Mythological Allusion in the Late Verse of Egill Skallagrímsson

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ABSTRACT: The essay examines Egill Skallagrímsson's renunciation of his veneration of Óðinn, the god of war and poetry, in the poem *Sonatorrek*. References to this patron and to the whole corpus of early Scandinavian mythology almost entirely disappear from the verse Egill composed over the last decades of his life. The events and emotional state that prompted this decision and the procedure by which it was effected is examined in detail.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article examine le renoncement d'Egill Skallagrímsson à sa vénération d'Óðinn, dieu de la guerre et de la poésie, dans le poème *Sonatorrek*. Les références à ce patron et à l'ensemble du corpus de la mythologie scandinave précoce disparaissent presque entièrement des vers composés par Egill au cours des dernières décennies de sa vie. Les événements et l'état émotionnel qui ont motivé cette décision, ainsi que la procédure par laquelle elle a été mise en œuvre, sont examinés en détail.

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The late occasional poems (*lausavísur*) of the warrior-poet Egill Skallagrímsson have come under renewed scrutiny as concerns, broadly speaking, authenticity. With the fresh edition of Egill's work provided by Margaret Clunies Ross in the recently published Volume 5 of the Skaldic Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages series, *Poetry in the Sagas of Icelanders*, this renewed critical view is brought to bear on individual poems, some 60 in total, among which should also be assessed the longer poems *Hǫfuðlausn*, *Sonatorrek*, and *Arinbjarnarkviða* (Clunies Ross, ed, in *Poems in Sagas of Icelanders*, 152-391, henceforth CR). This essay examines Egill Skallagrímsson's renunciation of his veneration of Óðinn, the god of war and poetry, in the poem *Sonatorrek*. References to the god and to mythology almost disappear from the poetry Egill composed in the latter part of his life. While addressing the questions related to the positioning of these later works within the prose saga, it is also timely to reconsider the poetic matter treated in them, more specifically their few mythological allusions, which are otherwise staple matter in the rigorous *dróttkvætt* or court meter.

The point of departure for this investigation is a stated turning point in the poet's relationship with the god Óðinn, which is announced in the latter half of the elegy *Sonatorrek* for his drowned son Bǫðvarr. This poem, in turn, is doubly retrospective, since Egill also grieves the earlier loss of his brother Þórólfr at the Battle of Brunaburh in England, here called Vin Moor, between Athelstan, king of England, and a mixed northern alliance. There is also another pivotal moment in the saga, this more directly related to narrative matter and its organization and focused on a purely secular relationship. This is celebrated portrait of the warrior-poet sitting across from Athelstan after the battle and the death in combat of Þórólfr and comes at the near narrative center-point of *Egils saga*, although the protagonist is likely to have been still in his late twenties (Sigurður Nordal, ch. 55, 143; approximate dating in Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, 248-249). The thumbnail sketch of the poet pulling his sword from its scabbard and ramming it back in, while his eyebrows keep pace, moving independently up and down emphasizes those same grim features that Egill celebrates in his own verse, where they are regularly linked, generally in contrast, to his brilliant poetic art: massive bald head, craggy brow, dark eyebrows and eyes, large nose, massive jaw, dour mien. The situation is transactional. Egill tacitly claims compensation for his brother's death, a claim given edge by both parties' awareness that that this may be the result of Athelstan's tactical decision to deploy the two leaders at different locations on the battlefield. Athelstan makes reparation, with a massive gold arm ring, passed from sword to sword. Egill's return to Iceland from England via Norway also marks this turning point in his life. He will settle down on his farm at Borg, marry his brother's widow, have sons, and pursue the claim to his wife's property in Norway. The three long poems, *Hǫfuðlausn*, *Sonatorrek*, and

Arinbjarnarkviða, which regularly begin and often end with comment on his poetic acts, and some 15 situational or occasional stanzas follow over the remaining 40 years of the poet's life.

