

Old Norse Poetry and New Beginnings in Late 18th- and Early 19th- Century Literature¹

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Abstract – This article first examines the image of northern antiquity conveyed in the productive reception of Old Norse literature by European writers and poets in the later 18th century, when this heritage at last attracted a non-scholarly international readership. Initially, European writers were impressed especially by the primitive and the sublime in Old Norse literature. This is partly attributable to the unusual character of the small selection of Old Norse poetry that had been translated into Latin. Secondly, the reception was informed by growing dissent against classicism in the European literary world and the consequent search for alternatives. The main part of the article then considers whether a similar emphasis may be discerned in Icelanders' reception of Old Norse literature a little later. The focus is on the resurrection of eddic metres, at first most evident in scholarly writings and in translations of lengthy epic poems, and later manifested in original poetry by Bjarni Thorarensen and other poets. Further aspects of Thorarensen's creative reception of Old Norse literature are also examined in light of the reception in other countries; and his ideas about the North in a broad sense, and Iceland's place in it, are discussed. Subsequently Thorarensen's views on Iceland's status within the kingdom of Denmark are analyzed. Finally the point is elaborated that Thorarensen approaches Old Norse literature primarily as the common heritage of a supranational North.

Keywords – Northern antiquity, image, Old Norse literature, reception, Bjarni Thorarensen, North vs. South, cultural identity

Introduction

European writers and poets discovered northern antiquity, and first realized the significance of the Old Norse cultural heritage, in the mid-18th century. Outside Iceland, Old Norse literature had prior to

¹ Translated from Icelandic by Anna Yates.

that time been largely the preserve of antiquarians, most of them Danish and Swedish, who generally published their findings about them in Latin along with translated examples. These poems and prose narratives had primarily attracted their attention as historical sources, not as literature. In the 1750s and 1760s, translation of Old Norse myths and poetry into the major European languages began in earnest. Among the translators were some of the leading pioneers of new ideas in European literary life, trends later termed pre-Romantic. Few of them had any knowledge of Icelandic, and in fact only in exceptional cases did they know any Nordic language. Hence their access to Old Norse literature was confined, in the main, to what had been translated into Latin. But the kernel of this small selection was clearly in harmony with the zeitgeist, and not only was it translated many times, in the conventional sense, it was also used as a basis for freer rewriting. This literary reworking presented a certain image of northern antiquity, and that in turn shaped European ideas about the Nordic peoples in general.

Swedish scholar Anton Blanck demonstrated in his *Den nordiska renässansen i sjuttonhundratalets litteratur* (1911) that the literary reworking of Old Norse literature in the 18th century may be seen as a consistent movement originating in the large northern European nations, which then spread to Scandinavia. It was under influence from abroad that Nordic poets first started to work regularly with elements of their own ancient literature, and their view of this heritage was initially informed by the European reception. Later research has confirmed Blanck's conclusion.² Blanck terms this movement the *Nordic Renaissance*, and other scholars have adopted the concept for this phenomenon.³ Some of them have traced this reception history into the 19th century, while Blanck's study is confined to the period prior to Romanticism as such.⁴ Hitherto no study has been made of whether the features of the literary movement Blanck describes have

² Springer 1936; Jansson 1996; Clunies Ross & Lönnroth 1999.

³ Medievalists sometimes apply this concept to writings of Icelanders and other Nordic people in the 12th and 13th centuries. See Johansson 2007.

⁴ Blanck himself assigns the concept of the Romantic a broader meaning than is used here and generally applied in literary discourse in recent decades: he extends it to cover pre-Romantic phenomena. The present consensus is that the features of the Romantic movement did not emerge clearly until the last years of the 18th century. See for example Furst 1976: 93.

any parallel in the Icelandic literature of the 18th and 19th centuries. An attempt will be made here to contribute to that issue.

It is undisputed that a clear turning point occurred in Icelandic literary history at the end of the 18th century and the first decades of the 19th. This turning point has sometimes been called the *Icelandic Renaissance*.⁵ This reflects, firstly, a judgement of the quality of the literature: the view that Icelandic literary life flourished for the first time since the Middle Ages. But the concept also entails that Old Icelandic writings were in some sense a springboard. Unlike other nations, Icelanders had never lost their connection with Old Norse literature, and they could still read it in the original. On the other hand, cultural resurgence in Iceland would have been impossible without a rethink of the traditional reception of the heritage. The leading poets of the period were Bjarni Thorarensen (1786–1841) and Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–45). While the two are often mentioned in the same breath, they were not of the same generation: Thorarensen was more than twenty years older than Hallgrímsson. The latter has received much more academic attention in recent times, partly due to his role in the periodical *Fjölnir*, which has been seen as an important precursor to the Icelandic campaign for independence from Denmark. But in literary writings of the 19th century both poets are afforded similar status, and by the end of the century the scholarly consensus appears to be that most younger Icelandic poets are following in their footsteps.⁶ In a well-known essay published in 1924, “Samhengið í íslenskum bókmentum” (Continuity in Icelandic Literature), Professor Sigurður Nordal voices his objections to the idea that Thorarensen and Hallgrímsson (and other members of the *Fjölnir* coterie) “had sprung in full armour out of the ancient past.” He is of the view that there has been a tendency to exaggerate the suddenness of the change attributed to them. Nordal points out that they built upon the work of the generations before them: “In effect they split between them the heritage of the 18th century, and it stood them in good stead.”⁷ The focus will here be upon Bjarni Thorarensen. His writing will be considered with respect to the

⁵ Gíslason 1923; Valsson 1996.

⁶ Melsteð 1891: xiii; Poestion 1897: 320.

⁷ “hefði stokkið albrynjaðir handan úr forneskju. Í raun og veru skiftu þeir arfi 18. aldarinnar með sér, og voru vel sæmdir af.” Nordal 1924: xxv.

productive reception of Old Norse literature that took place farther south in Europe in the latter half of the 18th century. Particular attention will be paid to the main features of the image of the Norse heritage entailed and disseminated by this reception farther south, and an effort will be made to explain its genesis. Parallels in Thorarensen's verse are considered, leaving questions of direct influence open. Several earlier Icelandic literary figures will also be examined in this context, while about Hallgrímsson's poetry a few comments must, alas, suffice.

Old Norse Culture Enters the European Literary World

The genres of Old Norse literature most respected today are undoubtedly the eddic poems and two categories of sagas that combine sophisticated storytelling with a fair degree of realism: sagas of kings and sagas of Icelanders. In the mid-18th century very little of this material had been translated into Latin: only a handful of eddic poems and one of the classic sagas, *Heimskringla*. In addition a few skaldic⁸ poems had been translated, as had the myths from the *Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturluson and a large number of legendary sagas—fantastical tales of Scandinavian heroes and kings of olden times. Outside Scandinavia, the mythology and the poems were the focus of attention. About a dozen poems, which gained currency in European literary circles in the 18th century, formed the canon of Old Norse literature there.⁹

The first two examples of Old Norse poetry that became accessible to the international scholarly world were printed in the original language (in runic letters!) together with a Latin translation in a treatise on runes, *Runer seu Danica literatura antiquissima* (often abbreviated to *Literatura runica*), published in Copenhagen in 1636. The body of the text was by Ole Worm, a professor of medicine at the University of Copenhagen and a self-taught antiquarian, who was well connected to learned Icelanders. The main text is followed by an appendix, which includes two short essays by Icelanders of the time,

⁸ It is an old established tradition to divide Old Norse verse into two principal types, eddic and skaldic poetry, but this classification is debatable; see Ólason 1992a: 52.

⁹ Most of these poems are enumerated in Heinrichs 1991; see also Amanda J. Collins's appendix to Clunies Ross 1998.

Bishop Þorlákur Skúlason of Hólar and the Rev. Magnús Ólafsson of Laufás, who write about the ancient poetry to be found in Icelandic manuscripts. The essays are followed by the poems they had acquired in Iceland for Worm: *Höfuðlausn* (Head Ransom) and *Krákumál* (the Lay of Kráka). The translations of the poems and the notes are mostly derived from Icelanders. *Höfuðlausn* is by one of Iceland's most significant poets of pagan times, Egill Skallagrímsson (who lived in the 10th century). In content it is a conventional paean of praise to a king. The title is a reference to Egill composing the verses when held captive by the king whom he praises the night before he could expect to be beheaded; the poem contributed to saving his life. *Krákumál* was believed to have been composed in even more dramatic circumstances by Ragnar Loðbrók, one of the most famous of ancient Danish kings (reputed to have lived in the 9th century). He is supposed to speak the verses as he awaits death in the snake pit of his enemy. In the poem, trapped with no hope of escape, he looks back over his life, entirely unbowed, and looks forward to reaching Valhalla. The final words are provocative: "laughing shall I die."¹⁰ *Höfuðlausn* was initially overshadowed by *Krákumál*, since that poem was believed to be by a more important person than a mere Icelandic poet. But another important aspect of the popularity of *Krákumál* was the impressive portrayal of an individual's stoicism in the face of death. *Krákumál* was the best-known Old Norse poem in Europe well into the 19th century.¹¹ Today, however, experts maintain that it dates from no earlier than the 12th century, and dismiss it as mediocre and uninteresting verse.

