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#### THE PAGAN INHERITANCE OF EGILL'S SONATORREK

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

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

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

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

#### The inherited faith

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

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

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

Grimmt vorum hlíð.  
Pats hronn of braut  
föðurs míns  
á frændgarði.  
veitk ófullt  
ok opit standa  
sonar skarð.  
es mér ser of vann.

Cruel to me  
was the gap Wave broke  
in my father's  
family enclosure;  
I know it stands open  
and unfilled,  
the son's breach  
which Sea has made for me.

Mjok hefr Rón  
þvækt um mik.  
emk ofsnauðr  
at ástvinumi.  
sleit marr bond  
minnar ettar.  
[Isnarani] Pótt  
af sjölfum mér.

Rán has shaken  
me hugely.  
I am too much  
stripped of loving friends;  
Ocean cut  
the bonds of my family.  
[the strong] strand  
of me myself.

Veizt, +ef Pé sok  
sverði of rakak.  
vas olsmið[rl]  
allra tíma:  
hroða vágð braðr  
+ef +vaga mattak.  
fórk andvígr  
ok Egis mani.  
(Sonatorrek 6-8, if II 246-56)

You know that ?if I could  
avenge this injury with a sword,  
? 'Ale-brewers' days  
would be over;  
if I could ?fight  
?wave-pusher's brothers,  
I would go against them  
and Egir's wife.

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

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

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

En ek ekki      But I didn't think  
eigna Póttumk      I could muster the power  
sakar af      to fight the killer(s)  
vib +sonar bana,      of my ?son (MS subs),  
Pvit alþjöð      for the old thegn's  
fyr augum verðr      lack of support  
gamals Fagns      is becoming clear to the eyes  
Gengileysai.      of the common people.  
(Sonatorrek 9)

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

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

hi mihton tocnavan, gif hi cuban Pat gescéad,  
Pat se is ann God Þe hi ealle gesceop.  
they could have recognised, if they had known  
discernment of this, that only He who made all these  
things is God.

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

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

Blatka Pví      I do not worship  
bróður Vílis.      Víli's brother,  
göðiðar.      the gods' protector,  
at ek gjarn sék,      because I ... want to.

(Sonatorrek 23/1-4)

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

<u>Gofumk ífrótt</u>	The wolf's foe,
<u>ulfs of bági</u>	used to combat,
<u>vigi vanr</u>	has given me a 'skill
<u>vammi firrða</u>	removed from fault',
<u>ok pat geð.</u>	and that 'quality of mind'
<u>es ek gerba mér</u>	by which I made for myself
<u>vísá fiandr</u>	certain enemies
<u>at vélondum.</u>	into scheming men.

(Sonatorrek 24, /8 MS ad)

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

Starcatherum, inusitata prius granditate conspicuum,  
non solum animi fortitudine, sed etiam condendorum  
carminum peritia illustravit,  
made Starcatherus, already renowned for his unprecedented stature, famous not only for his 'strength of mind', but also for his 'skill in composing spells'... [8]

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

The inherited structure

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

Veizt, +ef þá sok You know that ?if I could  
sverbi of raskak. avenge this injury with a sword.

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

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

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

Fonne he gyd wrecce, then may he make a poem,  
sarigne sang. a sorrowing song.  
Fonne his sunu hangab when his son hangs  
brefnes to hrobra. as pleasure for the raven,  
ond he him helpe ne mag. and he can't help him,  
oald ond infrod, old and wise inside,  
anige gefremman. can't help him whatsoever.

(*Beowulf* 2446-9) [11]

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

Wihte ne meahte He could not in any way  
on bam feorhbonan get faud-settlement  
feghba gebetani. on the life-killer;  
no by er he lone heaboring  
Nor any the sooner could he persecute  
hatian ne meahte. the man of battle  
labum dedum with hostile deeds.  
Peah him leof ne wes. though he wasn't dear to him.