Insufficient scholarly recognition has been given to the fact that scarcely any mythological allusions figure in Egill's verse subsequent to the poem *Sonatorrek*, not in *Arinbjarnarkviða* nor in the remaining *lausavísur*. Whether this is true to the historical facts or reflects the artful composition of the saga compiler/author and where its explanation may lie, are the subjects of this study. By way of preliminary, it may be observed that there are relatively few mentions of Óðinn in *Hǫfuðlausn* and these, quite conventional, only in the context of Egill's coerced poetic composition (CR, 233-267, st. ***Hfl*** 1, 2, 3, 8, 19, 21). Óðinn as god of war is not invoked and it may be that here it is only Egill who operates under his aegis, not King Eiríkr *blòðøx*, whose martial career in Britain seems characterized by the poem as a great deal of thumping noise (in *runhent* or end rhyme) but little in the way of battlefield specifics (Kries and Krömmelbein; Sayers, forthcoming).

Sonatorrek is a contemplative, elegiac poem over the death of Bǫðvarr by drowning and that of Þórólfr in battle in England. At the center of the poem, Egill expresses his existential anxiety over the absence of a kinsman to protect his back in conflict, a martial image that covers all family loss, the absence of peers, and solitude (Sayers, 2020). Bǫðvarr's name is encrypted at this juncture, a poetic trope that seems reserved for familiars: a woman being wooed (Steingerðr in *Kormáks saga*, Ásgerðr in this saga), a friend engaged in a political career (Arinbjǫrn). This coding involves synonym and homophone substitution, in which the hearer is charged with the recovery of the lexical components of the original name. The *hildr* 'battle' of stanza 13 of *Sonatorrek* (CR, 312, Egill ***St*** 13) prompts thoughts of the equivalent *bǫð* with the same meaning. The *hapax legomenon varfleygr* 'flight wary' (***St*** 14) puns on the *-var* element of the son's name, which represents archaic **warjaR* 'protector' (de Vries, s.v. *varr*; studies sympathetic to this view of word-play in Old Norse-Icelandic verse are by Guðrún Nordal, Lindow, and Quinn). Such a 'battle-guard' in the person of a close kinsman is precisely what Egill claims to lack in his grieving condition, without brother or son. At the heart of the verses, the son's name is securely concealed from all but the engaged listener, yet this is less less a poetic burial than preservation in a poetic locket. It may be objected that other examples of such encryption are contained in a single stanza, while in the present instance such coding is realized in two sequential stanzas. But these are at the very center of the long poem and the reading is further supported by what seems the poet's neologism, *varfleygr*.

The dual, complementary nature of the encoding trope, the interplay of overt and covert semantics, seems to lead the poet to a review of what has been a life-long relationship of reciprocity: Óðinn's gift of poetic art and, by extension, his

general patronage on the one hand, Egill's acknowledgement of his poetic gift, recurrent celebration of poetry as a craft, and his consequent veneration of the god of poetry and war on the other. Egill judges himself aggrieved in that the god, known to be fickle and untrustworthy, has disappointed him at two key moments in his life, the deaths of Þórólfr and Bǫðvarr. Egill seems also to concede that he had been remiss in disabusing Athelstan of the soundness of his planned battle tactics, which resulted in Þórólfr fighting and falling without Egill at his side (Sigurður Nordal, ch. 54, 141), and in sanctioning Bǫðvarr's departure on a local errand in Iceland, fetching timber, in an undermanned boat in unsettled weather (ch. 88, 243). As a consequence of these reversals in personal fortune, the poet announces that he will suspend his veneration of his artistic patron, Óðinn. In a striking turn in two stanzas at the center of the poem, Egill renounces the ritual pact.

Áttak gótt
við geira dróttin;
gørðumk tryggr
at trúa hǫnum,
áðr vinátt
vagna rúni
sigrhǫfundr
of sleit við mik.

Blótka því
bróður Vílis
goðjaðar
at gjarn séak.
Þó hefr Míms vinr
mér of fengnar
bǫlva bœtr,
ef it betra telk.

I was on good terms with the lord of spears [= Óðinn]; I came to feel safe to trust him, before the friend of wagons [= Óðinn] , the victory judge [= Óðinn], broke friendship with me.