Literatura runica was republished in 1651. In the intervening period the principal manuscript of eddic poetry, the *Codex Regius*, had been discovered, and the importance of this branch of poetry was beginning to be understood. In the revision of his original text, Worm was able to take account of this discovery. Two eddic poems, *Völuspá* (Prophecy of the Seeress) and *Hávamál* (Words of the High One), were published, in separate volumes, in Copenhagen in 1665, with Latin translations. The edda volumes were "appendices" to a trilingual (Icelandic–Danish–Latin) edition of the *Prose Edda*. *Völuspá* presents supernatural visions of an overview of the history of the world and

¹⁰ "lægiandi skal ek deya." Jónsson 1912: 649.

¹¹ Accounts of the reception of *Krákumál* are given in Heinrichs 1978 and Shippey 1998.

the gods; the poem culminates in their defeat by Giants, and the end of the world, followed by its rebirth. The best-known part of *Hávamál* in the present day is the first section, with its commonsensical maxims. In the 17th and 18th centuries the final part was generally regarded as more interesting: *Runa Capitulæ*, as it is called in this first published edition. Here Óðinn recounts how he attained wisdom and found runes; he also lists eighteen magical verses and explains their effects. Not until 1787–1828 was a complete edition of eddic poetry published, together with Latin translations, in three volumes by the Árni Magnússon Committee in Copenhagen.

The richest resource used by those who translated Old Norse poetry from Latin into major languages in the latter half of the 18th century was a treatise on the fearlessness of the ancient Norse in the face of death: *Antiquitatum Danicarum de causis contemptæ a Danis adhuc gentilibus mortis libri tres*, published in Copenhagen in 1689. Thomas Bartholin, antiquarian to the King of Denmark, is credited as sole author, but an important contribution had also been made by his young assistant, the Icelander Árni Magnússon, subsequently a professor at the University of Copenhagen. Magnússon collected examples from Old Icelandic writings for the book, and assisted in translating them into Latin; the book consists to a large extent of direct quotations. Most are in prose, drawn from the sagas, but some poetry is also quoted. The most complete examples represent six poems, which are translated in their entirety, or much of them. As one might expect, the subject matter of all relates to death, often in the context of supernatural powers or a particularly gruesome death. *Gamanvísur Haralds harðráða* (Comic Verses of Haraldur harðráði, pp. 155–57) are an exception, as the tone is humorous, and the subjects of the verses include a romantic theme. Haraldur expresses his surprise at being spurned by a certain Russian woman, although he is expert in eight skills and has won many military victories. *Ævikviða Ásbjörns príða* (Ballad of the Life of Ásbjörn the Gentle, pp. 158–162) is strongly reminiscent of *Krákumál*. The hero Ásbjörn, captured by enemies, looks back over his life as he awaits execution. Ahead of him lies an even crueller fate than in Ragnar's case: Ásbjörn's enemies will force him to disembowel himself. *Bjarkamál hin fornu* (the Ancient Lay of Bjarki, pp. 178–182) is a call to arms, a pep talk to warriors before they venture onto the battlefield. The first stanza of *Hákonarmál* (Lay of Hákon) by Eyvindur skáldaspillir is included, and also the section which describes the fall of King Hákon the Good, his interaction with

Valkyries and his warm reception at Valhalla (pp. 520–528). *Darraðarljóð* (Poem of Dörruður, pp. 617–624) as it appears in *Njáls saga* is part of a vision or revelation, which proves to be a portent of a bloody battle: norns weave a blood-soaked tapestry of fate. *Baldurs draumar* (Baldur’s Dreams, otherwise known as *Vegtamskeiða*, pp. 632–640) are usually classified with eddic poetry, although they are not included in the *Codex Regius*. The poem recounts Óðinn’s journey to Hel, where he awakens a seeress and asks her to interpret Baldur’s dreams: she predicts the end of the world. In addition to the ten poems enumerated here, *Hervararkviða* (The Ballad of Hervör) should be mentioned; the major part of it was translated into English, from a Swedish translation, around 1700. It contains a dialogue between the militant Hervör and her father, whom she has awakened from the dead in order to retrieve a magical sword that was buried with him. These were the poems that comprised the canon of Old Norse literature in the European literary world in the 18th century. Not all are regarded as particularly interesting today. The majority are composed in eddic metre, although only three are classified as eddic poems.

In the mid-18th century a fundamental change took place in the attitude of Europeans in general vis-à-vis the North, due not least to the influence of *De l’esprit des lois* (1748) by Baron de Montesquieu.¹² One of Montesquieu’s aims with the book is to demonstrate the influence of climate on legislation, religion, and national character. The crucial point is that different environments call for different lifestyles, and this in turn leads to diversity in legislation. Montesquieu puts forward the theory, which can be traced back as far as the Ancient Greeks, that a cold climate is conducive to diligence and resourcefulness, while a warm climate encourages sloth and feebleness. Montesquieu attributes one particular virtue to the Scandinavian peoples: love of freedom. He even calls them “the source of the liberties of Europe—that is, of almost all the freedom which at the present subsists amongst mankind.”¹³

Paul-Henri Mallet, a Swiss, was inspired by Montesquieu’s ideas in his overview of the ancient culture of the Norse, written in French:

¹² See for example Fink 2004: 80.

¹³ Montesquieu 1949: 268.

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Introduction à l'histoire de Dannemarc, où l'on traite de la religion, des loix, des mœurs & des usages des anciens Danois (1755). This publication became highly influential. It is conceived, as witness the title, as an introduction to Danish history, which Mallet had been commissioned to write, and which was published in due course. The *Introduction* deals with the period of history too remote in time to permit a chronological account. The book is a general description of Old Norse culture and customs, based for the most part on research by leading scholars. Mallet takes sources on the Germani (such as Tacitus' *Germania*) as valid for Nordic peoples. He also subscribes to the theory of older scholars that Celtic culture had sprung from the same root as the Nordic. A small anthology of Old Norse literature, selected and translated by Mallet, was published the following year: *Monumens de la mythologie et de la poésie des Celtes, et particulièrement des anciens Scandinaves* (1756). Both books enjoyed great popularity. Not only were they reprinted several times in French, they were also translated into several languages: Danish, English, German, Polish, Russian, and perhaps others. Mallet's publications were the principal European source on northern antiquity in the 18th century, and even well into the 19th. As late as 1847 a revised version of the *Introduction* was published in England as part of a popular series.¹⁴

In his preface to the *Introduction* Mallet discusses ancient migrations in Europe. He concludes that the vast majority of Europeans are the descendants of Scythians, who gradually expanded westwards, then southwards and northwards. They brought with them, he says, a simple but martial religion, a liberal form of government based on commonsense, and unshakeable courage fortified by harsh living conditions. Those who migrated southwards lost their vigour, and in addition they became mixed with other nations (mainly Egyptians and Phoenicians). This amalgam reached its cultural zenith in Rome. As the power of the Romans increased, the farther they departed from their ancient manners; they also suppressed the original spirit of the nations they conquered. But the Scythian spirit survived in the North, because people could live there without interference from other nations, and because the climate was conducive to the Scythian virtues. It was from the Nordic region in

¹⁴ Editor's note: On Mallet, see also Julia Zernack in this volume.

turn, according to Mallet, that the Goths set off, ultimately to destroy the Roman Empire and free the subjugated peoples of Europe.¹⁵

The *Introduction* is very readable, but this alone does not explain its popularity; it also had to fall into fertile soil. Mallet seeks to correct European misconceptions about the Old Norse nations, and he is full of admiration for many of their qualities, but he makes no secret of his view that much in their culture was barbaric. He is especially critical of the strong martial element in their mentality. Some scholars claim to detect the influence of Rousseau in the revised edition of 1763, but here too Mallet is far from idealizing primitive culture.¹⁶ Even the Nordic people of his own time are in Mallet's view rather backward. The translations in *Monumens* are refined, literary rather than scholarly translations. The anthology includes a large selection of mythological stories from the *Prose Edda*, selected stanzas of *Völuspá* and *Hávamál*, and three "odes" as Mallet calls them, complete or nearly so: *Krákumál*, *Gamanvísur Haralds harðráða*, and *Hákonarmál*. Mallet concludes with a rendering of a little-known rime, but this was clearly less well-received than the remainder of the book.

