

## CHAPTER 6

# Mirror Writing of the Unconscious

All hope of forgiveness lies in confession.

—*Icelandic Homily Book*<sup>1</sup>

In the previous chapter two possible explanations for the writing of *Egils saga* were outlined, if indeed it was composed by Snorri or someone in his entourage. The first was to rally the forces of his Sturlungar and Mýrar kinsmen to the standard of their common ancestor, the poet Egill Skallagrímsson; the second, a desire to express personal repentance for the outcome of Snorri's dealings with Sighvatr and Sturla. Both conjectures fit in well with what we know of the conflicts in which Snorri was involved in his lifetime and of medieval Christianity in general, although we have no means of proving them. Furthermore, neither conjecture precludes the other. Snorri could have repented of his sins and made reparation for them, yet still felt compelled to express—albeit in a veiled fashion—his repentance in a work that was read aloud at the gathering of the Sturlungar to mark their reconciliation. Snorri's anger had been directed at his brother and nephew, who were as closely, if not more, related to Snorri than to those he now needed to win over to his cause. It was important therefore to demonstrate his regret for the internal strife that had riven the Sturlungar.

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1. "Öll von líknarinnar stendur í játningunni," *Íslensk hómilíubók: Fornar stólræður* (1993), 88.

There is a third possibility not yet mentioned, which is that Snorri was not at all—or only partly—the author of *Egils saga*. In a stimulating book on *Modes of Authorship in the Middle Ages*, several authors propose new ways of thinking of authorship, notably of the medieval sagas. The book's editor, Slavica Ranković, puts forward the concept of the “distributed author,” i.e. a sort of collective authorship of oral literary works, distributed through time and space, but exhibiting nevertheless qualities of artistic design usually associated with individual authorship. Another contributor, Michael D. C. Drout, introduces the concept of meme—borrowed from the natural sciences—to attempt to dissolve the apparent contradiction between a strong tradition and the way authors create new cultural products within the tradition. In the same vein, Gísli Sigurðsson argues eloquently for extreme caution when talking about the author of a story or poem from the Middle Ages. We do not know the extent of the tradition the author was working from, and each item or strand of it is the creation of another, usually several others.<sup>2</sup> All of this places the authorship of *Egils saga* in a different perspective and has consequences for our understanding of what motivated the work.

But if Snorri was responsible for the saga—irrespective of whether he was working from an already established tradition of telling stories about Egill and his poetry, whether he dictated it, wrote it himself, or even composed it with the help of one or several others—it may be that when he wrote the saga he was motivated by nothing more than a wish to compose a compelling tale about his famous poet ancestor designed to entertain an audience close to him. The complex creation of meaning in the saga through the interaction of its structure and intertextuality may thus have been at least in part unconscious, although it is hard to believe that the meaning gleaned from the present reading of *Egils saga* can have been entirely unintended. The structure of the saga seems too carefully planned, the allusions to the Bible too precise and grounded in an extensive knowledge of both the Scripture and its exegetical tradition, yet certain aspects of the way in which meaning is generated in the saga would perhaps be better

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2. *Modes of Authorship in the Middle Ages*, ed. Slavica Ranković, Papers in Mediaeval Studies 22 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2012). See Ranković' article on 52–75, Drout's on 30–51, and Gísli's contribution on 227–35.

explained as unconscious creativity, revealing the inner workings of a single author's psyche.

If psychoanalysis and indeed other schools of psychology are to be believed, the unconscious is active in all creativity. There is a long tradition of analyzing works of art using concepts derived from psychoanalysis, going back to Freud's first major work on the interpretation of dreams and how they express—and at the same time conceal—what is happening in the unconscious. Freud's methods have subsequently been employed to understand other forms of human expression, while his concepts have undergone continual reappraisal. By this means a valuable insight has been gained into the connections between works of art, such as literature, and deep-seated aspects of the unconscious of the authors and audience of the works.<sup>3</sup>

