

Romancing the Rune:

Aspects of Literacy in Early Scandinavian Orality*

To a graduate student at Harvard in the 1960s oral literature was an exciting topic, but with thirty years' hindsight we seem to have had a narrow grasp of the potential issues. I was a student of Albert Bates Lord and indirectly of Francis Peabody Magoun, but more directly I was the student of Larry Dean Benson, who, in the mid-'60s, so memorably demonstrated the logical gap in the most provocative part of the oral-formulaic theory, the part that encouraged the transference of conclusions from the South Slavic model to all other oral poetry.¹ When I was writing my article "Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry" in 1974 and '75 (it appeared only in 1983), the problems for the segment of Scandinavian literature I had been studying seemed to be limited to (1) the applicability of Lord's model, especially with respect to memorization and improvisation, (2) Lord's rhetorical appropriation of the term "oral," and (3) problems specific to the eddic tradition, especially the relationship of larger compositional units to an oral poetics.² The more exact conclusions of that article

*For the original stimulation to write I thank Prof. Patricia Conroy of the University of Washington, Seattle, where the earliest version was presented in April 1993.

1. Larry D. Benson, "The Literary Character of Anglo-Saxon Formulaic Poetry," *PMLA* 81 (1966): 334-41.

2. Joseph Harris, "Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry: The Evidence of Parallel Passages in the Helgi Poems for Questions of Composition and Performance," in *Edda: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason ([Winnipeg]: University of Manitoba Press, 1983), pp. 210-42. [Reprinted in this volume, Eds.]

are limited to a small group of eddic poems, but at a more general level I came to the conclusion, not predictable from a starting point in the oral-formulaic theory, that there was no need entirely to throw out older eddic scholarship that was mainly concerned with what we would now call intertextuality, especially literary history established through evidence of borrowing. Though I was not especially concerned with formulas, I did and still do agree with the broader implications of Lars Lönnroth's study of eddic poetry in concluding that formulas are used in a variety of ways and do not guarantee the oral-formulaic model for Old Norse.³

Outside of Harvard, where spirits were less constrained to assassinate or venerate the fathers, scholarship had already spiraled out into vastly different realms of thought on orality and literacy, taking one of the *other* paths suggested by that seminal quartet of works of the early '60's—Lord's *Singer of Tales*, McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxy*, Goody and Watt's "Consequences of Literacy," and Havelock's *Preface to Plato*—or else non-Harvard scholars were *combining* Parry and Lord's philological way with these approaches from communications, sociology, and anthropology.⁴ In the mid-'70s Ruth Finnegan was also busy showing the enormous variety of oral literatures and deconstructing the inherited categories.⁵ Researchers unburdened by the Harvard past had discovered that in order to understand orality, they had to study the literacy and literate practices through which it was almost always perceived. In the last decade or so, writers on oral literature have somewhat muted their differences of opinion (at least by comparison to the stridency of the '60s) and quietly subsume contradictions, dipping eclectically into any reservoir of theory that can be harmonized with the general direction of their own thoughts. In America Walter Ong's book *Orality and Literacy* of 1982 has come to be widely regarded as a summa on which to build—if one

3. Lars Lönnroth, "Hjálmar's Death-Song and the Delivery of Eddic Poetry," *Speculum* 46 (1971): 1–20.

4. Albert Bates Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960); Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962); Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," in *Contemporary Studies in Society and History* 5 (1963), pp. 304–45 (often reprinted); Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963).

5. Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance, and Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977; 2nd ed. rev., 1992).

ignores a few blind spots.⁶ And today, as I struggle to keep up with the exploding universe of scholarship in the areas that interest me, Ong's interpretation of the oral/literate opposition appears to have spread almost everywhere as an internalized assumption too basic to be questioned. That this "Great Divide" theory *is* vigorously opposed by Ruth Finnegan and some social scientists qualifies the relative harmony of recent years but has hardly slowed the positive response in humanistic scholarship.⁷

Old Norse has not played much of a role in the burgeoning thought on oral literature. An internal discussion has simmered for decades on oral and written antecedents to the extant thirteenth-century sagas.⁸ This debate between *Freiproza* and *Buchproza*, the terms of which were set in the time of Andreas Heusler, continues with little influence from the intellectual heirs of Lord, McLuhan, and Goody until the important recent theoretical contribution—Carol Clover's "immanent saga"—an elegant solution, which, however, will probably satisfy neither side.⁹ Eddic poetry continues to be the focal point for the more general interest in orality and literacy and, of

6. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982). One of the blind spots is Ong's aversion to the term "oral literature"; see my discussion in "Introduction," in *The Ballad and Oral Literature*, ed. Joseph Harris, Harvard English Studies 17 (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 1–17, esp. 9–12.

7. Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988); eadem, "Tradition, But What Tradition and for Whom?" *Oral Tradition* 6 (1991): 104–24; Brian V. Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); *Literacy and Orality*, ed. David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Two examples of humanistic scholars who seem unimpressed with challenges to the "Great Divide" theory: Ursula Schaefer, "Alterities: On Methodology in Medieval Literary Studies," *Oral Tradition* 8 (1993): 187–214, declares the discovery of "the Orality/Literacy Question" to be a paradigmatic change in the sense of Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*; and John D. Smith, "Worlds Apart: Orality, Literacy, and the Rajasthani Folk-*Mahābhārata*," *Oral Tradition* 5 (1990): 3–19, illustrates the gap.

8. For a recent survey see Carol J. Clover, "Icelandic Family Sagas (Íslendinga-sögur)," in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, *Islandica* 45 (Ithaca, etc.: Cornell University Press, 1985); "The Long Prose Form," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 101 (1986): 10–39; Else Mundal, "Den norrøne episke tradisjonen," in *Hellas og Norge: Kontakt, komparasjon, kontrast: En artikkelsamling*, ed. Øivind Andersen and Tomas Hägg, Skrifter utgitt av det norske institutt i Athen 2 (Bergen 1990), pp. 65–80.

9. Clover, "Long Prose Form," (n. 8 above).

course, for further study of oral poetry in Parry's philological vein.¹⁰ A recent dissertation by Judy Quinn of the University of Sydney prefaces the fullest available study of the passage of eddic tradition from oral to written by a comprehensive discussion of early Icelandic orality and literacy historically considered.¹¹ Harry Roe has reviewed the origins and spread of literacy in early Scandinavia in order to argue that the extraordinarily high literacy rate of Iceland through the centuries is not, as he puts it, "a recent response of the human spirit to excessively dreary winters, but the vestige of an ancient tradition of literacy which Iceland held in common with the rest of early Scandinavian society."¹² Roe is speaking here of runic literacy, to which I will return, but Old Norse scholarship has as yet little to compare with the sophistication of recent work in Old English by Seth Lerer, Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, and Michael Near.¹³ These all deal to some extent with the relationship between written and oral discourse, with transitional literacy, residual orality, the social meaning of the oral and the written, and, my particular interest in this talk, with the hypothesis of distinguishable oral and literate mentalities. The Icelandic First Grammarian, that amazing linguist of the mid-twelfth century, was explicit in his acknowledgment of influence from England, which, he claimed, spoke essentially the same language as his audience. Perhaps Old English scholarship can again suggest a way for Old Norse.

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Latin writing must have come to Iceland with Christianity at the end of the tenth century, more than a hundred years after the settlement of the island by Norwegians and their Irish slaves. However, the first

10. Progress to 1983 reviewed in Joseph Harris, "Eddic Poetry," in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature* (n. 8 above), pp. 68–156.

11. Judy Quinn, "The Eddic Tradition: A Study of the Mode of Transmission of Eddic Mythological Poetry in the Middle Ages," diss. University of Sydney, 1990.

12. H. Roe, "The Origins and Spread of Literacy in Early Scandinavia," *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 1 (1983): 49–54 (here p. 53).

