

*OK VARD IT MESTA SKÁLD: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON  
THE PROBLEM OF SKALDIC TRAINING*

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The problem of the personality of the skald, however thoroughly discussed in modern criticism has hardly been exhausted. What I would like to do in this paper is to approach it from a somewhat different point of view than has generally characterized skaldic scholarship, thus possibly making an attempt to formulate some new questions. Let me begin with an Old Norse story about two brothers.

There was once a man called Þórðr -- a small, handsome man. Þórðr was a sea-faring trader and a retainer of King Magnús the Good who held him in high regard. On the other hand, Þórðr's brother Hreiðarr was tall and ugly and so stupid that he could scarcely care for himself. Consequently, he remained at home in Iceland. One time, however, Hreiðarr forced Þórðr to take him abroad and when they arrived in Bergen, Þórðr presented himself before the king and told him about his brother. Magnús was surprised and asked Þórðr why he had taken the fool abroad with him. 'I thought it would bring him good luck if he met you,' Þórðr answered. The king, therefore, asked to meet him and Hreiðarr came before the king.

During their meeting, Hreiðarr behaved in a most unusual manner. He told Magnús that he wanted to get a good look at him, compelled him to stand, remove his cloak and then examined him closely. Finally, Hreiðarr informed the king that he was quite satisfied with his appearance. Then it was Hreiðarr's turn to remove his cloak and be examined by the king who informed Hreiðarr that there had never been a man born uglier than he. Hreiðarr asked the king to look for some good points in him to which the king replied that probably "he could be clever with his hands."

The two brothers stayed on at Magnús' court during the winter, and then one day when Magnús and his uncle King Haraldr were meeting, Hreiðarr killed one of King Haraldr's retainers. King Haraldr's men provoked Hreiðarr to commit this murder by "making him lose his temper," just as King Magnús had predicted the first time they had met. Once Hreiðarr got angry, he behaved as if he had gone berserk -- he lifted the person who had offended him and then hit him on his head knocking out his brains -- making people think that he was superhuman in strength.

To protect Hreiðarr from King Haraldr's anger, Magnús sent him to Upplond to one of his chieftains. While Hreiðarr was in Upplond his first *þrótt* finally was revealed, proving that the king was correct in telling Hreiðarr that he could be a skillful man. One day Hreiðarr asked the man with whom he stayed to give him some silver and gold. 'Are you a skilled craftsman?' asked his host. 'King Magnús said I was,' Hreiðarr replied, 'but apart from that I

have no proof, for I have never put my skills to the test. He would not have said it unless he knew for certain, so I believe him.' In spite of his doubts, the man gave Hreiðarr all he requested and Hreiðarr produced a real masterpiece -- a gilded pig made out of silver.

It was just at this time that King Haraldr arrived and Hreiðarr presented the pig to him as a gift. Haraldr was pleased and professed his readiness to make peace with Hreiðarr; however, shortly thereafter Haraldr realized that this precious object may have been created as an insult to him. The pig appeared to be a sow, thus referring to Haraldr's father's unheroic nickname, Sigurðr sýr (Sow). Haraldr ordered his men to kill the offender, but Hreiðarr escaped the punishment, returned to King Magnús, showed him the pig and told him what had occurred.

Subsequently, Hreiðarr remained at court for a time and then one day he went to see Magnús requesting that the king listen to a poem he had composed in his honor. 'Why not?' said the king who appeared not at all surprised at Hreiðarr's request, otherwise he would have asked him whether he was a skald, as did other kings when they were approached by someone who had not composed for them previously. Clearly, the king found confirmation of his conjecture that the Iclander was a skillful man in Hreiðarr's otherwise unexpected request. The fact that he composed the poem was simply a new manifestation of his already revealed abilities. Thus it was that Hreiðarr declaimed the poem (I am following Hermann Pálsson's translation). "It was a strange composition, particularly at the beginning, but it improved towards the end. When the poem was over, the king said, "That is an odd poem. Still, the last part is quite good. It seems to me that your poem is just like your own life. So far, you have been a very odd and eccentric person, but you will improve the older you get. "

Hreiðarr received a big reward for his poem, returned to Iceland and settled there with great success. And, as the story tells us, "His life turned out very much as King Magnús had predicted, for the older he grew, the better he became," and "He gave up all the foolery he had indulged in when he was younger."