The part played by the unconscious in *Egils saga* is possibly revealed in an allusion to the story of Cain and Abel not yet mentioned. The *Historia scholastica*, and indeed many other works that were widely disseminated in Europe at the beginning of the thirteenth century, tell of Lamech, whose destiny was to kill his great-grandfather, the fratricide Cain. This story, which is not found in the Bible but probably originated in rabbinic literature,<sup>4</sup> was a popular subject of illustration during the Middle Ages (see figure 6). That it was known in Iceland is shown by a reference in *Alexanders saga*,<sup>5</sup>

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3. On the connection between the unconscious and creativity, see Elizabeth Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reappraisal* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 36, 61, 76–80, and 85. A number of psychoanalytical interpretations of *Egils saga* have already been attempted; see Árni Sigurjónsson and Keld Gall Jørgensen, "Saga og tegn: Udkast til en semiotisk sagalæsning" (1987), and Jón Karl Helgason's "Rjóðum spjöll í dreyra: Óhugnaður, úrkast og erótík í *Egils sögu*," *Skáldskaparmál* 2 (1992).

4. Émile Mâle, *L'art religieux du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle en France : Étude sur l'iconographie du Moyen Âge et sur ses sources d'inspiration* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1931), 204–6.

5. "Eftir það var skrifað það, er Kain drap Abel bróður sinn og svo, hversu Lamech, er hinn sjöundi var frá Kain, varð honum að skaða, sjá mátti það og að fyrir ósiðu manna, marga og stóra, var því líkt sem guð iðraðist þess, er hann hafði skapaðan manninn." Walter of Châtillon, *Alexandreis, það er Alexanders saga mikla eptir hinu forna kvæði meistara Phillippi Galtei Castellionæi, sem Brandur Jónsson ábóti sneri á danska tungu, það er íslensku, á þrettánda öld*, ed. Halldór Laxness (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1945), 63. (After that the story was depicted of how Cain killed his brother Abel and then how Lamech, the seventh in line from Cain, brought about his death, and it was also evident that because of mankind's great and manifold sins, God seemed to repent of having created Man. Trans. Victoria Cribb.)

and in *Stjórn* where Cain's death is said to have come about in the following manner:

Now as Cain hid for a while among thorns and brambles, Lamech shot and killed him as directed by the boy, in the full belief, however, that it was only a wild beast.<sup>6</sup>

The story brings to mind Egill's attack on Berg-Önundr in chapter 58 of *Egils saga*. Egill tells some boys that there is a bear hiding in a thicket and they go to fetch Berg-Önundr. When he arrives, Egill is hiding in the *bushes* and jumps out, killing both Önundr and his men.

On first impression these two stories have little in common apart from a man hiding in a thicket, who is mistaken for a wild animal, although we could also point out another common feature; in both instances it is a young boy who reveals the animal's hiding place. In *Egils saga*, moreover, it is the man in the bushes who kills rather than is killed, which may seem to preclude the possibility that we are dealing with an allusion to the legend of Cain. But there are various reasons why we should hold on to the idea of intertextuality here. One is that the depiction of Egill in the saga contains further allusions to Cain, as pointed out in chapter 2. Another is that this incident in *Egils saga* occurs in a chapter where fratricide forms a prominent theme. In the *Möðruvallabók* text the chapter is actually entitled "How King Eiríkr killed his brothers."<sup>7</sup>

The preceding chapter tells of the killing of Ketill höðr, whom Egill shoots with a spear in the half-light, an incident that can be interpreted as an allusion to the myth of Höðr the Blind's murder of his brother Baldr. Significantly, here too the relationship in the story is inverted. The man called Höðr is pierced by a spear instead of throwing it himself. The same applies to Egill in the bushes: the fratricide lurking in the thicket kills instead of being killed. According

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6. Trans. Victoria Cribb. "Nu sem Kayn leyndiz aa nöckurum tima milli þorna ok klungra, skaut Lamech hann til bana af sueinsins aaúisan. ætlandi þo allt at eins at þar myndi dyr fyrir uera." *Stjórn: Gammelnorsk bibelhistorie fra verdens skabelse til det babyloniske fangenskab*, ed. C. R. Unger (Christiania: Feilberg & Landmark, 1862), 1:47. From *Stjórn* 1, the section believed to date from the latter half of the thirteenth century.