At that time, dissent was growing in Europe against the aesthetic dominion of classicism. This was manifested in a search for other models than the Greek and Roman, often in other ancient cultures. At the same time, the literary reception of Greco-Roman classics changed; broadly speaking, the focal point was transferred from the Roman poets to Homer's epics.¹⁷ Shortly after Mallet's presentation of Old Norse culture, the poetry of Ossian, said to be a Celtic poet of around 300 AD, made its appearance. Scepticism about the authenticity of the poems did not prevent their becoming hugely popular throughout Europe in the last decades of the 18th century. In Denmark they enjoyed renewed success when Steen Steensen

¹⁵ Mallet 1755: 4–6. This theory of the origin of the Goths, which stems from a 6th-century Gothic historian, Jordanes, is not accepted by modern scholars.

¹⁶ In the writing of this article I did not have access to this edition, but in the English translation (Mallet 1770), which is mostly based upon it, p. 140 reads: "They must therefore be very little acquainted with human nature, and still less so with history, who place the golden age of any people in the age of its poverty and ignorance." The same sentence appears on p. 74 of the German edition (Mallet 1765), which was based solely on the 1763 edition.

¹⁷ Riedel 2000: 111–112.

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Blicher's translations were published in 1807–1809.¹⁸ The poems of Ossian are mainly set in the Scottish highlands, which from the perspective of continental Europe were seen as part of the remote and exotic North. Ossian was known as the “Homer of the North.”¹⁹ The popularity of Ossian was in many ways beneficial for the Norse cultural heritage. Even well-informed scholars did not necessarily draw a clear distinction between Old Norse and Celtic culture, as stated above. The distinction is, in fact, quite clear in the poems of Ossian themselves, which depict interaction between Celts and Norsemen, and some scholars placed emphasis on this. One of these was Scottish academic Hugh Blair, author of an essay often published with the poems of Ossian. He compares the ancient Celtic poems with *Krákumál*, which he sees as evidence of a less advanced culture: “This is such poetry as we might expect from a barbarous nation.” Ossian's poetry is more sophisticated in Blair's view: “We find tenderness, and even delicacy of sentiment, greatly predominant over fierceness and barbarity.”²⁰ Despite the fundamental cultural difference, the poetry of Ossian long coloured the image of northern antiquity held by people outside the Nordic region, and even by Nordic people themselves. They saw Ossian's verse as a product of Old Norse culture, or at least closely related to it.²¹

The word *sublime* was often applied to the poems of Ossian and the landscape in which they take place. This was an aesthetic concept that admittedly originated in ancient Greek philosophy, but was at this time keenly espoused by critics of classicism. The sublime was a beauty which provoked a powerful emotional response. The concept was regarded as appropriate to such natural phenomena as pounding surf, deep canyons, lofty mountain peaks, or thunder and lightning, to name but a few examples of new themes in art and literature. The sublime often had frightening overtones. Edmund Burke writes in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757):

¹⁸ Harwell Celenza 1998: 367–368.

¹⁹ See for example Singer 2004.

²⁰ Blair 1996: 349.

²¹ Jansson 1996.

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Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror is a source of the sublime.²²

Bjarni Thorarensen puts the same idea in a typically understated Icelandic manner in a letter: “Not everything that can be harmful is aesthetically ugly.”²³ All ancient poetry was presumed to be sublime, but the role of the macabre was particularly noticeable in the poems that had come to form the canon of Old Norse literature in Europe in the latter half of the 18th century.

One of the translators of Old Norse poetry into English was Thomas Percy. Best known for the collection of ballads *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), he also published a volume of his own translations of Old Norse poems, *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* (1763). His foreword throws an interesting light on the mindset regarding Old Norse poetry at that time. Percy clearly depicts the accepted image of the Old Norse in England—and probably throughout Europe—at the period: “Their valour, their ferocity, their contempt of death, and passion for liberty, form the outlines of the picture we commonly draw of them.”²⁴ The book contains five poems: *Hervararkviða*, *Krákumál*, *Höfuðlausn*, *Hákonarmál*, and *Gamanvísur Haralds barðráða*. Percy had very limited knowledge of Icelandic, but claimed to translate direct from that language; in fact his perspective on Old Norse poetry was largely confined to that which had been translated into Latin.²⁵ He thus regards the poems he translates as more typical than they are in reality: “From the following specimens it will be found, that the poetry of the Scalds chiefly displays itself in images of terror.”²⁶ With this emphasis on terror, Percy is, of course, not trying to put readers off, but to enhance the appeal of the poems by reference to the discourse on the sublime. Percy is not only captivated by the terrifying aspects of the poems, but also by the primitive in them. He sees them as showing “the workings of the human mind in

²² Burke 1998: 36.

²³ “Það er ecki ætíð æsthetisk líótt sem gétur giört Skada.” Thorarensen 1986: 97.

²⁴ Percy 1763: A6.

²⁵ Clunies Ross 1998: 61.

²⁶ Percy 1763: A6.

its almost original state of nature.”²⁷ This observation must be viewed in the context of Rousseau’s writings on the need for the civilized peoples to rediscover a more natural lifestyle.

Percy’s renowned fellow countryman, the poet Thomas Gray, set out at about the same time to rework two Old Norse poems in English: *Darraðarljóð* as *The Fatal Sisters* and *Baldurs draumar* as *The Descent of Odin*. In Gray’s version the fearsome ambiance of the poems is magnified by his vivid descriptions. But the external presentation, the form and register, are consistent with the aesthetic conventions of the age. The resulting poems are relatively independent works of art vis-à-vis the original poems. Gray’s poems inspired innumerable imitators in English verse; while that poetry is mediocre, illustrations to Gray’s verse by leading artists are still highly regarded.²⁸

The most important translator of Old Norse verse into German in the 18th century was undoubtedly Johann Gottfried Herder, who included some examples in his anthology of folk songs, *Volkslieder* (1778–1779).²⁹ At the end of the century he published an important paper in the form of a dialogue, “Iduna oder der Apfel der Verjüngung” (1796), in which he urged German poets to make use in their writings of Norse mythology rather than Greek, as some were indeed already doing.³⁰ His main argument is that Norse mythology is closer to German language and culture. Herder believes that this could lead to a renewal in German literature. The “apple of rejuvenation” in the paper’s title refers not only to this possibility, but also to Herder’s view that Norse mythology requires considerable “cleaning up” in order to be of use. He felt that the more barbaric elements must be eliminated, and that it was natural to continue to uphold the aesthetic rules of the Ancient Greeks. This quest to embellish and civilize northern antiquity became the predominant approach in the creative reception of Old Norse literature in the

²⁷ Percy 1763: A8.

²⁸ O’Donoghue 2007: 118–120.

²⁹ This comprises *Hervararkviða*, *Hákonarmál*, *Bjarkamál bin fornu*, *Völuspá*, *Baldurs draumar*, *Runa Capítule* from *Hávamál*, *Darraðarljóð*, *Gamanvisur Haralds barðráða*, *Ævikviða Asbjörns príða*, and four stanzas translated under the title *Das Hagehvetter*. They originated from Bartholin (pp. 233–234); the first and the last are from *Jómsvíkinga drápa*, the other two from *Bíadrápa*.

³⁰ Editor’s note: See also Julia Zernack in this volume.

following decades, not least in Scandinavia. In the literary reworking, the Old Norse world came increasingly to resemble Greco-Roman antiquity on the one hand, and the Christian central Europe of the Middle Ages on the other.

The Other Eddic Tradition

Bjarni Thorarensen was in no doubt about which Icelanders had paved his way by their literary contributions: Benedikt Jónsson Gröndal (1760/1762–1825) and the Rev. Jón Þorláksson (1744–1819). The former, he says in a letter, was “the first renewer of better literary taste in this country, by his translation of the Temple of Fame and the foreword to it.” The bulk of Gröndal’s translation of this poem by Alexander Pope was first published in 1790 and 1791 in the annual *Rit Lærdómslistafélagsins*.³¹ Thorarensen adds: “This paved the way for the Rev. Jón Þorláksson’s translation of Milton’s Paradise Lost.”³² Publication of the latter began in 1794, but a complete edition was not published until 1828. Both Gröndal and Þorláksson had also written their own original poetry, but Thorarensen clearly does not regard this as worthy of mention in this context. The resurgence of Icelandic literature begins, in his view, with the translations made by these two men. Thorarensen’s opinion entails, of course, a criticism of the poetry that had been common in Iceland in previous generations: hymns, rimes, and various poems for special occasions. Rimes had been the most prominent poetic genre. Originating in the Middle Ages, rimes were a unique Icelandic phenomenon, partly rooted in the skaldic tradition. Their content usually comprised a retelling of some Icelandic saga or foreign tale. Both rimes and skaldic verse are characterized by the use of their own poetic language, *heiti* and *kenningar*. The special vocabulary was useful when composing poetry under the complex rules of rimes or skaldic verse. Composers of rimes made liberal use of the *Prose Edda*, the 13th-century textbook for poets, when seeking words and phrases to

³¹ Vols. 10 and 11 of the annual. The final part was published in the last volume, no. 15, whose precise publication date is uncertain, although it is known to have been delayed for many years. See Björnsson 1976: 69–70, 73.