13. Seth Lerer, *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991); Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 4 (Cambridge, etc.: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Michael R. Near, "Anticipating Alienation: *Beowulf* and the Intrusion of Literacy," *PMLA* 108 (1993): 320–32.

vernacular writing we know of in Iceland was the writing down of the traditional laws in the winter of 1117-18: before that the oral preservation and transmission of the laws was part of the elected office of “lawspeaker,” a man charged with reciting the whole body of laws in the course of three summer parliaments. Ari Porgilsson, the historian whose “Book of the Icelanders” (*Íslendingabók*) of about 1130 gives us the date of codification of the oral laws, also conveys briefly a sense of the burden of reciting the laws: “Grímr Svertingsson of Mosfell took over the office of lawspeaker after Þorgeirr and held it for two summers, but then he got permission for Skapti Þóróddsson, his sister’s son, to hold the office, because he himself had grown hoarse.”¹⁴ Only about twenty-four manuscripts survive from the twelfth century, compared with some 700 surviving vernacular manuscripts from the entire medieval period, twelfth through fifteenth centuries; and according to Harry Roe there would have been three Latin manuscripts for every one in Icelandic.¹⁵ In saga scholarship the two-hundred-year gap between the writers and the events narrated, mostly from the end of the settlement period about 930 to the end of the conversion period about 1030, is recognized in the expressions “saga-age” and “writing-age,” for most of the sagas were written only in the thirteenth century. Genealogies, as well as laws, were written down much earlier.

Nothing comparable to the reliable references to oral laws and genealogies and to their early codification can be cited to clarify the history of the major oral-literary genres: sagas, eddic, and skaldic poetry. For the saga literature the evidence is notoriously slippery. One example: a famous anecdote set about 1050 tells how a young Icelandic sagaman managed to stretch out the tale of the youthful wanderings of King Haraldr Sigurðarson over the thirteen evenings of Yule at the court of and under the eyes of that same crusty king. The anecdote provides a fairly full picture of sagatelling as entertainment and oral history. But scholarship has not noticed that the best, but least familiar, manuscript has the storytelling carried on under the

14. *Íslendingabók* [,] *Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, I, *Íslenzk fornrit* 1, pt. 1 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1968), p. 19 (ch. 8): Grímr at Mosfelli Svertingssonr tók lögsgögu eptir Þorgeir ok hafði tvau sumur, en þá fekk hann lof til þess, at Skapti Þóróddssonr hefði, systurson hans, af því at hann vas hásmæltr sjalfr.”

15. Roe, p. 49.

king’s threat: “You won’t know, while you are narrating, whether the story pleases me or not, but it’s certain that after Yule you will be telling very few sagas if this one is told badly and untruthfully.”¹⁶ I think we may have here an echo of Motif J1185 Execution escaped by storytelling;¹⁷ but even without the influence of an international narrative pattern, there are reasons to be skeptical about what the episode, reported in manuscripts of the mid-thirteenth century, can tell about oral sagas two hundred years earlier.¹⁸ How long were they, how fixed was their wording, did they contain verse, were they the “same” sagas as were committed to writing so much later? The richest piece of evidence for oral sagas is the much-discussed description of an Icelandic wedding and the saga-tellings that entertained the guests in the year 1119. The historical saga that contains the report may have been written as early as 1160 or as late as 1237.¹⁹ In any case, the gap between event and written saga is much smaller here, and the incidents mentioned have the confusing particularity of real events. The saga’s reason for describing the wedding entertainment was the controversial nature of the reception of the stories told, some hearers insisting that they were true and tracing their ancestry to the heroes mentioned, others scoffing.²⁰ For us the passage is important as a hint of performance context, in among rejoicing, dancing, and wrestling, and as proof that the genre of mythic-heroic sagas, *formaldarsögur*, was orally performed long before it is so richly attested in the Danish history of Saxo Grammaticus about 1200. The first performer noted

16. *Austfirðinga sögur*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Íslenzk fornrit 11 (Reykjavík, 1950), pp. 333–36: “En ekki muntu vita, meðan þú segir, hvárt mér þykkir vel eða illa, en vís ván eptir jólin, at fár sögur muntu segja, ef mér þykkir þessi illa sögð ok ósannliga” (336). The shorter version in the earlier manuscript *Morkinskinna*, which lacks this idea as well as the Icelander’s name, is the one usually translated and commented on, as in Knut Liestøl, *The Origin of the Icelandic Family Sagas* (Oslo, etc.: Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning, 1930), p. 57.

17. Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, rev. ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955).

18. Cf. Hermann Pálsson, *Sagnaskemmtun Íslendinga* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1962), esp. pp. 40–42.

19. *Porgils saga ok Hafliða*, ed. Ursula Brown [Dronke], (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 17–18 (ch. 10); dating, pp. ix–xxix.

20. An indispensable interpretation of the passage is Peter Foote, “*Sagnaskemtan*: Reykjahólar 1119,” in his *Aurvandilstá: Norse Studies*, ed. Michael Barnes, et. al., *The Viking Collection 2* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1984), pp. 65–83 (with Postscript); original publication, *Saga-Book of the Viking Society 14* (1955–56): 226–39.

was Hrólfr of Skálmarnes, who told an adventure story, and the twelfth- or thirteenth-century sagaman or local historian insists that this “Hrólfr had himself composed [*samansetta*] this saga.” The second entertainer mentioned was Ingimundr the priest, who “told the saga of Ormr, skald of Barrey, including many verses and with a good lay [*flokkr*], which Ingimundr had composed [*ortan*], at the end of the saga.” The saga performed by Ingimundr may have occupied a generic middle ground between the more realistic “sagas of the poets” and the mythic-heroic genre, and the passage suggests that a recurrent formal arrangement in which longer poems, like those of Egill Skalla-Grímsson, cluster at the end of a saga may be very old.²¹ It definitely teaches that the prosimetrum or mixed form of prose and verse is much older than the period of saga writing and that the shifting reciprocal relationship between saga prose and verses is likely to stretch back as far as we can reconstruct the tradition.²² To the literate mind of the “writing-age” historian the entertainers were also “authors,” and the controversy over the “truth” of the material can perhaps be understood as the dissonance between a literate and an oral mindset in the reception of tradition.

The genre designation of Ingimundr’s *flokkr* suggests that it would have been in skaldic verse; but the nature and age of the oral saga supporting it might argue for eddic verse or a mixed type.²³ The antiquity and orality of the “eddic” poetic tradition is, of course,

21. Two further examples: *Orvar-Odds saga* and *Hákonar saga góða* in *Heimskringla*.

22. On the prosimetrum of the sagas see, for example, Mundal; Clover, “Long Prose Form,” (cited n. 8 above); Dietrich Hofmann, “Vers und Prosa in der mündlich gepflegten mittelalterlichen Erzählkunst der germanischen Länder,” *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 5 (1971): 135–75; Karsten Friis-Jensen, *Saxo Grammaticus as Latin Poet: Studies in the Verse Passages of the Gesta Danorum*, Analecta Romana Instituti Danici, Supplementum XIV, (Rome: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 1987), pp. 39–52 (“The Old Norse prosimetrum”).

23. *Flokkr* is only attested as a skaldic term (Gert Kreutzer, *Die Dichtungslehre der Skalden: Poetologische Terminologie und Autorenkommentare als Grundlagen einer Gattungspoetik*, 2nd ed. rev. [Meisenhausen am Glan: Hain, 1977], p. 88), but most recent scholars diminish the eddic: skaldic distinction; and since very little metalevel vocabulary for eddic verse survives, it is likely that when necessary originally skaldic terms were used for eddic verse: for example, “skald” is once used for the poet of an eddic poem. I have a fuller study of Ingimundr’s *Orms saga* in the context of saga prosimetrum forthcoming [“The Prosimetrum of Icelandic Saga and Some Relatives,” in *Prosimetrum: Crosscultural Perspectives on Narrative in Prose and Verse*, ed. by Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), pp. 131–63. Eds.]

strongly argued by agreement of meter, diction, and genre system with the other surviving fragments of Old Germanic poetry. This oral poetics was probably never at the service of a purely fluid epic tradition like the South Slavic, though it would be an understatement to say that opinions can differ on this.²⁴ The persistence in a certain verse context of an epithet like OHG *suasat*/ON *svási* “dear” from the eighth-century Longobardic *Hildebrandslied* through to the fourteenth-century eddic *Death Song of Hildibrandr* seems to speak for a poetic tradition where composition and performance are different kinds of speech events and where poetics relies on memory.²⁵ Direct references to eddic performance are few, however.²⁶ The story of Norna-Gestr offers a representation of a master of prose tales, who also performs eddic poetry.²⁷ A tradition of *applied* heroic verse, where the performance bore a special relevance to the setting and audience, can be grasped in an allusion to events in Denmark in 1131, but the idea of applied performance is also close to Lars Lönnroth’s concept of the “double scene,” in which the oral eddic poem is a kind of *mise en abîme* or intensifying mirror image of its performance setting.²⁸

Another reason for insisting on a relatively fixed tradition, with conscious innovators like Ingimundr, might be self-interest, for the literary history of this oral literature depends upon it. Here is an

24. Cf. Bjarne Fijestøl, “Islandingsaga og fyrstedikting: Dikting og samfunn i arkaisk norrøn kultur,” in *Hellas og Norge* (cited n. 8 above), 21–44.