7. *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, vol. 1, A-redaktionen (2001), 105.



Figure 6: Carving above the entrance to Bourges Cathedral in France. A small boy shows Lamech where Cain is hiding in a thicket.

to Freud, inversions of this type are common in dreams, and are one of the methods used by the unconscious to sidestep repression and express deeper urges. Termed “displacement” by Freud, this is one of the unconscious’s two main methods of expressing the forbidden. The other is “condensation,” whereby units of meaning connected with the subject, which must be concealed from the conscious, are repressed by being condensed around another person or object in the dream. Through a combination of displacement and condensation, dreams create meaning at the same time as disguising it, in a manner not unlike riddles, skaldic verses, or the Bible, according to its medieval interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

On closer examination, Berg-Önundr and Þórólfr Skallagrímsson turn out to have much in common. Both have brothers who are

8. Sigmund Freud, *Die Traumdeutung* (Wien: Franz Deuticke, 1900). A succinct explanation of Freud’s theories of dream analysis can be found in Elizabeth Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism* (1998), 16–23. Roman Jakobson discusses displacement and condensation as varieties of metaphor and metonymy in a famous article about these two stylistic devices. See “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Disturbances,” in Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language*, Janua Linguarum, Series minor 1 (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 69–96.

important characters in the story and both are described in almost exactly the same words as *hverjum manni meiri og sterkari*, “uncommonly large and strong” (chapter 37).<sup>9</sup> Both also enjoy a spell as favorites of Queen Gunnhildr (chapters 37 and 57), and eventually die at the hands of men who ambush them from a forest. The fall of Þórólfr is described as follows (chapter 54):

Thorolf advanced bravely and had his standard carried along the side of the forest, intending to approach the king’s men from their vulnerable side. He and his men were holding their shields in front of them, using the forest as cover to their right. Thorolf advanced so far that few of his men were in front of him, and when he was least expecting it, Earl Adils and his men ran out of the forest. Thorolf was stabbed with many spears at once and died there beside the forest. Thorfinn, his standard-bearer, retreated to where the troops were closer together, but Adils attacked them and a mighty battle ensued.<sup>10</sup>

Earl Aðils is one of two brothers involved in the rebellion against King Athelstan. He is invariably named after his brother Hringr and may therefore be the younger, as Egill is younger than Þórólfr. Hringr and Aðils are earls and also king’s sons. Their father was a vassal king of Alfred the Great, Athelstan’s grandfather, who had demoted all such kings to the rank of earl. The brothers therefore feel that they have been deprived of their birthright, much as Egill feels that Berg-Önundr and King Eiríkr Bloodaxe have deprived him of Ásgerðr’s legacy.

Thus Þórólfr’s characteristics condense around the figure of Berg-Önundr, just as Egill’s do around Aðils. We could express the

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9. The only difference is a single word (*manni*), which is missing from the description of Berg-Önundr and could well have been omitted by a later scribe.

10. Scudder (2004), 98. “Þórólfr sótti fram hart ok lét bera merki sitt fram með skóginum ok ætlaði þar svá fram at ganga at hann kæmi í opna skjöldu konungs fylkinginni; höfðu þeir skjölduna fyrir sér, en skógrinn var til hæggra vegs; létu þeir hann þar hlífa. Þórólfr gekk svá fram, at fáir váru menn hans fyrir honum, en þá er hann varði minnst, þá hlaupa þar ór skóginum Aðils jarl ok sveit sú, er honum fylgði; brugðu þegar mörpum kesjum senn á Þórólfi, ok féll hann þar við skóginn, en Þorfiðr, er merkit bar, hopaði aptr, þar er liðit stóð þykkra, en Aðils sótti þá at þeim ok var þar þá orrosta mikil.” ÍF 2:140.

same idea by saying that in the creation of meaning in *Egils saga*, displacement occurs between Berg-Önundr and Þórólfr, that is, between the protagonist's brother and chief adversary, and between Egill himself and Þórólfr's slayer. We may ask then whether Berg-Önundr and Aðils are not dream figures, representing something other than themselves. Perhaps we are here close to identifying the energy that is the driving force behind the saga and the author's desire to atone: his brother is his enemy. His brother has deprived him of his rightful inheritance, and he has done so under the aegis of the king.