³² “fyrsti Endurnýari betri Skáldskaparsmecks hér í Landi, með Utleggingu sinni á Musteri Mannorðsins og Formálanum fyrir henni. Þetta ruddi Veg fyrir Utleggingu Sr. Jóns Þorlákssonar á Miltons töpudu Paradís.” Thorarensen 1943: 166.

use in their long poetic works. The most important innovation introduced by Benedikt Jónsson Gröndal and the Rev. Jón Þorláksson was that they chose to base their above-mentioned translations on the *other* eddic tradition; they used the free eddic metre, *fornyrðislag*, for the translations.³³ After *Paradise Lost*, Þorláksson also translated Klopstock's magnum opus *Der Messias* using the same metre. *Fornyrðislag* was later used by others for complete translations into Icelandic of Homer's epics and the poems of Ossian, some of which have never been published.³⁴ Bjarni Thorarensen went in the same direction with his own verse, using *fornyrðislag* more than any other metre. He even went a step further, using imagery derived from eddic verse in some of his most memorable poems. This new reworking of eddic poems has long been interpreted as a sign of growing national consciousness among Icelandic literati. I am of the view that aesthetic objectives were the most important factor; no doubt all these writers were conscious of using a cultural heritage that dated back to long before the settlement of Iceland, a heritage common to the North in general. This is certainly the case, at least, with respect to Bjarni Thorarensen.

In 1782 the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters held an essay competition on the characteristics of Old Norse poetry, in comparison with the Greco-Roman heritage on the one hand and Germanic/Anglo-Saxon verse on the other. The prize went to

³³ The basic form of *fornyrðislag* is a stanza of eight lines, each with two lifts, but with a variable number of unstressed syllables; the rhythm need not be regular. No rhyme is used, only alliteration; odd lines have one or two alliterations, while even lines alliterate the first lift in the line. The quotations below from the poems *Veturinn*, *Íslands riddari*, *Friðriksljóð*, and *Um apturfarir Fljótsblíðar* by Bjarni Thorarensen illustrate this metre. In contrast, the characteristic metre of skaldic verse, *dróttkvætt*, has one more lift in each line, and a regular rhythm, with two alliterations in odd lines. The form is also typified by a regular pattern of internal rhyme, either of consonants only (in odd lines) or of whole syllables (in even lines).

³⁴ Jón Espólin (d. 1836) translated all Ossian's poems in the *fornyrðislag* metre. Shortly after Espólin's death, Bjarni Thorarensen discussed in a letter the possible publication of the translation (Thorarensen 1986: 328; Wawn 1994), but it remains unpublished to this day. At his death in 1852, Sveinbjörn Egilsson had translated much of the *Odyssey* in *fornyrðislag* metre. (He had previously made prose translations of both the Homeric epics.) His son, Benedikt Sveinbjarnarson Gröndal, was commissioned to complete the translation, which was published in 1854. He also undertook to translate the *Iliad* in the same metre. The first half of this translation was published in 1856, but the second half still remains unpublished.

Icelander Jón Ólafsson (the elder) from the Svefneyjar isles (1731–1811). His essay was published in 1786 as *Om Nordens gamle Digtekonst, dens Grundregler, Versarter, Sprog og Foredragsmaade*. It comprises mainly a prosodic study of the ancient metres and a discussion of the poetic language. Ólafsson’s work draws heavily upon the *Prose Edda*, especially the last part, *Háttatal*. Unlike Snorri Sturluson, however, Ólafsson gives much greater prominence to eddic poetry than skaldic verse. Ólafsson gives a detailed explanation of *fornyrðislag* (extending the term to include the *ljóðabáttur* and *málabáttur* variants). He regards *fornyrðislag* as a relic of the first poetry of the Norse peoples: by this he does not only mean the nation which, according to ancient sources, settled Scandinavia under the leadership of King Óðinn, but also the aboriginal inhabitants there. Ólafsson even implies that *fornyrðislag* closely resembles mankind’s oldest poetic form.³⁵ The metre was, in Ólafsson’s view, not confined to strictly poetic usage, but was applied by the Old Norse whenever they wished to express themselves in a formal or high-flown manner: “They also used it instead of commonplace non-poetic speech.”³⁶ Ólafsson envisages some kind of chanting, and thus he calls this form of expression *song-speech* (*Syngesproget*). He sees this direct connection between eddic poetry and that primitive form of expression as giving the verse special significance. The poems of the *Poetic Edda*, he says, “should thus be seen as precious relics of song-speech.”³⁷ In accord with these views, he places special emphasis on the frequency with which variations on the main rules of the metre occur in eddic poetry: lines are often extended by additional syllables, leading to an uneven rhythm; a stanza may be longer or shorter than eight lines; alliteration is sometimes more-or-less random, and so on. But it is the freedom and “the noble simplicity,”³⁸ together with unusual vocabulary, that lend the poems their special charm.

According to Ólafsson, the skaldic metre, *dróttkvætt*, evolved from *fornyrðislag* around 800 AD and gradually more or less supplanted it.³⁹ He judges poems composed in *báttleysa* (literally “metreless”) to be

³⁵ Ólafsson 1786: 1–18.

³⁶ “De betiente sig ogsaa deraf istedenfor daglig ubunden Tale.” Ólafsson 1786: 3.

³⁷ “ere da at ansee som kostbare Levninger af Syngesproget.” Ólafsson 1786: 10.

³⁸ “hin ædle Enfoldighed.” Ólafsson 1786: 14.

³⁹ Ólafsson 1786: x, 15, 57–58.

indications of the intermediate stage. In *báttleysa* the lines are of the same length as in conventional skaldic verse, with regular alliteration and rhythm; internal rhyme is either none or irregular. Snorri mentions this metre only briefly in an aside; indeed, few Old Norse poems survive in the metre. One of the principal examples is *Krákumál*. Its real author was undoubtedly striving to make the poem sound old by using this metre.

Jón Ólafsson of Svefneyjar completed a theology degree from the University of Copenhagen, having also studied Nordic philology, and spent his entire career in that city, publishing Old Icelandic literature and in other scholarly pursuits. He was long a recipient of grants from the Professor Árni Magnússon memorial fund, which also funded the first complete edition of the eddic poems.⁴⁰ As mentioned above, the first volume was published in 1787, a year after the publication of Ólafsson's essay. In spite of the two publications, and despite the fact that *fornyrðislag* had never completely died out in Iceland (it persisted mainly in folk ballads, where it had taken on a more regular form⁴¹), it seems that the commentator who presented the translation of the *Temple of Fame* in *Rit Lærdómslistafélagsins* in 1790 did not recognize the form. His comments may even be understood to reveal that he had not noticed the alliteration. He is impressed, however, and he is clearly familiar with something similar in foreign poetry:

We are so far from disapproving that Mr. Grøndahl does not bind himself by alliteration or complex metre, that we would desire, on the contrary, that our future poets would, instead of stifling meaning and inspiration in a Gothic jingle-jangle of similar-sounding repeated syllables, throw off all wretched or superfluous fetters which the versifiers of the Middle Ages placed upon themselves in compensation, so to speak, for exempting themselves from that which may be naturally expected of a poet: to compose with inspiration and eloquence.⁴²

⁴⁰ Kristjánsson 2008: 20–21, 84.

⁴¹ Ólafsson 1786: 56; Egilsson 1999: 67. In this context it was known as *ljúflingslag* (“elf metre”).

⁴² “Svo langt er frá því að oð mislíki, þó Hr. Grøndahl hafi ei bundit sig til studla edr dýrs bragarháttis, at vér þvert ímót óskum, at vor tilkomandi Skáld vildu, ístadinn fyrir at kicefa meining og andakraft í gautsku klíngklangi af einshliódandi ítrekudum

Bjarni Thorarensen writes in a letter that some people were unhappy with the Rev. Jón Þorláksson's use of *fornyrðislag* in *Paradise Lost*.

