

## TRANSLATING THE *POETIC EDDA* INTO ENGLISH<sup>1</sup>

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### *Early Knowledge of Norse Mythology*

Norse mythology, and the poetry and prose which recounted or alluded to it, was known about in England from the seventeenth century (see Quinn and Clunies Ross 1994 for a summary and the unpublished thesis of Bennett 1938 for detail). The Codex Regius, containing the great majority of the poems that we now classify as eddic, was sent to Copenhagen from Iceland by Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson in 1643, and was subsequently catalogued as GKS 2365 4to. In 1665 Peder Hans Resen published an edition of *Völuspá* and *Hávamál*, providing them with a Latin translation, though he did not make use of the Codex Regius as a basis for his texts (so Clunies Ross 1998, 180; *contra* Wawn 2000, 18 who suggests that Resen did employ the Codex Regius). With the addition of a text of Snorri's *Edda*, the Resen volume introduced Norse mythological poetry to the world (Quinn and Clunies Ross 1994, 193). The first reference to this work in England is in the Preface to Robert Sheringham's *De Anglorum gentis origine disceptatio*, published in 1670 (see Quinn and Clunies Ross 1994, 193 n. 12). Moreover, a copy of Resen's *Edda* was given to the Bodleian Library in Oxford in the early 1670s. Aylett Sammes seems to have been the first to translate part of an eddic poem (the Loddáfáfnir stanzas of *Hávamál*) into English (Sammes 1676, 442ff), though his source was Sheringham's citation of these verses in Latin, rather than Resen's Old Norse text.

The Swiss antiquarian Paul Henri Mallet wrote a two-volume account of early Scandinavian beliefs and history in 1755 and 1766, entitled *Introduction à l'histoire de Dannemarc* and *Monumens de la mythologie et de la poésie des Celtes*. Like many of his contemporaries, Mallet believed that the Northern races were Celtic in origin, hence his title. In his work Mallet summarized parts of *Völuspá*, quoted from *Hávamál* in

<sup>1</sup>This essay originates in a talk given to the Viking Society Student Conference in 1997, before the publication of some substantial works on the reception of the *Poetic Edda* in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It has been extensively revised to take account of Clunies Ross 1998 and Wawn 2000.

French translation, and also reproduced the first few verses of *Baldrs draumar* which had been published by the Danish scholar Thomas Bartholin (Bartholin 1689). Mallet's Introduction was translated into English by Bishop Thomas Percy under the title *Northern Antiquities* in 1770. Thus it was primarily from Mallet and then from Percy that English Romantic writers learned about Norse myth and heroic legend. They made 'versions' of the Norse heroic poems they found in the earlier works. Most notable was Thomas Gray's 'The Descent of Odin', expanding upon Mallet's excerpts from *Baldrs draumar* and the verses in Bartholin (see Finlay in this volume). Gray published this and his other Norse Ode in 1768 (Clunies Ross 1998, 105–09). Percy himself offered 'Five Pieces of Runick Poetry' (Clunies Ross 2001) which were published in 1763. Although he was aware of the Resen versions of the first two poems of the Codex Regius, Percy did not include any of the texts normally considered part of the *Poetic Edda* in his collection. In 1787 the Arnamagnæan Commission in Copenhagen began to publish a fully edited text of the Codex Regius and other eddic poems, at last permitting proper scholarly study and translation of the contents. The Copenhagen *Edda* reserved re-editing *Völuspá* and *Hávamál* to the third volume, on the grounds that Resen had already provided texts of them (however inadequate in terms both of textual soundness and of scholarly apparatus). Volume I of the Copenhagen *Poetic Edda* not only furnished texts of the rest of the mythological poetry of the Codex Regius, but also provided a useful Latin apparatus. This, as Clunies Ross puts it, was 'user-friendly for scholars who were neither native speakers of Icelandic nor trained in Old Norse studies' (1998, 180–81). The possibility of translating eddic verse into English from an Old Norse original, with the help of a Latin translation and the substantial Copenhagen glossary, now existed. This essay considers the translations of Cottle (1797), Herbert (1804, 1806, and 1842), Thorpe (1866), Vigfusson and York Powell (1883), Bray (1908), Bellows (1926), Hollander (1928), Terry (1969), Auden, Taylor, and Salus (1969) as well as Larrington (1996), the expanded Auden and Taylor (1981), and Dronke (1969, 1997).

#### *What is the Poetic Edda?*

Translators are faced with choices about what to include in their versions of the *Poetic Edda* even before they begin to think about larger translation principles. For early translators such decisions were limited by the availability of edited texts. Although neither of the terms 'eddic' and 'eddaic' was used in English until the middle of the nineteenth

century, 'Edda' is first used in James Macpherson's *An Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland* (1771, 180) referring most likely to Resen's edition. Although the core of eddic verse is the collection of poems from *Völuspá* to *Hamðismál* contained in GKS 2365 4to, other poems in eddic metre such as *Hrafnagaldur Óðins*, *Sólarljóð* or *Svipdagsmál* have been included in editions and translations at various times, along with the now more-or-less canonical *Baldurs draumar*, *Grottasöngur*, *Rígsþula* and *Hyndlóljóð*. Many *fornaldarsögur* contain verses in eddic metre (edited in Ranisch and Heusler, 1903). 'The Waking of Angantýr', the 'Riddles of Gestumblindi', and 'The Battle of the Goths and Huns', all contained in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, are often candidates for inclusion in eddic translations. The obscure *Hrafnagaldur Óðins* appears in Thorpe's translation of 1866, but is generally excluded from the canon thereafter, although Annette Lassen (2006) has recently argued that it may indeed be a genuine (late-) medieval poem. Hollander asserts that *Svipdagsmál* is 'undoubtedly genuine', though this view would by no means command universal agreement (Hollander 1936, xv). No later translators include it in their canon.