25. The Norse reflex of the *Hildebrandslied* is preserved in the fourteenth-century *Ásmundar saga kappabana* and the equivalent narrative material in Saxo; the text is edited as “Hildibrands Sterbelied” in *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. Gustav Neckel, 5th ed. rev. Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1983). Another verbal or formulaic continuity between the old and younger Hildebrand poems is found in the epithet “hoary” of st. IX of the saga (not adopted by Neckel/Kuhn): *inn hári Hildibrandr: Hiltibrant . . . her uas hērōro man* (1.7). Cf. *Zwei Fornaldarsögur (Hrólfssaga Gautrekssonar und Ásmundarsaga kappabana) nach Cod. Holm. 7, 4to*, ed. Dr. Ferdinand Detter (Halle: Niemeyer, 1891), p. 100.

26. Reviewed in Lönnroth, “Hjálmar’s Death-Song” (n. 3 above) and in Harris, “Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry” (above n. 2), with references to the older literature; see also Harris, “Eddic Poetry” (n. 10 above).

27. Commentary and sources in Joseph Harris and Thomas D. Hill, “Gestr’s ‘Prime Sign’: Source and Signification in *Norna-Gests Þáttr*,” *ANF* 104 (1989): 103–22.

28. Harris, “Eddic Poetry” (n. 10 above); Lönnroth, *Den dubbla scenen: Muntling diktning fran Eddan till ABBA* (Stockholm: Prisma, 1978); “The Double Scene of Arrow-Odd’s Drinking Contest,” in *Medieval Narrative: A Symposium*, ed. Hans Bekker-Nielsen, et al. (Odense: University Press, 1979), pp. 94–119.

example: scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and most recently Theodore M. Andersson, had already attempted various reconstructions of the lost lays of the Nibelungs.²⁹ One poem in the repertoire of the wandering entertainer Norna-Gestr seems to belong to this thread of preliterate literary history, for the “title” of this *Guðrúnarbrögð in fornu* seems to be equatable with that of the applied heroic poem attested for 1131, “Grimildae perfidia notissima.”³⁰ The saga describes the “Ancient Wiles of Gudrun” as new and unsettling to the men of the Norwegian court; its newness must have resided in the fact that it presents the story in the German, rather than in the Scandinavian version—that is, revenge *on* the brothers, rather than revenge *for* the brothers. If what Andersson and I have written, building on the older scholarship, holds, then we can grasp in a literary historical sense: an oral Saxon lay of the twelfth century; thirteenth-century North Germanic and Middle High German versions of it; and a lost ballad of the fourteenth century, all traceable by their title and by perturbations of their environment.

The core of eddic poetry is constituted by the poems of two anthologies, the final copies of which were written in Iceland in the mid- to late-thirteenth century. The codicological prehistory of these manuscripts, especially of the less fragmentary Codex Regius 2365 4to, has been elaborately studied. The paleographers differ on the age and composition of the written sources, but I tend to believe in indications of fairly early dates around 1200 for the pamphlets that immediately preceded the Codex Regius and in the possibility that some of the poems were written down in Norway.³¹ Why and how any of the poems were written down at all has, I think, eluded all scholars, but I think a plausible hypothesis for the construction of the final collection in Codex Regius could begin with the influence of a *book*, Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda*, which is, of course, a learned and literate work of c. 1223. One aspect of Snorri’s learning is its Christian and European basis; to a certain extent Snorri is making the

29. Theodore M. Andersson, *A Preface to the Nibelungenlied* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1987) and references there.

30. Joseph Harris, “*Guðrúnarbrögð* and the Saxon Lay of Grimhild’s Perfidy,” *Medieval Scandinavia* 9 (1976): 173–80; and references there [reprinted in this volume, Eds.].

31. Discussed in Harris, “Eddic Poetry” (n. 10 above).

native cultural past available to the Christian present by negotiating its relationship to European and universal history. His historical ideology emerges from the intense study of the last decade as quite complex; but framed within his ambiguous form of euhemerism, we can recognize a movement from ultimate beginnings and endings in myth descending toward heroic story and history.

When the Codex Regius compiler went to work, perhaps a quarter of a century later, Snorri had cleared the way by making an anthology of pagan mythological poetry followed by heroic poetry imaginable. But by omitting anything like Snorri’s euhemeristic framework, the Codex Regius compiler gave his book a more historical thrust in the sense of medieval typological history. For “prefigurations, shadows, and realizations in the fullness of time” have been convincingly found in the Codex Regius by Heinz Klingenberg.³² Klingenberg, however, grounds its historical sense in the social dissolution of the Icelandic present about the middle of the thirteenth century and stops short of a hypothesis I think is needed to capture the organizing “idea” of the Codex Regius as a book,³³ an hypothesis I’ve ventured so far only in lectures. How did the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda come to be arranged precisely as a two-part book deeply imbued with a sense of history as a succession of ages? It may be that another book, in fact *the* book of the Middle Ages, suggested the pattern. Perhaps biblical influence, if it is allowed at all, goes no farther than the bipartite succession a New Law upon an Old. “The Sibyl’s Prophecy” (*Vǫluspá*) is clearly placed first because it tells the genesis of the world, but that is not an obvious or necessary arrangement.³⁴ “The Sibyl’s Prophecy” opens with a capital five lines high; this is balanced by the only other initial of this size in the manuscript, the first letter of the heroic section that begins with the first Helgi poem.³⁵ Thus the heroic age, like the New Testament, is emphatically a new beginning, and

32. Heinz Klingenberg, *Edda—Sammlung und Dichtung*, Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie 3 (Basel, etc.: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1974).

33. Cf. Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley, etc.: University of California Press, 1976) and Jesse Gellrich, *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages: Language Theory, Mythology, and Fiction* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985).

34. For the literature on the arrangement of the Codex Regius see Harris, “Eddic Poetry” (n. 10 above).

35. As pointed out by Klingenberg.

the first Helgi poem opens with the phrase *Ár vas alda* (“it was early in the ages”), this opening line echoing one of the first lines of “The Sibyl’s Prophecy.” The biblical analogue in Genesis is “in the beginning,” structurally echoed in the Gospel of John, “in the beginning was the word.” This line of thought could be carried further,³⁶ but let me turn from the obvious literacy of the collection back to questions of orality and literacy in the eddic poems themselves.

The oral eddic tradition continued rather strongly in the thirteenth century, as attested for example in dream verses collected in the sagas of contemporary events, especially *Sturlunga saga*.³⁷ “The Sibyl’s Prophecy” survives in three versions, apparently showing some oral variation, as if its poetic tradition were still evolving when written down. In other words, written intervention in the tradition by Snorri, his predecessors, and the compiler of the Codex Regius seems not to have terminated the whole oral eddic tradition, but did it create conditions for a parallel *written* eddic tradition? The compiler has made a real *book* out of oral poems arrested in writing, but I see no compelling reason to believe that any of the poems is itself a written composition. Siegfried Gutenbrunner declared three to be “eddic poems from the scriptorium,” but in the case of “Brynhild’s Hell Ride” (*Helreið Brynhildar*) he is probably positively wrong because, in addition to a possible echo of the Norse poem’s poetic tradition in Old English, there is a second recording that looks very much like an oral variant.³⁸ For another poem, “The Third Lay of Gudrun” (*Guðrúnarkviða in þriðja*), there is no significant evidence. What

36. Lars Lönnroth, “The Old Norse Analogue: Eddic Poetry and Fornaldarsaga,” in *Religion, Myth, and Folklore in the World’s Epics: The Kalevala and its Predecessors*, ed. Lauri Honko (Berlin and New York: Mouton/de Gruyter, 1990), pp. 73–93, interestingly explores the possibility that Elias Lönnrot’s study of the *Poetic Edda*, and his explicit desire to emulate it, influenced his arrangement of *runot* in the 1849 *Kalevala*. But, I would argue, by ending his newly minted epic with the flight of the old gods represented by Väinämöinen, the birth of a new hero (cf. Helgi), and the beginning of a new age, Lönnrot would seem to have in mind only the mythological first half of the *Poetic Edda*. The *Shāb-Nāma* and the *Watunna* are two more epics that end with the beginning of the era of a new world religion (Islam, Christianity).

