

FREDERIC AMORY

SKAUFALABÁLKUR, THE FORNALDARSÖGUR,
AND THE EUROPEAN BEAST EPIC *

to my friends Madison Beeler and Jakob Benediktsson
who introduced me to Iceland.

The purpose of this paper which I offer you today is mainly twofold: to set forth the literary and historical relationships of a very late medieval Icelandic beast fable to the traditional heroic ideals of Scandinavia as represented especially in the fornaldarsögur, and also to the ubiquitous comic spirit of the continental beast epics, from which Skaufalabálkur is a detached epic lay. It is no part of my intention to suggest that Iceland in the Middle Ages did not have from the beginning its own anti-heroic and satirical attitudes, either in poetry or prose, towards sacred persons and things, which are often shown up by these attitudes, even among the gods, to be rather less than human in one way or another; but I believe that the literary relationship of the Icelandic fable, though historically ill-defined, to the fabling in the continental epics may account in part for the Icelandic fabulist's amusing parody of the æðvíkviður in the fornaldarsögur, which are uttered at the moment of death by the unconquerable heroes of olden times. I may say in this opening statement that it is not irrelevant to my purposes to acquaint you better with a delightful poem, The Lay of Shaggy-Tail, as I shall translate its title, which is easy and entertaining to read, but which nonetheless is not much read today, at least by foreign students of Icelandic literature. Fortunately, as the medieval period came to a close in the fifteenth century in northern Europe, Iceland, unlike some of the larger nations on the continent or in the British Isles, continued to turn out excellent pieces of literature—notably, the early rímur, which one would never dream of dismissing with Jónas Hallgrímsson's expression of contempt as "leirburðarstagl," doggerel repetition. What's more, the country lost none of its sense of humor in the gathering gloom of the last century of the Middle Ages, which was indeed a very dark time in Icelandic history. As exemplifications of perfect good humor, Skaufalabálkur and its companion piece, the Skíðaríma of the late fourteenth century, are small but brilliant gems of comic writing in the lustreless literature of the declining Middle Ages.

A couple of questions must be answered first briefly regarding the affiliation of these two poems and their authorship, for in the first quarter of the seventeenth century they were both ascribed to one Einar Fóstri, the fostering or fostered poet of Vatnsfjörð Björn Einarsson, the Jerusalem pilgrim, in a condensation of the latter's travelogue of a journey to Greenland, 1385, with his wife and this poet, which is reported at second hand in the Greenland chronicle of Björn Jónsson of Skarð river. Nothing more is known about the poet except for a short notice of him in the genealogical record of Jón Guðmundsson the learned (1640 or so), which only ascribes Skíðaríma to him. Certain fabulous and factual details of Vatnsfjörð Björn's journey are corroborated independently of his travelogue in a third source from the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Bishops' Annals of Síra Jón Egilsson. But when we turn to the explicit of the prime mid-sixteenth century MS. of Skaufalabálkur, to which this part of it may be supplied from an eighteenth century MS. fragment, we learn that its author was Svartur of Hofstaðir and not Einar Fóstri as named by Björn Jónsson in a quotation of another,

*Texts and reference works are listed at the end of the paper.

untraceable explicit. Skíðaríma too was ascribed to Svartur, but much more uncertainly, in a paper MS. of Skaufalabálkur from the first half of the eighteenth century.