*Hreiðars þátr heimska* is, certainly interesting in many respects. First of all, it is an Old Norse variant of a universal motif of an unpromising hero who eventually becomes a great man. I would, however, devote more attention to a more specific and rare motif expressed in this story, namely, the person who becomes a skald.

First, as we remember, our hero became a skilled craftsman, *smiðr*. Despite everything that we know about medieval handicrafts -- that there were secrets passed down from one generation to another, and that many years of training were required -- Hreiðarr started to work at his craft, becoming successful without either training or experience only because he believed what the king had told him, that he might be "clever with his hands." Similarly, he did not hesitate to attempt other even harder work requiring knowledge of many complicated rules, of special poetic language and tradition -- that of composing a poem of praise -- managing to succeed, although it sounded "odd" at

first. The oddity of the poem was not, however, due to lack of skill, but rather because the poem was represented in the story as a parallel to Hreiðarr's own life: he had been a very strange person, as the king said, but then he started to improve and thus his poem improved towards the end.

We may ask then, what was the cause of such a turn in Hreiðarr's life and how did he gain his talents and skills in both handicraft and skaldic art? The story gives us a clear answer to these questions: the main reason was Hreiðarr's meeting with the king that brought him good luck, i.e., according to the ancient beliefs, his share of the king's good luck, his *gæfa*.

Thus, Hreiðarr gained his skill and became a master -- smith and skald only because of his contact with the king. It is questionable, however, whether he really did *become* a smith and skald, i.e. got his skills *ex nihilo*, or whether it was that his meeting with the king simply revealed hidden talents of which he was not aware because he had never put them to the test. This point remains unclear because it was of no importance to the story-teller. There is, however, another story about how a humble man with no talent for poetry suddenly became a skald.

The last chapter of *Porleifs þátr jarlsskálds* recounts events occurring after this famous skald's death. It includes a story about a shepherd named Hallbjörn hali (Tail). I will loosely follow Jacqueline Simpson's translation of this story. "Hallbjörn got into the habit of often coming to Thorleif's mound and sleeping there at nights and keeping his flock close by. The idea kept coming into his mind that he would like to contrive composing a poem in praise of Thorleif, and he always spoke of this as he lay on the mound; but because of the fact that he was no poet and had never mastered that craft, he could find no verses, and he never got further in his poetry than the opening, which was: 'Here lies a poet.' But more than that he could not say.

One night, as he was lying on the mound and working at this same task of seeing whether he could add anything to his praise of the mound-dweller he fell asleep, and saw the mound opening and a tall, well-built man coming out.

The tall man climbed the mound and went up to Hallbjörn and said: 'You are lying here, Hallbjörn, and wishing earnestly for something which has not been granted you -- the power to compose verses in praise of me. Now there are two possibilities: either this accomplishment is destined to be yours and you will receive it from me, and in higher degree than almost anyone else (it's quite likely that this may come to pass); or else there is no point in your struggling over this any longer. Now I'll recite a verse to you, and if you succeed in understanding the verse and knowing it by heart when you wake, then you will become an outstanding poet and will compose praises for many chieftains, and then this accomplishment must be destined to be yours.'

Then he tugged Hallbjörn's tongue, and spoke this verse:

Here lies a poet, prince among  
All poets etc. ....

'Now you are to begin your poetic career by making a whole poem in praise of me when you wake; and take the greatest pains over the metre, the style, and above all the imagery (*ok vanda sem mest bæði hátt ok orðfæri ok einna mest kenningar*)'.

Then he vanished back into the mound, which shut again, but as Hallbjörn woke he thought he got a glimpse of the back of him. Then he learned the verse by heart, and after a little while he went back home to the farm with his sheep, and spoke about this happening. Afterwards Hallbjörn made a whole poem in praise of the mound-dweller, and became a very great poet; and there is a long saga which deals with him, both in this land and abroad, though it is not written down here."<sup>2</sup>

We can see that this account of how a skald got his, so to say, "education" is entirely fantastic. However, this story is of utmost importance for us, because there are no other reports dealing with how the skalds received their training and, accordingly, how the skaldic craft was transmitted from one poet to another.