#### *Early Translations: Cottle and Herbert*

Problems of contextualization, the publisher's and reader's tolerance of extensive apparatus and questions of contemporary taste have always affected the choices *Edda* translators make. Clunies Ross points out the practical difficulties facing early translators, who lacked Icelandic dictionaries and for whom the understanding of the complex mythology underlying such an allusive poem as *Völuspá* was nigh impossible to obtain. Furthermore, since eighteenth-century literary theorists, and their nineteenth-century followers, had 'strongly-held ideas about what ancient poetry was like' this led them 'to seek out poems that they thought exemplified their ideas, and thus to prefer a free over an exact translation' (Clunies Ross 1998, 25). Such freedom of style and interpretation is marked in Gray's 'The Descent of Odin', and in the work of the earliest translator of entire eddic poems: Amos Cottle. Cottle's *Icelandic Poetry, or the Edda of Sæmund* was published in Bristol in 1797, and, as Wawn notes (2000, 195–96), was based on the Latin translations in the first volume of the Copenhagen *Edda*, available in the Bristol Public Library and borrowed by such notables as Robert Southey (Pratt 1994 gives a full account of the Bristol coterie).

Following the first volume of the Copenhagen *Edda*, Cottle thus includes the mythological poetry from *Vaffbrúðnismál* to *Alvíssmál*, plus

*Hrafnagaldur Óðins*, *Vegtamskviða* (an earlier name for *Baldrs draumar*), *Fjölsvinnsmál*, and *Hyndlóljóð*. *Völuspá* and *Hávamál* are omitted, as they were from the first volume of the Copenhagen *Edda*. Cottle attaches a substantial and learned introduction to his translations; since he rightly assumes that his readership will be most familiar with Greek mythology he develops a lengthy comparison between the Norse deities and the Greek pantheon. Based on rather superficial resemblances, this results in some surprising assertions for the modern scholar of Norse myth. Thus Odin ‘appears to be the Northern Adonis. He was beloved by Frigga, who represents Venus, and is killed at last by a Wolf, as Adonis was by a boar’ (Cottle 1797, xxiii). Likewise, ‘Lok may be compared to the Apollo of the Grecians’ (Cottle 1797, xxiii). Cottle provides very little discussion of his translation methods, doubtless because of his ignorance of Old Norse. This leads him into considerable error, most notably in *Þrymskviða* (see below), but elsewhere too, where he proves incapable even of translating the Latin accurately. William Herbert, who could read Icelandic, knew Danish, and who offered the first part of his *Select Icelandic Poetry* to the public in 1804, criticizes the hapless Cottle without reservation: ‘Mr Cottle has published, what he calls a translation of this ode, but it bears little resemblance to the original. [. . .] Mr C. has not even taken the trouble of understanding the Latin’ (Herbert 1842, I, 179; see also 180 and 193). Cottle’s *Edda*, like Herbert’s, does not seem to have been widely circulated. In the preface to the first volume of *The Edda of Sæmund the Learned* (1866, I) Benjamin Thorpe notes ‘this work [Cottle’s] I have never met with; nor have I seen any English version of any part of the Edda, with the exception of Gray’s spirited but free translation of the *Vegtamskviða*’ (Thorpe 1866, vii). Notwithstanding Herbert’s justifiable criticism of his predecessor’s accuracy, Cottle often achieves a romantic grandeur in his versions of the poems.

Herbert’s own versions of eddic poetry were published piecemeal. Of what is now considered to be the *Poetic Edda* corpus, Volume I of *Select Icelandic Poetry* (1804) contained only *Þrymskviða* and a few verses of *Baldrs draumar*. The second volume of 1806 added *Helreið Brynhildar* and *Skirnismál* to the tally. In 1839 he translated *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* and *Atlakviða* from volume II of the Copenhagen *Edda* (see Clunies Ross 1998, 188). *Völundarkviða* followed in 1840; all three new poems were included in *Horae Scandicae: Or, Works Relating to Old Scandinavian Literature*, the first volume of Herbert’s complete works, published in 1842. Clunies Ross (1998, 183–202) gives a detailed account of Herbert’s sources and assesses his relative success in translating

*Prymskviða* and *Helreið* in *Select Icelandic Poetry*. Herbert represents his translations as ‘closely translated and unadorned; with a few exceptions they are rendered line for line; and (I believe) as literally, as the difference of language and metrical rules would permit’ (Herbert 1842, 167), modestly averring, ‘the only merit I have aimed at, is that of accuracy’ (1804, ix). As Clunies Ross shows (1998, 183–84), he amply persuades his reviewers of his mastery of Icelandic language, even though he often goes considerably beyond his source text, mostly in pursuit of a rhyme. Herbert contrasts ‘the energetic harmony of these old poems: [. . .] the most ancient are the simplest and most beautiful’, with skaldic verse, which he, like a number of other translators, understands as younger than the *Edda*, ‘for the Icelandic poetry degenerated into affectation of impenetrable obscurity and extravagant metaphors’ (Herbert 1842, 167). Herbert also composed poems based very loosely on Norse myth, such as *Hedin* (from the Hjaðningavíg myth) and, from the *Poetic Edda*, *The Song of Vala*, which was ‘freely imitated from a curious old poem called *Völospá hin skamre* [sic], or the ancient Prophecy of Vala, which forms part of the unpublished Edda’ (Herbert 1842, 147).

#### *Victorian versions*

The noted Anglo-Saxon scholar Benjamin Thorpe somewhat diffidently issued the first volume of his translation of the *Poetic Edda* in 1866, promising that ‘if a not unfavourable reception is given it by the British public, the Second, or Heroic part shall be immediately sent to press’ (Thorpe 1866, I viii). *The Edda of Sæmund the Learned* was based on a German edition (Lüning 1859; see Wawn 2000, 196–97) and includes the mythological poems of the Codex Regius, plus *Fjölsvinnsmál*, *Rígsþula*, *Hyndlóljóð*, *Gróugaldr*, and *Sólarljóð* (a text which Cottle had rejected on the grounds that it was ‘filled with little else but the absurd superstitions of the Church of Rome’ (1797, xxix–xxx)). Thorpe’s work is largely accurate and pleasingly simple; the translator modestly claims, ‘it had no pretension to elegance; but I believe it to be a faithful though homely representation of the original’ (Thorpe 1866, I viii). Volume II did indeed follow later in the same year, after positive reviews: ‘For not only has its reception been favourable, but in the United States of America it has been noticed in terms highly gratifying to the translator’ (1866, II iii). To the Codex Regius heroic poems, Thorpe added *Grottasöngur* and ‘Gunnars Slagr’ (1866, II 146–49), a poem preserved only in paper manuscripts and translated from Rask’s edition published in Stockholm (Rask 1818). Thorpe’s translations, often surprisingly

modern in tone, tend to eschew archaism and Latinisms. Wawn (2000, 196) suggests that Thorpe appears to take some liberties in re-ordering the Icelandic text when he translates some verses from *Völuspá* (Neckel and Kuhn 1962, vv. 45–46), an effect produced by the translator's faithful rendition of Lüning's text. The German editor collates lines from the Hauksbók and Codex Uppsaliensis manuscripts of *Völuspá* with the Codex Regius text, producing a Norse version that looks unfamiliar to those used to the Copenhagen *Edda* (Thorpe 1866, I 9; Lüning 1859, 150–51).