37. For a study see Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, “Guðrún Gjúkadóttir in Miðjumdalr. Zur Aktualität nordischer Heldensage im Island des 13. Jahrhunderts,” in *Heldensage und Heldendichtung im Germanischen*, ed. Heinrich Beck (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1988), pp. 183–96; cf. Quinn (n. 11 above), pp. 32–42.

38. Gutenbrunner, “Eddalieder aus der Scheibstube,” *ZDP* 74 (1955): 250–63. Cf. the OE *Wife’s Lament* and the variant text of *Helreið Brynhildar* in *Norna-Gests Pátr*.

would be significant evidence? If style cannot prove a poem oral, it also cannot prove it literary; late content is of no significance in view of the flourishing oral dream verses in eddic meters set securely within the mid-thirteenth century; the fact that words, formulas, or lines can be translated into Latin proves only that Gutenbrunner was a fine Latinist.³⁹ Significant forms of evidence would, I think, be two: (1) intertextual relations with learned writings which are unlikely to have been heard rather than read; or (2) a strong argument that a poem was written for its place in the manuscript. Applied to the poem "Grípir's Prophecy" (*Grípisspá*) these two criteria do at least awaken suspicions, for this insipid preview of Sigurd's life might well have been written to introduce a Sigurd pamphlet, as other scholars have proposed. However, the overall case for a written *Grípisspá* advanced by Gutenbrunner and, indirectly, by Theodore M. Andersson is not compelling. A more thorough attempt to apply the two criteria was made by Klingenberg in his argument that the first Helgi poem was written for its place in the codex. I tried to isolate and disarm some of Klingenberg's arguments, but it remains the best of its kind.⁴⁰

It might be of interest to introduce a new concept into these controversies, Susan Stewart's notion of "distressed genres."⁴¹ "To distress" something, for example a piece of furniture, is approximately "to antique" it, but Stewart is discussing the literary nostalgia of an eighteenth century that produced the ballad revival and figures like Ossian and Chatterton. Distressed genres, then, are made to look old or folkloric or ethnic for complex literary and cultural reasons. This way of looking at the eddic context perhaps contributes an interesting aspect to the Icelandic renaissance of the eleventh- and twelfth centu-

39. The presuppositions of this last "test" are that if parts of a text can be easily translated "back" into a language and poetic tradition from which it is hypothesized to have been borrowed, the translation constitutes an evidence of the borrowing. The obvious circularity here is not as illogical as it seems at first glance, however, since "re"-translation is only a special case of explaining linguistic anomalies in the putative borrowing poem by reference to the language, especially poetic language, of the putative lending tradition; see Harris, "Eddic Poetry" (n. 10 above): 102-06.

40. References and arguments given in Harris, "Eddic Poetry" (n. 10 above): 122-25.

41. Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 66-101.

ries,⁴² and perhaps it helps to answer the question why an Icelandic litteratus might have wished to write a *Grípisspá*. It cannot help to date the composition, however, or—despite my use of the word litteratus—distinguish it categorically as oral or written in origin. And it cannot help us directly in attempting to name the poet.

I do believe, however, that the eddic tradition, despite its anonymity, was one in which it makes sense to think—alongside tradition itself—of individual tradition-bearers, poets in a variety of senses. Ingimundr prestr was the poet of the *flokkr* that ended his *Orms saga* and probably of the scattered verses of the saga, but some skaldic stanzas attributed to Ormr by Snorri make it likely that Ormr's story had some traditional basis, perhaps with an historical kernel. Sigurður Nordal nominated the Icelandic skald Völu-Steinn as possible poet of *Völuspá*: the time, the nickname, the skill are right, and Nordal made the connection very plausible with evidence of thematic connections.⁴³ Felix Genzmer, seconded by Konstantin Reichardt, assigned “The Old Lay of Atli” to the Norwegian skald Þorbjörn hornklofi, poet of the semiskaldic praise poem *Haraldskvæði*.⁴⁴ Theodore Andersson did not *name* the Greenlandic poet of the later Atli poem but did derive his poem directly from *Atlakviða*.⁴⁵ Alexander Bugge nominated as poet of the first Helgi poem the “chief-poet” of King Magnús Ólafsson of Norway, Arnórr jarlaskáld.⁴⁶ In my own study of that poem I agreed at least to the extent that I felt the nature of the poetic composition in the first Helgi poem could be partly captured under the concept “skaldic revision” of an older, more eddic poem; this poet would have worked somewhat like Þorvaldr veili, who Snorri says

42. The chief study is probably still Andreas Heusler, “Heimat und Alter der eddischen Gedichte. Das isländische Sondergut,” *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 116 (1906): 249–281; rpt. in *Kleine Schriften* 2 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969), 483–494.

43. Nordal, “Völusteinn,” *Iðunn* 8 (1923–24): 161–78; rpt. and translated several times, esp. “The Author of *Völuspá*,” tr. B.S. Benediktz, *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 20 (1978–79): 114–30.

44. Genzmer, “Der Dichter der *Atlakviða*,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 42 (1926): 97–134; Reichardt, “Der Dichter der *Atlakviða*,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 42 (1926): 323–26.

45. Theodore M. Andersson, “Did the Poet of *Atlamál* Know *Atlaqviða*?” in *Edda: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason ([Winnipeg]: University of Manitoba Press, 1983), pp. 243–57.

46. Alexander Bugge, “Arnór jarlaskáld og det forste kvad om Helge Hundingsbane,” *Edda* 1 (1914): 350–80.

composed a poem (*kvæði*), which is placed by its metrical names, *kviða skjálfbenda* or refrainless *drápa*, midway between eddic and skaldic.⁴⁷ The subject of this lost poem, Snorri tells us, was the story of Sigurd. The situation of composition is not in oral performance, and not in a scriptorium, a perfect situation for what I’ve called contemplative composition, for the poet was shipwrecked on a skerry and composed the poem apparently to pass the time. If this lost poem had survived, we would have a semi-skaldic poem by a named poet, composed on an eddic subject in a form that could also describe the first Helgi poem.

* * *

To affirm a continuum (as I have implicitly been doing) between eddic and skaldic traditions is not to deny that at its most characteristic skaldic verse is drastically different, especially in its linguistic obscurity, and the difficulty of its textual history. One established fact about skaldic poetry, however, is that it was for centuries an oral art. And so it is peculiar that, to my knowledge, no one has attempted to assess skaldic poetry by the fitful light of modern work on orality and literacy and especially of the oral-formulaic theory. Even if it is not the “living laboratory” Lord and Parry found in Yugoslavia, skaldic poetry could be another kind of “laboratory,” a test case for the study of the transition of a genre of oral poetry, not only onto vellum, but into a family of genres that arise in close proximity to writing. For skaldic poetry was cultivated to a high art from long before the introduction of writing, and its evolving tradition continued down to the late Middle Ages when literacy is thought to have been fairly widespread in Iceland, making the transition from arch-pagan to fully Christian also.⁴⁸ Over 100 poets are named in the thirteenth-century antiquarian work “List of the Poets” (*Skáldatal*).⁴⁹ Some skaldic poetry is simply quoted to illustrate diction or meter in Snorri’s poetic handbook, giving little or no

47. Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Háttatal*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 18 (ch. 35).

48. Several introductions to skaldic poetry are available; see Roberta Frank, “Skaldic Poetry,” in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature* (n. 8 above).

49. *Edda Snorronis Sturlæi*, tomi tertii pars prior (Copenhagen, 1880).

context; but a great deal is preserved in saga narratives that purport to tell the circumstances of composition or transmission. Of course skepticism, even extreme skepticism, about details is in order where it is a matter of specific actions in specific times and places as reported two hundred years later, but the saga literature can be trusted to give typical pictures that were plausible to their hearers or readers in the high and later medieval centuries. Such sagas convey a good deal of information about poets, performances, function, and even the appreciation of skaldic poetry, and one genre of sagas focuses centrally on the life of its subject poet.