It is significant, that there are no such reports. Indeed, all the technical features of skaldic poetry testify to the necessity of special training for skalds. So called "poetic inspiration" (a concept hardly applicable to skaldic art) accompanied by some knowledge of tradition, i.e. verses composed by their predecessors, could hardly be enough to produce this highly complicated poetry, which was regulated by many detailed formal rules requiring a certain period of learning and instruction. Such relatively late texts as *Háttalykill* of Rögnvaldr Kali and Hallr Þórarinnsson and *Snorra Edda* may confirm this observation, since *Snorra Edda*'s purpose was to instruct the young skalds in their craft.

In contrast, however difficult the skaldic form is, the Old Norse sources completely ignore the problem of the young poets' training (with the exception of the grotesque story about Hallbjörn hali which sheds no light on reality). Instead they are trying to convince us that everybody capable of composing skaldic verses simply possessed this ability. "He was a good skald" -- reads the description of such people in sagas. Perhaps skaldic scholarship never paid due attention to this fact because it always interpreted the only account as described in sagas of a connection between an older and a younger skald as evidence of a teacher-pupil relationship. I have in mind the report in *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* recounting the friendship between the aged Egill and the young Einarr skálaglamm and their discussions of professional questions. *What is the saga actually telling us about? Are there really good grounds to consider its report relevant to the problem of training of a young poet?*

Chapter 78 tells us that "One summer at the Althing, it so happened that Einar went to Egil Skallagrimsson's booth and they started talking. Before very long they were discussing poetry, for that was the subject they both found most enjoyable (*þótti hvárumveggja þær ræður skemmtiligar*). After that, Einar made a habit of going to talk with Egil and this led to a close friendship between them. Shortly before, Einar had returned from a trip abroad, and Egil kept asking him the news from Norway, not only about his friends but about people Einar knew to be Egil's enemies. He also asked a great deal about people of importance. In return, Einar questioned Egil about all that had happened on his travels, and the outstanding deeds he had performed. That was the sort of talk Egil liked, so they got on well together". In parting they agreed to stay friends.<sup>3</sup>

As we can see, nothing in this account tells us that Einarr has been taking lessons in verse-making. Moreover, following the same pattern as other narratives about skalds, Einarr is said to have begun composing poetry at an early age. We can also take into consideration that he just had returned from abroad; therefore, it is likely that at the time the two skalds met, Einarr had already become a distinguished skald.

What is actually emphasized in the saga itself is, first, the skalds' mutual interest in their discussions, and, second, that poetry was not the only subject of their talks -- the saga stresses that both skalds were eager to discuss various events. It is most likely that the saga's author aimed to represent Egill and Einarr as partners and not as a teacher and pupil, irrespective of what he might have known about their actual relations to one another. The next episode of the saga is quite convincing in this respect.

We learn about Einarr's impudent behaviour towards Egill. Einarr came to Borg while Egill was away, waited for him and before departing he hung a precious shield he had received from Hákon Earl for composing *Vellekla*, a praise-poem in the earl's honour. Einarr told the people of the household that it was his gift for Egill. When Egill returned home and went to his seat, he caught sight of the shield and asked who owned such a treasure. Someone told him that Einarr skálaglam had visited, and left him the shield as a present. 'Damn the man!' exclaimed Egill. 'Does he really expect me to stay up all night making up a poem about his shield? Get my horse, I'm going to ride after him and murder him'. But his people told him that it was too late, for Einarr had left early in the morning. Finally, Egill composed his drápa and their friendship was restored.<sup>4</sup> It is not difficult to explain Egill's fury. Any gift which was not compensated by another of equal value would make the one who received it dependent on the donor and thus humiliate the recipient. A gift of a shield demanded compensation of a special kind -- a shield-poem in honour of the donor. So, Egill was compelled to compose verses in Einarr's honour -- a situation hardly imaginable for anybody related as teacher and pupil.

