galgi* presumably refers to one of the upright poles of a constructed gallows; there are many such kennings where a long, straight piece of wood such as a 'pole', 'ski' or 'plank', determined by 'battle' can represent a sword. In *ritmæðis gelgja*, the reference to hanging is a little more subtle. The primary meaning of *gelgja* is 'pole' or 'stick', but it can also denote the cross-beam of the gallows or a type of overhanging crane, such as the crane over the fire from which cooking-pots can be hung (Fritzner, de Vries). While 'the pole of the sword' functions as a perfectly good kenning for arm, it seems likely, in the light of the previous imagery, that the poet is playing on the relationship between *galgi* and *gelgja* to re-emphasize his representation of the arm as a sort of gallows of flesh. In any case, he seems determined to work in as many references to hanging and the gallows as possible here and it is clear that, by means of the kennings, the poet is trying to communicate something which is lost in the traditional interpretations of the stanza.

Finnur Jónsson, for example, translates this strophe as follows: *Krigeren lader ringen hænge på min høgebetrådte arm; jeg bærer det røde guldbånd på min arm; krigeren (kongen) råder over så meget større ros*, 'The warrior has the ring hung on my hawk-trodden arm; I bear the red gold-band on my arm; the warrior (the king) commands so much greater praise'.³ He effectively removes all the poetry from the

³ 'Brynju Höðr lætr hrammtangar hrynvirgil hanga mér á heiðis vingameiði, hauki troðnum; ek kná reiða rauðmældr gelgu á geirveðrs seiðs galga; gunnvala bræðir ræðr at meira lofi' (Skj B I, 45). Finnur Jónsson interprets the stanza somewhat differently from Sigurður Nordal. He corrects the MS variants (*rytmæðis*, *ryðmeiðis*, *ritmeide*, *ryðmæðis*) to

verses and indeed misinterprets, as does Sigurður Nordal, the line *gunnvala bræðir ræðr at meira lofi* (see my translation above and Guðrún Nordal et al, 1992, 236). Nordal's Modern Icelandic interpretation is even more prosaic: *Hermádurinn (konungur) lætur hring hanga á hendi mér (gefur mér hring); eg lyfti hringum á sverðinu; það er konungi til soma*, 'The warrior (king) has a ring hung on my arm (gives me a ring), I raise ring on the sword, that is to the king's credit' (*Egils saga*, 145). Of course Sigurður Nordal's detailed breakdown and explanation of the poetic elements of the stanza is there for anyone to read, but this heuristic approach of presenting the skaldic stanza as a puzzle to be solved, encourages readings and translations which not only disregard the 'multiple and shifting associations' which Roberta Frank maintains are a 'hallmark of skaldic aesthetics' (Frank, 1985:169), but ignores any further message the poet might wish to convey. As Carol Clover has pointed out:

'Of the early skalds Egill in particular is given to using an event as a starting point for an emotional unfolding which, by the time the strophe ends, may bear little relation to the original "topic" [...] it may be said that there are in fact two "topics", an ostensible one and the poet's own perception of the ostensible one, and that the latter may on occasion so overshadow the former that it tends to become the poem's main subject. In such instances it is fair to say that one topic, sometimes the chief one, of the poem is the poet himself.' (Clover, 1978, 65)

In the strophe under consideration here, the 'ostensible topic' is the gift of the ring; but, as I hope I have illustrated, even in the very words Egill uses to acknowledge the king's gift he is expressing his extreme dissatisfaction at the situation. The grotesque imagery Egill employs to describe the giving and receiving of the ring parodies, or even subverts, the stereotypical praise-poem. In the final phrase he clearly states that this 'praise' is all the king deserves: *gunnvala bræðir ræðr at meira lofi*.

It is not incongruous that Egill is preoccupied with death in this stanza. His brother, after all, has just fallen in battle. However, while the gallows certainly symbolises death, it seems an inappropriate image to associate with Þórólfr, who had fought bravely and died a glorious death. In medieval Iceland, hanging was associated with degradation and dishonour and was a death usually reserved for thieves, traitors and other criminals; it was 'the most ignominious form of execution' (Gade, 1985, 166). Kari Ellen Gade also observes that, in the sagas, hanging was a widespread literary motif which was used like *níðvisur* and *níðstong* as a means of degradation and 'to destroy a person's honor' (Gade, 1985, 168, 176). In this stanza Egill also uses the gallows as a literary motif to symbolise the dishonour which has been shown to him by the king's miserly gift, and the shame the king has brought upon himself as a result.

