

‘Gab mir ein Gott zu sagen, was ich leide’:
Sonatorrek and the myth of skaldic lyric

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‘Und wenn der Mensch in seiner Qual verstummt,/ Gab mir ein Gott zu sagen, was ich leide’. While researching this paper, I was struck by the fact that at least four scholars (Misch 1928, Olrik 1930, Hruby 1932, Reuschel 1961) quote these lines from Goethe’s *Torquato Tasso* (V, 5, 3432-3) in the course of their discussions of *Sonatorrek*. Aside from the obvious thematic similarity between Egill’s poem and this little fragment, what could its persistence in the critical literature suggest?

For one thing, the quotation presents us with a historically particular idea of the poet: as a man who suffers like everyone else, but who, rather than being overpowered by his personal feelings, is gifted with the capacity of expressing them. Surpassing the mute, inward subjectivity of common men, the poet has available to him a transparent means of externalising his inner feelings: he simply speaks what he suffers. This is, I hope, instantly recognisable as a Romantic account of expressive lyricism, one which stresses the expression of the poet’s subjectivity, often facilitated by some kind of ecstatic or mystical inspiration (think, for example, of Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’ or ‘The Aeolian

Harp’). Also, by implicitly invoking a kinship between *Sonatorrek* and a universally acknowledged great of Western literature, the use of this quotation from Goethe positions *Sonatorrek* as a ‘classic’, in the sense of a work that in some way transcends its historical moment, can profitably be compared to other classics, and constitutes a model of excellence for people in other places and times – claims rarely made about other skaldic poetry. *Sonatorrek* is thus emplaced in a New Critical canon of decontextualised ‘verbal icons’.

In this paper, I will survey the influence of this discursive complex on discussions of skaldic poetry in a few literary histories of the first half of this century. After briefly looking at some of the ways in which these ideas can be said to linger on in more recent skaldic scholarship, I will outline another possible approach to the *lausavísur* of the *Íslendinga sögur*, illustrating this with reference to the stanzas known as *Máhlíðingavísur* in *Eyrbyggja saga*.

Turning to the scholarly literature, then, I wish now to examine the implications of the idea of *Sonatorrek* as expressive Romantic lyric. Lest it seem that I am reading too much into a few citations from Goethe, here is a representative sample of what some scholars have had to say about *Sonatorrek*. Many other discussions of the poem exist, of course: as Krömmelbein observes (1983 130), few other skaldic poems have attracted such a degree of attention (a circumstance of no small significance to the argument of this paper).¹

- ‘it was no brutal pirate manslayer (as the Saga too often depicts him) that could feel and express such grief’ (Vigfússon and Powell 1883 276)
- ‘there is a strong contrast between the peculiar Icelandic method of narrative – so scrupulous in letting the characters speak for themselves, so determined to keep the author’s private sentiments from interfering – and the lyrical grief of Egill’s poem’ (Ker 1904 191)
- ‘Kein andres altnordisches Werk, in Vers oder Prosa, kreist so um das Ich und folgt so zwanglos den Bewegungen der Seele. Es ist die persönlichste Lyrik dieses Schrifttums’ (Heusler 1923 145)
- *Sonatorrek* ‘offenbart sich nun vollends die eigene, von aller antikischen Selbstbesinnung wesensverscheidene Art, in der der kämpfende Mensch hier sich findet, besitzt und weiß’ (Misch 1928 238)
- Egill can ‘express his whole soul in a poem with lyric colouring’ (161); ‘for the first time lyric feeling broke forth in full force, the world-historic point

¹ Reasons of space necessitate my passing over much scholarship on *Sonatorrek* (Krommelbein 1983 contains the fullest bibliography of studies published prior to 1980). The most glaring omission, of course, is Sigurður Nordal’s ‘Átrúnaður Egils Skallagrímssonar’ (1924), which inaugurates an important alternative strand of discussion of the poem, focusing on the way it uses myth, and its possible religious or ritual content. This is the liveliest strand of *Sonatorrek* scholarship in recent times (see for example Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999, Harris 1999). The developmental and/or psychologising interests which focused on *Sonatorrek* in the early years of this century have, I suggest, dispersed into other texts, for example, the *skáld* sagas (see below).

had been reached . . . the new element is the strength of feeling which forces him to sing of his inner experience . . . the outburst of individuality in this epoch now makes itself felt in poetry' (Olrik 1930 164-65)