No other substantial translations of the *Edda* appeared in the nineteenth century except for Vigfusson and York Powell's work in *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* (1883), though the notable Icelandic scholar Eiríkr Magnússon had his translation rejected (Wawn 2000, 195, n. 65) and that of his compatriot Jón Hjaltalín was never published (Wawn 2000, 362). Eiríkr Magnússon and William Morris did, however, offer some versions of those heroic poems relevant to *Völsunga saga* in their 1870 translation of that work, *The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs, with certain songs from the Elder Edda*; these are the last part of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, the wisdom section of *Sigrdrífumál*, *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*, *Helreið Brynhildar*, *Brot* (rechristened *Fragments of the Lay of Brynhild*), *Guðrúnarkviða II*, *Atlakviða*, *Guðrúnarhvöt*, and *Hamðismál*, with the addition of *Oddrúnargrátr*, 'which we have translated on account of its intrinsic merit', the authors note (Magnússon and Morris 1870, x). The authors make a close comparison between the eddic poems and the content of the saga, noting of the episode of Sigrún and Helgi in the burial mound: 'for the the sake of its wonderful beauty however, we could not refrain from rendering it' (vii). The authors are aware that the material may offer some difficulty, but exhort the reader to effort:

we may well trust the reader of poetic insight to break through whatever entanglement of strange manners, [...] such a reader will be intensely touched by finding, amidst all its wildness and remoteness, such startling realism, such subtilty, such close sympathy with all the passions that may move himself to-day (x–xi).

Vigfusson and York Powell divide up the poems of the Codex Regius according to their presumed chronology, their hypothetical place of origin, and their supposed author, such as 'the Western Aristophanes', author of *Lokasenna*, *Hárbarðzljóð*, and *Skírnismál*. Vigfusson and York Powell discuss the principles of their prose translations, which run along the bottom of the page of their edition, in the introduction to volume I

(cxiv–cxvii). They maintain that the translation has no pretension to literary merit, but is merely a guide to assist those who wish to read the poems ‘without having mastered the tongues in which they are composed’ (cxiv). The enterprise is not simple, despite its limited goals: for the translator must render the different styles of the poets: ‘the legal phrases of the Greenland Lay of Attila and the Euripidean softness of the Gudrun lays are very far removed from the antique Homeric beauty of the old Attila and Hamtheow Lays’ (cxv), they note; like Cottle and Herbert before them they employ familiar parallels from classical literature to characterize the Norse. The sternest observations are reserved for the mere philologist who becomes ‘a gerund-grinding machine’ (cxv), who fails to immerse himself in a detailed study of the ‘old life’ (cxiv) and thus misses the literary qualities of the poems. Particularly castigated are those translators of Norse who fall into ‘the affectation of archaism, and the abuse of archaic Scottish, pseudo-Middle English words’ (cxv), a criticism no doubt meant for such enthusiasts as Eiríkr Magnússon and William Morris. Though Vigfusson and York Powell have opted for ‘the real meaning’ rather than ‘the poetical rendering’ they omit obscure and obscene phrases, so as not to mislead or offend the reader. Noteworthy, too, in this preface is the appeal to ‘Englishmen and Americans to seek back for themselves into the Homeric age of their forefathers’ (cxvii); like Thorpe, the two Oxford scholars are well aware of the importance of the American market.

#### *Twentieth-Century Translations*

The early twentieth century brought a small flurry of eddic translations, with the first American versions appearing in the 1920s. Olive Bray’s *The Elder or Poetic Edda* appeared in 1908, under the auspices of the Viking Club (later to become the Viking Society). Bray was very conscious of the vivid visual images which the mythological poems produced, and attributes some translation difficulties to their interference:

For their style is so essentially graphic without being descriptive that the more familiar we are with their works, the more difficult does it seem to translate them into words instead of colour and form (Bray 1908, i).

No wonder then that the edition is freely illustrated with striking black-and-white drawings by W. G. Collingwood. Bray edits and translates only the mythological poetry of the Codex Regius, plus the two *Svipdagsmál* poems; her introduction captures the romantic aura which the Old North held for enthusiasts of the Viking Club, at the same time as it apologizes for its un-Greek qualities:

For mythology is itself a tangled garden of thought unless it has undergone complete transformation in the hands of the artist. It is nothing less than the mind of the nation laid bare [. . .] all stamped by past experience, but never blended into unity (vi).

Her translation aspires to literalness:

to satisfy truth and for fear of doing injustice to the original, we have endeavoured to keep the translation as literal as possible, though ambiguity in the original occasionally necessitates interpretation by a somewhat freer rendering (i).

Quinn (1994, 120–22) discusses Bray's edition in the context of the activities and inquiring spirit of the Viking Club in the early years of the twentieth century.

Bellows selected the poems of the Codex Regius, plus *Baldrs draumar*, *Hyndloljóð*, and *Svipdagsmál*, for his translation, noting Thorpe's translation as 'conspicuously inadequate', Vigfusson and York Powell's as 'unsatisfactory', but praising Bray's work as 'excellent' (Bellows 1926, xi). Published by the American-Scandinavian Foundation in 1923, Bellows's was the first American translation, offered with the hope that

greater familiarity with the chief literary monuments of the North will help Americans to a better understanding of Scandinavians and thus serve to stimulate their sympathetic coöperation to good ends (Bellows 1926, facing title page epigraph).