Now, who is to have which poems, and what is the explanation for these conflicting ascriptions of Skaufalabálkur? It is hardly enough to say, with its modern editor, Jón Þorkelsson, that "if Einar Fóstri existed and did compose a Skaufalabálkur, that will have been an other lay than this." A hint of how the conflict in the ascriptions came about is given by the faulty naming of Vatnsfjord Björn's wife in the Greenland chronicle of Björn Jónsson, where she bears the name of Óluf instead of Solveig, her right name. Óluf Loftsdóttir was the wife of Vatnsfjord Björn grandson, Björn Þorleifsson, lord of Skarð, across Breiðafjord from Vatnsfjord, until his death in 1467, and she was the patroness of Svartur, just as Vatnsfjord Björn had been the patron of Einar. The genealogical record of Jón Guðmundsson the learned states: "In the days of the lordly Björn Þorleifsson of Skarð and his lady Óluf, Svartur dwelt [in the last third of the fifteenth century] on Króksfjord farm. He was poet to the great lady Óluf, and a poet of lesser breed [than she]. He composed eulogies to the lady, but while he recited [them] before her, she protested, 'No more of that, Svartur, my man,' and so forth and so on. His sons too were poets." Evidently by the beginning of the seventeenth century the wife of Vatnsfjord Björn had been forgotten and his grandson's wife, the grande dame of Skarð, had filled the gap in the genealogies of north-west Iceland. Similarly, since Vatnsfjord Björn, the great traveller, was so much more memorable than his grandson, Björn, either some of his mobility was imparted to the unventful existence of his grandson, who is mistakenly said (by Síra Jón Egilsson) to have taken his journey to Greenland, or else he was coupled by the two chief seventeenth century authorities (Björn Jónsson and Jón Guðmundsson) with the name of a lady who was not only a member of his family by marriage, but also a patron of a poet, like himself. For these reasons it came about that whatever was written or recited by one poet for the Björn of the oldest generation could equally well have been ascribed to the other poet of Óluf in the youngest generation, and vice versa. However, one is left with the distinct impression from the explicit of the prime MS. of Skaufalabálkur and the notice of Einar Fóstri in Jón Guðmundsson's genealogical record that the lay was the work of Svartur of Hofstaðir and the ríma the work of another poet, Einar or someone else in the fourteenth century who had versified it before he recited it to Vatnsfjord Björn on appointed days of the week during the voyage home from Greenland. At any rate, I do not share the doubts of Jón Jóhannesson, the medieval historian, about the ascription of Skíðaríma by Jón Guðmundsson to Einar. Björn Jónsson, the genealogist's contemporary, probably followed him in ascribing Skíðaríma to Einar, and so shall I. The ríma, everyone but Svartur's editor would agree, I think, cannot have been versified by Svartur, if only because of the marked stylistic differences between his "child's verses," as Skaufalabálkur is categorized in its corresponding explicit, and the fancy kennings and mythological machinery of the satirical Skíðaríma.

Unlike Einar Fóstri, Svartur Þórðarson of Hofstaðir appears to have been a stay-at-home

poet, never very far on Króksfjord farm, or further west at Hofstaðir in Þorskafjord, from his adored lady Óluf and the less-travelled lord of Skarð, Björn, her true husband. Let us not overlook the physical fact, indicated in the Greenland chronicle of Björn Jónsson and substantiated by a papal letter of 1492, that the northern seas were becoming impassable in the fifteenth century because of floating ice and the severest cold weather in the geographical history of the western world for centuries. It might be a linguistic sign of his confinement to the coasts of Breiðafjord that his literary language in Skaufalabálkur has not a loan-word in it, whereas Skíðaríma, the work of Einar or someone else who had sailed abroad, is sprinkled with Gallicisms and Anglicisms, such as "amors vess" (-vers d'amour), "ffinn," "pür," "lukka" (<ME lukke or MLG lucke), "panna" ("brain-pan" < ME panne or Swed. panna), "líf (for "person" < ME lif?). If Svartur, however, was geographically isolated within the coastal region between Reykhólar and Skarð, he was not culturally cut off, strange to say, from the stock-pile of beast fables on the continent, whose themes and stylisms he drew upon in parodying the ævíkviður in the formaldarsögur and satirizing the heroic ideals of Scandinavia. Icelanders have always seemed to know more about the world than the world knows about them, but in this case it is going to be practically impossible to establish the historical or biographical basis for Svartur's special knowledge, though what he knew of the fabling from abroad, in or out of Iceland, can be verified at once merely by reading the relevant texts. The case is quite unique, even for Iceland, because Svartur was the sole fabulist of the beasts in Icelandic medieval literature.

Additional bits of his biography have been collected and evaluated by the editor of Skaufalabálkur in a foreword to the poem. Svartur's ancestry is not given in the genealogical record of the learned Jón Guðmundsson, but he could have been the son of Þórður Svartsson, a witness and a judge at law, November 10, 1411, in Vaðall on Barðastrand, and a respected person in his day, with property perhaps from his father in Reykhólar but which fell into the clutches of the powerful Guðmundr family. Svartur married the daughter of a man from Vaðall, Þorgerðr Pétursdóttir, and he frequented Reykhólar often, acting there as a binding witness, August 1, 1462, to a business contract between Andrés Guðmundsson and his family and a grand-daughter of the Geirmundr family, Þorbjörg Ólafsdóttir tóni ("Melody"). He farmed for a while at Hofstaðir, part or all of which he owned, composed Skaufalabálkur on this farm, and sold 700 wadmals worth of farm property from here to one Jón Asmundsson, June 27, 1477, by a deed executed at Skarð. He may then have taken up residence on Króksfjord farm, or if he was too old for farming, retired to Skarð as the family retainer of his patroness Óluf. No record of him exists after the sale of Hofstaðir, nor any deed for ownership of Króksfjord farm. Besides his private position of eulogist in Björn Þorleifsson's household, he had the professional literary status of sagnamaður—story-teller and/or historian—as a note to the Huldarsaga tells us, which acknowledges the sagabook of Svartur of Hofstaðir as the source for the MS. of this particular saga. As for his sons, the poets mentioned above by Jón Guðmundsson, a Pétur, son of Svartur, was certainly his, who stood witness to a deal between two Björnsson brothers and Andrés Guðmundsson at Reykhólar