- 'Kein altnordischer Dichter hat uns erlaubt, so tief in seine Seele zu schauen und dort das Wirken elementarer menschlicher Gefühle nachzuerleben' (de Vries 1941 136)
- *Sonatorrek* is 'generally regarded as the first purely subjective lyric in the North' (Hallberg 1962 136)
- 'a deeply personal and most unconventional expression of feeling' (Foote and Wilson 1970 361), which 'gives an even deeper insight into Egill's character' than his *lausavísur* (Turville-Petre 1976 lxxii)

The expressive model of lyric, then, goes unchallenged here; what is perhaps more surprising, however, is way in which the assumption of lyric expressiveness is imbricated with a narrative of cultural development. This is particularly clear in the citations from Misch, Olrik and Hallberg (though it is also a subterranean presence in Heusler's *Die altgermanische Dichtung*).

According to this narrative, the emergence of lyric poetry marks a crucial turning point in the history of Western civilisation – the birth of the individual, no less. Archaic heroic society, it is suggested, fosters in the communal epic its proper literary form, and society and literature develop in tandem into both a more differentiated social organisation, and a personal and subjective poetic, that of the lyric. The idea that epic and lyric manifest successive stages in the development of human consciousness is based originally on a conceptualisation of archaic Greek literary history, which is then taken as a model for cultural development in general.² For Romantic theoreticians as disparate as Goethe, Friedrich Schlegel, Hegel, and Hugo, Greek poetry develops historically from epic song concerned with communal myth to a lyricism which expresses an individual, even idiosyncratic, subjectivity (see Goethe 1819, Hegel 1835, Wellek 1967, Miller 1994). In the early years of this century, the developmental model took concrete form, culminating in the works of classicists such as Snell (1953) and Fränkel (1951).³ A line from Homer to

² The Greeks, in this theory, lived through the historical development of all the important Western literary forms: as befits an age whose cultural status is classical, Greece contains the germ of all that we now value. 'It is generally agreed nowadays that the various poetic genres that make up the literatures of the West, the epic, lyric poetry, and drama, coexist side by side. Among the Greeks, however, who created the types destined to serve as the vehicles of great poetic inspiration, and through whose influence, direct or indirect, they were spread among the nations of Europe, the genres flourished in chronological succession. . . . In the land of their origin, it seems, the literary types were the result, and the vocal expression, of specific historical situations' (Snell 1953 43).

³ Fränkel studied under the classical philologist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, a colleague of Andreas Heusler's at Berlin with whom Heusler maintained a correspondence after his move to Switzerland in 1919 (Kosenina and Zernack 1995).

Archilochus, for these scholars, traces the development of a ‘more precise appreciation of the self and its distinctive qualities’ (Snell 1953 47) and a ‘discovery of individual feeling’ (Snell 1953 61). The validity of this model for archaic and classical Greek poetry has since been extensively and searchingly challenged (see eg. Walker 1998, Miller 1994, Fowler 1987), but what is of interest here is, of course, the influence of such a model in skaldic studies.⁴

Perhaps its most straightforward manifestation is in the works of W. P. Ker and Axel Olrik. For Ker, skaldic poetry, ‘later in kind’ (1908 137) than eddic, appears *prematurely* in Old Norse-Icelandic literature and therefore prevents the full development of eddic poetry (1908 136-38, 142). The heroic epic is supplanted by lyric in the mandated way, but the consequences are disastrous, as skaldic verse is bad lyric, insincere, artificial and frigid mannerism (1908 136-38). Olrik is also unimpressed by skaldic poetry in general, for the Romantically-inflected reasons we might expect – skaldic poetry is ‘barbarously dis-integrated’ (1930 157) from real life, merely ‘a play of words’ which does not partake of ‘inspiration’ (158). When writing about *Sonatorrek*, though, he can afford to be a little more positive, and casts his argument, as we have seen above, in terms of a historical development of consciousness paralleled by the shift from impersonal heroic epic (eddic poetry) to lyric (skaldic): ‘the mighty waves that surged through Egil’s soul . . . indicate a turning point in the life of the Scandinavian people’ (Olrik 1930 164).