Bellows aimed to help scholars, and to stimulate others to learn the language, but, in keeping with the aims of the Foundation, he 'place[s] the hope that this English version may give to some, who have known little of the ancient traditions of what is after all their own race, a clearer insight into the glories of that extraordinary past'. Bellows implies a readership not simply of first- or second-generation immigrants from Scandinavia to North America, but makes a larger assumption that the 'glories' are the heritage of Anglo-Saxon and German Americans alike. Cord's foreword to a 1991 reprint praises the work in terms which have not normally been employed since World War II:

the translator has overcome formidable linguistic barriers as well as certain cultural implications to convert the original Icelandic (Old Norse) poems into verse forms in English that retain, and even project, the essence of the original Teutonic ambience (Bellows 1991, i).

'Teutonic ambience', produced largely by archaic diction, is precisely what most postwar translators try to avoid—once, as Quinn notes, 'the sinister potential of Aryan ideologising had become evident' (1994, 124).

Hollander's translation is still frequently reprinted, the eleventh printing of the second revised edition appearing as recently as 2004. The selection is relatively conservative, consisting of the Codex Regius poems, *Hyndloljóð*, with *Völuspá in skamma* printed separately, *Rígsþula*, *Grottasöngur*, and *Baldrs draumar*. *Svipdagsmál* is included, and the *Dvergatal* of *Völuspá* is also dealt with separately (Hollander 1936). Hollander notes that 'still other lays of Eddic quality' exist, translated in an earlier volume (Hollander 1962, xv, n.). He is thoughtful about the problems of reflecting the broad range of synonyms available in Norse and finds that these can only be reproduced in English through recourse to archaic equivalents, despite Vigfusson and York Powell's comments on this practice (see above): 'I have, therefore, unhesitatingly had recourse, whenever necessary, to terms fairly common in English balladry, without, I hope overloading the page with archaisms' (Hollander 1962, xxix).

Auden and Taylor's influential selection of poems was published in London in 1969, the same year that Patricia Terry's *Poems of the Vikings* appeared in Indianapolis. The introduction to the first of these, written by Peter Salus and Paul Taylor, explains metre and quantity and the details of Norse cosmology, with a particular excursus on riddles and charms. No reflection on translation practice, beyond questions of rhythm and caesura, is offered, however, except for a warning of silent rearrangement of stanzas in the case of *Völuspá* and *Hávamál*. The volume is subtitled 'A Selection', and contains the Codex Regius mythological poems, *Helreið Brynhildar* and *Völundarkviða* from the heroic poems, and, most unusually, 'Innsteinnsljóð' from *Hálfs saga*, as well as *Eiríksmál* and 'The Waking of Angantýr'. Auden died in 1973; in 1981 Paul Taylor reissued the 1969 volume with twenty-three further versions of eddic poetry by Auden (Auden and Taylor 1981). The volume now included all the heroic poetry from the Codex Regius, 'Hjálmar's Death-Song', 'Hildebrand's Death-Song', 'Hlǫðskviða', the Riddles of Gestumblindi from *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, and *Sólarljóð*. Some poems, such as *Atlamál*, *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*, and *Grípissþá* are scarcely versified, but remain as stanza-by-stanza translations into prose; the other additions are substantial poetic versions. Now that Auden is dead, Taylor pays warm tribute to his qualities as poet in the Foreword: 'He went to the Icelandic itself. I gave him my translations in the best poetic line I could manage, and he turned that verbal and metrical disarray into poetic garb. The product is his' (Auden and Taylor 1981, x).

Terry translates all the Codex Regius poems, plus *Baldrs draumar*, *Grottasöngur*, and ‘The Waking of Angantýr’; *Rígsþula* and *Hyndlóljóð* are rejected on the basis of inferior quality. Terry notes the lyrical qualities of the poems, but eschews imitation of the metre, beyond trying ‘to suggest, if not reproduce the alliteration’ (Terry 1969, ix). She hopes to avoid the pitfalls of Hollander’s diction: ‘Apart from such embellishments (kennings), the language of the Edda is simple and free from archaisms; I have tried to keep mine the same’ (Terry 1969, x). In the same year again, the first volume of Ursula Dronke’s edition of the *Poetic Edda* was published (Dronke 1969). This contained important facing-page translations of the last four heroic poems in the Codex Regius (*Atlakviða*, *Atlamál*, *Guðrúnarhvöt*, and *Hamðismál*). Volume II (1997) contains *Völuspá*, *Rígsþula*, *Völundarkviða*, *Lokasenna*, and *Skírnismál*. Auden may have looked at volume I. By 1969 he was beginning to think about moving back to Oxford, and his former college, Christ Church, where he indeed lived for the last year of his life, was also the college of Gabriel Turville-Petre, then Vigfusson Reader in Ancient Icelandic Literature and Antiquities. It seems plausible that Turville-Petre would have brought Dronke’s book to Auden’s attention. If he saw it, though, he did not pay much attention to the commentary or apparatus: he might otherwise have avoided such misinterpretations as, for example, *Guðrúnarhvöt* st. 5, which he takes as referring proleptically to the deaths of Hamðir and Sqrli, rather than back to the deaths of Erpr and Eitill.

My translation appeared in 1996. I included all the texts edited in Neckel and Kuhn 1962, except for ‘The Battle of the Goths and Huns’, ‘Hildebrand’s Death-Song’, and some eddic fragments, poems which would have demanded too much contextualization and explanation to justify their inclusion. Like Auden and Taylor, I made no statement about my aims in the translation, beyond discussing metre. My implied reader was the ordinary reader, the regular buyer of World’s Classics translations, who did not need a translation which reflected every subjunctive or plural-for-singular usage, but who was interested primarily in the narrative and who would appreciate the humour, grandeur, horror, and suspense of the Norse originals.