I do not sacrifice to the brother of Vílir <god> [= Óðinn], the god-defence [= Óðinn] because I am eager to do so. Yet Mímir's <mythical being's> friend [= Óðinn[has provided for me compensation for woes if I count the better [side] (CR, 323, ***St*** 23).

A translation of the second *helmingr* that more closely reflects the sequence of gift, its exercise, betrayal, and grievance, yet continued possession would read:

I do not sacrifice to Óðinn, the brother of Vílir, the guardian of the gods because I am keen to do so. Still, Mímir's friend has given me a gain, atonement for my misfortune, if I consider the advantage I still have.

In a turn suggestive of an inversion of the scene with Athelstan, Egill recognizes that his compensation, the gift of poetry, has preceded the offence—the death of kin—but continues in efficacy through it and beyond. Instead of excoriating the god for his faithlessness, Egill here sidelines him by indirection, with allusions to Víli's brother and Mímir's friend (figures both subaltern to the paramount god), this in lieu of any of the many epithets heralding Óðinn's wisdom, might, terrifying presence. Egill stays within convention, but the references, constructed on the same model as the kenning, serve an ironic purpose. Although we should imagine Egill still taking part in ritual sacrifice as socially obligated, with this explicit emotional renunciation mythological allusions all but disappear in his verse after *Sonatorrek* (for an example of sacrificial practice mandated by a chieftain, see the account of the youth of Búi in *Kjalnesinga saga* [Jóhannes Halldórsson]). Nonetheless, Egill does not abandon his poetic gift, only its patron.

The turn from Óðinn is prefigured in the poem in an earlier stanza, the imagery of which has caused some discussion. In stanza 13 Egill reveals his mental state:

> Opt kømr mér
> mána bjarnar
> í byrvind
> brœðraleysi.
> Hyggjumk um,
> es hildr þróask,
> nýsumk hins
> ok hygg at því:

Editor Clunies Ross explicates and translates:

> The loss of brothers often comes into my favorable wind of the bear of the moon [GIANT > MIND]. I ponder it when battle increases; I enquire into it and think about this (Clunies Ross, 312, ***St*** 13).

Sigurður Nordal (ch. 78, p, 251, st. 13) also sees a giant behind the kenning, as does Bjarni Einarsson (ch. 80, p, 159, st. 13), who in addition entertains the reading "máni bjarnar", enemy of the moon, more in line with the thoughts of the present essay. The first *helmingr* surely deals with (nocturnal?) anxiety but the central kenning does not point to a giant nor exclusively to the poet's mind. An expanded

allusion would be to the swallowing of the moon and sun at Ragnarǫk by the wolves Garmr, Fenrir, and Skǫll (one of these may have two names), here evoked by a proxy predator, the bear (Snorri will later use the form *Mánagarm* in *Skáldskaparmál*; Faulkes, 1998, vv. 335-336). Thus, the fair wind would favor not Egill but the advance of the wolves, along with the hosts led by Loki, so that the dative form *mér* is not to be read as genitival but rather as literal, 'to me'. Wind imagery is typical of the skaldic handling of mental processes, especially creative ones, so that *byrvindr* points both to the rush of wolves' advance and to the poet's uncontrolled thoughts. The plural form *bræðr* encompasses Egill's brother, an early loss, and his own two sons, Bǫðvarr and an unnamed child who died early. The admission of Egill's (microcosmic) anxious mental state over the loss of family might then be paraphrased as: "I am buffeted by the fair wind of the moon-devouring bear." With this emphasis it is the structure of the family that has been attacked, not that of the cosmos. Grimly ironical, Egill's mental state parallels the apocalyptic events as these will affect Óðinn, who will die at Ragnarǫk at the jaws of Fenrir. Egill then goes on in stanza 23 to formally renounce his allegiance to, and hence worship of, the god.