In this context it is interesting to note another combination of condensation and displacement in the saga, which is found in the presentation of Skallagrímr and King Eiríkr Bloodaxe. There is a direct correlation between Arinbjörn's intercession on Egill's behalf in York and Þórólfr's earlier mediation on behalf of Björn Brynjólfsson. Björn had aroused the wrath of Skallagrímr by omitting to inform him that he had eloped with Þóra hlaðhönd against her family's wishes. By bringing Björn before Skallagrímr, in the same way that Egill is brought before Eiríkr Bloodaxe, the saga creates a parallel between the king and father. Such a displacement is perfectly understandable in that both characters symbolize authority figures in the protagonist's life, and certain traits coalesce around the king and father, serving to heighten the parallel. Particularly striking is the way the king glares at Egill from his throne in York, when shortly before Egill had been at great pains to avoid his father's gaze after the latter had died with his eyes open. Egill was the killer of King Eiríkr's son but also of Skallagrímr's son, if we accept that he can be held accountable for the death of his own brother.

We may ask, then, whether Egill's conflict with the king is not a displaced symbol for another, far deeper-rooted conflict with his own father. All the stories of Egill's childhood describe conflict of one kind or another with his father or a father figure. The first example is when Egill's father will not allow him to attend the feast at his grandfather's house (chapter 31), provoking Egill to declare: "Á ek þar slíkt kynni sem Þórólfr" (They're just as much my relatives as Þórólfr's). The next event is Egill's killing of a boy called Grímr, where a vital identifying characteristic of the father, his name, is given to Egill's first victim. In the third incident Skallagrímr comes within a

hair's breadth of murdering his own son, at the last moment deflecting his anger onto the two people dearest to Egill, Þórðr and Brák. Egill takes revenge in turn by murdering Skallagrímr's favorite retainer.

The conflict between father and son in Egill's youth is as follows: Egill flouts his father's prohibition because he cannot accept the preferential treatment given to his brother. Next, he kills his father's namesake and symbolic substitute. His father then comes close to killing him, and in their ensuing violent hatred each man murders a surrogate for the other.

In the semantic universe of *Egils saga*, conflict between father and son is to be avoided at all costs. This is apparent in the account of how Björn Brynjólfsson abducts Þóra for a second time, this time from his own father's house. His mother orders that no one is to tell Brynjólf, for “þá væri búið við geig miklum með þeim feðgum” [serious trouble would develop between the father and son] (chapter 32). Murderous hatred is also at the root of relations between Skallagrímr and Egill, but is held in check precisely because enmity between father and son was viewed in such a serious light, and finds an outlet instead in their treatment of others.

Nevertheless, a confrontation seems inevitable in the last conversation between father and son, when Skallagrímr demands that Egill pay him the compensation for Þórólfr that King Athelstan had entrusted to him for his father (chapter 59). Neither spares the other: Egill avoids answering his father's reasonable question, and Skallagrímr retaliates by withholding his own chest of silver from Egill along with the *eirketill*, possibly symbolic of mercy.<sup>11</sup> The implication is that Skallagrímr will henceforth show no mercy toward the man who is at once his son and his son's killer, a fact seemingly underlined by Egill's behavior after his father's death, which suggests that he fears his father's ghost.<sup>12</sup>

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11. I have already discussed the possible meaning behind the sinking of the copper cauldron with the chest of silver (see chapter 2).