#### *Translators and Style*

In comparison with the ‘impenetrable obscurity’ of skaldic verse, in Herbert’s phrase, the language of the *Poetic Edda* is not particularly difficult to construe, although there are a number of *hapax legomena*, and some passages which are obscure in their reference or damaged in

transmission. The poems' narratives can be broadly understood with the help of Snorri (though of course Snorri's interpretations cannot be regarded as definitive). There are few kennings or complex metaphors. Early translators, as we have seen, were constrained by the serial and slow publication of the three volumes of the Copenhagen *Edda*. By the time Thorpe came to make his version, the German philological revolution meant that a better understanding of Old Norse, and a scholarly edition with useful apparatus, were available to him. Bellows uses Hildebrand's 1876 edition, revised by Gering in 1904, but consults the numerous commentaries which had by then appeared. Hollander follows Bugge (1867), while subsequent translators have used Neckel and Kuhn's fourth edition of 1962, with the additions outlined above.<sup>2</sup>

Once the canon has been identified, the translator must decide which, if any, verse form should be employed. Rhyming verse is favoured by Cottle and Herbert; Cottle tends to expand each individual Norse line into at least a couplet. Later translators prefer longer or shorter lines of prose, sometimes arranged as verse, or free verse, either imitating the half-line structure in rhythmic terms, or expanding it further. They must also decide how far the alliteration of the original is to be imitated. This will throw up the problem of the relative lack of synonyms in English, and invites the use of Latinate words or archaisms to fill the gap. The adoption of rhyming couplets is not always successful. Cottle's verse sometimes gives a nicely epigrammatic turn to the eddic line: 'Remember once your hand was bit / By Fenrir in an angry fit' (1797, 163) perhaps trivialises *Ls* 38, but there is some grandeur to the latter part of Skírnir's curse in *Skm* 36 (Cottle 1797, 95):

Mark the giant ! Mark him well!  
Hear me his attendants tell!  
Can'st thou with the fiends engage,  
Madness, Impotence and Rage?  
Thus thy torments I describe  
The furies in my breast subside.

Internal rhyme can often be effective; Bray's 'quivering and shivering' in *Prk* 1 is a striking example (1908, 127). The temptation to reproduce exactly the Norse alliteration may produce over-emphatic lines: Auden and Taylor's 'broken to bits was the Brising necklace' in *Prk* 13 is probably excessive, as well as going beyond the original (1969, 85). The list from *Skm* 36, in the original *ergi, æði ok óþola*, produces a range

<sup>2</sup>In the discussion which follows, poem titles are abbreviated according to the scheme used in Neckel and Kuhn 1962.

of possible afflictions for Gerðr: from the gloriously personified ‘Madness, Impotence and Rage’ of Cottle (1797, 95), who fails to note that these are runic staves rather than demonic powers, to the intensively alliterating ‘lechery, loathing and lust’ in Hollander (1962, 72), who loses the implication of madness. Bellows gives ‘longing, madness, and lust’ (1926, 118), Terry, ‘frenzy, lewdness and lust’ (1969, 59) while ‘filth, frenzy and lust’ is the choice of Auden and Taylor (1969, 123). Larrington’s ‘lewdness, frenzy and unbearable desire’ makes explicit the connection of *óþola* to its root, *þola* ‘to bear with or suffer’ (1996, 67), as does Dronke’s ‘lust’, ‘burning’ and ‘unbearable need’ (1997, 384). Thorpe keeps the words in their Icelandic forms, accentuating their strangeness by keeping the Icelandic orthography: ‘ergi, and æði, and óþoli’ (Thorpe 1866, 83).

Bellows is particularly concerned with retaining the rhythm of the different metres, the characteristics of which he describes in detail (1926, xxiii–xxvi), an effort which Terry explicitly eschews. Rhythm is a strong point of Auden and Taylor’s work; their substantial discussion of it in the 1969 introduction perhaps reflects the keen ear of Auden as a practising poet. Their version of the curse (*Skm* 35) has a pounding, hypnotic beat (1969, 123):

Hrimgrinnir shall have you, the hideous troll,  
Beside the doors of the dead,  
Under the tree-roots ugly scullions  
Pour you the piss of goats;  
Nothing else shall you ever drink,  
Never what you wish,  
Ever what I wish.  
I score troll-runes, then I score three letters,  
Filth, frenzy, lust:  
I can score them off as I score them on,  
If I find sufficient cause.

The greatest temptation for the translator is to employ archaisms or etymologize; for Cottle, Herbert, Thorpe, and Vigfusson, ‘thou’ and ‘thee’ naturally seem less archaic than they do to twentieth-century translators. *Mær/mey* encourages ‘maiden’ for ‘girl’ by assonance and alliteration. The late nineteenth century brings a heightened philological awareness. Typical is Magnússon and Morris’s rendition of *Fm* 66: ‘Seldom hath hardy eld a faint-heart youth’, or *Fm* 211: ‘Such as thy redes are I will nowise do after them’ (Magnússon and Morris 1870, 61, 62). Vigfusson and York Powell, despite their scathing remarks about the ‘mere philologist’, enthusiastically render Norse words with their English

cognates, or coin philologically possible but unattested words, e.g. ‘Anses’ for Æsir, and ‘Ansesses’ for *Ásynjor*, ‘Tew’ for Týr, ‘Eager’ for Ægir, and Woden instead of Óðinn, as well as ‘bearsarks’; a spelling which commits them to a particular understanding of the ferocious warriors’ behaviour. They also use ‘methinks’ and ‘wight’. Bray has the archaic ‘ye’, as well as ‘ween’, ‘olden’, ‘twain’, the dialectal ‘bairns’, and not only ‘Wanes’ for Vanir, but the not entirely happy ‘Wanelings’ for *vaningja*. Hollander’s literalism and etymologizing instinct brings ‘fain’, ‘I ween’, and ‘I wot’, as well as lines such as ‘if I wend with thee to the world of etins’; Bellows has ‘methinks’, ‘fare’ for ‘journey’, and ‘doth’, though he has few other ‘-th’ endings in the present third person singular. Dronke generally captures a modern-sounding idiom, though the demands of alliteration produce the obscure ‘Bayard and bracelets’ for *iós ok armbauga* in *Ls* 13, more prosaically ‘horse and arm-rings’ (1997, 336). Bayard is a generic Middle English term for a well-bred horse. Even Auden and Taylor, whose translations usually sound reasonably contemporary, employ ‘thurse’, ‘maids’, ‘mighty-thewed’, and refer to ‘garths’, ‘Vanes’ (for Vanir), and ‘orcs’. The latter may likely be ascribed to Tolkien’s influence—the volume is dedicated to him. ‘Busk yourself Freyia’ demands Loki in Auden and Taylor, recalling Herbert’s ‘Now, Freyia, busk, as a blooming bride’ (Herbert 1842, 176)—a usage which even in 1804 occasioned an explanatory note.