The poet's choice of *kviðuháttr* is of a metric form less demanding than *dróttkvætt* and thus for its listeners more compatible with a narrative, as seen in the poems of the *Edda* in the related *fornyrðislag* meter. The term for this meter is generally considered to reflect *kviða*, often glossed 'song, poem' with little specificity. But the term *orðkviðr* 'proverb' and the apparently derivative *orðkviðuháttr* 'meter/verse form featuring proverbs' suggests that folk etymology has been at work and that the meter was originally called *kviðarháttr*, that is, 'verdict meter' (Sayers, 2023). Snorri lists *orðkviðuháttr* in *Háttatal* (Faulkes, 2007, section 26) but not *kviðuháttr*, perhaps because he was reluctant to give the impression of sitting in judgment on King Hákon Haraldsson and Jarl Skúli Bárðarson, the objects of his encomium, especially since both were still alive, active, and influential. This identification offers a better fit with the poetic matter of such memorializing verse as *Ynglingatal*, which may now be seen as a succession of history's verdicts—not all positive—on early Norwegian rulers. The template underlying the summary histories in *Ynglingatal* is perceptible in Egill's poem: name of the subject, location of the critical event, and individual destiny, here not an incongruous death but a comparably unprecedented banishment of a god from the life of a man. In the case summarized by Egill, Óðinn has been judged and found wanting. The sentence is that Óðinn will not enjoy Egill's veneration. He will no longer be the object of any personalized cultic devotions and has moreover been banned from Egill's verse as surely as an outlaw from Icelandic society. Nonetheless, Egill in fairness acknowledges the gift of poetic creation that Óðinn early granted him and the rich life it has allowed him. Even now, while he cannot bring his son back to life

but could father another, he has also birthed a poem. Trade-offs and reciprocities abound in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Bǫðvarr was stolen to the sea, with Egill also its victim, the same sea that that was the scene of much of the story of the theft of the mead of poetry, e.g., the murder of Gilling at sea, Suttungr's attempt to avenge him by threatening to drown his killers at sea, and Óðinn's transmarine transport of the mead. Throughout Egill's work, the sea and poetry/the poetic elixir enjoy a metonymical relationship. as evidenced in the first verse of *Hǫfuðlausn*.

In sum, Egill has renounced Óðinn but not art. Just as profane objects, constructions, and topographical locations could be made sacred by human pronouncement and this sacrality then augmented by religious rite and other protocols on the site, Egill has sacralized the death of Bǫðvarr within the parameters of his poetic creation (discussion of the more common theme of transformation from secular to sacred in Losquiño et al. This is not to say that Bǫðvarr is sacrificed to art, rather that he is resuscitated and maintained through it, like the early Scandinavian rulers. The elegiac poem is then operative as 'verdict verse' on the life and death of Bǫðvarr, Óðinn, even Egill himself. Art changes the nature and import of memory. Unlike the verdicts of *Ynglingatal*, here the death of the principal is only anticipated. Later in life Egill must cross another divide and sit, an old man, by the kitchen hearth.

Egill is never modest and it is not a complete surprise that he would dare to sit in judgment on the High One. But he is no agnostic, a loner believing in his own might and main, and despite having been prime-signed in Athelstans's England before Brunaburh, gives no hint that he is ready for conversion to a new affiliation ('faith' seems anachronistic in this context; on 'might and main', Sayers, 2024). The old god is scorned as might be a treacherous ruler in the fashion of *Ynglingatal* but there is never question of his reality. On the absence of Óðinn in Egill's late poetry, it is, admittedly, difficult to imagine the beasts of battle present at the scenes of local feud, or Óðinn sitting in judgment on these combatants. Egill's life in Iceland necessarily affects the matter of his poetry. The Icelandic locus does not, however, preclude references to the supreme god in the poetry of other Icelandic skalds.

Any inquiry into the relative incidence of allusions to Norse mythology and particularly to the god Óðinn after Egill's disavowal of Odinic worship in the poem *Sonatorrek* must take into account the comparable density of such allusion in verse composed before the elegy for Bǫðvarr. Egill's mercenary service with King Athelstan of England and the celebrated portrait of a surly Egill sitting before the king will again serve as first terminus. From this scene forward to the death of Bǫðvarr, some fifty *lausavísur* are preserved, in addition to the the *drápa* for *Eiríkr blóðøx* ('blood-axe'), *Hǫfuðlausn*, and a similar long poem in praise of Athelstan, of which only a refrain is extant. Egill's long poems come in

relatively quick succession in the saga (chs 60-78), somewhat compressing our sense of the later years of his career. References to Óðinn as the patron of war and poetry are largely conventional in application, although the the kennings which are their medium may be difficult. A good example is the presence of the supreme god in the verse that encrypts the name of Egill's future wife Ásgerðr, his brother Þórólfr's widow:

> þvít geir-Rótu gǫtva
> gnýþings bragar fingrum
> rógs at ræsis veigum
> reifendr munu þreifa.
>
> ... because some summers-up of the din-assembly of the vestments of spear-Róta <valkyrie> [MAIL-COATS > BATTLE > WARRIORS] grasp with the fingers of poetry at the drinks of the instigator of discord [= Óðinn > poetry]. (CR, 213, ***Lv*** 17)

There are two exceptions: firstly, the invocation to Óðinn and other Norse gods, with here unspecified functions, that figures in the versified curse proclaimed in conjunction with the raising of a *níðstǫng* or pole of defamation intended to drive his avowed enemies King Eiríkr and Queen Gunnhildr from Norway. The second exception is the more ample allusions to the god and to the myth of the mead of poetry that introduce *Hǫfuðlausn* and also conclude it. Otherwise, Odinic references in the body of *Hǫfuðlausn* that laud Eiríkr as a successful warrior are run-of-the-mill and seem to decline in frequency and intensity as the poem progresses. The majority of the other invocations of Óðinn are in *lausavísur* that accompany single combat against various opponents in Norway and a tribute-collecting expedition to Vermaland.

To return to poetic creation after the declaration of *Sonatorrek*, *Arinbjarnarkviða* follows in fairly close succession and is occasioned by Hákon Haraldsson's accession to the Norwegian throne and the chieftain Arinbjǫrn's rise among members of the new court. In fact, Egill's laudatory poem seems in the nature of a political endorsement, intended to cement his old friend's new prominence. The eulogy of Arinbjǫrn lacks the heathen trappings of conventional praise poetry and it is his generosity and nobility of spirit that are recognized, not the craft of war, whose patron was Óðinn. This, despite Arinbjǫrn having accompanied Egill on an earlier viking raid (Sigurður Nordal, ch. 69). There is one allusion to the paramount god but this occurs in an opening passage to the poem, a flashback to a moment when Arinbjǫrn's friendship was most crucial to Egill's life. The scene here is York where a forced landing on the Yorkshire coast brings Egill before the throne of his archenemy, Eiríkr *blóðøx.* Arinbjǫrn negotiates a transaction, a praise poem for the king in return for

sparing the life of Egill, who had killed Eiríkr's son Rǫgnvaldr. In one early stanza of *Arinbjarnarkviða* Egill recounts how he brought to the king a poem whose inspiration lay in the mead of poetry stolen by Óðinn from the giants.

> Þó bólstrverð
> of bera þorðak
> maka hœings
> markar dróttni,
> svát Yggs full
> ýranda kom
> at hvers manns
> hlusta munnum.
>
> Yet I dared to bring to the lord of the forest [RULER = Eiríkr *blóðøx*] the pillow-price of the match of the he-salmon [= Óðinn's > POEM], so that Yggr's <= Óðinn's> cup [POEM] came foaming to every man's mouths of hearing [EARS] (Clunies Ross, 339, ***Arkv*** 6).