Georg Misch’s thought-provoking 1928 article on Egill’s poetry is part of a larger project, the *Geschichte der Autobiographie*, a monumental investigation of the representation of the self in Western culture, from classical times on. In the context of this project, Egill is intended to illustrate the mode of being a subject proper to Germanic heroic culture, defined in opposition to both the classical ideal of the gradual development of personality, and the medieval Christian one of the care of the soul (Misch 1928 199-201) – inserting, that is to say, archaic *Germanentum* into the Hegelian narrative by which European Christianity emerges out of the ruins of classical culture (see Wyss 1999). In contrast to Olrik’s condemnation, for Misch the authenticity of all of Egill’s poetry ‘aus einem ursprünglichen, Dichtung und Wirklichkeit verbindenden Lebensverhältnis hervorgeht, das die ganze germanische Kriegergesittung durchwaltet: dem Bunde des Helden und des Sängers’ (202). The kenning, stigmatised by Ker and Olrik as sterile decoration, is also rehabilitated. According to Misch, the kenning aims at the opposite effect to conventional poetic imagery, insofar as it does not particularise the arbitrary generality of the linguistic sign by deployment of idiosyncratic, irreducibly personal imagery, but rather acts as an instrument for the ‘symbolic consecration’ of the everyday, emplacing the particular items of experience (‘dieser schneidende Schwert,

⁴ For example, this model may suggest a reason for the persistence, noted by Roberta Frank, of the conviction that eddic poetry is older than skaldic (Frank 1985 160).

dieser wikinghafter Sohn') in a communal mythic system (215-6). He also insists upon the characteristic mode of address of the skaldic poem, rejecting the Romantic analogy of music and poetry:

Die Unmittelbarkeit des altertümlichen Lyrikers ist nicht von der subjektiven Art, daß er vor sich hinsänge, so daß das Erlebnis wie von selbst zu Musik würde. Er spricht . . . auch wenn er sein innerstes öffnet, zu andern Menschen oder vor ihnen auftretend, bewußt und in fester Form Diese Verse sind gebundene *Rede* in dem eigentlichen Sinne des Wortes: Rede, die nicht bloß darstellt, sondern kundgibt, mitteilt und auslöst, Eindruck macht und einwirkt, eingreift in den Gang des Geschehens hier und jetzt'. (Misch 1928 217)

This reading of Egill's poetry licences a historicised version of the 'outburst of individuality', that is, the emergence of a historically distinct heroic Germanic individuality, born in struggle and displaying itself in triumph. 'Nicht um zu sagen, was er leidet, schafft Egill das 'Erblied' [*Sonatorrek*] . . . sondern die Überwindung des Leides spricht er aus: wie er den Druck der Bedrängnis und sich selber zwingt' (238). Romantic self-expression is absent: in its place is self-assertion (217), and Misch rejects the ideology of the poet as demiurge, creating a new world out of his mind, in favour of the poet as speaker of the communal symbolic language given to him by myth. The rhetoric of striving, self-assertion and triumph employed by Misch now seems very much of its time. Nevertheless, his insistence on the social dimension of skaldic poetics, for example, his positive re-evaluation of those conventional aspects of the kenning so distasteful to believers in expressive lyricism, points forward to the recent interest in cultural context and the ways in which discourses such as myth and poetry were active in Old Norse-Icelandic society.

My final example, Andreas Heusler, also makes reference to the developmental model, but in a complex and contested way.⁵ As several writers have pointed out (eg. Beck, Clunies Ross), his is a pessimistic account of European history. Influenced by Nietzsche, he sees pre-Christian Scandinavia, particularly Iceland, as the classical age of Germanic culture which declines disastrously into the repressive Church and State of Christian Europe. Iceland thus typifies a middle stage of culture, between savagery ('man kannte Menschenopfer, aber keinen Kannibalismus' 12) and a 'gereifere Kultur' [more ripened culture] of cities, a cash economy, occupational specialisation and ceremonious, orthodox religion (pp. 12-14).⁶ In *Die altgermanische Dichtung*

⁵ Beck outlines Heusler's rather complex taxonomy of Old Germanic poetry (1998 285-86); Swenson's discussion of Heusler's model in ch. 1 of her *Performing definitions* critiques its developmental implications (1991).