in the winter of 1483—the so-called "winter of fortification" for feuds. In our editor's opinion, the Indriði Svartsson who is named again and again in documents over the turn of the fifteenth to the sixteenth century was more likely the son of Svartur Indriðason than Svartur Þórðarson. (That Svartur was a west-fjords man and a visitor to Reyk-hólar in the second third of the fifteenth century.) Whether any sons of Svartur Þórðarson took after their father and composed poetry is a moot question.

Skaufalabálkur, his little masterpiece, is a mock-heroic poem on the single combat, the hólmanga, of an old arctic fox, Shaggy-Tail, with a huge wether sheep, which, driven by hunger and egged on by his wife, the vixen, he attacks and kills. But before he can haul home his kill to the den, he himself is beset by a shepherd and his dog—"long-legs" and a "big monster, black in color," as they are respectively described by the fox, and he has to take refuge from them temporarily in a rock crevice on a hillside. The crevice has its entrance narrowed by a stone, so that the baying dog, "the loud-mouthed hero," cannot get in at him. Unluckily for the fox, the shepherd can still thrust his staff all the way in to his side, and cracks three of his ribs. This is a death-blow to Shaggy-Tail. He has just strength enough, after they are gone, to crawl off with the mutton to his den, where, bloody-faced, he recounts his misadventure to his wife, recites his former exploits in the district (thefts of dried fish, skins, and leather, and of course many sheep raids), laments his old age and the fate which has brought him to this pass, and rejoices that from his race will spring a yet more murderous slaughterer of sheep, then bites his wounds in a death agony, and dies. His long speech to his wife, with the bloody period, is his ævi-kviða.

The dramatic form of the fable, as in the best Eddic and skaldic poetry, is full of suspense. In the first three stanzas we are introduced to Shaggy-Tail and his wife and their numerous family of eighteen sons and a daughter, a total of nineteen cubs to which the old saying satirically applies that with cowards there is always one missing out of every ten men. Of them, three ungrown sons and the daughter remain in the den, and the cupboard is very bare. The scene is now set for a husband and wife dialogue (stanzas 4 to 14), in which the wife does most of the talking, egging her man on as in the sagas. Where is their next meal coming from? Nothing much would be lost by starvation in her young ones, perhaps, but they two need food, and old and weak and mangy as he may be, he must go up the fells while the sheep are being rounded up (it is autumn), and fetch the family a leg of mutton. The reluctant Shaggy-Tail cannot help reminding her that where there are sheep, in round-up time, there will be shepherds. This observation provokes his wife mightily (st. 13): "I didn't really know," says she, "that you bear a coward's heart in you..." "Have it your way," he replies (st. 14), "...but the Norns have prophesied this about me that in my old age it would go badly for me." Another four stanzas (15 to 18) relate only his victorious encounter with the wether, when the scene shifts (st. 19) far ahead to his bloody-faced return to the den with the mutton, and thenceforth the poet allows him dramatically to declare what happened to him, and what his past life has been like, in an ævi-kviða.

which runs almost to the end of the poem. Thus his ævíkviða answers her initial egging on with a final "I told you so." "It goes with me as with many another," he moralizes (st. 40), echoing a famous stanza or two of the Hávamál (76-7), "death kills people and sheep."