There has been debate over the image of a male salmon as a proxy for the snake form that Óðinn assumed in order to bore through the mountain rock and reach the retreat of the giant Suttungr and his daughter Gunnlǫð. But male salmon return from the sea to their natal waters to spawn and deposit semen on the waiting eggs, so that Óðinn's comparable action with the giantess is quite neatly referenced in adapted form. From this perspective, Óðinn assumes a symbolic female role in drinking the mead given by Gunnlǫð in return for sexual services. On the god's return to Ásgarðr these physical acts will be recalled and reversed when he regurgitates the mead in order to share it with the gods and humans (see Clunies Ross's summary of earlier identifications of the salmon image in Finnur Jónsson (an eliptic reference to a 'snake of the forest') and in Sigurður Nordal (a familiar reference to Egill's purported ancestor Ketill *hœngr*, who is credited with the killing of a dragon). These images of ingestion and evacuation through body orifices (including the eagle's anal squirts of digested mead for poetasters) are capped by Egill's near-grotesque metaphor of the acoustic effect of the proclaimed poem reaching the mouths of the listeners' hearing, the ears. The retrospective reference to Óðinn in *Arinbjarnarkviða*, after the disavowal of *Sonatorrek*, is then circumscribed by the historical circumstances of the poem's original composition and draws on its world of images, at a time when Egill was, indeed, still creating under the aegis of Óðinn, before the loss of Bǫðvarr. This is the sole, and as we have now seen, none too flattering, reference to the god of war and poetry in the poem for Arinbjǫrn. Such a reference may have been conventional in the opening verses of eulogies--the poet establishing his credentials through an allusion to the donor of the gift of poetry.

A more typical stanza, one that highlights poetic creation rather its patron, concludes the poem:

> Vask árvakr,
> bark orð saman
> með málþjóns
> morginverkum.
> Hlóðk lofkǫst,
> þanns lengi stendr
> óbrotgjarn
> í bragar túni.

> I was awake early. I put words together with the morning-tasks of the speech-servant [TONGUE]. I heaped up a praise-pile [PRAISE POEM], which will stand for a long time not easily broken in the home-field of poetry [POETIC CORPUS?]. (CR, 366, st. 121, ***Arkv*** 25)

The editor does not comment on the potential word-play of *málþjón* 'speech-servant', a kenning for *tungr* 'tongue', which has a near homophone in *tǫng* 'tongs', as might be used by farm-workers to carry stones for the erection of a cairn or larger *haugr* to memorialize or even house a deceased family member. *Óbrotgjarn* may then be accorded the amplified meaning 'not easily broken in to'. Arinbjǫrn's reputation, as ensconced in Egill's poetic *haugr*, will not be easily violated or vilified, as might occur in a concrete *haugganga* 'breaking into a cairn'. As befits a friend rather than a king, the ambiance of the eulogy is thoroughly domestic, as is his kenning characterizing his friend as a 'hearth bear'. ***Arkv*** 15 (CR, 351, st. 111) similarly employs the image of craftmanship, when poetic composition is likened to woodworking (on the image more widely, see Sayers.2002). In the present stanza, the verb *hlaða* (> *hlóðk*) was also used of lace-working, another domestic craft, as well as for laying stone foundations for booths. We might now translate:

> Early awake, I carried words together as in morning chores with my tongs-like tongue. I heaped up a praise-pile, a mound that will long stand, not easily broken into, in the home-field that is poetry.

A comparable instance of a poem of appreciation dates to Egill's later years, when he thanks the Norwegian chieftain Þorsteinn, the son of Arinbjorn's sister Þóra, for a fine shield brought to Egill in Iceland (Clunies Ross, 380-383, ***Berðr*** 1). Óðinn is remote, behind an ornate kenning in a *helmingr* that reads in re-ordered syntax: "Opt skal mín góð ǫrð annar kjapta of fregnask of trǫð Hǫrða, hrafnstýrandi hræra hragna" ("Often shall my good produce of the eagle's beak

[POETRY] be heard of across the land of the Hǫrðar [= Hordaland = Norway], raven-steerer of ... [SHIP? > SEAFARER? > Þorsteinn])".