(*Beowulf* 2464-7)

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

#### Male elegy: the genre

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

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

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

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

confirm the second (*Beowulf* 1384-5):

Selre bid aghwam. It's better for any man  
Pat he his fyeond wrece, to avenge his friend  
Ponne he fela murne. than mourn greatly.

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

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

<u>Esa auðPeystr.</u>	The joyful find
<u>þvit ekki veldr</u>	of Frigg's kinsmen,
<u>hofugligr.</u>	long ago borne
<u>ór hyggju stab</u>	from the world of giants,
<u>fagnafundr</u>	is not easily driven
<u>Friggjar niðja.</u>	from the place of thought,
<u>ár borinn</u>	for heavy sorrow
<u>ór Jotunheimum.</u>	is the cause of this.

(Sonatorrek 2)

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

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

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

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

Formal cognate of giedd, 'song', is geb, i.e. 'temper, wits, passion, quality of mind' (cf. wedd, væð). Geb and giedd are closely similar in meaning in OIce blanda gebi and OE gieddum wrixlan, each of which denotes the exchange of confidences among friends (Hávamál 44, Maxims I 14). Geb is prominent in Sonatorrek 24 as the companion of Egill's íPrótt yammi firrb, his poetic skill 'removed from fault'.

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

1. Hildr hjaldr-gennis geb(1)-fjarbar 16(2)

'current of the fjord (2)

of the 'soul' of Battle's roar-encounterer [Óðinn] (1)'  
(Úlfur Uggason, Húsdrápa 1, Skj B I 128)

2. grjótaldar geb(1)-reinir gildi(2)

'drink (2)

of the land of the 'soul' of the rock-people [giants] (1)'  
(Hof-Garðar Refr, Skj B I 295)

3. þóð(1)-[h]rørðis hafs alda(2)

'wave of the ocean (2)

of the rouser of 'soul' (1)'  
(Einarr Skálaglamm, Vellekla 5, Skj B I 117)

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

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

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

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

which he reaffirmed.

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

Longab Ponne ry las      He languishes less who  
Re him con leopa worn.      knows a number of songs  
offe mid hondum con      or can touch the harp  
hearpan gretan;      with his hands.

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

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

καὶ τῆς δυνάμοις ἣν μει ἐποίησεν, μελλόντων τῷών  
εστι χαρέντοι καὶ πολιωνόδοσικουρτι δουλεύειν  
οὐκ ἀντέτον εἶναι, πατέρου δὲ τίκνην εἰσαγαγόν  
λαβεῖν, τοῦ μοι, οὐθεος διέτεινεν εἰναι, οὐ γε αὐτὸν πληνοῦται  
τούτου προς σπουδὴν εἶπεν πατέρων εἰτι λόγῳ  
ἀκούοντας πολέμην πατέροις θεοῖς ἔχοντι παρεστεκτο εκκύψιον,  
εἴπει δέσπι τούτο μεταγενέκτι τυχήν, βενιαρεον οὐδεὶς εὐτελεύκτων.

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

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

Ἐγώ μέντοι προδίτην τηγαλέφην οὐκ ἔχω. ἀφείτετο  
υπερ μή την ενοίσαι ή παρενοιει τυχήν. αλλα  
κατει μοι, οὐ φίλη Φαίρα, καὶ μη κιβαρέν τι καὶ  
λεπτόν εὐτοι καὶ οπούσον δοκετών τιπτήτι.

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

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

κιβαρότην τε λύτρην δυτικήν εἰς συμπόσιον την παρεδύειν  
πιττειται, διδέην προσκιβαρέν δοκενει τη καὶ αποκαρει, γενειται.

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

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

himself of grief.

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

Conclusion: the 'individual' voice

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

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

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

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

Mjok es torfyndr,  
sás trúð kne gum  
of alþjóð  
Elgjar galga.  
(Sonatorrek 15/1-4)

Extremely difficult it is  
to find a man we can trust  
among the common people  
of 708inn's gallows [the world].