This outline of the form and content of Skaufalabálkur will serve for the comparisons I want to make between the fable and the fornaldarsögur, on the one hand, and the European beast epic, on the other. The Reykhólar region was fertile ground for the crossing of local story-telling with fabling from abroad. There, in the twelfth century, if I have understood the tenth chapter of Þorgilssaga ok Hafliða correctly, the story-telling Ólaf guilds were organized and the genre of the fornaldarsaga originated. The heroes, real or imaginary, of the fornaldarsaga which pleased King Sverrir as a "lying saga," but displeased those Icelanders that traced their ancestry to one hero in it were also sung subsequently in a ríma of the fourteenth century, the Hrómundar ríma Gripssonar. Whether in the fornaldarsaga form of prose and verse medleys, or in ríma verse-form, the heroic tales of olden times must have come down to Svartur and moved him a little to mirth, with the same irreverent reaction of the Norwegian king to their exaggeration, remoteness, or sheer impossibility. I cannot say just which hero in which heroic tale Svartur may have had in mind when he composed Skaufalabálkur, but within the formal limits of the genre of fornaldarsögur I have selected two interconnected sagas--Heiðreks or Hervararsaga and Urvar-Odds Saga--in which the átvíkviður of the heroes, Hjálmar and Urvar-Odd, seem to me illustrative of what he was parodying in the themes and form of the genre. The two sagas are not, of course, guild products of Reykhólar, but they do have formal and thematic elements in common with the "lying saga" of Hröngvið the Viking, Hrómundr Gripsson, etc., which the king listened to with such pleasure. Even the howl of a berserker was broken into in that saga, as at the waking of Angantýr in the Hervararsaga.

The episode connecting Hervararsaga and Urvar-Odds Saga, however, is a battle fought on the Danish island, Samsø, by Hjálmar and Urvar-Odd against twelve berserker brothers, of whom the second oldest, Hjörvarðr, challenged Hjálmar for the hand of the beautiful Ingibjörg, daughter of the Swedish king, Ingjald. In the battle, the oldest brother, Angantýr, armed with a sword like a sun-ray, Tyrting, wounds Hjálmar mortally in sixteen places, but Urvar-Odd, clad in a magic Irish silken shirt, is invulnerable to the blows of the eleven brothers about him. When the whole berserker brood of them has been destroyed, the dying Hjálmar having all he can do to slay Angantýr and Urvar-Odd dispatching effortlessly the other eleven, then Hjálmar utters his death-speech, in which, with sad recollections of his estates and the feasting in his father's, or the Swedish king's hall, he commends himself to the princess Ingibjörg who foretold his fate, so he says, and gives Urvar-Odd a gold bracelet for her in bitter remembrance of him. Bitter, indeed--on receiving the bracelet with word of his death the lady takes her own life.

This tragic, romantic episode is but an episode in the unbelievably long and eventful life of Urvar-Odd narrated in his saga, of which there are two versions in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the first ending with a fragment of an ævíkviða of his and the

second with a complete recapitulation in verse of the saga of his life. The fragment is the briefest of fond farewells to his wife Silkesif and their sons, but the whole ævíkviða is nothing less than a versified re-telling of his life story, which spans three hundred years (!) of travels and battles—a welter of incidents that hang together over a nonsensical span of time on the fine-spun narrative thread of a sibyl's prophecy in the second chapter of the saga. She prophesied, and has her nose bloodied for warning him, that after the allotted life-span of three hundred years death would come to him at last from a horse's skull, and so it does, in the shape of a serpent, which slides out of the skull to bite him ignominiously on the ankle and poison him to death. How King Sverrir would have laughed at this saga, popular as it was in medieval Iceland! It is a true "lying saga," which is a contradiction only in terms.

At this point we can, with good assurance, posit prophetic fate as an indispensable element in the composition of an ævíkviða, heroic or mock-heroic. Without the element of fate neither the whole ævíkviða of Örvar-Odd nor the saga which it recapitulates in verse would have any unity of narrative at all. By contrast, the battle episode on Samsö where he and Hjálmar fought the twelve berserkers requires no "fateful" motivation behind it—a beautiful woman or mere chance was cause enough for them to fight—and yet, in the Hervararsaga, the dying Hjálmar will speak of Ingibjörg, his love, as having "fore-told" ("saga," st. 9) his death, even though there is no previous warrant for this remark in the prose narrative of Hervararsaga. But again fate must take a hand in the action. Another indispensable element in the ævíkviða is retrospective autobiography (Rückblicksgedicht), which formally complements prophetic fate. Love affairs, battles, and travels are the stuff of life which flash before the eyes of the dying hero. His poetic autobiography can be as compact as Þórir jökull's verse in Íslendinga Saga 143—"Don't make a wry mouth, old boy, even if it rains on you; you had the girls' love; everyone has to die once"—or it can be as long-winded as Örvar-Odd's dull ævíkviða. In this autobiographical material a third element, romantic love for a noble lady, was integral to the for-aldarsögur, but not to the ævíkviður themselves, which in the old Germanic poetry were terse utterances of heroic resignation rather than romantic regrets for this lady, or that. Accordingly, in parodying the death-songs of ancient heroes, Svartur the fabulist dispensed with the romantic interests in their sagas, which he could have readily exploited, and he kept the two first elements of prophetic fate and retrospective autobiography which structure the death-speech of Shaggy-Tail to his wife in a classic form.

