

CONTEXT AND COMPOSITION
LANGUAGE AS ART IN EGILL'S *HQFUÐLAUSN*

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1.

Two motifs determine the plot of *Egils saga*: *The relationship between king and vassal or, more precisely, the individual struggling against the established authority, and the gift and power of ars poetica.*

- (1) The storyline is marked by an anti-Haraldian trait: Kveld-Úlfr already knows that nothing good for his family will come of his relationship with King Haraldr hárfagri (chap. 6); the conflict between Kveld-Úlfr/Skalla-Grímr and King Haraldr (culminating in the death of Kveld-Úlfr's son Þórólfr) continues with the animosity between Egill Skalla-Grímsson and Haraldr's son Eiríkr blóðøx.
- (2) Numerous skalds appear in *Egils saga* giving it the appearance of a skaldic biography: the family's 'progenitor' Úlfr inn óargi himself possesses the gift of poetry; Ólvir hnúfa is the prominent skald in the first part of the saga, Egill in the second. Excellent skalds belong to Egill's family: Kveld-Úlfr and Skalla-Grímr, then Björn Hitdoelakappi, Víga-Barði and in generations to come, the Sturlung-dynasty with Snorri Sturluson and his nephews Sturla and Óláfr Þórðarson (Snorri is related to Egill's family on his mother's side; cf. *Íslendinga saga* chap. 156; Thorsson et al. 1988, 211-12). A special role is reserved for the young skald Einarr Helgason skálaglamm, whom Egill instructs in composing poetry. The dichotomy of 'ugly' and 'handsome' is linked to inspiration or the lack of it through Óðinn's poetic mead: the 'ugly' members of Egill's family compose poetry (Kveld-Úlfr, Skalla-Grímr, Egill), the 'handsome' ones do not (Þórólfr 1 and 2, Þorsteinn; cf. Krömmelbein 1983, 139-41).

Both motifs culminate in the episode in York, where the power of poetic art triumphs over despotism. Egill, being on his third voyage that will take him to king Æþelstan of England, is shipwrecked at the mouth of the Humber (according to the saga author, chap. 60). From there he surrenders himself to his worst enemy: Eiríkr blóðøx. By composing and reciting a drápa on Eiríkr, *Hqfuðlausn*, and with the help and mediation of his friend Arinbjörn, Egill manages to save his life.

The drápa that Egil presented at York is still considered a laudatory poem of conventionality and little originality, due to the fact that the emphasis lies on its form rather than the contents. In the main, scholars simply point out the introduction of end rhyme in skaldic praise poetry. However, the exceptionality of the poem's form is revealed when one looks at the skalds of the 9th to the 11th century: the poets generally avoided using end rhyme (Kuhn 1983, 83-84). Only 260 lines in dróttkvætt poetry display this form of metre. It seems justified to conclude that by consciously choosing an unusual form of composition, Egill confronted tradition. However, it remains a risky speculation to say that taking up the runhent-metre might have been regarded as plagiarism, as it was identified with Egill's poem.

The skilful composition of the form of *Hqfuðlausn* has long been neglected by scholars. Most comment was caused by the highly conventional kenningar, especially with regard to Egill's poem *Sonatorrek*. In *Sonatorrek*, we have one of the most important skaldic poems of the later heathen period, highly acclaimed for its use of mythological kenningar (cf. Krömmelbein 1983, 130-69). Thus scientific *opinio communis* has it that *Hqfuðlausn*

comes only second after *Sonatorrek* and the statements dealing with the form of the drápa are scarce:

Erik Noreen (1926, 196): "I *Höfuðlausn* är det den sällsynt glänsande formen som tilldrar sig huvudintresset."

Sigurður Nordal (1933, xxi): "Auk þess er kvæðið sjálf efnislitið og minna listaverk en beztu skáldskapur Egils annar ... af íþrótt en andagift."

Peter Hallberg (1975, 127 ff): "... can scarcely be regarded as a remarkable poem ... its greatest claim to fame consists in the fact that it is, as far as we know, the first Norse poem to employ end rhyme ... a rather conventional laudatory poem."

Jónas Kristjánsson (1988, 100): "The rhymed verse is plangent and the diction strident ..."

Gerd Wolfgang Weber (1989, 54): "In *Höfuðlausn* zeigt sich die außerordentliche Betonung der Form in der skaldischen Dichtung — hier tritt der Inhalt ganz zurück."