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

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

Egill says in this stanza that his geb or character was a gift from 80inn; and the prose and verses of Egils Saga show the appropriate perversity. Egill fights lawsuits in Norway and Iceland (chh. 56, 82), but raids lawlessly from coast to coast. His is avaricious without end, keeping back his father's silver, burying his own (chh. 56, 85). He is loyal to his friends, a soft touch for women; but still wild and irrational - vomit, mutilation of Ármóðr and his threat to murder Einarr Skálaglamm (chh. 71-2, 78). Implicit in Sonatorrek 24, therefore, could be the popular reaction to his character:

ok Pat geb, and that quality of mind  
es ek gerba mér, by which I made for myself  
vísa fjandr certain enemies  
at vélondum. into scheming men.

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

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

Turville-Petre, for instance:

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

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

Erumka Pekkt The company of commoners  
Fjóða sinni. is not pleasing to me,  
Pótt sér hyrr even if each man keeps  
sótt of haldí; the peace about him.

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

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

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

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

#### NOTES

1. Ed. Sigurður Nordal, Falenzk Fornrit II (Reykjavík, 1936). Jón Helgason, Skjaldevers (Copenhagen, 1961), p. 29-33.
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3. Sigurður Nordal, 'Átrúnaður Egils Skallagrímssonar', Skírnir 98 (1924), 145-65 (160-3).
4. Gustav Neckel, 'Egill und der angelsächsische Einfluss', Beiträge zur Eddaforschung (Dortmund, 1908), p. 367-89 (375).
5. Finnur Jónsson, Edda Snorra Sturlusonar (Copenhagen, 1930), p. 175. Ski B I 387-8, 1-3.
6. Martin's Opera omnia, ed. C.W. Barlow (New Haven Ct., 1950), De Correctione Rusticorum, p. 159-203 (186). Gall Jecker, Die Heimat des hl. Pirmin (Münster W., 1927), p. 36. J.C. Pope, Homilies of Alfric: A Supplementary Collection, 2 vols, Early English Text Society 260 (London, 1968), II 667-724 (680-1). D. Bathurst, The Homilies of Wulfstan (Oxford, 1957), p. 221-4 (221-2).

- 7 Finnur Jónsson, Den oldnorske og oldislandske Litteraturs Historie, 2nd ed., 2 vols (Copenhagen, 1920-3), I (1920), 479: 'Egill var én af de fritenkere, som ikke just kun stolede på deres egen "kraft og styrke" og fuldstændig forkastede den gamle Asatro, men han har stillet sig frit overfor mange af de gamle dogmer'.
- 8 Saxo's Gesta Danorum, ed. J. Olrik and H. Rader, 2 vols (Copenhagen, 1931-57), I (1931), 152.
- 9 Sigvatr Þórðarson, Skið I 251, 13. 22. GulaÞingslog, ch. 255. Norges Gamle Love, ed. R. Keyser et al., 5 vols (Christiania, 1846-95), I (1846), Um rannsak. Hálfdanar Saga Svarta, ch. 8, ÍF XXVI 92. Arna Biskups Saga, ch. 16. Biskupa Sögur, 2 vols (Copenhagen, 1858-78), I (1858), 699-700.
- 10 Árni Pálsson, 'Sonatorrek', Skírnir 99 (1926), 153.
- 11 OE ed. The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, ed. G.P. Krapp and E.V.K. Dobbie, 6 vols (Columbia, 1931-53).
- 12 A.G. van Hamel, 'IJslands Odinsgalooft', Mededeelingen der kon. ned. Akademie der Wetenschappen, Afd. Lett. 82 B (1936), 187-88 (151-2).
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- 16 Prokop: Werke, 5 vols (Munich, 1961-77), IV (1971), 208-11.
- 17 ÍF I.1 12. 55, 143, 146
- 18 F. Niedner, 'Egile Sonatorrek', ZfDA 59 (1922), 217-35.
- 19 Cf. Gautreks Saga, ch. 7: Leiðr skal hann síþýbu allri.
- 20 E.O.G. Turville-Petre, Scaldic Poetry (Oxford, 1976), p. 41.