We can see, therefore, that the skalds' training is a subject beyond the scope of Old Norse sources; however, that does not mean that the skalds had no training at all. They certainly got some form of education either at home or while staying with their foster-parents, sometimes inheriting their profession through their family, as other craftsmen did, or by coming into contact with some older skalds in their neighborhood. Based on what we know, we have no evidence that their education could have had anything in common with that of Irish poets.

It is worth mentioning that Irish sources give us detailed accounts concerning the training of future poets, the so called *filid* and *bards*. The importance of this subject for Irish society is explained by the fact that in Ireland poets formed a well-organized literary order whose duties, privileges, and social status were defined by law. Moreover, a poet's place in the hierarchy depended largely on the education he had received. Some of them, i.e. poets of higher rank had right to teach their craft to others. For this purpose schools were organized where the pupils spent many years. One Irish treatise reports

that the bard and fili shared the first seven years of training and that the fili was instructed for a further period, so that it took twelve years to become a fully qualified fili (*ollav*). We are even told how many tales and meters every grade of pupils had to learn and we know something about the conditions in which the pupils had to work at their poems. They were required to compose "each by himself on his own bed, the whole next day in the dark, till at a certain hour in the night lights being brought in, they committed it to writing". Apparently, this quotation reflects the general custom in Ireland: when he wished to compose a poem, the fully trained poet withdrew to his bed enclosing himself in darkness.<sup>5</sup>

The skalds, of course, never formed an organized order of this kind. However, they also were professionals and had a privileged position at the Norwegian court. Moreover, Old Norse society had always shown much interest in the skalds. Besides their verses, a lot of stories about the poets were preserved. How can we explain, why in spite of all their interest in the skalds' lives, Old Norse sources passed over in silence everything concerning their professional training? I propose that, there is an answer to this question and that it may be of importance for our understanding of the personality of the skald.

Searching for our answer it is necessary to analyze Old Norse attitudes towards the poetic craft, focusing first of all, our attention on the myth about the mead of poetry. Almost all the kennings of poetry in skaldic verses (and we find a lot of them) are based on this myth. According to the myth, poetry may be called *Kvasis dreyri* "blood of Kvasir", as the wise Kvasir was killed, his blood mixed with honey and became the mead which makes whoever drinks of it a poet or a learned man, *Boðnar bára* "the wave of Boðn" after the jar the mead was kept in, *ðverga drykkja* or *Suðra mjǫðr* "the drink of the dwarfs" (or of any particular dwarf), as the dwarfs brewed the mead, *falla stillis drykkja* "drink of the lord of the mountains", as Suttungr, the giant got it from the dwarfs, *Yggs öl* or *Gauts gjǫf*, as Óðinn stole it and gave to Æsir and men. Some of the kennings mentioned above were already used in the earliest preserved poetry, i.e. in Bragi Boddason's verses, and then, kennings of these types were employed as long as the tradition of skaldic verse-making existed. This fact is easily explainable, for one of the important peculiarities of skaldic poetry is that it very often takes itself as a topic. In their verses the skalds were always ready to speak about themselves, about their poetic abilities and about the poems they were producing and performing. Many praise-poems in honour of kings and earls begin with the skald's request for a hearing, very often expressed by means of kennings referring to the myth of the origin of poetry. The well-known examples of such *drápu-upphaf* are introductions to *Háleygatal* by Eyvindr skáldaspillir and to *Vellekla* by Einarr skálaglamm. Both poems were composed in honour of Hákon Earl.

What, actually, draws our attention in such verses is not so much the great variety of mythological kennings for poetry employed by the skalds, but their sense. It is quite obvious that at least the majority of these kennings (if not all of them) are describing not the poetic ability or the *art of poetry* as such, but the skald's own creation -- the very poem he is performing before his audi-