The other *lausavisur* from the last decades of Egill's life (roughly 962-990) not only lack mythological references but, with the exception of two allusions and the specific situations in which they are made (a reminiscence of earlier conflict, a note of appreciation of generosity), treat neither of war nor of poetry, Óðinn's ambits. We have verses on the reception of gifts (from Arinbjǫrn and a young friend), drinking bouts (as hosted in Värmaland), social and family relations (nullifying botched runic medicine, complaining over a soiled gown), and old age (chs 78-85). No extemporized verse accompanies the account of the dispute of Egill's son Þorsteinn with Steinarr. One of the exceptions noted above comes in the context of Egill's friendship with the young poet Einarr *skálaglamm* 'tinkle- scale', who introduces himself to Egill at the annual general assembly: "ok tókusk þeir at orðum, ok kom þar brátt talinu, at þeir rœddu um skáldskap; þótti hvárumtveggja þær rœður skemtiligar" ("and they began talking and their conversation quickly turned to poetic composition; and they both thought that topic very entertaining"; Sigurður Nordal, ch. 78, 268). Unfortunately we do not know whether their conversations dealt with matter or style, metaphor or metrics, patrons or long poems. On one occasion Einarr, now his poetic foster-son, flatteringly asks Egill which was his greatest accomplishment when fighting alone against superior numbers. The question evokes what the protagonist might consider the theme of his saga: one against all. In another hint of an *ævidrápa* or autobiographical poem, Egill recalls incidents from Frisia and Vermaland, and seems to conclude this backward look with a (for us complex) mention of Askr and Embla, their endowment of human properties by Óðinn, Hœnir, and Lóðurr (Sayers, 2023). But the supreme god is not directly named in the reported discussion. The other mythological tag—one is tempted to call it—is in the first stanza of an otherwise lost *drápa* expressing gratitude for the gift of another ornamental shield. Here the poet may have felt obliged to respond in an appropriate conventional style. The allusion to Óðinn is certainly deeply buried.

> Heyri fúrs á forsa
> Fallhadds vinar stalla
>
> Listen, retainer of the king [Þorsteinn Þóruson], to my waterfalls of the flowing-haired friend of the fire of altars [VOTIVE RITE > HEATHEN GOD = Óðinn > POEM] (Clunies Ross, 380-381, ***Brdr*** 1).

Egill's professed disillusion with Odin that has been at the focus of this discussion is a facet of the larger motif of reciprocity, encapsuled in the scene of Egill before Athelstan, where battle prowess and a lost life are compensated

for with gold jewelry and royal favor. Reciprocity informs all three of Egill's preserved longer poems. In the grim deal between Egill and Eiríkr speech rises from the ephemerality of performance to the level of human memory and memorialization, as words are traded for life, animate existence through time. In the elegy for lost kinsmen, reciprocal relations are renounced although what has once been given—poetic art—cannot be be recalled, just as the dead cannot be returned to life. Only in the eulogy of Arinbjǫrn do we see wholly positive reciprocal relations: Arinbjǫrn's interventions in saving Egill's life and in recovering his wife's property are fully repaid by the laudatory poem that is created just as the chieftain is assuming a prominent position at the court of Hákon Haraldsson, nicknamed *Aðalsteinsfóstri* 'foster-son of Athelstan', a fortuitous but neat return to an earlier crucial earlier negotiation. Yet here too mythological allusions are absent and Óðinn is recalled early in the *drápa* only for his gift that generated the head ransom poem.

Largely untreated thus far in this essay is the question of the authenticity of Egill's verse, in particular that ascribed to his later life. Indeed, questions of historical fact and authenticity pervade the saga, from individual *lausavísur* to the overall structure of the written work and the identity and objectives of its compiler. Mikael Males examines the treatment of *hendingar* or rhymes in the verse of *Egils saga* (Males, 2020: 'Metrical archaization in *Egils saga*'; see too work in progress in Males, Patria, et al., 2021-, *Old Norse Poetry and the Development of Saga Literature*; Clunies Ross, 2022, 51-76; and Clunies Ross, Gade, and Wills, 233-236). Males judges rhyme patterns less fully realized than in classical *dróttkvætt* to be an archaizing effect by pseudonymous poets to provide the *prosimetrum* that is the saga with 'sources' for the narrative at specific points. On these occasion the simpler 'spoken' syntax of these second lines of couplets is revelatory of post-Egilian composition. Verse without such tell-tale metrical features is then more likely to be authentic. In the present context it is of compelling interest that verse associated with Egill's friendship with the Einarr *skálaglam* Helgason (Sigurður Nordal, 1933: ch. 78) should not only not contain such archaizing lines but also not make reference to the Óðinn denounced by Egill, Only one stanza of Egill's *Skaldardrápa* (the first?) is preserved. He thanks Einarr for the gift of a fine shield. It should also be recognized that we have no suggestion of pastiche by an unknown later poet of an entire long praise poem (unless it be the body of *Hǫfuðlausn*; Sayers, William., forthcoming). The content of this stanza is, however, precisely that in which the poet introducing his work might make specific mention of his patron, in the context of alluding to the myth of the purloining of the mead of poetry. Egill writes:

> Mál es lofs at lýsa
> ljósgarð, es þák, barða
> -- mér kom heim at hendi

hoddsendis boð--enda;
Skalat of grundar Gylfa
Glaums misfengnir taumar,
--hlýðið ér til orða--
orðgróins mér verða.