⁶ What exemplifies the "lower" end of this cultural ladder is not clear, though the reference to cannibalism suggests long-established European prejudices about the "savages" of Africa and the Pacific; but the upper end is clearly the Christian culture of the western European High Middle Ages. This positioning of pre-Christian Old Norse-Icelandic culture as a 'middle stage' is part of Heusler's investment in the ideology of the classical epoch, always imagined in terms of a centre, moderation, etc.: discussing Winckelmann's formula 'noble simplicity and quiet grandeur', Wyss

(1st ed. 1923, 2nd rev. ed. 1941), he polemicises against the Romantic narrative I have been discussing, saying:

Das von der Völkerkunde und der allgemeinen Dichtungslehre erwartete Bild: wie sich aus der tanzenden, singenden Masse gleichsam herauschält die gegliederte Gemeinde, wo der Einzelne etwas gilt und neben dem Gesang das mehr apollinische Sprechen zu Ehren kommt: - wer dieses Bild in anschaulichem Einzelfall bestätigt sehen will, wende sich anderem Stoffe zu als den Dichtresten der alten Germanen. Er wäre denn gewillt, einen hartnäckigen Kampf mit den Quellen zu führen (Heusler 1941 113).

Heusler does not believe that skaldic poetry evolved out of eddic poetry, but he does regard it as more distant from common Germanic roots than eddic, and is inclined to ascribe this to the influence of the Celtic culture of Ireland (28, 242). The model of autochthonous, organic development is thus abandoned in favour of hybridity; skaldic poetry on Heusler's account is a foreign body in *altgermanische Dichtung*. It is important in Old Norse-Icelandic literary history, however, if only because it introduces the subjective impulse which heroic poetry then puts to better use:

Einfluß der skaldischen Lyrik auf die Heldenelegie möchten wir nur in dem mittelbaren Sinne annehmen, daß jene persönliche Ichdichtung mitgearbeitet hat an dem Lockern und Bereichern der Seelenschwingungen . . . obwohl dann die Lyrik im Bande der heroischen Rollen viel strömender, sanglicher wurde, mehr Naturlaut, als es dem Hofton und seinen Genossen vergönnt war! (Heusler 1941 188)

This is, of course, the nub of the problem that skaldic poetry presents to these scholars. According to literary history it *must be* lyric; it appears at the right historical stage, after epic and, in the prescribed manner, seems to supplement the 'objective', 'external' representation of historical events with the subjective representation of personal feelings. On every other criterion which the nineteenth century offered for judging lyric, however, it is at best a very marginal case. Heusler gives as good an account of this circumstance as anyone:

In dem engen, nicht weniger als kunstlosen Rahmen offenbart sich eine entschiedene 'Individualdichtung' . . . Es sind in der Tat keine Naturlaute, kein volksliedhafter Singsang; die eddischen Heldenklagen erreichen mehr an wogendem Gefühlserguß . . . Eine gehaltene, glasspröde Kunst, einem Krystall ähnlicher als einer Blume (Heusler 1941 101-102).

No-one, I presume, will be surprised by this stage that Heusler praises *Sonatorrek* fulsomely. Egill's reckoning with his god bodies forth healthy Germanic paganism, cheerful, worldly, and self-willed. The poem itself is both uniquely personal, and attains to a popular, proverbial wisdom; lyrical, and yet

observes, 'noble, yet simple; great but without being loud; classical harmony was a free balance of opposites' (26). A similar emphasis, I would argue, determines the firm delineation of the classical epoch not only from the decadent modernity it reproves, but also primitive 'savagery'.

a product of will and intellect. I wish to make two suggestions concerning this. The first is that Heusler (as do the other scholars I have discussed) makes *Sonatorrek* the crucial exemplar of the version of Old Norse-Icelandic culture given to him by his philosophy of history. The Egill he reads out of *Sonatorrek* is recognisably a personification of the positive virtues associated with the Nietzschean *Herrenethik* which, as Beck observes, ‘Heusler considered a generally prevailing characteristic of Old Germanic civilisation’ (Beck 1998 292). Secondly, I believe that the almost paradoxical turn of phrase Heusler deploys here is an element of his classicising agenda, according to which he regards *Sonatorrek* as a balance of opposing forces: emotion and intellect, personal and public for example.