May Phoebus forgive the churlish critics of Paradise Lost!
They do not like that which is not rhythmic [...] and they have
no idea of poetry which is not for singing or chanting.⁴³

The Rev. Gunnar Pálsson (1714–1791) was one of those who contributed to the first volume of the edition of eddic poetry published by the Árni Magnússon Committee. He was for a time principal of the cathedral school at Hólar, a learned man and a well-known poet in his time, in both Icelandic and Latin. His poems have, however, never been published as a whole, nor systematically studied. They include an excellent imitation of an eddic poem, *Gunnars slagur* (Gunnar's Harp Song); a decision was made to publish it, together with a Latin version, in an appendix to volume two of the eddic poems, which contained the heroic poems. The volume was not published, however, until 1818. The content of *Gunnars slagur* draws on several heroic poems, while the events are also recounted in the *Prose Edda* and *Völsunga saga*. Old engravings have been discovered in Norway and elsewhere that may indicate that a real eddic poem on the subject once existed.⁴⁴ Snorri's version of the events recounted in *Gunnars slagur* is as follows:

King Atli invited Gunnar and Hogni [sons of Gjúki] to visit him, and they complied with the invitation. But before they left home they hid the gold, Fafnir's legacy, in the Rhine, and this gold has never again been found. But King Atli met them with an armed force and fought Gunnar and Hogni and they were captured. King Atli had Hogni's heart cut out while he was alive. This brought about his death. He had Gunnar

adqvædum, slíta af sér öll dárleg, edr óþarflig bönd, er midaldursins vísnaðsmidir hafa á sig lagt, svo at segia til uppbótar fyrir þat þeir vildu hafa sig undan því er náttúrliga heimtað má af einu Skáldi: at yrkia með andagipt og ordheppni." *Rit þess Konúngliga Íslenska Lærdóms-ListaFélags*, 10, xvi.

⁴³ "Phoebus fyrirgefði Dónunum Critiken yfir Paradísar Missir! enn, það smackar þeim ecki, sem ecki er rhytmiskt [...] og þeir géta ei gjört sér Hugmind um Skáldskap sem ecki er til að syngría eða qveda." Thorarensen 1986: 130.

⁴⁴ Helgason 1962: 93, 95. In *Norna-Gests þáttur* (*The Tale of Norna-Gestur*), which survives in the medieval manuscript *Flateyjarbók*, the protagonist performs "Gunnarslagur" on a harp, but it is not clear from the story whether a poem was also recited or sung.

thrown into a snake-pit, but he was secretly provided with a harp, and he plucked it with his toes, as his hands were tied. He played the harp in such a way that all the snakes went to sleep except for the one adder that darted at him and struck at the bottom of his breastbone, burying its head in the hollow and hanging on to his liver until he died.⁴⁵

Gunnars slagur is supposed to be the farewell of Gunnar Gjúkason, spoken as he plays his harp in the snake pit. The similarity with the circumstances of the speaker of *Krákumál* is obvious. Many 19th-century translators of eddic poetry chose to include this poem by Gunnar Pálsson, as the editors had not absolutely dismissed the possibility that it was truly an ancient poem. The Austrian scholar Poestion claims in his history of Icelandic literature that in numerous cases this resulted in the poem being discussed as if it were indisputably an authentic eddic poem.⁴⁶

Bjarni Thorarensen, Iceland, and the Wider North

Bjarni Thorarensen was fifteen when he set sail for Copenhagen in the autumn of 1802, having resolved to study law. He enrolled at the university the following spring, after which his studies progressed normally. He completed his legal studies in 1807, then remained in Copenhagen doing a variety of work until 1811, when he was appointed to his first post in Iceland. Almost all his correspondence from his time in Copenhagen is lost, and thus few details are known of his life during this important formative stage. Scholars do not agree, for instance, on whether he attended the famous lectures given by Henrich Steffens in the winter of 1802–1803, often regarded as heralding the dawn of the Romantic era in Scandinavia.⁴⁷ This is not of any great importance, as Thorarensen could have familiarized himself with what was said at a later time, when he was better equipped to understand it; the bulk of the lectures was published in 1803. One can only speculate as to the latter-day poets Thorarensen may have read when in Copenhagen. However, it is clear that he soon

⁴⁵ Sturluson 1987: 103–104.

⁴⁶ Poestion 1897: 241–242.

⁴⁷ Óskarsson 2007.

gained a good command of both German and French, in addition to Danish. In later life he also learned English. His translations made during his time in Copenhagen are mostly of Roman poetry; he also translated, with the help of a friend, parts of a poem they believed to be by Ossian; it was in fact a German imitation. From comments in letters and other documents from Thorarensen's later years, it is clear that he was well-read in the contemporary literature of other countries. But the literature he is known with the greatest certainty to have studied in Copenhagen is eddic poetry: his financial resources when he lived in the city after graduation included a grant from the Árni Magnússon Committee, which he devoted partly to work on volume two of the *Edda*. Two complete copies of the heroic eddic poems are extant in Thorarensen's hand.⁴⁸

All indications are that Bjarni Thorarensen's perception of eddic poetry was similar to that of Jón Ólafsson. We do not know how well they knew each other in Copenhagen, but the inference of Thorarensen's later comments on Ólafsson is that they were at least acquaintances.⁴⁹ When Thorarensen uses eddic metres in his verse, he unhesitatingly makes use of the freedom of variation on which Ólafsson had placed such emphasis in his essay. In other words, Thorarensen focuses on those features of *fornyrðislag* (and its variants) which Ólafsson regarded as proving that the metre was ancient and primordial. Jónas Hallgrímsson too used *fornyrðislag* similarly in his juvenilia, when he was still strongly influenced by Thorarensen; but as he matured as a poet this changed. He then used *fornyrðislag* like any other regular metre—but admittedly without rhyme. Hallgrímsson also frequently adds to the lifts in each line; that is, he extends them.⁵⁰ Thorarensen is likewise in agreement with Jón Ólafsson in giving much weight to *háttleysa*. This metre is most readily recognizable in his work where in some of the lines he uses internal rhyme typical of *dróttkvætt*. But Thorarensen also uses *háttleysa* completely without rhyme, though with all the other features of *dróttkvætt*. Both Thorarensen and Hallgrímsson make some use of conventional *dróttkvætt*, but the published poetry of the latter includes only two examples of *háttleysa*. One is a eulogy to Thorarensen, and the content

⁴⁸ Ólafsdóttir 1986.

⁴⁹ Thorarensen 1847b: 78; Thorarensen 1943: 174.

⁵⁰ Egilsson 1999: 64–68.

of the other relates directly to a poem by him.⁵¹ This indicates that Thorarensen's contemporaries identified *báttleysa* with him.

Spectacular imagery, with clear links to the heroic world of the eddic poems, sustains two of Thorarensen's best-known poems, *Sigrúnarljóð* (Sigrún's Verses) and *Veturinn* (Winter). Both testify to Thorarensen's taste for the sublime combination of beauty and terror, while his humour and irony prevent them from becoming too high-flown.

The relationship of *Sigrúnarljóð* with *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* has often been pointed out. In the eddic poem, the Valkyrie Sigrún, said to be Svava reborn,⁵² marries the hero Helgi, and has sons by him. Helgi is slain at an early age, and Sigrún mourns him deeply. But one day he is seen riding out of the sky with his retinue and vanishing into his burial mound. Sigrún happily rushes to be reunited with him there, and she stays in his arms overnight. In the morning Helgi and his men ride off back into the sky. This tale of the lover who returns from the realm of the dead "clearly relates to pagan notions that some kind of life remains in the body initially after death, and that the dead can walk around in tangible form."⁵³ At the beginning of *Sigrúnarljóð* the speaker, a man, refers to the conversation he has just had with his beloved Sigrún. He had mentioned the possibility that she might die before him. She reacted badly to the subject, but in the poem he continues to imagine how they could go on being lovers, even if that were to happen. She is to return to him as a ghost, when the weather and other circumstances are appropriate:

Komdu þegar á köldu
kólgur ganga hausti
og um miðnætti máni
í mökkva sig hylur.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Egilsson 1999: 337–338. This is a variant of *báttleysa*, with two lifts instead of three in every other line, which Thorarensen had used primarily in eulogies.

⁵² The woman who is the subject of Thorarensen's love poetry is called Sigrún or Svava, if she is named at all.

⁵³ "tengist bersýnilega heiðnum hugmyndum um að eins konar líf sé í líkamanum fyrst eftir dauðann og dauðir geti gengið um í efnislegri mynd." Ólason 1992b: 142.

⁵⁴ Thorarensen 1935: 1:76.

[Come in cold autumn
when the sky is lowering
and at midnight the moon
veils itself in cloud.]