It remains to see how and where The Lay of Shaggy-Tail, with its sub-structure of an ævíkviða, fits into the larger pattern of northern European fabling. In the standard literary history of Stefán Einarsson, Svartur's lay is pigeon-holed as a miniscule imitation of the Low German fable, Reinke de Vos, first published in Lübeck in 1498, but there is only one parallel in the Low German fable to the lay, namely, Reinke's appetite for stray lambs or kids: "Should I have the urge," Reinke confesses (I, ch. 22), "I often chase after many a young lamb and kid, whenever they go astray." Shaggy-Tail likewise has the

reputation of being "the old sheep-biter" (st.18), and he glories in it. Prior to Reinke, however, the continental Reynard dined almost exclusively on chickens and wild fowl. Reinke's taste for mutton is a dietary novelty in the European beast epic. Shaggy-Tail partakes of the same food gladly, but not necessarily for literary reasons. In his native habitat the Icelandic melrakki fox (alopex lagopus) lived off sheep and dried fish on the farms, since no chickens were raised in Iceland as in England and Europe. It would be unwise to disregard, as some students of the European beast epic would have us do, the natural as against the fictionalized habits of the fox in different habitats. Svartur had not only possibly "heard tell" of Reynard from foreign fabling, he had also obviously watched the ways of the arctic fox in the west fjords of Iceland.

The striking thing about the foreign literary, or, if you will, oral-formulaic sources of Skaufalabálkur is that they should go back much earlier to the formative period of the European beast epic in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. By what channels did they filter through to this mock-heroic epic lay? In the face of our ignorance of the means of transmission of literary or oral details from those sources, I shall have recourse to a rather old fashioned nineteenth century hypothesis for the beast epic which in our century has been upheld for the Indo-European epic generally, by the researches of Menéndez Pidal and Georges Dumézil. I would like to hypothesize that where, as in this case, we cannot document beyond certain historical limits the dissemination of an epic body of beast fables to the peripheries of Europe, we may alternately assume that the European or Indo-European beast epic, which in its full breadth extends from India to Iceland, had inherent unities of its own which will satisfactorily account for the literary resemblances between the body of beast epics in Europe, isolated fables around it, and the beast novel in India. Failing such an hypothesis, one must regard these resemblances as curious coincidences, too small or too random in occurrence to be of significance. But it is my view, of which I can give you no more than a glimpse in the focus of this paper, that a similarity or actual identity between small details in contexts widely separated from each other in space or time presupposes a maximum degree of unity to bring them to the surface of literature, now in one fable, now in another, and stamp them as more or less alike. To take the most startling of these "coincidences," in Branch I of the Roman de Renart Renart dyes himself yellow, falling into a dye-pot, and in the first book of the Panchatantra, his Indian counterpart, the jackal Plerce-Howl, dyes himself indigo in the same manner. Nineteenth century scholars, especially in Germany, used to attempt perseveringly to correlate such odd consistencies in the fabling of half the world, but the attempts were given up when Jacob Grimm's theory of the Indo-Germanic unity of the European beast epics was finally discredited by positivistic French scholarship towards the beginning of our century. Whatever one thinks of the old scholarship and the theory it held, which one may think better of today, we ought to recognize that correspondences did really obtain between the Indo-European communities in their beast fables, and they were not the result of literary borrowings primarily, nor of grand coincidence.

The epic corpus to which Skaufalabálkur relates the closest comprises three northern European beast epics from the eleventh to the twelfth century and a ninth century fable, all told: chronologically, the Fabula de Aegro Leone by Paul the Deacon, or Notker the Stammerer, the mid-eleventh century Lotharingian beast epic, Ecbasis Cuiusdam Captivi, the comic masterpiece Ysengrimus of the Flemish poet, Magister Nivardus, at the middle of the twelfth century, and lastly the many-branched Roman de Renart by Pierre de St.-Cloud and other clerics, dating from the last quarter of the twelfth century to the thirteenth, with remaniements in the first half of the thirteenth. In the formative period of the European beast epic, a fable of the sick lion, of which the Fabula was an initial variant, swelled to epic size in the two Latin beast epics, Ecbasis and Ysengrimus. As literature, the European beast epic was the special creation of medieval clerks working with a particular fable from oral and literary sources in the Indo-Germanic community of nations. Though Aesop told this fable in the outward form which they have it, Greek and Roman fabulists never expanded it, or any other Aesopian fable, to epic lengths; and the Indian fabulists of the Vale of Cashmere created in the Panchatantra a beast novel in prose, with passages of verse, like the saga, rather than an epic proper.