Bjarni Einarsson (1993, 154): "Höfuðlausn is singularly empty of concrete material; the king is praised for his generosity and martial prowess, as was usual."

Egill's *Höfuðlausn* is a remarkable example of skaldic poetry, not only for the special context in which the poem was handed down to us. Very rarely do we find such a poem undamaged, surviving in all of its stanzas. In this respect *Höfuðlausn* stands as an exception: 18 stanzas survive in the Wolfenbüttel manuscript of *Egils saga* (W, about 1350), being obviously regarded as an entity. Furthermore, we find 19 stanzas in AM 162a fol. (= ε, about 1400) and AM 457, 4° (= Ketilsbók, about 1700). Ole Worm offers a good copy of a now lost manuscript in his *Literatura Runica* (1636, 227-39), set in runes and accompanied by a Latin translation, where st. 16, 1-4 and st. 13, 1-4 are joined as stanza 16. In all extant manuscripts, we find at the end of *Höfuðlausn* an *epodium*, still awaiting interpretation. Most probably this half-stanza is a later addition, though the usefulness of the wish expressed contains semantic difficulties: "Njóti bauga/ sem Bragi auga/ vagna vára/ eða vili tára" [He shall have use of (gold)rings, as Bragi (had) of (Óðinn's) eye, of the keeper of the carts (?), or Vili (had) of (Frigg's) tears].¹

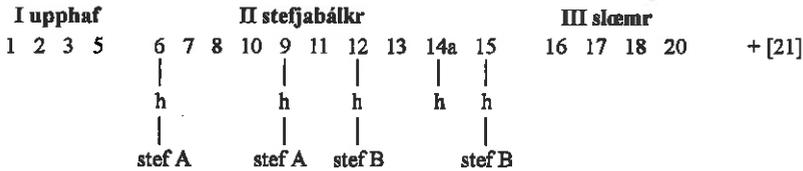
The composition of the stanzas differs in W and ε/K. According to Fidjestøl (1982, 88; cf. Helgason 1969, 162-68), they represent two varying oral versions of the poem. With regard to Finnur Jónsson's sequence of stanzas (1912-15, B I:30-33; cf. also Fidjestøl 1982, 47, 88-89, who follows Jónsson 1912-15, A I:35-39), the poem appears in W und ε/K as follows:

WOLFENBÜTTEL		KETILSBÓK/ε	
4 complete stanzas	1-3, 5	5 complete stanzas	1-5
half a stanza with stef A	6	half a stanza with stef A	6
3 complete stanzas	7-8, 10	2 complete stanzas	7-8
half a stanza with stef A	9	half a stanza with stef A	9
1 complete stanza	11	2 complete stanzas	10-11
half a stanza with stef B	12	half a stanza with stef B	12
1 1/2 stanzas	13, 14a	2 complete stanzas	14a+13b, 18
half a stanza with stef B	15	half a stanza with stef B	15
4 complete stanzas	16-18, 20	4 complete stanzas	17, 14b+16b, 19-20
(<i>epodium</i>)	21	(<i>epodium</i>)	21

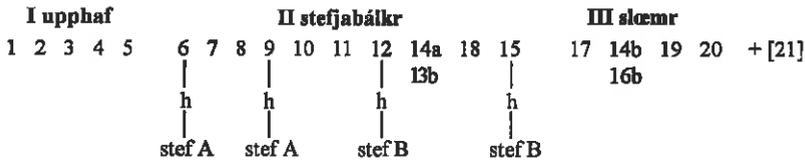
1 Here as elsewhere, the stanzas of *Höfuðlausn* are cited from Finnur Jónsson's edition of the poem (1912-15, B I:30-33).

WOLFENBÜTTEL

(a= first helming, b= second helming, h= half-stanza)



KETILSBÓK/ε



It is not likely that the two versions represent two independent entities. If so, however, it still seems to be a doubtful conclusion to draw — as Jón Helgason did (1969, 166) — that it would be needless, trying to reconstruct the text.² Variants emerge through oral tradition, where the so-called ‘original’ is in a state of flux: The text is being transformed, changed, instead of being canonically fixed.³ This phenomenon frequently appears in the transmission of scaldic poems, one indication being the splitting up of once complete literary entities (cf. Poole 1991). This is of course due to the chronological gap between the composition and the recording of a text in the High Middle Ages. However, the differences between the two versions are not as serious as to call them two independent ‘*Höfuðlausn* poems’. They are mere variants, without reflecting two different concepts with regard to the poem’s form and contents. On the contrary: They adhere to a single compositional principle.⁴