She is to touch him, then embrace him so tightly that he dies; thus he assumes that her body is still at her disposal. And the speaker himself assumes that he will still have his body after death. He imagines himself with Sigrún, speeding around space in perpetual lovemaking: “Glöð skulum bæði við brott síðan halda | brennandi í faðmlögum loptvegu kalda | í gullreiðum norðljósa þjóta um þá!”⁵⁵ [Joyful then we shall depart, in burning embraces along the cold paths of space in a golden chariot of Northern Lights we shall speed!] The knowledge given in advance, that this is simply playing with an idea, makes the entire poem more down-to-earth. *Sigrúnarljóð* soon gained popularity, but Thorarensen seems not to have taken it very seriously. The title is apparently not Thorarensen’s; he originally called the poem *Apturgönguvisur* (Ghost Verses) in a manuscript, and later *Til Sigrúnar* (To Sigrún).⁵⁶ The first editors of the collected poems of Bjarni Thorarensen, who included Jón Sigurðsson (leader of the Icelanders’ campaign for independence in the 19th century), classified *Sigrúnarljóð* and Thorarensen’s other love poems with his drinking verses, and not with his “serious poetry.”⁵⁷ In his introduction to the next edition, Realist writer Einar H. Kvaran read the poem, on the other hand, as a high-flown (and rather naïve) paean to spiritual love. This view appears to have been accepted ever since.⁵⁸

Winter is personified as a mighty ancient king in Thorarensen’s poem of that title (*Veturinn*). He appears as a godlike Norse warrior, wearing a grey coat of mail, with a shield of ice hanging on his shoulders; he brandishes his sword, giving off a chilly wind, and on his helmet is a crest of Northern Lights. This being is as old as god, and older than creation, and will outlive all worlds. This is to some extent a manifestation of one of the primal forces of existence. His true home is the Arctic:

⁵⁵ Thorarensen 1935: 1:77.

⁵⁶ Thorarensen 1935: 2:90.

⁵⁷ Thorarensen 1847a: ii, 144–146.

⁵⁸ Thorarensen 1884: xliii.

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

Hann er riðinn frá
heimum miðnáttar,
aflbrunni alheims
ok ótta munaðar –
mun ei Vor una
né Vellyst þar aldri,
í Segulheimum,
á Segulfjöllum.⁵⁹

[He has ridden from
midnight's realm,
from the cosmic wellspring of power,
foe to hedonism—
where neither the Spring
nor Voluptuousness can thrive,
in the Magnet Realm,
on the Magnet Mountains.]

This stanza states a theme that recurs frequently in Thorarensen's verse: the North as the antithesis of indulgence and luxury. His ideas on this are clearly in accord with the climatic theories of Montesquieu and Mallet. But here they may be combined with the natural philosophy of Steffens. In light of his theories (the idea that is crucial here had been made public by Steffens before his lectures in Copenhagen), the third line of the stanza may be interpreted literally. For Steffens maintained that the magnetic poles of the earth were power centres that directly influenced the evolution of life on earth.⁶⁰ He based this idea upon Friedrich Schelling's *Identitätsphilosophie*, which includes the theory that light, heat, magnetism, and electricity are different manifestations of the same fundamental energy.⁶¹ These theories attracted renewed attention shortly before the composition of *Veturinn*, when Danish scientist H. C. Ørsted discovered electromagnetism.⁶² Two lines in another of Thorarensen's poems,

⁵⁹ Thorarensen 1935: 1:119.

⁶⁰ Rerup 1991: 332.

⁶¹ Steffens discussed this theory of Schelling in his sixth lecture in Copenhagen in the winter of 1802–1803. See Steffens 1968: 90–108.

⁶² Ørsted made his discovery in 1820. *Veturinn* was composed in the summer of 1823; see Thorarensen 1935: 2:129. In 1831 James Clark Ross located the position of the magnetic north pole on Boothia Peninsula in northern Canada.

Brúðkaupsvísa til Tómasar Sæmundssonar (Epithalamium to Tómas Sæmundsson, 1834), can scarcely be interpreted otherwise than as a reference to Steffens’s ideas on the magnetic poles of the earth: “Frá norðrinu streymir um mannheima magnið – | Mjöllnis er segull í hendi á Þór”.⁶³ [From the North flows the power through the world of men – the hammer Mjöllnir’s magnet is in Þór’s hand.] No conclusion will be drawn here on whether Thorarensen subscribed to the theory, or whether he simply found it a useful source of metaphor.

As *Veturinn* progresses, the impressive images of the poem also tend towards the grotesque. Winter has the quality of reinforcing that which is strong. Hence the earth grows hard in Winter’s embrace, her blood is turned to diamonds, and the green pile of her mantle withers and turns grey. Winter returns and crushes the earth in his embrace, and she is impregnated—presumably with the new year’s vegetation. The Earth chooses Spring as her midwife. But Winter does not flee Spring; he moves upwards, leaving her below. Winter never leaves entirely: he never relinquishes his hold on the poles, or the land closest to heaven. This is why the snow remains in the high mountains—and now the narrator makes a great, illogical leap, which suddenly robs the poem of its harshness:

því vill ei heldur
þiðna á vori
himinhrími
á höfði öldunga.⁶⁴

[therefore also
the rime-frost
on old men’s pates
will not thaw in spring.]

This abrupt twist in the poem is an example of Romantic irony, undermining the ideas that have been presented.

⁶³ Thorarensen 1935: 1:166.

⁶⁴ Thorarensen 1935: 1:121.

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The Norse gods rarely appear in Bjarni Thorarensen's verse. In *Freyjukettirnir* (Freyja's Cats), however, his starting point is in Norse mythology, but treated with freedom. It even acquires a somewhat classical character in his version. The Norse goddess Freyja is called in the poem "kvöldstjörnu drottning"⁶⁵ [Queen of the Evening Star]. The role of her cats is similar to that of Eros/Amor/Cupid in the reception of Greco-Roman mythology: their job is to make people fall in love. In Old Norse literature Freyja's cats are simply draught animals who pull her coach.

Thorarensen's belief in the improving influence of the northern climate is expressed most clearly in the poem *Suðurlönd og Norðurlönd* (Lands of South and North). The first stanzas state the same historical theory as Mallet, in his foreword to the *Introduction* (see above). The first stanza is:

Áður en afi Skjaldar
og Óðins faðir lifðu,
stálbúnir fóru firar
að finna Suðurheima.
Hrímið þá hittir sólu
hjaðnar það og eyðist,
allt eins hreystin harra
hlánaði af kulda ráni.⁶⁶

[Before Skjöldur's grandfather
and Óðinn's father lived,
men went armed
in search of the Southern World.
When frost meets the sun,
it shrinks and vanishes,
just as the men's vigour
thawed when the cold was gone.]

⁶⁵ Thorarensen 1935: 1:179.

⁶⁶ Thorarensen 1935: 1:81. The stanza is a good example of *báttleysa*, in which internal rhyme occurs of the kind typical of *dróttkvætt*.

The Óðinn in question here is clearly the earthly king of that name, who led the ancestors of the Nordic people to Scandinavia; his son was named Skjöldur. But the stanza is primarily concerned with other, southwards, migrations, which took place long before: the robustness of those who ventured south melted away in the heat. The second stanza reports the fate of the others, who travelled northwards. King Winter weeded out the “ónýta seggi”⁶⁷ [weaklings] among them. In the third stanza southern peoples and cultures are symbolized by flowers, while in the fourth stars and the Northern Lights are symbols of the Nordic peoples and their culture. The final stanza asks, should we nurture better “rós en norðurljósín? | Eða virða meir vísir | vellystar eður hreysti?” [the rose than the Northern Lights? Or value more highly the monarch of voluptuousness or fortitude?] The poet does not answer the question directly, but reminds us that fortitude “oss heldur í gildi” [maintains our worth], while voluptuousness “oss linar til bana.”⁶⁸ [will weaken us to death.]

The poem *Nóttin* (Night) contains a variation on the imagery of the fourth and fifth stanzas. The stars in the sky symbolize great men of the past in general, while the Northern Lights stand for the honour of outstanding men of the North who, according to this, are by far the most excellent of the earth. It is hard to tell how seriously Thorarensen meant this comparison.

Iceland has no specific importance in any of Thorarensen’s poems whose content has been discussed hitherto. Where the North is mentioned, this is a far more extensive area, contrasted with a distant South. The energy centre of the North lies far to the north of Iceland. In his poem *Ísland* (Iceland), on the other hand, Thorarensen specifically connects the fortifying nature of a cold climate with his native land. Other attributes of Iceland, long seen as negative by Icelanders, are here presented in a positive light: volcanic eruptions, the uninhabitable and near-impassable uplands, the island’s isolation. Thorarensen points out that some of the factors over which Icelanders traditionally complain may also be a source of incentive:

⁶⁷ Thorarensen 1935: 1:81.

⁶⁸ Thorarensen 1935: 1:82.

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Fjör kenni' oss eldurinn, frostið oss herði,
fjöll sýni torsóktum gæðum að ná;
bægi sem kerúb með sveipanda sverði
silfurblár Ægir oss kveifarskap frá.⁶⁹

[May the fire teach us vitality, and the ice fortify us,
the mountains show us how to reach difficult ends;
like a cherub with a flaming sword
may silver-blue Ægir deliver us from weakness.]