12. We could explain the building blocks identified in the first chapter of this book with the help of Freud's concepts of “displacement” and “condensation.” For example, the three accounts in chapters 31, 59, and 88 in *Egils saga* of the fraught exchanges between fathers and sons, when one of them is about to leave home to take part in a social ritual, are both similar and dissimilar. The differences can be explained by the interplay of displacement and condensation. If we regard the first story as the original scene (Egill wants to go to a banquet to which Þórólfr has been

All this is concealed in *Egils saga*, while at the same time being charged with an intense emotional energy that is expressed in the narrative through the displacement that occurs between, on the one hand, the figures of the brother and the enemy, and, on the other, the father and the king. This energy bursts forth when it transpires that the king intends not only to deprive Egill of his lawful legacy and hand it over to Berg-Önundr, but also actually to have Egill killed. At this point Egill can no longer restrain himself. As his boat slips past the king's in the half-light he throws a spear at a man who resembles Eiríkr. His intention is to kill the king.

Yet the text is still concealing what it is saying, for nothing is stated in as many words; instead the meaning must be unraveled. Attempted assassination of a king, no less than patricide, is too serious a crime to be spoken of overtly.

After this a different force seems to take charge of the narrative, with Egill losing control of events and of himself. Although he intends to return to Iceland after the Gulaping assembly, "the weather was calm, with a wind from the mountains at night and a sea breeze during the day" (chapter 58).<sup>13</sup> He sails out to sea one night but "the next morning the wind dropped and it grew calm."<sup>14</sup> So he turns back to land and now all the signs are that he is hell-bent on revenge. He kills Berg-Önundr but instead of stopping there, he goes to excessive lengths in his gratuitous slaughter of the young prince Rögnvaldr Eiríksson.

It is interesting to note how the displacement between king and father continues here. The next event to be related is the death of Skallagrímr, after which, oppressed by melancholy, Egill decides to go and visit King Athelstan to see if the latter will keep his promise to him. If we accept that kings and fathers are different manifestations

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invited, Grímr forbids him, Egill disobeys his father), then an inversion takes place in the next story (Egill is going, not Grímr) and displacement in the third (Grímr of Mosfell replaces Skallagrímr), with the characteristics of the father condensing around the figure of Grímr of Mosfell thanks to his name. The same could be said of the men named Ketill in their role as symbolic building blocks. The semantic themes of blindness and fratricide condense around them, influencing the overall meaning of the saga.

13. Scudder (2004), 114. "Veðr váru vindlítill, fjallvindr um nætr, en hafgola um daga." ÍF 2:165.

14. Scudder (2004), 115. "... ok er mornaði, fell veðrit ok gerði logn." ÍF 2:166.

of the same phenomenon with which Egill is grappling, it would seem that he is filled with depression after the death of Skallagrímr. Although the saga implies that the sorcery of Queen Gunnhildr is to blame (chapter 60), it could also be that Egill is finding it hard to bear his father's anger. Thus he goes in search of the benevolent father figure Athelstan, but the wind delivers him into the hands of a paternal figure who is even angrier than Skallagrímr, by driving him to York where king Eiríkr "reigned, rigid of mind."<sup>15</sup>

In his 1917 article on "Mourning and Melancholia," Sigmund Freud explained that *ógleði*, "grief," of the type suffered by Egill has its origin in guilt at the death of someone, often a loved one.<sup>16</sup> The mourner, blaming himself for the death, denies the deceased, while at the same time feeling as if he is possessed by his or her spirit. In other words, the mourner's ego becomes subsumed in the lost subject.

The Egill we know from his saga is of course a fictional character who can be neither diagnosed nor psychoanalyzed. However, whoever composed the saga in its present form, and no matter to what extent he was indebted to a tradition about his hero, must have been expressing something of his own mind, clothing his inner conflict in the guise of a work of art. The winds that govern Egill's travels are controlled by this author; it is his energy that impels the story forward.<sup>17</sup>

According to Freud, great artists tend to express the deepest secrets of their psyche in their works,<sup>18</sup> and no one can deny that *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, as we know it, was composed by a great artist. We can present fairly cogent arguments for the identity of this author being Snorri Sturluson, about whom we have more

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15. *Arimbjarnarkviða*, stanza 4: Scudder (2004), 178. "... stýrði konungr / við stirðan hug / í Jórvík / úrgum ströndum." ÍF 2:259.

16. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. 5 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953-74).

17. In his article "Jorvikferden: Et vendepunkt i Egil Skallagrimsons liv," *Edda* 46 (1947), Hallvard Lie underlines Egil's strange behavior and relates it to his melancholy after his father's death. I prefer to look at the mind, conscious and unconscious, that is shaping the story.

18. Sigmund Freud, "Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*" (*Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1907), 9:3-95.

information than about any other medieval author who wrote in the vernacular before the time of Dante. For one thing, we know that he was involved in major conflict with his brother and nephew. This conflict, which may have begun when they clashed over a marriage alliance with a woman of noble birth, involved a paternal legacy and also royal favor. There is little doubt that Snorri and Sturla were rivals not only for control of Iceland but also for the title of earl, which could only be granted by a king. Snorri gambled on Duke Skúli, usurper of the throne of Norway, Sturla on King Hákon, who emerged triumphant from the civil war against Skúli.

Snorri and Sturla “báru eigi gæfu til samþykkis” (did not have the good fortune to agree with each another). This misfortune was of their own making, a result of the violent emotions that seem to have remained simmering beneath the surface for as long as Sighvatr and Snorri could carve out a niche for themselves in different parts of the country. These feelings were to burst forth from time to time after Sighvatr arranged Sturla’s marriage to the blue-blooded Solveig Sæmundardóttir. The quarrel was instigated by Snorri, who persuaded their elder brother Þórðr to side with him in demanding their paternal inheritance from Sighvatr and Sturla. The latter were obdurate, however, and could not always control their anger. This is especially true of Sturla, who carried out a vicious attack on the home of his uncle, Þórðr, at Hvammur. The hatred reached its height at the 1229 Alþingi, the summer after the raid on Sauðafell. All three brothers marched in force to the assembly where violent clashes were expected, but in spite of the fraught situation, they “parted without any untoward happening.”<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps this was because neither Snorri nor Sturla was up to undertaking any major campaigns that summer. “Snorri was taken sick with erysipelas during the Þing and could not attend,” while Sturla had injured his foot shortly before.<sup>20</sup> He had been staying at Víðimýri before the assembly where he and Kolbeinn “amused themselves by running in contest up the stronghold walls and finding who could run farthest up the walls. Once, when Sturla ran at

19. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:234. “. . . skildust óhappalaust.” *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:321.

20. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:235. “Snorri tók ámusótt um þingið og mátti ekki ganga.” *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:321.

the wall, he tore a sinew in the back of his foot, so that he could scarcely stand.”<sup>21</sup>

Snorri's quarrel with his brother must surely have caused him considerable mental distress. That he so often proved eager to come to terms with both Sturla and Sighvatr, especially the latter, implies that he would rather have had a good relationship with them. The evidence would suggest that Sturla was also under considerable mental stress over being at odds with his uncle. Shortly before his accident at Víðimýri, a meeting was held at Sauðafell where a plot was hatched to attack Snorri. The night before the meeting Sturla dreamt “that a man came to him and said, ‘Do you know that Snorri will be in his coffin before you are?’”<sup>22</sup> Freud described dreams as the fulfilment of our secret desires, although it seems unlikely that there was any secret about Sturla's desire for Snorri's death. In the event the planned attack came to nothing because Snorri's friends and the relatives of both men refused to take part. It was then that Sturla went to Víðimýri and injured himself fooling around on the ramparts. The author of *Íslendinga saga* felt it significant to point out that the man responsible for building those walls was none other than Snorri Sturluson. It is worth dwelling on the fact that Sturla Sighvatsson should have slipped and fallen on Snorri's work. In psychoanalysis, the technical term for actions that seem to betray one's unconscious thoughts is *parapraxis*. They are better known as “Freudian slips.”<sup>23</sup>