In the sick lion fable the weak but sly fox is pitted against the strong but dumb wolf, and sometimes the bear, as in its ninth century variant. The fox, who has been discourteously absent from court, is denounced by the wolf or the bear to the ailing king of the beasts, but the maligned animal returns to court with a good excuse for his absence—he has worn out his shoes looking for a doctor, or making a pilgrimage—and therewith cures the lion himself by wrapping him in the flayed hide of the detractor. The dualism between wisdom and strength in the rivalry of the fox and wolf, or bear, is universal throughout the world, but it evidently was more potent in medieval north Germanic culture than in the combined Graeco-Latin cultures of Antiquity, and presumably facilitated the composition of beast epics by the northern clerks to the extent that it thematized their fabulation. In the final stages of the formative period of the European beast epic, when the fabling began to be done in the French vernacular, the dualistic rivalry of fox and wolf, now already named Reynard and Ysengrimus, was projected from monastic circles onto the courtly sphere of life in the Roman de Renart, in which the central situation is no longer the malady of the lion, but the adultery of Renart with Dame Hersent, wife of Isengrin, the wolf. The sick lion fable has been relegated to a sub-theme, but the dualistic rivalry it ennobles increased in magnitude by being transferred to a new situation. In the end, of course, for there was an end to this European fabling, Reynard wins out over his rival and the king of the beasts and the whole animal kingdom. His very name has passed into the French language as a common noun displacing the older word for the fox, goupil, and the names and the deeds of all his opponents are forgotten.

His fame had risen to its zenith and oblivion was descending on his fellow beasts when the lone fabulist of Iceland, Svartur of Hofstaðir, composed his lay of Shaggy-Tail. Hence the court setting of the sick lion fable, the lion, the wolf or the bear, indeed, every

beast in the kingdom but the fox and his family, the wether and the sheep, and the dog are "out of the story," as they say in the sagas. Furthermore, in mockery of the fornaldarsögur, the lay mock-heroically exalts not the cunning of an old fox, but a fatal exercise of his physical strength in combat. This inversion of the north Germanic dualism of wisdom and strength is infrequent in the European beast epic, though it does occur with near fatal consequences for the fox in a climactic branch of the Roman (Br. VI) in which Renart has to fight a judicial duel with Isengrin for seducing Dame Hersent, and in a show of strength is no match for his stronger opponent. Usually Renart saves himself by a ruse, playing dead, until he dies for good in Branch XVII--only to be revived again by the remanieurs for further adventures. Thus, ever shamming death, he utters no dying speeches like the ævíkviða of Shaggy-Tail. Instead, being the pet creature of clerical poets, he confesses his exploits occasionally as so much wrong-doing by him. In both the Icelandic lay and the Old French epic, the retrospective autobiographies of the vulpine protagonists rehearse their many misdeeds, but in dissimilar tones--mock-heroic in the lay and mock-contrite in the epic.

The parallelisms between the lay and the European beast epic converge closer together in the proemial situations of Shaggy-Tail and Renart before a hunt for food, which their hungry wives and children hard press them to find. The scene is comically grim in the lay, with little concern shown for the ungrown cubs in the den, but it is pathetically affecting in the proemium to Branch XI of the Roman: "N'i a celui ne se demente" (l. 16), not one of Renart's family is without complaint, he is racked by hunger pangs and his wife and sons are all in tears. In their need Renart and his family and Shaggy-Tail and his feel, with or without commiseration among themselves, the deepest drive of their animal nature--hunger, which, as a brutal Old French proverb put it, will make even an old woman trot.

Shaggy-Tail is also feeling his age in stanza 4 of the lay and again in stanza 36, and it depresses him because the Norns have prophesied disaster for him in his old age (st.14). His fatalism is a formal element of the ævíkviða, as I have said before, but the marks of old age on his shaggy body are physically very similar to those which the vixen in the inner fable of the Ecclasis Cuiusdam Captivi, the earliest beast epic of the European Middle Ages, described on her body in excusing her absence from court to the sick lion: "The passing years plunder us, one after the other; the seasonable white hairs fall from the head; lo!, about my ears the down of old age grows; already a tough skin invests these shanks of mine; day and night they are shivered by severe pain; I shall not outdo the dog in running, nor the boar in strength" (ll. 473-8). Later on, Renart entered this plea of poor health, due to old age, at a hearing before the lion king of the charges of adultery and other villanies against him: "But now I have a snowy throat," he whines, "I'm old, can't help myself anymore--no longer do I care to plead my cause" (Br. I, ll. 1266-8). Shaggy-Tail's complaint of old age is a commonplace of medieval European fabulation which has been re-duplicated anew in the Icelandic lay.