Considering our position at the far end of the process I have tried to sketch briefly here, I would argue that what is at issue is the formation of a canon. As critiques of the canon of post-medieval English literature over the last couple of decades suggest, canons are formed by ideological ‘pressures and limits’, to use Raymond Williams’ phrase. The formative pressures on the canon of skaldic poetry are exerted by the centrality of the concept of lyric to several disparate cultural endeavours. One, as I have tried to show, is the historicist attempt to map an evolution of consciousness in Western cultures using changes in literary forms. Another is a Romantic commitment to a poetics of subjective expression: by reading *Sonatorrek*, we can see into Egill’s soul. Lyric poems are also, of course, the preferred raw material for the *modus operandi* of close reading leading to ‘literary appreciation’ promulgated by the major literary critical movement of the mid-twentieth century, the New Criticism. Even a comparatively recent study such as that of de Looze (1989), for all its gestures towards deconstruction, still unfolds according to this tradition. *Sonatorrek*’s status as the canonical ‘classic’ of the skaldic lyric, then, seems secure enough. I do not want to suggest, however, that the historicist or psychologising approaches I have been describing are necessarily illegitimate, or to ‘correct’ the scholarship that has been carried out under their banners. Rather, I wish to put the question that has been asked about the canon in post-medieval literature in the last twenty years or so: what does it exclude, and why?

Put in these terms, I think it is possible to see the emphases outlined above, albeit somewhat muted by the materialist turn skaldic scholarship has taken in recent decades, persisting into more recent work in the field. Considerations of space prevent my going into this at any length. Briefly, though, I think that the idea that skaldic *lausavísur* are used by saga-writers to depict subjective states that “cannot” be depicted in saga prose (eg Foote and Wilson 1970 362, Frank 1978 24) is underpinned by the conviction that lyric is mimesis of emotion, ‘an elegant attitudinal display which derives its significance from the implied or given narrative-dramatic frame’ (Walker 1998 37). This then licences a methodology of lifting saga *lausavísur* from their narrative framing and investigating them as isolated artefacts, whether the aim is to critique the

depiction of character in the saga prose, weigh the claims to authenticity of prose and verse, or simply to explicate the expressive resources of the *lausavísa*. This author-centred approach is also reflected in the organisation conventional in editions of skaldic poetry, and the fascination with the personality of the poet evident in much work on the *skálda sögur* (though it must be admitted that the Old Norse-Icelandic sources are themselves pretty interested in authorship when it comes to skaldic poetry). And indeed, the preponderance of studies of *skáld* biographies over readings of the many other *Íslendinga sögur* which contain verses is an example of the way in which skaldic studies are still often driven by Romantic interests in personal expression and inspiration.

In a constructive vein, then, I would like now to give a short account of a somewhat different set of ideas which I am currently trying to apply to some skaldic *lausavísur*; specifically, the 17 *dróttkvætt* stanzas known as the *Máhlíðingavísur*, found in chapters 18 to 22 of *Eyrbyggja saga*, which I am working on at the moment.⁷

The Prologue to *Heimskringla* gives some hints as to the direction of a possible re-contextualisation. In it, Snorri makes a case for the use of poems as historical source-material. Recognising that there is a potential problem with respect to the credibility of skaldic verses, he gives the following justification for his belief that they are reliable witnesses:

Með Haraldi konungi váru skáld, ok kunna menn enn kvæði þeira ok allra konunga kvæði, þeira er síðan hafa verit í Nóregi, ok tókum vér þar mest dæmi af, þat er sagt er í þeim kvæðum, er kveðin váru fyrir sjálfum höfðingjunum eða sonum þeira. Tókum vér þat allt fyrir satt, er í þeim kvæðum finnsk um ferðir þeira eða orrostur. En þat er hátt skálda at lofa þann mest, er þá eru þeir fyrir, en engi myndi þat þora at segja sjálfum honum þau verk hans, er allir þeir, er heyrði, vissi, at hégómi væri ok skrokk, ok svá sjálf hann. Þat væri þá háð, en eigi lof. (ÍF 26: 5)⁸

Snorri adduces in the course of his justification, then, a fictive scene of performance, in which princes, their sons, and retainers hear a skaldic poem at court. The performative situation is what enables the poems to be taken as true ('tókum vér þat allt fyrir satt') and used as *exempla* ('dæmi'). This may seem on the surface to be a comforting guarantee of referential truthfulness (and we

⁷ The text of the *Máhlíðingavísur* used in the following discussion is based on the readings of AM 448 4to, a copy by Árni Magnússon and Asgeirr Jónsson from the lost MS Vatnshyrna, with significant variants from AM 442, 309, 445b and 446 4to. The major editions of the poem are *Skjaldedigtning* I A: 111-15, I B: 105-9, and ÍF 4: 38-56. Translations are my own.