ence. Thus, according to Eyvindr, his genealogical poem in the Ead's honour is nothing but the poetic mead Óðinn brought from Jötunheimr flying in the shape of an eagle (cp. ... *meðan hans ætt / í hverlegi / galga farms / til goða teljum. // Hinn es Surt / ór spökkdglum / farmognuðr / fljúgandi bar.* "... whilst I count his family to the gods in the song ('liquid of the cauldron of the load of the gallows'). The one that the journey-maker (Óðinn) carried flying from the pit-dales of Surt").<sup>6</sup> Even more explicitly, the same notion is expressed in a fragment of an *erfíkvaði* by Völu-Steinn, in which the skald asks his son, Egill, to hear how "his streams of Óðinn's breast rush from his mouth" (*Heyr Míms vinar mína ... glaumbergs, Egill, strauma*) and states that he has been given "the find of Pund" (*mér's fundr gefinn Pundar*).<sup>7</sup> Taking into consideration such verses, we may well find ambiguity in Snorri's report that Óðinn gave Sutting's mead to the Æsir and those men who can compose poetry (*heim mognnum, er yrkja kunnu*). It is worth asking, then, what these lucky men were actually given. Was it their poetic skill? Yet, it is said that they were already capable of composing poetry. If so, why should not we understand this statement otherwise, namely that Óðinn gave them their poems?

The fact that the skalds tended to identify the *art of poetry* with the *piece of poetry* is quite significant and should reflect their attitude towards their craft. Otherwise, nothing could compel them to substitute these two concepts and to use one and the same group of kennings for poetry and for their poems. The verses of Egill Skalla-Grímsson provide us with evidence that if needed, skalds could invent other types of poetic circumlocutions to designate their poems, e.g., the way Egill describes his praise-poem in the last stanza of *Arinbjarnarkviða* -- *lof-köstr* "a pile of praise". That, of course, does not imply that while searching for some new modes of expressing himself Egill had in mind to solve the problem and to break off with the traditional usage. On the contrary, Egill's verses are the most revealing sources permitting us to discover the ideas, hidden behind this traditional confusion of concepts.

As we learn from *Sonatorrek*, the skald's poetic craft is a result of his direct, personal relations with Óðinn, a gift he received from his friend (*vinr*), the god of poetry. "The enemy of the wolf, accustomed to battle, gave me that skill devoid of faults" (*egfumk sþrótt ... vammí firða*) -- that is the way Egill explains the origin of his art. We may be sure that Egill was not the only skald who believed that he got his share of the mead of poetry directly from its divine owner. Describing their verses as "the gift" or "the mead of Óðinn", skalds were, undoubtedly, expressing this very idea.

Certainly, the notion that the skald was chosen by Óðinn and thus got a direct access to his precious drink could not but strengthen the self-consciousness of the Old Norse poet. We may even suspect that this idea of the skald's personal relationship with the god of poetry was the one underlying their self-consciousness. However that may be, while employing the mythological kennings for poetry as denominations for their own poetic production, skalds were using the most effective way of self-assertion.

Nevertheless, at the same time we have to take into consideration one very important consequence following of the idea that the skald's poetic art

was donated to him by Óðinn as a result of his direct, personal connection with this god: in the skald's relationship with his divine patron there was no room left for mediators. This was, probably, the main reason, why the so called "god of poetry", Bragi, most likely, the double of Bragi inn gamli Boddason, and thus initiator of the tradition, was not even mentioned in the myth of the origin of poetry. The skalds neither wanted, nor recognized any mediators in their personal relations with Óðinn. Here, presumably, is an answer to the question, why Old Norse sources provide us with no information at all about anything concerning the skald's professional training or his connections with his predecessors -- the skald owed his skill only to Óðinn.

Only once was the silence broken and a skald paid tribute to a person who instructed him in verse-making. I am referring to a quatrain of Hofgarða-Refr in which he credits Gizurr Gullbráskald with having taught him the art of poetry: "he led me often to the holy bowl of the raven-god" (*at helgu julli Hrafnáasar*). However, in the next *heimingr* Refr is expressing his gratitude to Óðinn: "we have to thank you, Val-Gautr, for the drink of the dwarf" (*þér eigum vér veigar / Val-Gautr ... Fals ... gjalda*). This "holy bowl of the raven-god" given by the elder poet to his pupil, mentioned by Refr, is the only instance when the skald recognizes a human mediator in his relations with Óðinn. Otherwise, the skalds preferred not to reveal their relations with their teachers. While declaring their verses "Óðinn's discovery", his "drink" or his "gift", they were mythologizing their craft and, thus, joining in a conspiracy of silence to avoid mentioning the very existence of the tradition to which they belonged. What for, we may ask. Beyond all doubt, they did so to emphasize the exceptional quality and value of their own poetry and the individual nature of their art.