So how, on a preliminary assessment, *would* early skaldic poetry measure up as oral poetry? Well, but tautologically well, if we mean, with Ruth Finnegan, simply poetry which is not composed in writing, but badly if our definition is shaped by the South Slavic-Homeric model. First of all skaldic poetry seems not to be in any sense formulaic. At least, I cannot point to a demonstration that it is formulaic; it remains possible that a formulaic structure unlike what we know elsewhere is waiting to be discovered. Bjarne Fidjestøl, whose book on West Norse royal eulogy is the most important publication on skaldic poetry in some years, is quite conscious of the anomaly of a poetry that is “oral but at the same time unchanging”;⁵⁰ Fidjestøl speaks of a system and a technique “answering to oral-formulaic technique in another type of traditional poetry,” but he adds, “Oral formulas are few in skaldic poetry.”⁵¹ Russell Poole describes one repeated collocation as “verg[ing] upon the formulaic in battle poetry”;⁵² but the more general results of his studies suggest that “we cannot distinguish in any general way between improvised, occasional verses on the one hand and the constituent stanzas of longer, more formal poems on the other hand by using ... technical criteria” (p. 6). Kennings, the condensed two-part metaphors that stand in for nouns, are constructed to a set pattern, which can be

50. *Det norrøne fyrstediktet* (Øvre Ervik: Alvheim & Eide, 1982); quotation (“munnleg, men likevel varig”) from Fidjestøl, “Islandingsaga og fyrstedikting: Dikting og samfunn i arkaisk norrøn kultur,” in *Hellas og Norge* (cited n. 8 above), 23.

51. Fidjestøl, *Fyrstediktet* (n. 50 above): 204 (“Oral formulas er det lite av i skalde-diktinga”).

52. R. G. Poole, *Viking Poems on War and Peace: A Study in Skaldic Narrative* (Toronto, etc.: University of Toronto Press, 1991), p. 89.

captured as generative rules,⁵³ but the elements are not distributed formulaically. In fact, their distribution seems to be fairly unpredictable.⁵⁴ Diana Whaley’s studies of clause arrangement constitute a step toward predictability within the helming or half-stanza,⁵⁵ but, more generally, diction at the skaldic end of the eddic-skaldic spectrum still seems unnatural, artificially fragmented, puzzle-like, a consciously made thing, and—choosing a purposely pregnant adjective—lapidary. The few modern connoisseurs can recognize personal styles, and there is every possibility of borrowing and imitation. Skalds could be influenced by their predecessors and contemporary rivals—Harold Bloom’s strong poet in agon with the burdening past can be seen already in 961 in the *Hákonarmál* of the Norwegian Eyvindr Finnsson. In fact, it seems to be Eyvindr’s propensity to seek inspiration in others’ verse that earned him the sobriquet *skáldaspillir*, “despoiler of skalds,” or more tendentiously Eyvind the Plagiarist. Skaldic poetry evinces manuscript variations and corruptions but fewer instances of certain evidence of oral variants than one would expect of such an emphatically oral art, and the nature of oral variation in skaldic textual history does not appear to resemble closely the free variation of a living tradition of oral composition on Parry’s model.⁵⁶ Fidjestøl’s complex discussion of this matter yields only few extended parallel texts in purely oral variation, but it is important to add that he has not parsed the material with exactly the same question in mind as I am proposing.⁵⁷ Moreover, the question should be reconsidered in view of Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe’s concept of orally competent scribes. In any case, most skaldic poetry is associated with named skalds; even when there is confusion in

53. Bjarne Fidjestøl, “Kenningsystemet: Forsøk på ein lingvistisk analyse,” *Maal og minne*, 1974, pp. 5–50; John Lindow, “Riddles, Kennings, and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry,” *Scandinavian Studies* 47 (1975): 311–27.

54. Two schools of skaldic interpretation differ especially in the degree of “naturalness” ascribed to the syntax; see Frank, “Skaldic Poetry,” in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature* (n. 8 above), pp. 165–166.

55. Diana C. Edwards [Whaley], “Clause Arrangement in Skaldic Poetry,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 98 (1983): 123–75; 99 (1984): 131–38.

56. Lönnroth (note 3 above) and Harris (note 2 above) discuss the role of parallel texts in an oral poetry.

57. *Fyrstediktet* (n. 50 above) pp. 45–60 (Skriftleg eller munnleg tradering), pp. 61–70 (Overleveringsdublettar eller parallellstrofer?), pp. 71–80 (Parallellar som grunnlag for teksttolking), pp. 199–209 (Handverket).

the sources about who the author is, it is always clear that there is *supposed to be* an author. It is also intensely occasional, praising a patron, describing a shield or house decorations or a vignette from life. There is a strict traditional poetics, but the content is usually not a traditional story like the Sigurd saga, although such material is used in refrains and kennings.

What of the representations of composition and performance in the sagas, and, a related question, what of the intelligibility of skaldic poetry? Frequently the sagas represent such poetry as instantly composed, necessarily in some sense composed in performance, but on closer analysis this seems to be purely conventional. In contrast to West Germanic verse, skaldic poetry is thought not to have been accompanied by music,⁵⁸ and real dependence on the stimulation of the moment would usually preclude accompaniment. There is a need for a careful historical evaluation of the contexts described for skaldic performances, and such a study also needs to consider coherence and structure in the poems themselves. If poetry is instantly composed, it is likely to be consumed effortlessly.⁵⁹ The audience of Demodocus or Avdo Međedović will not have scratched their heads in puzzlement, at least not for long. Medieval Icelanders did cultivate the art of improvised couplets; and one can read an extensive depiction of a verse-capping session in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*.⁶⁰ On the other hand, flowing oral-composition was at least imaginable to the makers of the mythology since Odin was said to speak in verse, and Starkaðr was given the gift as well.⁶¹ Snorri says of the eleventh-century skald Sigvatr Þorðarson that he “did not speak fast in prose, but poetic utterance was

58. Cf. Kari Ellen Gade, “On the Recitation of Old Norse Skaldic Poetry,” in *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. Heiko Uecker (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1994), pp. 126–56.

59. Cf. Michael Cherniss, “*Beowulf*: Oral Presentation and the Criterion of Immediate Rhetorical Effect,” *Genre* 3 (1970): 214–28.

60. Ed. Ursula Brown (Dronke) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 13–18.

61. “Önnur [íþrótt] var sú, at hann [Óðinn] talaði svá snialt ok slétt, at öllum, er á heyrðu, þótti þat eina satt. Mælti hann allt hendingum, svá sem nú er þat kveðit, er skáldskapr heitir. Hann ok hofgoðar hans heita lióðasmiðir, því at sú íþrótt hófsk af þeim í Norðrlöndum” (Snorri Sturluson, *Ynglingasaga*, ed. Elias Wessén, Nordisk filologi, A 6 [Oslo, etc.: Dreyers, etc., 1964], p. 9 [ch. 6]); “Óðinn mælti: ‘Ek gef honum [Starkaði] skáldskap, svá at hann skal eigi senna yrkja en mæla’” (*Gautreks saga in Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson [Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1950], p. 30 [ch. 7]).

so ready to hand for him that it rolled right off his tongue, just as if he were speaking other [that is, normal] language.”⁶² This has the ring of exaggeration, but Heather O’Donoghue comments that non-Icelanders may have overestimated the difficulty of improvisation.⁶³ I am not yet sure whether it is possible to come to a general conclusion about the improvisation of single stanzas in the more complex verse forms, but many stanzas presented by their prose matrix as improvisations in specific situations are suspicious because of their retrospective point of view or because they do not fit the situation of the saga. In these cases one can only say that the circumstances of composition are unknown. One of the difficulties is that when we say “skaldic poetry” we say too much. It sounds as if a single, tightly defined genre were at stake, but the one term covers over many internal differences. Let us look at two prominent representations of composition and performance, resisting the temptation to generalize too glibly to all of so-called skaldic poetry.