⁸ 'There were skalds with King Haraldr, and men still know their poems and poems about all the kings there have been since in Norway, and we take examples mostly from what is said in those poems which were recited before the princes themselves or their sons. We take everything to be true that is to be found in these poems about their journeys or battles. Though it is the habit of skalds to praise most the one whose presence they are in, yet no-one would dare to tell a prince himself about deeds of his which all those who heard them would know to be nonsense and invention, as he would himself. For that would be mockery, rather than praise.' (My translation).

should remember at this point that the assumption that poetry is referentially true is just as fundamental to the idea that poetry is mimesis of emotion, as it is to Snorri's enterprise of using poetry to write history). The authenticating characteristics of the discourse type invoked by an appeal to the context of performance, however, become apparent at the end of the extract. Here the relevant terms are not *sannr* [true] or *sannindi* [truth, evidence] (terms which recur elsewhere in the Prologue), but *hégómi* [nonsense, slander], *skrök* [falsehood, invention], *háð* [mockery], and *lof* [praise]. Whether or not what poems say about princes is true depends for Snorri on a prior judgment about generic modality (*háð* or *lof*, for example) and the purposes the poems were intended to serve, that is to say, a literary or (more accurately) rhetorical judgment. And what governs these generic possibilities, according to Snorri, is the social negotiation inherent in the moment of performance, in which the generic norms of skaldic composition ('hátt skalda') intersect with the social ones of the royal audience. This stress on the specific socio-historical context in which the verbal act is performed recalls J. L. Austin's doctrine of the performative utterance. The performative is 'an act which specifically engenders the moment of connection of language with society' (Slinn 1999 65), which in its focus on the *effect* of the verbal act 'free[s] the analysis of the performative from the authority of the truth value, from the true/false opposition . . . [and] substitute[s] for it . . . the value of force' (Derrida 1988 13).

What happens if we apply the idea of performativity to the *Máhlíðingavísur*? Paying attention to the performative status of these stanzas requires, for one, that we take cognisance of the prosimetric form in which the stanzas are conveyed, that is, in a saga-prose setting. I will now briefly outline that setting. The episode begins when Þorbjörn, related by marriage to the powerful Snorri *goði*, attempts to bring a lawsuit of dubious legality (the notorious *duradómr*) against Þórarinn *svarti máhlíðingr*. Þórarinn is a peaceful man, and is initially reluctant to fight Þorbjörn but, after being egged on by his mother, he does so, and kills him. The stanzas are addressed by Þórarinn to various kinsfolk as he travels about seeking support in the ensuing lawsuit. Legal matters are thus a constant presence in the poem, which situates itself in the nexus between poetry, slander and the law so well explored by Preben Meulengracht Sørensen in his study of *níð* (1983 [1980]). Rather than *níð*, though, the *Máhlíðingavísur* are frequently concerned with *frýja*, womanly scorn or whetting, which, as a technique used by a man's female relations to egg him on to some action, is familiar to every reader of the *Íslendinga sögur*. The necessity of defending oneself against attacks on one's reputation in the form of *frýja*, and of giving a favourable account of one's actions so as to persuade people to give their support in a lawsuit, are recurring concerns in the *Máhlíðingavísur*. The poem as a whole has a performative force, I would argue, when viewed in the context of the saga prose (into which it is interwoven more dextrously than the writer of *Eyrbyggja* is often given credit for). It

describes the events which have taken place, but for the purpose of swaying the audiences before which its various parts are presented: rather than an expressive outpouring of Þórarinn's despair at his fate, the poem is a dramatisation of his case, a re-motivation of the words of slander and law, which is intended to intervene in the processes of informal verbal dishonouring and formal legal redress (which will, nonetheless, eventually drive Þórarinn from Iceland).

The first stanza provides a bit of an illustration of what I'm talking about here:

1. Varðak mik þars myrðir	I defend myself – there where the murderer
2. morðfárs vega þorði	of murderous harm [WEAPON->WARRIOR]
3. hlaut orn af ná neyta	dared to attack, the eagle got to eat a fresh
4. nýjum kvinna frýju,	corpse - against women's reproaches. I did
5. barkak vægð at vígi	not bring mercy to the killing there in the stir
6. valnaðrs í styr þaðra	of the carrion-snake [WEAPON->BATTLE]; I
7. mælik hól fyr hœli	seldom speak praise of that before the
8. hjaldrs goðs af því sjaldan. ⁹	praisers of the battle-god.