Finnur Jónsson reconstructs *Höfuðlausn* as a classical drápa of twenty stanzas (see also Nordal 1933, 185–92), that presents itself in its tripartite structure (*upphaf*, *stefjabálkr*, *slæmr*) as a well proportioned poem. The *stefjabálkr* (10 stanzas) is surrounded by 5 stanzas each and according to the rule we find an equal distance between the stanzas carrying the stef (cf. ε/K):

2 Some of the helmings in *Höfuðlausn* show a different arrangement of the individual verses, the stanzas itself being still formally identical. These differences go back to oral tradition and are not important for our interpretation of the poem and therefore negligible.

3 Cf. Poole who talks about a “flexible fixity” instead of a “complete fixity” with regard to *Höfuðlausn* (1993, 82).

4 It is only sensible to talk of two independent variants, if it is possible to explain the variation as semantically motivated.

Sequence of stanzas according to Jónsson
(1912-15, B I:30-33; Nordal 1933, 185-92)

I upphaf					II stefjabálkr										III slæmr						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	+ [21]	
					h			h			h			h							
					stef A			stef A			stef B			stef B							

Jónsson's reconstruction by no means shows a random arrangement of the stanzas, but follows the versions in the surviving manuscripts (W, ε/K), keeping the 20 stanza reference in mind. The underlying principle of the formal masterpiece *Höfuðlausn* is *symmetry*. *Upphaf* and *stefjabálkr* do not show great differences in the surviving texts.⁵ The *slæmr*, however, presents us with some difficulties. W and ε/K have four stanzas each, differing somewhat from each other, and an additional half-stanza (*epodium*), that might have been inserted at a later stage, being probably of a receptionist nature. Finnur Jónsson follows manuscript W for stanzas 16-18, whereas st. 19 takes up the ε/K-version, as it is only found in this manuscript. The final stanza (st. 20) matches the last complete stanza in W and ε/K. Thus Jónsson is able to 'reconstruct' an ideal close of the poem. The arrangement of the stanzas follows the surviving versions, being supported by textual interpretation. We therefore take Jónsson's text (1912-15, B I:30-33) as the basis for our interpretation of the poem, taking the deviances in the manuscripts into account if necessary. For Jónsson, the *epodium* does not belong to the poem proper. However, medieval tradition obviously regards it as part of *Höfuðlausn* (cf. also the modern school edition of Kristjánisdóttir and Óskarsdóttir 1992, 245-51).

The following remarks are meant as a try to prove the symmetry of *Höfuðlausn en detail*, beginning with the rhyme scheme displayed in stefs A and B.

2.

Stef A (st. 6, 3-4 and 9, 3-4), with the simple statement "Orðstír of gat/ Eiríkr at þat" [Eiríkr earns his renown (by being victorious in battle)], is emphasized by kenningar in the previous two lines. But the number of kenningar differs: st. 6 has one, st. 9 two; however, the number of kenningar is by no means arbitrary, as becomes obvious when looking at stef B (st. 12, 1-2 and st. 15, 1-2) and the rhyme scheme displayed there (the kenningar appear in italics):

st. 6		st. 9	
Hné ferð á fit	(a)	Þar var <i>eggja at</i>	(a)
við <i>fleina hnit</i> .	(a)	ok <i>odda gnat</i> .	(a)
Orðstír of gat	(b)	Orðstír of gat	(a)
Eiríkr at þat.	(b)	Eiríkr at þat.	(a)

⁵ Up to stanza 12, the sequence of stanzas is very similar. If we keep the 20 stanza-reference in mind, we know that W lacks at least two and a half and ε/K one stanza. Thus, we first look at ε/K for the missing stanzas. An obvious deviation between the two manuscripts is seen in stanzas 13 and 14.

st. 12		st. 15	
Kom gráðar læ	(a)	Jöfurr sveigði ý	(a)
á gjalpar skæ;	(a)	hrutu unda bý;	(a)
bauð ulfum hræ	(a)	bauð ulfum hræ	(b)
Eiríkr of sæ.	(a)	Eiríkr of sæ.	(b)