The problem of synonyms, if not solved by archaisms, leads to a repetition of ‘warrior’, ‘fighter’, ‘hero’ which is almost unavoidable. The etymological attraction of ‘mare’ for *marr* ‘horse’ in Auden and Taylor puts Skírnir on an animal whose connotations of effeminacy should have given Auden’s expert advisers pause for thought; ‘mare’ is frequently used elsewhere in their translations. Fighting, of which there is a great deal, entails ‘smiting’, ‘slaying’, and ‘felling’ in Thorpe, Vigfusson and York Powell, Bray, Bellows, and Hollander; Terry prefers ‘strike’ and ‘lay low’, while Auden and Taylor alternate between ‘fell’, ‘kill’, and ‘lay low’. I used ‘strike’, ‘batter’, and ‘kill’; ‘batter’ may be too colloquial and perhaps not forceful enough.

Cottle shows no sensitivity to the question of the appropriateness of Latinate or Romance diction: Prymr’s sister, for example, becomes a ‘sordid dame’. Herbert makes a point of avoiding Latin-derived words where he can, though he etymologizes freely in his Introduction. Failing to identify the ‘Thursar’ as giants, he connects them with Turks, Tuscans, *thus* (Latin, ‘incense’), and, splendidly, those ‘murderous immolators of the East’, the Thugs (1842, 187, n.). As a philologist Thorpe is aware that

Latinisms are not appropriate, but he fails to avoid ‘computation’ and ‘celestial’ in *Hym* 1 and uses such terminology as ‘Fafnicide’ and ‘altercation’ in poem titles; the jingle of ‘Ægir’s Computation, or: Loki’s Altercation’ must indeed have been hard to resist for *Lokasenna*. There is less Latinism in twentieth-century translation, though Dronke has ‘itemize’ for *telia* ‘reckon up’ in *Ls* 28 (1997, 339); the frequently-repeated charge against Loki in this poem that he is *ærr* ‘mad’, she renders as ‘lunatic’.

The language of romance is also difficult: women and girls become ‘damsels’, ‘wenches’, ‘that fair’, or the rather uncourtly ‘lass’ in Thorpe. Auden and Taylor have ‘maids’, and Terry ‘maidens’; I tried to keep the maidens out, preferring ‘girl’. The sexual encounter in *Hrbl* 30 is euphemized into ‘sweet colloquy’ (Cottle 1797, 116), ‘trysting’ (Bray 1908, 193), ‘dallied’ (Thorpe 1866, 76), or ‘granted me joy’ (Bellows 1926, 131). The same verse’s *línhvít* ‘linen-white’ is assimilated to mid-Victorian ideas of decorum in descriptions of female beauty by Thorpe in ‘lily-fair’; Bray gives ‘linen-fair’, potentially rather puzzling; Hollander loses the comparison by glossing ‘white-armed’, followed by Terry, while Vigfusson and York Powell, Bellows, Auden and Taylor, and Larrington stick to the literal ‘linen-white’. Sex will always raise difficulties; incestuous sex is even trickier. When Freyja is accused of having sex with her brother in *Ls* 32, Cottle completely misunderstands the charge, suggesting that Freyja has orchestrated ‘mortal strife’ against her brother (1797, 160). Thorpe coyly gives ‘against thy brother the gentle powers excited’ (1866, 95), while Vigfusson obscures Loki’s words with an ellipsis (1883, 105). Hollander converts Loki’s charge that Freyja is a witch (*fordæða*) into the accusation that she is a whore (1962, 97); Bray has the gods find her ‘at thy brother’s’ as if she were merely visiting for tea and has her ‘frightened’ rather than farting (1908, 257). The fart that results when Freyja is discovered *in flagrante* with her brother is first noted by Bellows (1926, 162): ‘Freyja her wind set free’; Hollander is the first to translate the fart directly.

Scatology predictably causes problems. *Skm* 35’s *geita hland* is ‘urine of the unsav’ry goat’ for Cottle (1797, 95); ‘foul beverage from the goats’ is Herbert’s version (1842, 201). Thorpe gives ‘goat’s water’ (1866, 83); Vigfusson and York Powell omit the phrase. Bray’s ‘foul water of goats’ (1908, 151), like Herbert’s and Thorpe’s term, leaves it unclear as to whether the liquid is left-over goats’ drinking-water. Hollander’s impressive ‘staling of stinking goats’ depends on the reader recognizing the archaic ‘staling’ (1962, 72). Bellows’s ‘horns of filth’ misses the link

with *Heiðrún*, the mead-giving goat of *Valhöll* (1926, 118). By the sixties ‘piss’ becomes possible; thus Terry (169, 59), Auden and Taylor (1969, 123), and Larrington (1996, 66); Dronke has the politer ‘goat’s urine’ (1997, 384).

The daughters of *Hymir* (probably personifications of the mountain rivers flowing into the sea) are mentioned in *Loki*’s insult in *Ls* 34 as urinating in *Njörðr*’s mouth. This proves too much for Cottle: ‘The sentiments and expressions of this and the following verse would not admit with propriety of an English version’ (1797, 161). Thorpe gives the mysterious ‘had thee for a utensil’ and apologizes: ‘the events related in this strophe are probably a mere perversion, by the poet, of what we know of *Niörd*’s history’ (1866, I 96); Vigfusson employs an ellipsis; Bray’s ‘used thee as trough for their floods’ is rather vague (1908, 259), while Hollander’s ‘pot’ and ‘midden’ suggests a product which is too solid (1962, 97); Bellows’s ‘privy’ is more to the point (1926, 63). Terry (1969, 81) and Auden and Taylor (1969, 138) have the coy ‘made water in your mouth’ while Larrington gives a perhaps dysphemic ‘piss-pot’ and ‘pissed’ (1996, 90); Dronke has the etymologically related ‘piss-trough’, but also ‘made water into your mouth’ (1997, 340).