If we now return to the story of Hallbjörn hali -- how he got his skill from the mound-dweller -- it will be easy to see, that the fantastic procedure described in this story had very much in common with the myth we have been discussing -- that of the origin of poetry. One of the main motifs of the myth is the idea of what may be called "orality" of the precious drink. The wise Kvasir was created of the spittle of the gods who *spat* into a jar to make a truce; the dwarfs who killed Kvasir told the gods that he had *choked* with his own wisdom; while stealing the mead from the giants, Óðinn *drinks* it up, keeps in his chest on his way to Ásgarðr and there *spits* it into the jars. The poetic mead, thus, was "oral" in every sense of the word, and the skalds were getting this oral gift of poetry also orally, passing through their mouths the mead spat out by Óðinn.

The same method of "oral" transmission of the art of poetry is described in the story of Hallbjörn. The only difference is that the poetic mead is substituted in it for its equivalent -- a *vísa* which the mound-dweller pours directly into Hallbjörn's mouth while tugging his tongue. Such a substitution can be explained by the fact that Hallbjörn is getting his skill not from Óðinn himself but from the dead poet, someone who was very close to Óðinn due to the magic poem, *níð*, he composed for Hákon Earl. Just as a drink of the mead of poetry, this *vísa* was enough to become a skald. Thus, in the story of



Hallbjörn's training as a poet we find reflection of the old myth of the poetic mead.

However, the myth does not exhaust this story. At the same time we can find in *Porleifs þáttur* a motive which proves that its author was aware of something beyond the scope of the myth. For Hallbjörn's task was not just to swallow the stanza pronounced by the dead poet and thus to get the art of poetry at one gulp, but to memorize and to repeat it, and afterwards to compose the rest of the poem about Þórleifr. In this manner the tradition was maintained and continued. So, the story of Hallbjörn contains and combines two different notions of how the skalds could get their skill – the mythological one, according to which no training was needed, since the skalds received their art with a drink of the poetic mead in a supernatural way; and quite another one, however deeply rooted in reality, that was never expressed directly: the recognition of the fact that the art of poetry was transmitted traditionally from skald to skald.

### References

- <sup>1</sup> *Hreiðars þáttur heimskæ* is cited from Guðni Jónsson's edition: *Íslendinga þættir*. Reykjavík, 1945; for the English translation see *Hrafnkel's Saga and other Icelandic stories*. Translated with an introduction of Hermann Pálsson. Penguin Classics, 1972, pp. 94–108.
- <sup>2</sup> *The Northmen Talk*. A Choice of tales from Iceland. Translated and with introduction by Jacqueline Simpson. London: Phoenix House & Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1965, pp.150-152. For the edition of *Porleifs þáttur jarlsskúlds* see *Íslendinga þættir*, ed. Guðni Jónsson. Reykjavík, 1945.
- <sup>3</sup> *Egil's Saga*. Translated with an introduction by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards. Penguin Classics, 1982, pp. 215-218.
- <sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 218; *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, Sigurður Nordal gaf út. (Íslensk fornrit, II. bindi). Reykjavík, 1933, bls. 268-272.
- <sup>5</sup> See Caerwyn Williams, *The Court Poet in Medieval Ireland*. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. LVII (1971).
- <sup>6</sup> *Háleygjatal*, 1b -2: All the verses are quoted from *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*. (A: Text efter håndskrifterne, 2 vols. B: Rettet text, 2 vols.). Udg. ved Finnur Jónsson (1912-15). København: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1967-73.
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. Bo Ralph, *En dikt av Steinþórr, islänning*. *Scripta Islandica*, 26 (1975), s. 46-53. See by the same author: *Om tillkomsten av Sonatorrek*. *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, bd. 91 (1976), s. 153-165.