The *steffabálkr* is characterized by an evenly distributed number of kenningar. In *Höfuðlausn* we find that meaning is not transferred by filling them with main and secondary semantic implications, but by distributing the kenningar in a certain way: Thus we see within the frame of the *steffabálkr*, stanzas 7 and 14 — the first and the last full stanza of the *steffabálkr* — being void of such constructions. St. 7 (first helming) takes up the request for hearing displayed in st. 2, 7-8 and 3, 1, marking a new semantic unit at the beginning of the middle part, which explicitly deals with Eiríkr's merits in war: "Fremr munk segja,/ ef firar þegja;/ fróðgum fleira/ til frama þeira" [If the men keep silence, I will continue, I got to know more about their military campaigns]. The second helming leads over to the main topic: "æstu undir/ jöfurs of fundir,/ brustu brandar/ við bláar randar" [The wounds were increased by the fighting prince, edges broke on blue shields].

Stanza 7 connects Eiríkr's fights at sea (st. 4 and 5) with his fights on land. The poem's climax is reached in stanzas 10 and 11, between stef A and B, showing four kenningar each and being thus especially marked within *Höfuðlausn* (cf. fig. "The Composition of *Höfuðlausn* [on the basis of Jónsson's conflated form]" at the end of the text).

By taking the distribution of kenningar and the rhyme scheme of the stef stanzas into account, we are faced with a remarkable symmetrical shape of the *steffabálkr*.⁶

stef A		stef A		stef B		stef B			
6	7	(8)	9	10	11	12	(13)	14	15
1	0		2	4	4	2		0	1
aabb		aaaa		aaaa		aaaa		aabb	

The appearance of mythological kenningar (put in italics), as well as the designations for the beasts of battle (wolf, raven), show that the *steffabálkr* stanzas, where Eiríkr's battles on land are described, form the climax of the poem in its sequence of thoughts. *Slæmr* and *upphaf* (st. 3-5) do not contain any such kenningar.

st. 8: frákat fellir/ fyr fetils svelli/ Óðins eiki/ í járnleiki.

st. 10: þar vas hrafnu gorr,/ . . . ól flagðs gotal/ färbjóðr Skota;/ trað nipt Nara/náttverð ara.

6 Stanzas 8 and 13 appear in brackets, as we do not include them in our interpretation. St. 8 offers numerous kenningar and circumlocutions for battle and thus shows a similar composition as st. 17, which displays many gold-kenningar, being located right after the introductory stanza of the *slæmr* (st. 16). Stanza 13 presents us with some problems in its transmission and should therefore not be integrated into the interpretation of the form of *Höfuðlausn* (st. W12 and W 13, respectively s/K 13 and s/K 14, appear to have more divergences in the surviving copies than the rest of the *steffabálkr*; cf. p. 3). The symmetrical composition of the *steffabálkr* as a whole is nevertheless obvious. Any 'irregularities' caused by the chronological gap between the composition and the transmission of the poem are therefore negligible.

- st. 11: Flugu *hjaldrs tranar*/ of hræs lanar;/ órut blóðs vanar/ *benmós granar*;/ sleit und freki,/ en oddbreki/ gnúði hrafní/ á *høfuðstafni*.
 st. 12: Kom gráðar læ/ á *galpar skæ*;/ bauð ulfum hræ/ Eiríkr of sæ.
 st. 13: Lætr *snót saka*/ *sverð-Freyr* vaka
 st. 15: = stef st. 12