Insult is hard too: *Hrbl* 49’s *halr inn hugblauði* is literally if unimaginatively rendered ‘shameless coward’ and ‘coward’ by Auden and Taylor (1969, 131), and Larrington (1996, 49), respectively. Bellows’s ‘witless man’ loses the connection with courage (1926, 135); Terry’s ‘faint-hearted fellow’ (1969, 66) is, like Bray’s ‘faint-heart’ (1908, 197), perhaps not strong enough. It is the older translators who excel here: Hollander’s ‘craven knave’ (1962, 81) and Thorpe’s ‘dastardly varlet’ (1866, 77) with their internal rhymes, or Cottle’s marvellous, if very free ‘infernal caitiff, wretch absurd!’ (1797, 121).

Some translators seize the opportunity for a witty idiomatic rendering. In *Þrk* 32 *Prymr*’s sister, who has expected good-will gifts from her new sister-in-law, receives a blow from *Mjöllnir*, *Pórr*’s hammer, instead. *Hon scell um hlaut fyr scillinga* tempts some translators to try to reproduce the jingle of *scell* and *scillinga*. Vigfusson and York Powell do rather well with ‘she got a pound instead of pence’ (1883, 180); Thorpe’s ‘she a blow got instead of skillings’ is confused by the archaism (1866, 66). Bray and Bellows combine ‘stroke’ and ‘shillings’ for a near-alliterative effect, but suggesting perhaps a friendly pat on the head (1908, 137; 1926, 182). Hollander has ‘shock’ and ‘shillings’ (1962, 108). ‘Blow’ and ‘money’ in Terry (1969, 92) and ‘blow’ and ‘gold’ in Auden and Taylor (1969, 88) miss the pun, which I tried to render with ‘striking’

and ‘shillings’ (1996, 101). Now that ‘shillings’ are no longer current, the joke will probably disappear.

Though a relatively simple poem in terms of lexis, *Þrymskviða* provides a range of challenges to the translator. In the first stanza there is much emphasis on Þórr’s hair and beard; the mysterious loss of his hammer is experienced by the god as uncanny and literally hair-raising in its implications: *scegg nam at hrista, scōr nam at dýia*. Cottle’s version is, as ever, over the top: ‘From his heaving breast uprear’d, / Gusty whirlwinds shake his beard’ (1797, 179). Bray’s ‘quivering and shivering’ (1908, 127), as noted above, is effective, while Hollander’s ‘shaggy head gan shake’ suggests a certain wobbliness (1962, 104). Bellows (1926, 174–75) and Terry (1969, 88) understand the implications, but Auden and Taylor’s ‘tossed his red locks’, not only makes Þórr sound a little petulant, it also imports the idea of redness, which is attested only for Þórr’s beard (1969, 84). In stanza 13, problems of divine dignity are encountered. That Freyja is angry (*reið*) at the suggestion that she should go to Jötunheimr to marry Þrymr produces ‘wrath’ in Herbert, Thorpe, and Vigfusson and York Powell (1842, 176; 1866, 63; 1883, 177); Cottle as usual expands mightily: ‘Passion in Freya’s cheek glowed hot / Cold tremors thro’ her bosom shot’ (1797, 184). Freyja’s undignified snorting (*fnásaði*) is first recognized by Vigfusson and York Powell. Bray has her panting (1908, 131), while Hollander (1962, 106) reports that she ‘foamed with rage’ (perhaps even less dignified than snorting). When Freyja refuses on the grounds that going to Jötunheimr would prove her to be *vergjarnasta* ‘most eager for men’, Cottle (1797, 185) falls into the startling error of having her agree to the journey, a consent which, as Herbert tartly remarks, ‘destroys the sense of all that follows’ (1842, 180). Herbert himself settles on ‘wanton bride’ as a translation (1842, 176), while Thorpe gives ‘lewedest’ (1866, 64). Vigfusson and York Powell have the literal ‘man-maddest’ (1883, 178), varied by Hollander as ‘most mad after men’ (1962, 106). Bray’s ‘most wanton’ and Bellows’s ‘most lustful’ are quite neutral (1908, 131; 1926, 177). Terry (1969, 90) spells out ‘I’ll have gone mad with hunger for men’, while Auden and Taylor (1969, 85) too directly make Freyja a ‘whore’, losing the superlative which is an important part of the comedy, for Freyja fears to prove herself an outstanding example of what she already is. My own ‘most sex-crazed of women’, I now think likely to date (1996, 98).

Thus far I have mostly considered the mythological poetry, since the earliest translators were most interested in the mythological parallels with the Greek. Particular interest in the heroic poetry was probably

kindled by the work of Magnússon and Morris, reinforced no doubt by the first performance of Wagner's Ring Cycle in London in May 1882. It is interesting to compare the versions of Magnússon and Morris, Auden's 1981 texts and Dronke's translations of the last four heroic poems. The Victorian translators strive more for effect than for clarity; Auden is oddly literal and unpoetic in these last versions, while Dronke very often finds the *mot juste*, creating a series of images which are coherent in their implications. Space permits only one example: three versions of *Hm 20*, chronicling the arrogant reaction of Jǫrmunrekkr to the news that Hamðir and Sǫrli have arrived at his hall. The verse lists a sequence of the king's self-conscious actions (Neckel and Kuhn 1962, 272):

Hló þá Jǫrmunreccr, hendi drap á kampa,  
beiddiz at brǫngo, bǫðvaðiz at víni;  
scóc hann scǫr iarpa, sá á sciöld hvítan,  
lét hann sér í hendi hvarfa ker gullit.

Loud Jormunrek laughed,  
And laid hand to his beard,  
Nor bade bring his byrny,  
But with the wine fighting,  
Shook his red locks,  
On his white shield sat staring,  
And in his hand  
Swung the gold cup on high  
(Magnússon and Morris 1870, 255–56).

Then Jǫrmunrekkr laughed,  
with his hand stroked his whiskers,  
spurred himself to wildness,  
grew battlesome over his wine,  
flung back his brown hair,  
glanced at his white shield,  
made the golden cup  
swing in his hand.  
(Dronke 1969, 165).

The stout-hearted king stroked his beard,  
And laughed grimly, aggressive from wine;  
He shook his locks, looked at his shield,  
And twirled the golden goblet he held.  
(Auden and Taylor 1981, 142).