In the most famous such scene, the composition of “Head-Ransom” in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*,⁶⁴ an intricate, extended composition requires quiet and solitude. The saga conveys the impression that it is amazing that Egill could have accomplished the feat in a single night, let alone, as the dramatic story has it, in half a night. Yet poetic composition as night work is mentioned at least once in a tenth-century poem, as well as a second time in *Egils saga*.⁶⁵ In the saga it is these unusual factors that make the “Head-Ransom” anecdote worth telling, but many appearances of skalds before kings imply that composition of the longer eulogies took place well in advance and was carefully calculated.

62. “Sigvatr var ekki hraðmæltr maðr í sundrlausum orðum, en skáldskapr var honum svá tiltækr, at hann kvað af tungu fram, svá sem hann mælti annat mál” (Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga helga* in *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit 27 [Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1945], 292).

63. Heather O’Donoghue, *The Genesis of a Saga Narrative: Verse and Prose in Kormaks Saga* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), p. 11, n.; also citing the example of Sigvatr, she reflects briefly on the likelihood of improvisation of individual verses in court meter generally and considers in detail the cases in her saga (passim).

64. *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933), pp. 175–95 (ch. 59–61).

65. Einarr skálaglamm, *lausavísa* 1, transmitted in *Egils saga, Jómsvikinga saga*, and *Flateyjarbók* (*Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, AI (Copenhagen and Kristiania: Gyldendal and Nordisk forlag, 1912), p. 131; *Egils saga*, ed. Nordal (cited n. 64 above), pp. 270–71; prose attributed to Egill in *Egils saga*, ed. Nordal, p. 272.

A short story or *þáttur* set in the twelfth-century gives a very realistic picture of the improvisations of the court poet Einarr Skúlason.⁶⁶ (A translation is attached here as an appendix). Each vignette stresses the court's admiration for Einarr's ability to compose an eight-line poem on short notice, but he does not automatically spout verse. In the last of the story's anecdotes, Einarr is challenged to compose a stanza before a certain ship passes a certain headland, and he matches this with a challenge to the audience: the eight of them are each to remember one line, and the skald is to be paid for each line forgotten. The retainers retain none of the lines, but the king is very pleased with himself for having caught not only his assigned line, the first, but also the last of the poem. Understanding skaldic poetry might not have been any easier than remembering it.⁶⁷ There are a handful of saga passages which refer to restricted comprehension, and John Lindow's paper on kennings as riddles and court poetry as the secret language of the all-male warrior group is persuasive as far as it goes.⁶⁸

The picture of skaldic composition is, then, not a unified one. But let us after all return to the risky matter of a general assessment of the central traditions called skaldic in the context of other oral poetry. If the standard of oral poetry is to be the South Slavic—and in view of all the factors that make oral skaldic poetry peculiar as measured by the South Slavic standard—it would be tempting to think of skaldic verse as literary *avant la lettre*. For even when obviously pre-literary in any usual sense, it has many features of literary verse. Perhaps it would be better to avoid the Gallic trendiness of calling an oral poetry literary, and I would not want to invoke Derrida's reversal of priority of writing and speech.⁶⁹ It would be possible to propose to

66. *Morkinskinna: Pergamentsbog fra første halvdel af det trettende aarhundred*, ed. C.R. Unger (Christiania: Bentzen, 1867), pp. 226–28.

67. The specific connection of remembering with understanding (as if the hermeneutics of skaldic poetry required the text to be held in mind and slowly deciphered) has its locus classicus in Gísli Súrsson's verse "Teina sá ek í túni" and its accompanying prose; see my discussion in "The Enigma of *Gísli saga*," in *The Audience of the Sagas* [Preprints of The Eighth International Saga Conference, August 11–17, 1991, Gothenburg University], vol. 1, pp. 181–192.

68. John Lindow, "Riddles, Kennings, and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry," *Scandinavian Studies* 47 (1975): 311–27; saga passages on restricted comprehension are cited here and in Harris, "Enigma" (cited n. 67).

69. For Derrida's position see Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982), esp. pp. 98–110; for Walter Ong's response, *Orality and Literacy* (n. 6 above), pp. 75–77, 166–70.

recognize a spectrum of oral poetic traditions from hard (skaldic) to soft (South Slavic). But we already have one such continuum, that of orality and literacy, with the associated notions of oral and literate mentalities, and for the remainder of this essay I would like to entertain the idea that an element of literate mentality might lie at the core of skaldi poetry and constitute the explanation for its peculiarities when viewed through the South Slavic lens. This element, if it existed, would be recognizable not just (circularly) in the mirror of the literary features of skaldic poetry—authorship, possession of the text, relative invariance, etc.—but (non-circularly) in a conceptualization of poetic discourse as something material, language made visible, in O’Keeffe’s terms. And this element, if it existed, would derive from the skald’s exposure, not so much to Latin manuscripts, as to inscriptions, especially inscriptions in runes—“the letters of the unlettered down to the Reformation,” as Einar Haugen has called them.⁷⁰

Runic writing probably developed in a contact area between Germanic and Mediterranean peoples at least by the first century A.D., and seems to have spread rather rapidly to the hinterlands of Scandinavia where finds in the older runic alphabet or futhark begin with the third century.⁷¹ Apparently the level of production in the older or 24 character futhark declined in the seventh century, but in the early ninth century there was a major revision into what is known as the younger or 16 letter futhark and simultaneously a new wave of runic inscriptions. This younger wave coincides with the early development of skaldic poetry, and the Harvard undergraduate whose senior thesis stimulated some of these speculations also aligns the new runic impetus with reinvigoration in a variety of economic and social spheres.⁷² The earliest attested skaldic stanza appears inscribed on the Karlevi rune stone on Öland. Its date of about 1000 does not, of course, make this an early skaldic poem, but as Jansson writes, it

70. Einar Haugen, *The Scandinavian Languages: An Introduction to Their History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 118.

71. Every runologist has his own opinion about these matters, but the recent synthesis (with full references) by Claiborne W. Thompson is convincing to this non-runologist: “Runes,” in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Joseph Strayer, vol. 10 (New York: American Council of Learned Societies and Scribner’s, 1988), pp. 557–68.

72. Carl Edlund Anderson, “Let us tell a folk memory: The Rök Runestone in the Scandinavian Wisdom Tradition,” Senior Honors Thesis (for B.A.) in Program on Folklore and Mythology, Harvard Archives.

is “the only skaldic stanza of which we possess the original text.”⁷³ This poem certainly makes use of established poetic traditions, but it is just as clearly composed for this monumental site and for incision in runes; it is “written” in every sense but stems directly from an oral poetic tradition.

A good deal of verse is preserved in runes, most in simpler eddic meters rather than in skaldic,⁷⁴ but our interest lies in the runic monuments’ public performance of material language. Many inscribed stones were intended to be seen and admired, to stand “near to the road,” as two Swedish stones say,⁷⁵ echoing a proverb or sententia preserved in the eddic *Hávamál* (“Words of the High One”): “Seldom do stone monuments stand near to the road, if kinsman does not raise them after kinsman.”⁷⁶ One Swedish stone leaves no doubt that three things form a single whole in the mind of the rune-master: language made material in letters, stone in which it is engraved, and a man’s reputation; he writes in verse: “Hróðsteinn and Eilífr, Áki and Hákon, those lads raised this eye-catching monumental stone after their father, after Kali dead. Thus must the noble man be mentioned as long as the stone lasts/lives and the letters of the runes.”⁷⁷ Such uses of runes bring up also the matter of authorship. Here four brothers name themselves; they must count collectively as the authors, runemasters, and construction engineers

73. Sven B.F. Jansson, *Runes in Sweden*, tr. Peter Foote (n.p.: Gidlungs [Royal Academy and Central Board of National Antiquities], 1987; Swedish original 1963), pp. 134–36.

74. See Erik Brate and Sophus Bugge, *Runverser: Undersökning af Sveriges metriska runinskrifter* (Stockholm: Hæggström, 1891) and Hans-Peter Naumann, “Hann var manna mestr óníðingr: Zur Poetizität metrischer Runeninschriften,” in *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. Heiko Uecker (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1994), pp. 490–502; Jansson (cited n. 73 above), pp. 131–43.