It is time to proclaim the shining fence of ships [SHIELD] which I have received, with the end of praise [PRAISE POEM]; the message of the treasure-sender [GENEROUS MAN = Einarr skálaglam] came to me at home. I shall not lose my grasp of the reins for the Glaumr <horse> of the land of Gylfi <sea-king> [SEA > SHIP] of the earth-grown one <dwarf> [POEM]; listen to my words. (CR, 376-378, ***Skalddr*** 1)

A subsidiary factor is the taste of pseudonymous contributors to the Egilian tradition. Third is the argument in this essay: that the disaffection with Óðinn over his failure to protect Egill's kin is authentically an expression of Egill's disappointment with his hitherto patron in poetry and war. This is most explicitly expressed in the poem, *Sonatorrek*, whose length, literary quality, personal subject, and deep emotion are unlikely to be the product of a later versifier intent on filling out the portrait of the warrior-poet.

To summarize, the few allusions to Óðinn in Egill's late verse are typical references to the art of poetry, a recurrent topic in the poet's self-promotion, but there is no deployment of other material from the mythological corpus or from known religious ritual. Comparably, Egill is credited with no further large-scale martial activity after *Arinbjarnarkviða.* Even as early as *Sonatorrek* he entertains no notion that he will go on to die on the field of combat and thus be a candidate for Óðinn's Valhǫll, if, indeed, he were still willing. He does not wait for the arrival of one of Óðinn's valkyries, choosers of the slain. Instead, in the final stanza of *Sonatorrek*, he fatalistically waits for the death goddess of commoners, a glancing reference to the *ævidrápa* or 'life poem' subgenre.

After his death Egill's bones are moved to Christian ground, a final distancing from Óðinn and his world that, symbolically might be judged congruent with his renunciation of the supreme deity of the old religion. In a stylish linking of the spherical entities associated with generation, physical, cerebral, and artistic, the whitened cranium recalls the duck egg and sea-shells that Egill received in recompense for his first poem, and also the head-oriented portrait before Athelstan. Still, Egill's huge skull, omnipresent in the saga as a whole, resists the posthumous baptismal tap of the priest Skapti Þórarinsson (Sigurður Nordal, ch. 86, 299). Egill had been prime-signed [received preliminary baptism] on entering Athelstan's army. Torfi H. Tulinius notes that manuscripts of the saga other than *Möðruvallabók* conclude by stating that Egill was prime-signed and did not worship gods. This may be a summarizing compression of the account of the condition for pagan mercenaries' service in

a Christian army under a Christian king, and of the renunciation of Odinic worship in *Sonatorrek* and thereafter. With his skull still intact, Egill goes into a new grave as he had lived, his own man to the end, as he had stated earlier:

> Nú erum torvelt:
> Tveggja bága
> njǫrva nipt
> á nesjum stendr.
> Skalk þó glaðr
> með góðan vilja
> ok óhryggr
> heljar bíða. (CR 326, st. 25, 96, ***St*** 25))
>
> I have it hard now.
> Wan sister of the siblings of strife,
> Hel stands on the headland.
> Gladly, willingly, yet unbowed,
> I hail her coming. (my adaptation)[1]

NOTES

1. At death's door, Egill is less wary than when in battle with his back unprotected by family members. Clunies Ross's annotated translation reads: "Now it is difficult for me to manage. The ... sister of the enemy of Tveggi <= Òðinn> [= Fenrir > = Hel] stands on the headland. Yet I shall gladly, with good will and unafraid, wait for death."

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