Magnússon and Morris add elements not present in the Norse: loudness of laughter, a byrnie, redness to the hair; they muddy the relationship between the wine and the fighting and break the rhythm of the series of speedy actions by making Jǫrmunrekkr sit and stare, as if preoccupied,

at his shield, while at the same time he swings his cup. Dronke nicely captures the studiedness of Jǫrmunrekkr's behaviour without recourse to archaism, except perhaps in 'battlesome'; the lexis is simple: 'cup', 'brown', 'white'. The 'whiskers', a description of facial hair which at the same time evokes an alert animal, is better than 'beard'. She keeps the swiftness of the successive gestures with 'glance', suggesting a fleeting awareness that he may indeed have to fight in person, and making the cup casually 'swing in the hand' underlines the self-consciousness of the king, the focus of all attention in the hall. Auden's 'stout-hearted', there for the alliteration, is too conventional to be effective; though 'aggressive' captures the sense of *þǫðvaðiz* quite well and echoes 'grimly', it lacks the element of working himself up to fury which the Norse reflexives convey, and which Dronke retains in 'spurred himself'. 'Locks' again alliterates, but at the cost of archaism; the series of colours, 'brown', 'white', 'golden', is lost, and the 'twirling', though studiously negligent, seems rather dainty for the leader of the Goths. Comparing the three verses shows the compromises in subtlety which faithfulness to alliteration can demand; Magnússon and Morris lack the precision which Dronke manages, though they have a strong sense of rhythm—perhaps stronger than Auden's here.

Beyond problems of tone and diction, translators must decide what to do with Norse names, whether occurring singly or in the great lists of *Grímnismál* or the *Dvergatal* of *Vǫluspá*, the varying status of which, as Quinn comments, 'has the dwarfs being marched in and out of the poem throughout the last hundred or so years' (1994, 127). Some translators, such as Thorpe and Terry, keep the *Grímnismál* catalogue in its Norse form; Vigfusson and York Powell make a start on listing the names in stanza 46, then abandon the list with 'etc'. Auden and Taylor and I chose to mix the translation of the more perspicuous names with the retention in the original form of those whose meaning is obscure. Hollander (1962, xxix) comments sagely that the matter

presents a knotty problem to the translator. [. . .] I do not hesitate to say that on the translator's tact and skill in meeting this problem—for dodge it he cannot—will depend in large measure the artistic merit of his work and its modicum of palatableness to the modern reader.

Dronke gamely translates all the dwarf-names of *Vǫluspá*, in places guessing at possible etymologies, so that *Nóri* becomes 'Shipper'. Ingeniously she manages to keep some of the internal rhymes: *Skirvir* and *Virvir* become 'Joiner' and 'Groiner', though this also results in 'Trembler' and 'Trumbler' (a nonce word) for *Bivǫrr* and *Bavǫrr* (1997, 9–11). The

replacement of unfamiliar with familiar name forms can have unfortunate, even hilarious, results. Quinn has noted the unaccountable decision of Auden and Taylor to begin their version of *Völuspá* by re-christening the *seiðkona* Heiðr with the name of the Swiss goat-girl Heidi (Quinn 1994, 128).

Translators have also to make decisions about the fidelity with which they render word order. The Norse case system allows inversion of subject and object as modern English does not; confusion can sometimes arise when the Norse syntax is imitated too literally. Thorpe keeps the Norse word order for the final line of *Þrymskviða* quite successfully: 'So got Odin's son his hammer back' (1866, 66), but Hollander's 'Laughed Hlórríthi's heart within him / when the hammer beheld the hardy one' runs the risk of personifying Miðllnir (1962, 108). Vigfusson and York Powell opt for 'This is how Woden's son got back his Hammer' (1883, 180). Terry keeps the inversion but makes it sound natural, 'That's how the hammer came back to Thor's hands' (1969, 92). 'Thus Thor came to recover his hammer' (Auden and Taylor 1969, 88) alliterates, where Larrington 'So Odin's son got the hammer back' is strictly literal (1996, 101).

Understanding of Norse religious practices tests translators, nowhere more than in *Hym* 1, a truly difficult verse for those who have not immersed themselves in 'the old life' as Vigfusson and York Powell call it (1883, cxiv). Cottle has the gods examining entrails like classical soothsayers, 'Till the teeming entrails tell, / Truth divin'd by mystic spell' (1797, 127). Thorpe's bald 'rods they shook' leaves the divination highly mysterious and he fails to register that Ægir does have some kettles (1866, 56). Vigfusson and York Powell's 'they cast the divining rods, and inspected the blood' (1883, 220), and Bray's 'they shook divining twigs, scanned the blood-drops' (1908, 113) make the process admirably clear, though Bray's vision of the gods eating 'dainties' seems rather effete delicate. Hollander's 'on wassail bent their wands they shook' complicates by use of archaism (1962, 83), while Bellows's 'blood they tried' makes it sound as if the gods are drinking the substance (1926, 139), as does Auden and Taylor's 'relished blood' (1969, 89). The latter also elaborate the divination-twigs as rune-carving on wood, which is not what the text says. Terry's 'by shaking small branches, steeped in blood' may be over-explanatory, but her translation is probably clearer than mine: 'they shook the twigs and looked at the augury' (1996, 78).

The translator's task will always be fraught with anxieties. 'At best his version is to the original as the thin, muffled, meagre, telephone-

rendering is to the full rich tones which it transmits, faithfully, it is true, but with what a difference to the hearer!’ exclaim Vigfusson and York Powell (1883, cxvi). Translations are not for all time, but simply for their own particular age, ‘a stop-gap until made to give place to a worthier work’ as Thorpe modestly observes (1866, I viii). Translators ought to articulate to themselves and to their readers what prejudices and predilections they bring to the project. As a teacher of Old Norse, I felt clarity was more important than poetic effect in my translation, though every now and again I rewarded myself with a little *jeu d’esprit*. It is both salutary and educational to read earlier versions: translators generally hope that their versions will stand the test of time, but through their ideas of appropriate diction, whether the lofty Latinisms of Cottle’s late eighteenth-century Gothic, the more subdued romanticism of Herbert, the simplicity of Thorpe, the coyness of Bray, the ‘Teutonic ambience’ of Bellows, the archaisms of Hollander in pursuit of his sound effects, the free additions in Auden and Taylor, and the occasional jaunty sixties note of Terry, each translator inevitably imparts a flavour of the contemporary.

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