While the poem has sometimes been placed in the context of the embryonic stage of the campaign for independence from Danish rule, it entails no comparison with Denmark. Anti-Danish prejudice is, however, a striking aspect of Thorarensen's best-known patriotic poem *Íslands minni* (In Honour of Iceland)—though admittedly in stanzas which are rarely, if ever, sung in modern times. The second stanza expresses the longing of Icelanders in Copenhagen to go home to Iceland, mainly due to the insalubrity of the city (the majority were students, who intended from the outset to return home on completion of their studies). This poem, one of the earliest extant poems by the poet, is said to have been composed for singing at an Icelandic gathering (or gatherings) in Copenhagen.⁷⁰ There is undeniably some humour in the image of tipsy Icelandic students in Denmark singing:

glepur oss glaumurinn
ginnir oss sollurinn
hlær að oss heimskinginn
Hafnarlóð á.⁷¹

[the rumpus confuses us
the profligacy seduces us
the fool laughs at us
in Copenhagen.]

The third stanza belittles the Danish landscape, which is likened to a face without nose or eyes (as it lacks mountains and lakes). Both these

⁶⁹ Thorarensen 1935: 1:56.

⁷⁰ Thorarensen 1935: 2:40.

⁷¹ Thorarensen 1935: 1:27.

stanzas exist in far less extreme versions vis-à-vis the Danes. Thorarensen himself composed a more moderate version of stanza II, while Professor Finnur Magnússon adjusted stanza III. It was in this bowdlerized version that the two stanzas were first published, in 1819 in a Danish anthology of student songs in various languages. The song was reprinted, unchanged, in *Íslenskt sagnablöð* 1824–1825.⁷² Thorarensen specifically stated in a letter to Magnússon shortly after the initial publication that he was happy with the alterations he had made to the poem:

I have nothing against the changes you made to my “Eldgamla Ísafold” [the first words of the poem]—for I am of your view, that it should contain nothing offensive, least of all to Copenhagen people, for we have no complaint to make against them.⁷³

It was probably Jón Sigurðsson’s decision to print the more nationalistic version of the stanzas in the first collected edition of Thorarensen’s verse in 1847.⁷⁴ His example has been followed in later publications.⁷⁵

The first literary survey of Thorarensen’s verse was published in the Danish annual *Gæa* in 1845. It was written by Icelander Grímur Thomsen, who graduated at about that time as a magister of aesthetics; he later became a renowned and prolific poet. Thomsen never uses the word *Romanticism* in his article; he defines the cultural ambiance of Copenhagen during Thorarensen’s time in a different way, stating that he had arrived at the university “in the turbulent age of Napoleon,” and that this had given him “new nourishment for his poetic inspiration.”⁷⁶ The Napoleonic wars twice impinged upon

⁷² Thorarensen 1935: 2:36–38.

⁷³ “eckért hefi eg á móti Umbreiting þeirri sem þú giördir í mínu „eldgamla Isafold“—því samrar Meiningar er eg með þér að í slíku á eckért meidandi að vera síst við Khafnar Menn því yfir þeim höfum við eckért að klaga.” Thorarensen 1943: 157.

⁷⁴ Thorarensen 1935: 2:39.

⁷⁵ But Jón Helgason includes all the variants on the “official” version in his notes to his edition; see Thorarensen 1935: 2:36–38.

⁷⁶ “i den bevægede napoleonske Tid [...] en ny Næring for sin poetiske Aand.” Thomsen 1845: 192.

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Copenhagen, in 1801 and 1807, far more dramatically on the latter occasion. At the beginning of September 1807, the English besieged and bombarded the city, causing great damage to property and considerable loss of civilian lives. Bjarni Thorarensen took part in the defence of Copenhagen as a member of Kronprindsens Livkorps (the Crown Prince's Life Guard). On the third night of the bombardment he is known to have been on guard duty at Amalienborg Palace; that morning, his home burned down.⁷⁷ The English were victorious in this confrontation, and as a consequence seized the entire Danish navy. These events gave rise to a strong wave of nationalist feeling among Danish poets. Adam Oehlenschläger and N. F. S. Grundtvig were among those who responded with fiery patriotic writings, although neither had been present at the time.⁷⁸ Two poems by Thorarensen appear to have been inspired by these events: *Herhvöt* (Battle Cry) and *Herganga (eptir Bjarkamálum)* (Military March—After the Lay of Bjarki). For a long time the consensus was that Thorarensen had composed the poems in Copenhagen, but Professor Jón Helgason believed he had evidence that at least one of them dated from no earlier than 1813.⁷⁹ Even if this is so, it is quite clear that both poems relate to the siege of 1807. Both are composed to well-known military marches, and are intended to urge soldiers on their way into battle. In both poems sacrificing one's life for one's country is glorified. In *Herhvöt* these lines appear twice:

Halur lifað hefir nóg
hvör sá föðurlandi dó,
minning hans hjá mönnum lifir
þá mold er komin bein hans yfir.⁸⁰

[A man has lived enough
who has died for his fatherland,
his name will live among men,
when soil has covered his bones.]

⁷⁷ Thorarensen 1935: 2:20.

⁷⁸ Kuhn 1976.

⁷⁹ Thorarensen 1935: 2:51–52, 2:54.

⁸⁰ Thorarensen 1935: 1:47, 1:49.

Herganga culminates in the words: “Heiður er fríður | bræður blíðir! | blóði föður- vernda land!”⁸¹ [Fair is honour, blithe brothers! With blood our fatherland defend!] The poems were not composed as a call to arms for direct use in a real situation: they were composed in Icelandic, for a nation that has never been at war or had its own military forces. Only very rarely did an Icelander serve with the Danish military. On the other hand, it would be to go too far to conclude that Thorarensen had no specific “fatherland” in mind in these poems. He must be referring to the “fatherland” he himself had taken part in defending: Denmark. This is not to cast doubt on Thorarensen’s sincere Icelandic patriotism; but that does not mean that he could not also have seen himself, at the same time, as a Danish patriot. In fact, he says explicitly in a letter in 1813: “I must tell you that according to my political creed, no one is a true Icelandic patriot, who is not also a Danish one.”⁸² In another letter he speaks of Denmark as his fatherland “sensu latiori.”⁸³ Thorarensen, a progressive in Icelandic affairs, supported Baldvin Einarsson and the *Fjölnir* group in their demands for greater autonomy for Iceland in its own affairs. But he was also always a convinced royalist, and highly sceptical of the liberal movement in Denmark.⁸⁴ Thorarensen was strongly in favour of the proposal for an Icelandic consultative assembly, and he felt that it should be held at Þingvellir. But he was far from seeing such an assembly as the first step towards greater democracy or independence. On the contrary, he clearly saw the consultative assembly as a long-term solution.⁸⁵

In a lengthy paean to German poet Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, *Íslands riddari* (Knight of Iceland), Thorarensen sends the goddess Saga (History) to find Iceland, personified as a woman. The story surrounding the poem is a long one, and can only be briefly summarized here.⁸⁶ In 1820 Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag (the Icelandic Literary Society) decided to make Fouqué an honorary

⁸¹ Thorarensen 1935: 1:59.

⁸² “Því vita skaltu að eftir minni politisku Creddu er sá enginn sannur Íslenskur Patriot sem ecki undireins er Danskur.” Thorarensen 1943: 3.

⁸³ Thorarensen 1986: 68.

⁸⁴ Thorarensen 1943: 99, 196, 227–228, 254.

⁸⁵ Thorarensen 1986: 246, 300.

⁸⁶ The most detailed account is in Poestion 1909.

member. He was at that time very popular in his home country; he had a wider appeal than other German poets of the Romantic school, and he was also the only one of them who made extensive use of Norse material. Fouqué expressed his thanks to the Society in a poem (partly translated by Thorarensen), while Thorarensen's poem is intended as a reply. The story goes on, for Fouqué in turn thanked Thorarensen for his praise in a personal poem, and in 1826 he dedicated his very long reworking of *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* to the "Gelehrten-Gesellschaft Islands." On this occasion it was Finnur Magnússon who expressed the gratitude of the Literary Society with a poem. Fouqué "cleaned up" northern antiquity a good deal in his work, so that it resembles an idealized copy of the Age of Chivalry in central Europe.⁸⁷ Thorarensen's poem to Fouqué indicates that he was familiar with his life and work. But there is no trace of influence from Fouqué in Thorarensen's own verse. Now, when Saga meets Iceland in Thorarensen's poem of praise, gratitude is the main sensation.

Flutti hún svo þakkarljóð
fagur-geigvænni:
at sér um aldir
unnt hefði mest –
ok annars Volsunga
ok vera norrænna
minning myndi gleymd
miðgarðsdróttum.⁸⁸

[Delivered she then a poem of thanks
to the sublime one:
that she had loved her the most
for many centuries—
and without her love
the memory of the Völsungs
and the Norse would be forgotten
by mankind.]