All mythological *kenningar* referring to Eiríkr appear in the *stefjabálkr*. The only exception being the *kenning* “Fróða mjöl” [Fróði’s flower (= gold, goldrings)] in st. 17 (*slæmr*), which does not come as a surprise in a stanza praising the recipient’s generosity. As mentioned before, Egill ‘keeps’ the ornamental poetic-mead-*kenningar* at the beginning of the poem, to himself, having as a skald been inspired by it. Beginning and end of *Høfuðlausn* are skilfully arranged, starting with Egill himself (st. 1: “Vestr komk” [I came from the west]), naming the reason for composing the poem and addressing the recipient directly (st. 2: “Buðumk hilmir lqð” [I bring the praise poem before the prince]). This is followed by the obligatory request for silence and hearing (st. 3, first helming), leading over to Eiríkr’s merits in war (st. 3, second helming): “flestr maðr of frá,/ hvat fylkir vá,/ en Viðrir sá,/ hvar valr of lá” [most of the men heard about the prince’s merits in battle, and Óðinn saw, where the slain lay]. St. 4 and 5 deal with Eiríkr’s deeds as a warrior exclusively. The end of the poem displays a reverse sequence: st. 16, introducing the *slæmr* — as does st. 7 of the *stefjabálkr* (“Enn munk vilja/ fyr verum skilja/ skapleik skata,/ skal mærd hvata” [I want to present the ruler’s disposition toward the men; the laudatio shall soon be finished]) — takes up the subject of Eiríkr’s generosity, skilfully combined with a slight hint at the skald’s reward (we have to keep in mind that Egill’s head is at stake): “skal mærd hvata;/ verpr ábröndum” [the laudatio shall soon be finished; “river-fire” (= gold) is spread (by the prince)] (st. 16,4-5; transition to the second helming). In st. 18 we see the skald confessing “hugat mælik þar” [openminded I state here (in Eiríkr’s hall)], hinting at Egill’s recall in the following stanzas (19, 20), where he, the skald, with proper (honest, true) words succeeds in increasing Eiríkr’s fame by reciting and composing *Høfuðlausn*: “kank mála mjöl/ of manna sjöt” [I measure the words properly in the hall of men] (st. 20, 3-4). The last stanza with the ‘ear-catching’ *kenning* “ór hlátra ham” [from the hull of laughter (= the chest)] already shows Egill’s triumph over the king. Furthermore, *upphaf* and *slæmr* are characterized by a recurring water-motif (journey and poetry), the function of which is to be explained in the following part.⁷

3.

The York-episode in *Egils saga* contains numerous inadequacies with regard to its contents and has therefore provoked diverse interpretations. The historical truth behind the events presented has been justifiably questioned. Chronological inconsistencies only point to one conclusion, namely that we are confronted with a combination of historical facts and poetic design. A look at the geographic frame reveals that the distance between the mouth of the Humber and York, the residence of Eiríkr, is great enough to give Egill the possibility of getting to safety. Besides, scientific investigation has shown that this report is contra-

7 The following words and circumlocutions shall be quoted as examples: *Viðris ber*, *munknarrar skut* (st. 1), *Óðins mjöl* (st. 2), *mælis ú* (st. 4), *brimils móði* (st. 5), *fit* (st. 6) — *sæ* (st. 15), *ábröndum* (st. 16), *haukstrandar mjöl* (st. 17), *Óðins ægi* (st. 19).

dicted by Egill's poem *Arinbjarnarkviða*, where we hear: "létk hersi/ heim of sóttan" [I visited the ruler at home] (st. 3; Jónsson 1912-15, B I:38). The author of the saga, be it Snorri or not, was looking for a rational explanation for Egill's decision, who was undoubtedly able to get to safety, but delivered his life into Eiríkr's hands. We therefore conclude that the key to properly understanding this episode, has to be sought in Egill's own life and poetry.

The *Höfuðlausn*-episode in York is reflected by Egill himself in his praise poem *Arinbjarnarkviða* (st. 3-10). As is well known, the poem is dedicated to his friend Arinbjörn, who stood up for him at king Eiríkr's court. Egill's self-portrayal displayed here is a conscious, meaningful stylization of the skald and his counterpart Eiríkr. Compared with *Höfuðlausn*, where we only have one mythological kenning ("sverð-Freyr", st. 13) versus twelve neutral ones — meaning in this context faint and non-marked designations as "gramr" (st. 4, 5, 20), "jöfurr" (st. 7, 15, 16, 19), "hilmir" (st. 10), "skati" (16) and "þengill" (st. 20) —, *Arinbjarnarkviða* puts Eiríkr's importance (cf. the genealogical link in st. 3: "ynglings burar" [Yngling's son]) and position as a powerful ruler at the center: "Þars allvaldr/ und ýgs hjalmi,/ ljóðfrömuðr,/ at landi sat;/ stýrði konungr/ við stirðan hug/ í Jörvík/ úrgum" [There the omnipotent, the patron of the people, ruled the land under the helm of terror; the king ruled in York with a firm mind over swampy lands] (st. 4; Jónsson 1912-15, B I:38).