What distinguished the kinsmen was that while Sturla gave “much thought to having copies made of the saga books which Snorri was writing,” he was not the author of such works himself.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps that is why he gave in to the urge to order the killing of the two brothers from Vatnsfjörður, Þórðr and Snorri Þorvaldsson. It can

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21. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:232. “. . . höfðu það að skemmtan að renna skeið að kastalavegginum og vita hver lengst gæti runnið í vegginn. En er Sturla rann í vegginn gengu í sundur sinarnar aftan í fætinum og mátti hann nær ekki stíga á fótinn.” *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:319.

22. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:231. “. . . að maður kæmi að honum og mælti: ‘Vittu að Snorri skal fyrr í kistuna en þú.’” *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:319.

23. Sigmund Freud, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, ed. A.A. Brill (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1914), 177–209.

24. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:242. “. . . mikinn hug á að láta rita sögubækur eftir bókum þeim er Snorri setti saman,” *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:329.

hardly be coincidental that they bore the same names as Sturla's two uncles with whom he had so long been at odds, Snorri and Þórður. It is tempting to propose that there was some kind of displacement, in the Freudian sense, involved.

Like Macbeth, Sturla Sighvatsson went ahead and committed the "murder [that] yet [was] but fantastical," whereas Snorri was able to sublimate the same kind of feelings in art. He took up his pen and made reparation with a story about a poet whose body was found in a *skript*, a word with associations of writing/confession, while simultaneously expressing his emotional response to events through the complex saga that I have attempted to elucidate here. It includes a portrait of a ruthless Viking who, after butchering dozens of men, heads out to sea. There he expresses his thoughts in the following verse (stanza 32):<sup>25</sup>

With its chisel of snow, the headwind,  
scourge of the mast, mightily  
hones its file by the prow  
on the path that my sea-bull treads.  
In gusts of wind, that chillful  
destroyer of timber planes down  
the planks before the head  
of my sea-king's swan.<sup>26</sup>

"The mighty headwind (*andærr jötunn vandar*) converts the smooth surface of the sea (*jafn vegr stafnkvígs*) before the bow of the ship into a chisel (*þél*) that the cold wind (*svalbúinn selju*) uses mercilessly (*eirar vanr*) to plane (*sverfa*) the bow of the ship (*Gestils qlft*) before the prow." In observing the ship and sea, the poet clothes his experience in an image charged with the merciless

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25. Ólafur Halldórsson has pointed out that this stanza could have been written quite a long time after Egill's day, see Ólafur Halldórsson, "Þél hreggi höggvin," in *Afmælisrit Björns Sigfússonar*, ed. Björn Teitsson, Björn Þorsteinsson, and Sverrir Tómasson (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1975), 192–93. I think it likely that it was composed to figure in the saga.

26. Scudder (2004), 119. "Þél höggr stórt fyr stáli / stafnkvígs á veg jafnan / út með éla meitli / andærr jötunn vandar, / en svalbúinn selju / sverfr eirar vanr þeiri / Gestils qlft með gustum / gandr of stál fyr brandi." ÍF 2:172.

power of nature and of his own psyche. The image is as terrible and inhuman as the depths of his unconscious.

This profoundly personal aspect, which can be detected in all of *Egils saga*, does not at all undermine what has previously been said about its composition having been a social act, intended to bring together formerly warring factions of the same group, and also to suggest regret for acts of anger and hostility that had previously been perpetrated. Indeed, it would have been all the more effective since it would have spoken to the shared emotions of all those involved in the clash, and possibly present when the saga was first read aloud. In a way similar to how the tragedies of ancient Greece dealt with the tensions within the *polis*, *Egils saga* seems to project the unconscious conflicts of Snorri and his kinsmen onto a distant past, which is also the founding moment of their community. Its success as an artistic achievement might have been due to its capacity to bring forth the same sort of catharsis as the Greek tragedies, sublimating the disruptive forces and feelings into a unique work of narrative art.