75. Tjuvstigen stones in Södermanland and Ryda stone in Uppland in Jansson (cited n. 73 above), pp. 139–40; cf. Brate/Bugge (cited n. 74 above), pp. 155–57 and 142–43. A third instance was on the lost stone from Kungs-Husby kyrkas vapenhus, Brate/Bugge, pp. 135–36 (by the carver of Ryda?); a variant is *brautar kuml* at Sälna, Skånela socken, Sämingshundra härad, Upland, Brate/Bugge, pp. 102–05.

76. St. 72: “sialdan bautarsteinar/ standa brauto nær,/ nema reisi niðr at nið” (*Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. Gustav Neckel, I: Text, 4th ed. rev. Hans Kuhn [Heidelberg: Winter, 1962]); Jansson (cited n. 73 above), pp. 139–40.

77. Nöbbele stone, Småland; cf. the translation of Jansson (cited n. 73 above), pp. 137–38; cf. Brate/Bugge (cited n. 74 above), pp. 248–49.

of this monument at Nöbbele. Public performance of language here, the compulsion to record name for fame, and the element of authorial ego—all agree with features specific to skaldic tradition though the verse form is eddic. Several times the pride of a runemaster expresses itself in verse, as when in an eddic stanza on the Swedish Fyrby stone Hásteynn and Holmsteinn refer to themselves as “the most rune-skilled men on Middle Earth,” and refer like the Nöbbele brothers to setting up “the stone and many rune-staves after their father”—a comment that joins the same three elements—permanence of stone, visible language, and the fame of their father—with a more explicit realization of the fourth. For they have secured their own fame in the same moment and with the same elements.⁷⁸

However peculiar the treatment of language in skaldic poetry, I would, of course, not suggest that the typical preliterate skald actually thought of his spoken words as physical things like the “many runes” of the Fyrby stone, but he was an author, often an author of poems that ensured the fame of his patron, dead or alive, and of himself. *Hávamál* refers to the “word-glory” that “never dies,” a social idea of fame that depends not on any *thing* but on human communication.⁷⁹ But I doubt we can tell conclusively when this kind of *oral* conception of language passes over into one influenced or tainted by having *seen* word-glory as inscription. (Even a tactile sense of language could result from a monument “near to the road”; the Vietnam War memorial wall perhaps brings home the point). In any case, the connection between the two skills we are considering, poetic composition and runic writing, is fairly widespread. A Swedish inscription (in prose) was signed by Thorbjørn Skald, and at least two other Swedish runemasters bear that nickname;⁸⁰ many exhortations or challenges to “read these runes” are delivered in verse.⁸¹ A poet of the mid-twelfth century listed runic literacy along with books and

78. Jansson (cited n. 73 above), pp. 137–38; cf. Brate/Bugge (cited n. 74 above), pp. 323–26.

79. *Hávamál* 76: “enn orðztírr / deyr aldregi / hveim er sér góðan getr.”

80. Jansson (cited n. 73 above), pp. 132–33; and one Swedish inscription may honor a skald, though the reading is very uncertain (Brate/Bugge [cited n. 74 above], p. 287).

81. Jansson (cited n. 73 above), p. 97; Brate/Bugge (cited n. 74 above), pp. 32–34, 143–47; 252–60; 303–04; 201–03; 332–33, etc.

poetry among his nine accomplishments.⁸² There are poetic embellishments of the futhark, rune poems,⁸³ and the association in the realm of magic is very close, as in certain parts of the eddic wisdom poems. There is no question that early skaldic poetry is oral, but does it perhaps betray a touch of runically literate mentality?

Rune-finds are rare in Iceland (about fifty) and, of course, relatively late. His saga does not record how Egill Skalla-Grímsson became a great runemaster, but every reader will remember how Egill erected the scorn-pole against King Eiríkr and Queen Gunnhildr, pronounced a magical curse, and, the saga says, “cut runes on the pole declaiming the words of his formal speech,”⁸⁴ and some may know of Magnus Olsen’s experiment with runic transcription of Egill’s two stanzas cursing King Eiríkr: Olsen hypothesized that it was precisely these stanzas, verses 28 and 29 of the saga, that Egill had inscribed on the scorn-pole, and Olsen’s transcription confirmed the hypothesis, at least to his own satisfaction, because the number of runes necessary came out exactly as one of the magic futhark numbers.⁸⁵ If Olsen is right, then Egill did have a literate mentality—literally with a vengeance! Later in the saga Egill encounters a host whose sick daughter he is able to cure by shaving off and destroying the runes that caused her illness and substituting healing runes.⁸⁶ This treat-

82. Røgnvaldr kali in *Skjaldedigtning* (cited n. 65 above), BI, p. 478 (*lausavísa* 1). It seems that Røgnvaldr is executing “one-ups-manship” on his predecessor Haraldr harðráði (poem c. 1040), for Haraldr’s fragmentarily transmitted poem listed the king’s eight accomplishments (*Skjaldedigtning*, BI, p. 320). Latin writing (the apparent meaning of *bók* in Røgnvaldr’s verse) may be the added skill; though the later poem is not so close a parody as to permit reconstruction of the eleventh-century poem with confidence, it does appear that runes were one of Haraldr’s skills, and poetry is on the surviving list.

83. Maureen Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem: A Critical Edition* (Toronto, etc.: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1981); the Norse rune poems are printed as an appendix.

84. *Egils saga*, ed. Nordal (cited n. 64 above), p. 171; *Egill’s Saga*, tr. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 148.

85. Magnus Olsen, “Om trolldrøner,” *Edda* 5 (1916): 225–45; rpt. in his *Norrøne studier* (Oslo, 1938), pp. 1–23. For doubts about Olsen’s case, and further references, see James E. Knirk, “Runes from Trondheim and a Stanza by Egill Skalla-Grímsson,” in *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. Heiko Uecker (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1994), pp. 411–20.

86. *Egils saga*, ed. Nordal (cited n. 64 above), pp. 229–30 (ch. 72); Knirk’s brilliant article (n. 85 above) is skeptical about the authenticity of the episode and the verse, but the parallel Knirk establishes from a rune stick can be explained as Egill’s use of a traditional sententia already established in verse form.

ment of runic grooves not as patterned absences of wood but as material signifiers that draw their signifieds, efficacious language, with them is paralleled in several places.⁸⁷ A more interesting allusion to runes in Egill’s preserved verse occurs in the saga’s verse 9, where Egill carves runes on a drinking horn to disable the poison in it; the stanza is semiotically fascinating since it juxtaposes Egill’s sign system to the harmful one of the host who poisoned the brew, his runes against the “sign” of his host (*ǫl, þats Bárøðr signdi*).⁸⁸ But more pertinent to us is the exact wording of the first two verse lines: “I cut runes on the horn, I redden speech in blood...”⁸⁹ The word for “speech” here is *spjöll*, cognate with English *spell*, but to redden speech you must have a very physical conception of it. Nordal’s modern Icelandic translation substitutes “words” (*orðin*), which from our literate point of view is unexceptionable, but in an oral culture the expression “rjóðum spjöll” must have had a force like “paint a song red.” Here a word for speech stands for material signifiers; so there must be a sense of the interchangeability of speech and its signs. However, evidence of a significant “literate residue” in Egill’s oral poetry is difficult to establish. In “Head Ransom” (*Höfuðlausn*) praise-words constitute a physical thing, Odin’s mead, a liquid cargo first to be loaded (st. 1), then stirred by mouth (19) and unloaded (20); on the other hand, battle is a prophecy to be heard (4).⁹⁰ In Egill’s “Lament for my Sons” (*Sonatorrek*) a physical sense of language gives songs weight (1, 2); the substance of a song is timber to be carried out of a holy place of words, and language itself is the leaves on the timber (5); on the other hand, language is

87. For example, in the curse in the eddic poem *Skírnismál*.

88. This verse and its immediate context are under suspicion of being based on an episode of attempted poisoning in a glass that breaks when “signed” with the cross, an episode in a seminal early medieval text, Gregory’s *Dialogues*; see Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger for Egils saga* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1975), p. 176 n. The correspondences are interesting, but a common source is real life customs; cf. a famous incident in the saga of Hákon the Good, *Heimskringla* I, 171–72 [ch. 17–18; Íslenzk fornrit 26] where a drinking horn is “signed” (*signaði*) to Odin and the Christian king’s cross-gesture over the horn has to be explained to the pagan court as the sign of Thor’s hammer. For Egil’s verse 9 (of the saga) the question is complicated by a very close relationship between the larger episode surrounding the poisoned and burst cup with a tale in *Orkneyinga saga*.