One descriptive detail in his complaint stands out conspicuously from stanza 36, a detail virtually identical with a comic touch in the special pleading of his continental cousins before the lion since the ninth century. I refer to the wearing-out of his "shoes of shanks' skin" ("fitskór troðnir"), a metonymic periphrasis for tired feet which is used here metaphorically, like the phrase "slíta skónum," to describe old age on the verge of death. I have just quoted to you above the words of the vixen in the Ecbasis to the lion: "already a tough skin invests these shanks of mine." A more convincing excuse than horny feet for a long absence from court was a tangible pair of tattered shoes. Anyone might feel foot-sore and old, at times, especially in the presence of an offended lion, but a pair of tattered shoes would visibly demonstrate what a great distance you had gone, on an errand of mercy, or piety. With some such thought as this, possibly, the author of the ninth century Fabula de Aegro Leone, with which the Latin fabling about the fox begins in the Middle Ages, outfitted the fox of his fable with a torn pair of shoes, for show. The sick lion sees through the ruse, but has to smile at it as the fox approaches with the old shoes over his shoulder. None of the clerical authors of the Roman de Renart play with this idea, but a comic poet of genius, Magister Nivardus of Ghent, author of the greatest long poem in Latin of the Middle Ages, Ysengrimus, made a magnificent game of the fox's shoes in the third book (l. 379 ff.) of his wolf epic. On the appearance at court of the Flemish Reinardus, he claims that he hasn't wasted a minute travelling to Salerno and back for healing herbs with which to cure the sick lion. "The whole court is witness to the shredded shoes which I wore from here, and returning hither, from there [Salerno]." He then proceeds to produce three pairs of shoes from his satchel, each of which he counts up in three languages which the king speaks, Latin, Greek, and Hungarian, so that each pair gets counted three times over, and thus the six shoes total eighteen by his reckoning. So many shoes were worn out on the journey to Salerno is the ludicrous implication of his mad arithmetic.

Svartur, be it granted, would most improbably have read, or even seen, MSS. of either the ninth century Fabula de Aegro Leone or the mid-twelfth century Ysengrimus out in the west fjords of Iceland in the fifteenth century. The more's the mystery how he came to speak in any sense of the fox's foot-wear, which was a detail that was not carried over from the Latin to the vernacular fabulation of Europe by the Roman de Renart, though it turns up not illogically in the Flemish MHD epic from the first half of the thirteenth century, Van den Vos Reynaerde (A text, l. 2847 ff.). Of worn shoes he could have read something in his own literature: e.g., the tale in Ragnarssaga Loðbrókar (ch. 14) of the old pilgrim who wore out two pairs of iron shoes on a pilgrimage to Rome, or, nearer to hand, that ríma of the sturdy beggar Skíði who travels in a dream to far-away Valhalla by the Black Sea, but as a good Christian fights a terrific battle with the heathen gods and the heroes of olden times, and wakes up where he is sleeping by Hítarvatn, in the Hnappadalur district, with his new pair of shoes in tatters--"Troðnir í sundur tvennir skór" (Skíðaríma, st. 202). Despite the pertinence of these passages to Skaufalabálkur, st. 36, they give us no clue as to how

Svartur came to speak metaphorically of shoes on the fox. We cannot explicate this usage of his without reference to the fox, solely on its analogy to such a phrase as "slíta skónum," which semantically connotes aging and dying with the scuffing of shoes. We shall have to inquire further whether Svartur may not have been alluding by it obliquely to the shod fox of medieval Latin tradition, an unfamiliar beast, to be sure, in the vernacular literature of Europe after the twelfth century, outside the Netherlands. I believe that a bit more evidence from the lay and a recourse to the hypothesis that I advanced in the middle of this paper will help us to an affirmative conclusion on this troubling matter.