⁸⁷ See for example Bödl 1996: 367.

⁸⁸ Thorarensen 1935: 1:114.

Iceland thanks Saga in her turn for having taken care of her, alone, for centuries; she complains that no (foreign) poem has been sung in her honour since the Norwegian Eyvindur skáldaspillir did so eight hundred years ago. Fouqué, who in the poem has overheard the dialogue (or seen everything in a vision), decides to rectify the matter. What is interesting here is that Thorarensen focuses on the Germanic and pan-Nordic in Old Icelandic literature, but makes no mention of the uniquely Icelandic contribution.

Bjarni Thorarensen's verse includes no major reworking of Old Icelandic literature recounting Icelandic events, and he never depicts an image of the Old Commonwealth period as a Golden Age, as the *Fjölfnir* group did in their writing—notably Jónas Hallgrímsson in the poems *Ísland* (Iceland) and *Gunnarsbólmi* (Gunnar's Islet).⁸⁹ On occasion in his poetry Thorarensen may be interpreted as referring to Iceland's heroic age, but that era has no political connotations for him, and is sometimes conflated with more ancient times. In *Reiðvísa* (Riding Verse) Icelandic nature apparently wishes to tell of heroic deeds she has witnessed:

Brosir oss móti hin græna grund,
glymur í vötnum í sama mund,
er sem þau vilji
oss um þylja
aldnar sögur köppum frá.⁹⁰

[The green land smiles upon us
and the waters roar
as if they would
tell us
ancient tales of heroes.]

An earlier version of the same stanza, however, indicates that Thorarensen also had other heroes in mind. In this case nature is identified with the poetic inspiration of Old Norse court poets:

⁸⁹ The story has been told that Hallgrímsson composed *Gunnarsbólmi* at Thorarensen's suggestion, but this has an air of folklore rather than fact. See Hallgrímsson 1989: 4:130–131.

⁹⁰ Thorarensen 1935: 1:61.

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Eyvindur, Egill, Hallfreður and Sighvatur. The following appeal is made to their spirit:

Færðu sóma Fróns um heim
fjöllum hærra og kynntu þeim
at frægir synir
Íslands einir
ólu minning Rögnar hropts.⁹¹

[Bear the honour of Iceland about the world,
higher than mountains, and tell
that the famed sons
of Iceland alone
held aloft Óðinn's memory.]

The focus here is clearly the common heritage preserved by Icelanders on behalf of northern-European nations. In two other poems by Thorarensen, the spirit of the ancient court poets merges with Icelandic nature; both are paeans to (reigning or future) kings of Denmark and Iceland. In *Kvæði á fæðingardegi Fríðriks kónigs 6ta* (Poem on the Birthday of King Frederik VI) an eruption under the Eyjafjallajökull glacier is interpreted as the glacier composing a lay of praise for the King “sem fornaldar-skáldin”⁹² [as the ancient poets did]. In *Fríðriksljóð* (Poem to Frederik), this wish is made:

Eyvindur, Sighvatur!
Arnór, Hallfreður
festið á Austfjarða
fjöllum strengi!
felið svo enda
undir Horndröngum
og Ossíans boga
um þá farið.⁹³

⁹¹ Thorarensen 1935: 2:73.

⁹² Thorarensen 1935: 1:118.

⁹³ Thorarensen 1935: 1:152–153.

OLD NORSE POETRY AND NEW BEGINNINGS

[Eyvindur, Sighvatur!
Arnór, Hallfreður
fix strings to the mountains
of the East Fjords,
and the other end
under Horndrangar,
and play upon them
with Ossian's bow.]

Here again, no distinction is made between Norwegian and Icelandic poets; in addition, the Old Celtic poet Ossian is invited along, with more-or-less equal status.

In a few poems Thorarensen refers, directly or indirectly, to *Njáls saga*, in the context of description of nature and society in the Fljótshlíð district. Thorarensen's relationship with the saga was unusual: he grew up on the farm of Hlíðarendi in Fljótshlíð, the home of the main hero of the saga, Gunnar Hámundarson. In the poems Thorarensen is either looking back on his childhood or bemoaning the damage that has been caused to the estate of Hlíðarendi, and the entire region, by the Þverá river. One of the poems, *Um apturfarir Fljótshlíðar* (The Decline of Fljótshlíð)⁹⁴ from 1821, has often been read as an older (and inferior) equivalent to Jónas Hallgrímsson's *Gunnarsbólmi* (first published in 1838), and a harbinger of "the spirit that characterized the nation's campaign for freedom in the 19th century."⁹⁵ Hallgrímsson's poem compares flourishing Icelandic society at the time of Gunnar of Hlíðarendi with the degradation of his own time. The barren sands between Fljótshlíð and the Eyjafjöll mountains symbolize Iceland's decline since the days of the Old Commonwealth: "Þar sem að áður akrar huldu völl | ólgandi Þverá veltur yfir sanda"⁹⁶ [Where cornfields once flourished on the plain, billowing Þverá now tumbles over the sands.] Only the place where Gunnar demonstrated his love for his country in practice, by turning back when he was about to go into exile, has been spared by the

⁹⁴ It is uncertain whether Thorarensen himself chose this title, as no autograph manuscript of the poem exists.

⁹⁵ "Þess anda sem einkenndi frelsisbaráttu þjóðarinnar á níttjándu öld." Helgason 1998: 37.

⁹⁶ Hallgrímsson 1989: 1:79.

destructive forces: and here grass still grows. In *Um apturfarir Fljótsblíðar* Gunnar's ghost stands upon his burial mound at Hlíðarendi, looking out over the devastation wrought by the Þverá river,

og iðrast nú
að aptur hvarf
að bera bein
blá við hrjóstur.⁹⁷

[and now regrets
that he turned back
to die
in this barren place.]

It is unlikely that Thorarensen saw the destruction as a symbol of the general decline of the country since Gunnar's time; he knew, better than most, that it was a relatively recent phenomenon. This emerges clearly in an article commissioned from Thorarensen about Gunnar's burial mound. He described how branches of the Markarfljót river started to flow into the Þverá river in the early 18th century, so that it burst its old banks. He points out specifically that it is only about fifty years since the Þverá first caused damage on Hlíðarendi land.⁹⁸ In the poem, Thorarensen appears simply to be expressing his resentment at the way the forces of nature had treated a place of which he was fond.

In a brief poem from late in his career, *Ungum áður söngvar* (Songs in My Youth), Bjarni Thorarensen recalls his early delight in *Krákumál*; the poem "læstust mér hjarta ið næsta!"⁹⁹ [took hold, close to my very heart!]. The obvious inference is that in this declaration of love *Krákumál* stands for Old Norse poetry as a whole. But precisely in this choice of a representative of the literary heritage, central aspects of Thorarensen's reception of Old Norse literature are crystallized. It is obvious from the poem that he believes that *Krákumál* was truly composed by Ragnar Loðbrók, and by his consort Áslaug kráka; this appears to have been the accepted view among scholars at that

⁹⁷ Thorarensen 1935: 1:102 .

⁹⁸ Thorarensen 1847b: 80.

⁹⁹ Thorarensen 1935: 1:178.

time.¹⁰⁰ Thorarensen could, naturally, have picked a poem indisputably composed by an Icelandic poet. The nationalistic aspect (in a narrow sense) of the poem's origin was clearly a matter of indifference. Thorarensen's choice underlines his interest in the oldest parts of the literary heritage, the closest to its origins and at the same time the most sublime. Probably the fact that *Krákumál* was known internationally played a part in his choice; indeed, there is no indication that the poem had a high reputation in traditional Icelandic reception. Thorarensen's declaration of love is consistent with what has emerged from this survey: that his attitude to Old Norse literature has no specific features of Romanticism. It is more reminiscent of the way that poets and intellectuals abroad saw this heritage (shortly) before the Romantic age. But that does not preclude the presence of other qualities of the Romantic in Thorarensen's verse. However, that is another subject of study, which cannot be addressed within the bounds of this paper.

The characteristics of the pre-Romantic literary movement described by Anton Blanck, which he termed the Nordic Renaissance, have clear equivalents in Icelandic literature. These parallels are in fact of great importance for the renewal of Icelandic verse after a very long period of stagnation. Aesthetic gains were invariably paramount at this stage of the reception of Old Norse literature in new literary creation: the objective was to expand the horizons of poetry, to open up new possibilities for literature. The ideological content was unclear, in Iceland as elsewhere, but the reworkings reflected a distinctive image of the people of the European North and their cultural heritage. In the Icelandic context, that image was naturally somewhat alien, and it was very unlike the idealized view of Iceland's Saga Age which before long became such a striking aspect of the Icelandic reception of Old Norse literature. But by then a whole new stage of the nation's identity formation had begun.

¹⁰⁰ Rafn 1826: 55–74.

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