As a result, Egill has to put the "helm of courage" ("djarfhött"; st. 3) on his dark hair to face the ruler with the "helm of terror". Egill presents the danger to confront Eiríkr in his own kingdom as a special risk that bears mythical overtones. The "helm of terror" has a parallel in Fafnir's *Ægishjálmr*. It has the potential to inflict fear in everybody seeing it and can thus be interpreted as a symbol of violence and arbitrary rule (*Snorra Edda*; Jónsson 1931, 129). The negative stylization of Eiríkr as a 'kind of Fafnir' is paralleled by Egill's own self-portrait as a 'kind of Óðinn': "en tíru fylgðu/ sǫkk sámleit/ síðra brúna" [and the gift was followed by the dark lowering of the hanging brows] (*Arinbjarnarkviða* 8; Jónsson 1912-15, B I:39). Egill's striking outer appearance is described in detail in *Egils saga*. The author says about Egill, who is sitting at king Æpelstan's carousal after the death of his brother Þórólfr: "en er hann sat, . . . þá hleypði hann annarri brúninni ofan á kinnina, en annarri upp í hárrætr; Egill var svarteygr ok skolbrúnn" [there he sat . . . with one eyebrow sunk down right to the cheek and the other lifting up to the roots of the hair. His eyes were black and his eyebrows joined in the middle] (Nordal 1933, 143; trans. Pálsson and Edwards 1976, 128). With this facial expression, Egill imitates one-eyedness, one of Óðinn's most prominent features: Egill portrays himself as Óðinn, to be closer to the god that he admires most (cf. also Bessason 1977, 283).⁸

Egill has a special relationship with Óðinn. The skald knows him so well that he can predict the god's wrath: "Reið sé rogn ok Óðinn!/. . . Leiðisk lofða stríði/ landóss" [May

8 A similar example can be found in *Sturlunga saga*, in the saga of Hvamm-Sturla (*Sturlu saga*), Snorri Sturluson's powerful father. Here, Hvamm-Sturla is attacked by Páll's wife Þorbjörg with a knife: "Hún hljóp fram milli manna og hafði kníf í hendi og lagði til Sturlu og stefndi í augað og mælti þetta við: 'Hví skal eg eigi gera þig þeim líkastan er þú vilt líkastur vera en þar er Óðinn'" [She ran out among the men with a knife in her hand and thrust at Sturla's eye, saying, "Why shouldn't I treat you most like the figure you want to be — and that is Óðinn?"] (Thorsson et al. 1988, 94; trans. McGrew 1970, 107-8; cf. Heinrichs 1995, 60-61). Snorri, being probably the author of *Egils saga*, definitely knew the story. Besides, he was related to Egill's family through his mother Guðny. Egill is thus a precursor of the Óðinn admirer Hvamm-Sturla. They both identify themselves with the one-eyed god.

the presiding forces and Óðinn be angry with him! . . . The land-Áss shall hate the people's enemy (= king Eiríkr blóðøxx) (Lv. 19; Kock 1926-29, 37, § 1044). One of Óðinn's special gifts is rune magic, that Egill himself performs several times in *Egils saga*. Óðinn's one-eyedness stands not only for rune magic, but for poetry itself (cf. *Hávamál* 139-40: "oc ec drycc of gat ins dýra miadaðr/ ausinn Óðreri" [and I received a drink of the delicious mead, from (the cauldron) Óðreri] [Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 40]). These are the two gifts that Egill received from 'his' god, the 'weapons' that help him face his arch-enemy Eiríkr successfully. By the means of poetry — Óðinn's gift to the Æsir and humanity through the capture of the poetic mead — Egill manages to save his head and even challenges the enemy: "ór hlátra ham/ hróðr berk fyr gram" [from the hull of laughter, I brought praise before the king] (st. 20, 5-6).⁹ What we see is the glorification of Óðinn's gift. Poetry/poetic mead is "Óðins mjöð" (st. 2,3) and "Óðins ægi" (st. 19,7), serving as a protection against the ruler with the "helm of terror": "Þó bólstverð/ of bera þorðak/ maka hœings/ markar drótni" [Nevertheless I dared to bring the "pillow-reward of the salmon-shaped" (= Óðinn = poetic mead/poetry) before the "master of the woodland" (= Eiríkr)] (*Arinbjarnarkviða* 6; Jónsson 1912-15, B I:38). Here, the choice of the kenning for "poetry" is revealing, as it hints at a special trait of the myth: in the form of a slippery and agile snake, Óðinn visits the giantess Gunnlóð, stealing the poetic mead. This is the context of Egill's kenning "pillow-reward of the salmon-shaped" (the snake is described by a *tertium comparationis* meaning "agile, winding" (= like a salmon), a usual device in skaldic metonymy). With Óðinn's inspiration (poetry) Egill is able to withstand the fatal threat caused by Eiríkr in York. Just as Óðinn once found himself in a extremely dangerous situation visiting Gunnlóð and performing the cultural deed, so Egill does now at king Eiríkr's court. This interpretation is supported by the poem's beginning and end. While Egill "boarded" his "ship of the mind" [munknarrar skut (= chest)] with the cargo (poetry) in stanza 1, he explicitly states in stanza 19 that he brought the poetry forth with his mouth from the bottom of his soul, "spitting it out" before the king: "hroerðak munni/ af munar grunni/ Óðins ægi/ of jöru fægi" [I brought forth from the "mind's bottom" (= chest) "Óðinn's sea" (= poetry) for the "battle's decorator" (= Eiríkr)]. Egill presents himself as Óðinn in a situation of comparable danger, that he alone overcomes by using the gift of 'his' god. Never has Egill been closer to Óðinn than in York. And he is able to outdo his 'precursors' (from the point of view of the saga's author: *Höfuðlausn*-poets as Óttarr svarti, Þórarinn loftunga and Gísli Illugason) and even Óðinn himself:

– He refuses to "hide his head" [fara hulðu höfði] when going to Eiríkr (*Egils saga* chap. 59; Nordal 1933, 178); Óðinn, however, visits the giants *incognito* and in disguise, when pledging his head in a contest of knowledge (*Grimnismál*, prose introduction): "Sá var í feldi blám oc nefndiz Grimnir, oc sagði ekki fleira frá sér" [He had a coat on and called himself Grimnir, and he didn't reveal anything else about himself] (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 57).¹⁰

9 The *Lausavísur* (Lv. 35 and 36; chap. 61 and 64 in *Egils saga*) show another moment of Egill's ironic and arrogant attitude towards Eiríkr (Lv. 36: "Urðumk leið en ljóta/ landbeidaðar reiði;/ sigrat gaukr, ef glamma/ gamm veit of sik þramma" [The look of the land-grabber was loathsome to me: Cuckoos won't perch to be killer-bird's carrion] [Nordal 1933, 200; trans. Pálsson and Edwards 1976, 168]). Hines (1995) presents another picture of the relationship between Egill and Eiríkr. He calls it one being based on equality and sympathy. However, this is neither supported by Egill's own reception nor by the saga's context.

10 Even in *Sonatorrek* Egill puts himself in direct context to Óðinn's cultural deed (st. 1, 5-8; Jónsson 1912-15, B I:34). Just as Óðinn once brought the poetic mead in his chest to the Æsir (and

– Óðinn has to spend three nights with Gunnlǫð to gain three draughts of the mead. In a single night Egill manages to turn Óðinn's inspiration into poetry (the drápa *Höfuðlausn*).

– Óttarr svarti is also outdone: He needs three nights — the magical implications of the number three need to be borne in mind — to compose a drápa and save his head (a recurring case).¹¹

– Egill is introduced to another precursor by his friend and aid Arinbjörn: “Svá gerði Bragi, frændi minn, þá er hann varð fyrir reiði Bjarnar Sviakonungs, at hann orti drápu tvituga um hann eina nótt ok þá þar fyrir höfuð sitt” [That's what my kinsman Bragi the Old did when he had to face the anger of King Bjorn of Sweden. He made a drápa of twenty stanzas overnight and that's what saved his head] (Nordal 1933, 182; trans. Pálsson and Edwards 1976, 156).

– Egill could even point out a similar case in his own family: According to *Skáldatal* (*Snorra Edda*, Codex Upsaliensis), Úlfr inn óargi composed a drápa in a single night.

We see that *Höfuðlausn* is no less complex than Egill's other major poems. What is more, the context of the saga, the interpretation of the poem and its reflection by Egill himself, mark it as the climax in Egill's self-stylization as a skald and his artistic independence from royal power.

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thus to humanity), delivering it over Ásgarðr, so Egill now has to bring forth poetry (“Óðinn's theft”) from his chest: “esa nú vænligt/ of Viðurs þýfi,/ né hógdrægt/ ór hugar fylgsmi” [it is not justified to hope for “Óðinn's theft” now, nor easy to drag it forth from the “thoughts' hidingplace” (= chest)].

11 As far as *Höfuðlausn*-narratives (Óttarr svarti, Gísli Illugason, Þórarinn loftunga) and their relation to the York-episode in *Egils saga* are concerned, see Hafstað 1995.

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