Egill's bizarre conduct and Æthelstan's response to it demonstrate that both men accepted it was the king's responsibility to offer compensation for Þórólfr, who had, after all, died in the service of the king. But whether Egill would have been happy to settle for a monetary compensation is another matter. As Carol Clover notes, 'The shame attached to "selling one's kinsmen for money" or "carrying one's kinsmen in one's purse" was evidently as slow in dying out in Iceland as it was and is in

rauðmeldr (red meal, i.e. gold), creating a kenning 'rauðmeldrs gelgja' which he translates as 'gold ring'; he also reads *seið* for *seil*.

bloodfeud societies elsewhere' (Clover, 2002, 17). In a stanza in *Sonatorrek* (st. 15), Egill himself explicitly denounces the practice of selling a brother for rings:

Mjök es torfyndr	It is very difficult to find
sás trúa knegum	one whom we can trust
of alþjóð	from people
Elgar galga,	of gallows of Elgr (<i>probably</i> 'people of Yggdrasil')
þvít niflgóðr	because a <i>niflgóðr</i> (?destroyer, ?betrayer)
niðja steypir	caster-off of kin
bróður hrær	sells corpse of brother
við baugum selr.	for rings.

(*Egils saga*, 251-52)

So Egill is now placed in a difficult predicament. His code of honour demands that he avenge his brother in blood, but in this situation such a form of revenge is completely impracticable and he must be content to accept a financial settlement instead. However, the payment the king initially offers, one gold ring, is very poor recompense for a man such as Þórólfr; it is an affront to his memory and to the family honour, which Egill feels keenly. At the same time, it would be dangerous for Egill to insult Æthelstan by rejecting the gift. He finds a solution for this dilemma in the recitation of a *dróttkvætt* stanza, which provides the perfect vehicle for him to articulate his inner conflict. He takes the objects and characters from the 'real-life' scene which has been narrated in prose (i.e. the giving of the ring) and distorts and reshapes them until a warrior (the king) is transformed into a god; a ring is a metallic noose hanging on an arm which is a gallows of flesh and bone, or a wooden pole; a battle is a storm of spears and so on. The distorted, fragmentary or even monstrous nature of these figures reflects the disorder and lack of harmony Egill will feel until Þórólfr's death has been properly compensated. The verse achieves the desired effect and harmony is restored when King Æthelstan presents Egill with two chests of silver. We have seen so far that skaldic verse contains 'marvellous', 'grotesque', 'surreal' and 'supernatural' elements, but whether it is fruitful to compare this genre with a literary phenomenon which reached its peak in the nineteenth century is another matter. According to Tzvetan Todorov's classic definition, 'The fantastic is the hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event' (Todorov, 1975, 25). This is clearly not the case in skaldic verse. Although there might be said to be a 'hesitation' between the literal and figurative meaning of some of the kennings we have discussed above, there is no hesitation in the audience's mind that a *hrammtong* exists anywhere except in the domain of skaldic diction or in the realm of imagination. There are some interesting parallels, however, between the way fantastic literature responded to the historical and cultural context in which it was produced (and to the realist literature which emerged alongside it), and the manner in which skaldic poetry functions in the prose narrative.

'Fantastic literature points to or suggests the basis upon which cultural order rests, for it opens up, for a brief moment onto disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems. The fantastic traces the unsaid and unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent' [...] since this excursion into disorder can only begin from

a base within the dominant cultural order, literary fantasy is a telling index of the limits of that order. Its introduction of the 'unreal' is set against the category of the 'real' – a category which the fantastic interrogates by its difference.' (Jackson, 1981, 4)

In a similar fashion skaldic poetry can function as the 'unreal' which disrupts the order of the 'real' prose narrative. It literally disrupts the 'realistic', 'natural' word order by means of its convoluted syntax. It challenges the rational, positivist world of the prose by reflecting an image of itself which is warped, unnatural, and surreal. In the example we have looked at here it is the space where voice can be given to that which is 'unsaid' or unutterable in prose, and expresses those 'morbid states of the conscious mind, which [...] projects before itself images of its own anguish and terror' (Harter, 1996, 1).

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