It is addressed to Geirriðr, Þórarinn's mother. Þórarinn has just returned from killing Þorbjörn and Geirriðr asks how things have gone, eliciting this stanza in response. As Þórarinn says in the first *helmingr*, 'Varðak mik . . . kvinna frýju', 'I defend myself . . . against women's reproaches'. On one level, this statement simply enlarges on the parenthetical statement in this *helmingr* ('þars myrðir . . . nýjum'), which informs his mother that he has in fact killed Þorbjörn, and so by the act of killing, defended himself against her earlier accusation of cowardice. When viewed through the lens of the performative, however, it becomes apparent that 'Varðak mik' is also a performative speech act: what Þórarinn is doing in the poem is defending himself, both now and later. This opening stanza is thus an act of generic positioning, often a role of opening stanzas in other skaldic genres.¹⁰

The question of what the concept of performativity, particularly in its post-Austinian avatars,¹¹ brings to the understanding of genre calls for extended analysis. At this point I would just like to suggest that this first stanza puts into play a parodic distancing of the *Máhlíðingavísur* from the prestigious model of skaldic poetry, the encomia presented at royal courts on the Scandinavian

⁹ MSS: *Snorra Edda* Codex Regius, Codex Trajectinus (ll. 1-2 only); AM 448 4to, fol. 38 l. 20 – fol. 39 l. 27; AM 309 4to, fol. 36r 45-49b; AM 445b 4to, fol. 6v 8-11a.

Significant variants: [3] hlaut: hlytr 309, 445; [7] mæleg liod fyr flíode 309.

Prose word order: Varðak mik – þars myrðir morðfárs vega þorði, hlaut orn neyta af ná nýjum – kvenna frýju. Barkak vægð þaðra at vígi í valnaðrs styr; mælik sjaldan hól af því fyr hœli hjaldrs goðs.

¹⁰ Cecil Wood (1960) discusses the conventional 'bid for a hearing' in the opening stanzas of skaldic praise poems, for example.

¹¹ Culler (1999) gives a concise account of the varied theoretical manifestations of the concept of performativity after Austin.

mainland. It proclaims its rejection of the norms of courtly praise poetry, which is to say its audience (warriors, the ‘*hæliir hjaldrs goðs*’), warlike subject matter (the referent of ‘*af því*’) and rhetorical standpoint (praise, or ‘*hól*’). The important generic marker *hól* is also emphasised by the cognate agent-noun *hæliir* in the same line – the repetition of cognate words in this manner seems to be a stylistic feature of the *Máhlíðingavísur*. So in stanza 1, the poet says ‘This poem defends me against *kvinna frýju*’, thus defining himself in opposition to the courtly tradition: his poem is a reactive defence (*varðak*), rather than praise (*hól*), and specifically Icelandic, insofar as the poem intervenes in a dispute whose terms are set by the expectations of honourable behaviour enshrined in Icelandic law, and draws much of its lexis (even in kennings) from the semantic field of that law.¹²

In conclusion, then, I have tried in this discussion to suggest some of the ways in which an historically specific account of the true value and meaning of poetry, originally elaborated within the broader cultural contexts of historicism, the Romantic movement, and the adulation of classical Greece, was naturalised in studies of skaldic poetry. Expressive lyricism became established as the standard by which skaldic poems were judged. The popularity of *Sonatorrek* in skaldic studies (especially early this century) is one consequence of this: its subject-matter and narrative framing seem to license an interpretation based on the model of ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’. In the second section of my paper, I suggest an alternative emphasis which could be brought to bear on some other skaldic poems. The concept of performativity, and the idea that lyric poetry may exert a rhetorical force, also rise in currents of thinking which to some extent lie outside Old Norse-Icelandic studies, but their potential usefulness as a means of destabilising the eternal verities of the field is, I believe, no less because of that.

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¹² Reference to myths in the *Máhlíðingavísur* as a whole is also quite limited in comparison to courtly poems of similar length, suggesting that what is going on here cannot be exhausted by the *Heroisierung* model (Wolf 1965), whereby skaldic *lausavísur* in sagas are regarded as generating a heightened atmosphere by drawing comparisons between the events described in the prose and mythic or heroic narratives. See the Introduction to Clunies Ross (1998) for a discussion, with references, of the notion of *Heroisierung*.

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