89. Ristum rún á horni, / rjóðum spjöll í dreyra” (Nordal’s text); my translation; Pálsson and Edwards are too free to use here.

90. Cited by stanza from *Egils saga*, ed. Nordal (n. 64 above), pp. 185–92.

also social action (20–21), and poetry is a skill (24).⁹¹ In his “Lay of Arinbjörn” (*Arinbjarnarkviða*) the oral image of language as action with ethical meaning dominates the beginning (1–2), but with the idea of the permanence of poetic fame the image shifts to something like a verbal rune stone: “Now is easily *seen* where, *before a host* of men, in the *view* of many, I shall set up the praise of the mighty kin of noblemen, steeply-climbed with feet of verse.”⁹² In st. 15 this praise-monument is wood to be carved by the voice-plane, but in the concluding stanza Egill returns to the idea of language as a signal tower, a beacon on a high sea-cliff like Beowulf’s barrow: “I was awake early, I carried words together. With the morning works of the slave of language (the tongue) I heaped up a cairn of praise which will long stand unbreakable in the enclosure of poetry.”⁹³ Now Egill had not read Horace’s “*monumentum aere perennius*”;⁹⁴ in fact there is no reason to believe that Egill had read anyone who did not write in runes, but the fame of Arinbjörn is here made equivalent to a monument of stone. And it is hard not to think of the conjunction of stone monument, written language, and fame that we know from some of the Swedish runestones.

* * *

I conclude by returning to an earlier hint about opposition to what Ruth Finnegan calls the “Great Divide” theory of orality and literacy. Such opponents might adapt a current phrase and describe the arguments advanced here as “romancing the rune”—slim evidence for

91. Cited by stanza from *Egils saga*, ed. Nordal (n. 64 above), pp. 246–56.

92. Cited by stanza from *Egils saga*, ed. Nordal (n. 64 above), pp. 258–67: “Nú’s þat sét, / hvars setja skal / bratt stiginn / bragar fótum / fyr mannfjölð, / margra sjónir, / hróðr máttigs / hersa kundar.” An alternative interpretation of the syntax of “bratt stiginn bragar fótum” is less visual: “I, having climbed steeply with the feet of poetry, shall set up the praise of the mighty kin of noblemen.”

93. St. 25: “Vask árvakr, / bark orð saman / með málþjóns / morginverkum, / hlóðk lofkost / þanns lengi stendr / óbrotgjarn / í bragar túni.”

94. The comparison to Horace’s famous phrase is inevitable and probably often indulged in; two instances that have come to my attention are Bjarne Fidjestøl, “Islandingsaga og fyrstediktning” (cited n. 50 above), p. 23, and Carolyne Larrington, “Egill’s longer poems: *Arinbjarnarkviða* and *Sonatorrek*,” in *Introductory Essays on Egils saga and Njáls saga*, ed. John Hines and Desmond Slay (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1992), p. 53.

anything as grand sounding as a literary mentality *avant la lettre*. The physical conception of song as drink comes from ancient mythology. A “staff” is etymologically a physical thing that comes to be used for letters, then words and verbal constructs; in “rune,” on the other hand, semantic development apparently moves from an oral act (as in German *raunen*) to the non-literate idea “secret” and on to physical letters, but the further development from “letter” to “(magical) utterance” parallels that of “staff.” In both cases a speech act is conceived in terms of chirographic things, letters, but whatever the semantic evidence might mean, it is not limited to skaldic poetry; and no skaldic passages known to me give such an effective picture of the treachery of writing as do the contrasting eddic message scenes in *Atlakviða* (the wolf’s hair: an index) and *Atlamál* (the runes: a sign system).⁹⁵ It is intriguing, nevertheless, to consider that Ong’s dictum “writing restructures consciousness,” taken seriously, ought have some consequences for early Norse culture which was, though predominantly oral, for many centuries also runically literate. If so, the utterances of the skalds might well be the place to look for traces that would match Ong’s notion of “oral residue” in literacy with a “literary residue” within the most incontestably oral of all early Scandinavian oral literature.

95. *Atlakviða*, st. 8, *Atlamál*, st. 4–12, in *Edda*, ed. Neckel (cited n. 76 above).

Appendix
The Story of Einarr Skúlason
[from *Morkinskinna*: See N. 66]

1. Einarr Skúlason was at the court of the brothers Sigurd and Eysteinn, and Eysteinn was a great friend to Einarr. And King Eysteinn asked him to compose an “Ode of Olaf” [*Óláfsdrápa*], and he composed it and recited it up north in Throndheim in Christ’s Church itself. And that was accompanied by many signs, and there came a precious odor into the church. And people say that they were tokens from the [deceased] king himself giving notice that the poem was highly valued.

Einarr stood in high esteem with King Eysteinn, and it is said that once King Eysteinn had taken his seat [for dinner], but Einarr had not arrived.—King Eysteinn had at that time made him his marshal, and this was up north in Throndheim.—Einarr had been to the nuns’ cloister at Bakki. Then the king said, “You are at fault, skald, that you don’t come to table, and yet you have the rank of king’s skald. Now, we two won’t be friends again, unless you compose a stanza right now, before I drink off this flagon.”

Then Einarr spoke a poem:

Abbess distant from all distress
Made me hungry na’theless,
Hallowed women did not suffice
To gird me up gainst that vice.
But at Bakki with nuns to eat
Was deemed for Marshal most unmeet.
The Lady gladdened not within
Bold audacious ruler’s friend.

Now the king was thoroughly pleased.

2. The story is also told that when King Sigurd was residing in Bergen, this incident happened: in the town there were entertainers, and the one was named Jarlmaðr. And this Jarlmaðr commandeered a young goat and ate it on a Friday, and the king intended to punish him for that and gave orders for him to be taken and flogged. And when

Einarr walked up, he said, “Lord, you are now about to deal harshly with our colleague Jarlmaðr.”

The king said, “You shall now govern the outcome. You shall compose a verse; and for as long as you are doing the composing, he shall be flogged.”

Einarr said, “It will be his wish, this Jarlmaðr, that I don’t prove to be one who has much difficulty in composing.” But they struck him five blows. Then Einarr said, “Now the verse is done:

Stole a kid that Christian vile,
That Jarlmaðr who plays upon the viol—
Famished for flesh the rude scapegrace—
Eastward rapt it from the farmer’s place.
The Rod did strike!—wise, well-spoken,
The Cudgel sang to that ‘artiste’
A harsher laudes, no saint’s feast.

3. It happened one summer that a woman came to Bergen who was named Ragnhildr, a splendid woman. She was the wife of Páll Skoptason. She kept a long-ship and sailed as proudly as barons of the realm. She had stopped off there in the town; and when she had begun sailing away, the king caught sight of her passage and spoke. “Which of my skalds is with me now?” said the king. Snorri Bárðarson was in attendance. He was not one who composed fluently, and he didn’t get engaged as quickly as the king wished. Then the king said, “Things wouldn’t be going this way if Einarr were here in attendance.”

He had fallen somewhat into disfavor with the king because of inattentiveness, and the king asked if he were in the town and said that somebody should go to fetch him. And when he stepped onto the quay [*bryggjurnar*, the Bruggen in Bergen], the king said, “Welcome, skald. See now how stately the journey of this woman is begun. Compose a verse now and have it finished before the ship sails out past the island of Hólmi.”

Einarr answered, “That won’t come free.” The King asked, “What will it cost?” Einarr answered, “You must promise, for yourself and seven of your retainers in addition, that each of you will remember his line in the poem. And if that fails, then you give me as many kegs of honey as lines which you don’t remember.”

The King agreed to that. Then Einarr spoke a poem:

The valiant dame with prows divides
 The hollow waves through Ústeinn's tides,
 The Wind, that Driver-of-fine-rains,
 The swollen sheets on boom it strains.
 No steed-of-the-Sea upon this earth
 Runs homeward hence in greater mirth—
 The broad-planked bottom batters the flood—
 Upon its poop a stately load.

Then the King said, "I believe that I remember:

'The valiant dame with prows divides'

—yes, by God:

'Upon its poop a stately load.'

They didn't remember at all what had been in the middle. Einarr then remained with the king's retinue and was in every way in harmony with the king's men.