In fact, there is a last link in the lay with medieval European fabling in Latin. Compare, for example, Shaggy-Tail's description of the hound in stanza 21 as a "big monster, coal-black in color" with the ironic announcement by the rooster to Reinhardus, in Ysengrimus V, ll. 197-207, of the dogs that are hunting with their master for him: "Nay, black creatures, having the appearance of piety, and no doubt kind, run before and after him. They hasten rapidly, perhaps they're not after us, yet they fly as if they were, with nimble briskness hither. Do you not see how each of them burns and sweats? Something red [i.e., the tongue], I know not what, hangs from the mouth of the pious ones. How their countenance proclaims their harmlessness, their snouts their gentleness! Ingrained love of evil does not bestir such creatures." The description of the hound in the lay is but a phrase, compared to this flowing discourse, but like the word "fitakór" and other periphrases of Svartur it has been stylized by the circumlocutionary rhetoric of Latin fabling from the Fabula de Aegro Leone to Ysengrimus, a rhetoric which Magister Nivardus wrought to a fine art and which was imitated in the fables of European and English vernacular literature. Compare also with the rooster's announcement of the oncoming dogs in Ysengrimus, Chantecler's reported dream of the fox in Branch II of the Roman de Renart and Chaucer's NonnePreestes Tale, and you will find the same kind of periphrastic descriptions of the nightmarish fox, a devouring beast with his shoes off in these contexts.

In point of style it should be observed in Skaufalabálkur that except for the epithet "hundsjafningi" ("equal of the hound," st. 19) Svartur did not complicate his fable with kenningar, i.e. metaphors consisting of noun plus noun in a genitive construction. He was composing a fable in the category of "child's verses" to alleviate the dullness of "ignorant folk" (st. 42). For this audience simple metonyms which periphrastically describe a whole object by its parts, as in the epithets "langhali," "lágfóta," "inn háfaetti," etc., were more suitable than skaldic metaphors, the kenningar, which substitute a whole object for another, its symbolic equivalent. Skíðaríma abounds with these metaphors—"bauga skorða" ("helpmeet of rings"—a woman), "laufa víðr" ("leafy wood"—a man), "Suðra sjávarrok" ("sea-drift of Suðri," "the dwarf" poetry), etc.—but Skaufalabálkur is devoid of them because Svartur deliberately simplified his Icelandic verses to the lower stylistic level of fabling in the European vernaculars which continued and popularized the Latin fabling with metonyms of Magister Nivardus.

What shall we conclude about the two small verbal details of the fox's shoes and the

black monster of a dog which figure in the periphrastic style and the narrative content of both Ysengrimus and Skaufalabálkur, but apart from the style, not in the content of any extant intermediary vernacular fables outside the Netherlands? We have already ruled out the possibilities of travels to Europe in Svartur's attested residence at Hofstaðir, or a migration of Latin MSS. of beast fables to Iceland. Shall we put down those details to jonglerie and oral-formulaic transmission from abroad? If they reached him thus by word of mouth, we should expect that others in the chain of transmission would have heard of them too in Iceland, but his lay alone survives to tell the tale of the flight of the fox from the dog and the man which wore out his "shoes of shanks' skin" and brought death on him. Shall we then conclude, after all, that the corresponding touches in the Latin wolf epic and the Icelandic lay are curious coincidences, too small or too random in occurrence to be of significance? I for one shan't. On my working hypothesis for the Indo-European unity of the beast epic, which can be concretely tested, it is precisely the smallest details that are of the greatest significance, if they appear reasonably alike in widely separated contexts. For, as I have argued, their likeness on the surface of literature arises from a very deep underlying unity in the fabling of the Indo-European communities--deeper than the superficial language differences or the distances that divide them. The two details under discussion are of the sort that I exemplified with the dyeing of the fox and the jackal in the Roman de Renart and the Panchatantra. I therefore conclude that it is unnecessary, if not impossible, to account for details of the sort by literary borrowings, tortuous translation processes, or oral-formulaic transmission. The unity of Indo-European fabling simply gives rise to them of itself, preserving itself in ever smaller detail up to the surface of literature. Poetically pictured, it is as if a snowstorm had an order and coherence of its own which was imprinted in microscopic designs on the crystals of every snowflake whirling in it. I hope, however, that we do not have to examine microscopically every literary detail of Skaufalabálkur to appreciate how deftly Svartur adapted the fabling of the Indo-Germanic community to a critique not only of its warrior class, the heroes of olden times, but also of the local Icelandic literature which celebrated them in the formaldarsögur. His parody of their death-songs in that literature had a precedent in the parodies of courtly romances in branches of the Roman (cf. Brs. Va-VI), but his artistic success in the mock-heroic mode of fabling was entirely his in Iceland. According to its success, Skaufali's ævíkviða may be considered the inspiration for the rhymed tóukvasði, or fox songs, of the seventeenth century, which do not come within the scope of this paper.

Abbreviations and Selected Bibliography

Br., Bra.--Branch(es)
l., ll.--line(s)
MS., MSS.--manuscript(s)
ME--Middle English
MHD--Middle High Dutch
MLG--Middle Low German
Swed.--Swedish
st., sts.--stanza(s)
< --"derives from"

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