

‘MYTH TO LIVE BY’ IN *SONATORREK*

Joseph Harris

Joseph Campbell regularly expounded his idea that the salvation of modern man lies in finding or resurrecting myths, or simply myth, ‘to live by’.¹ To me this seems a peculiar prescription for contemporary happiness, considering the myths I happen to have encountered. But if we remove the prescriptive stance, by which Campbell constructed himself as a guru catering to our wish to be improved by something just beyond comprehension and catering generally to our civilized discontents² — if we remove this normative and pedagogical stance, Campbell’s description of some aspects of the religious life of premodern man is not out of line with more disengaged students of the mythological side of religion, students such as Jan de Vries, Theodor Gaster, Konrad Preuß, and, most famously, Mircea Eliade. Of course, all these scholars of myth were interested in many other aspects of the field as well, and for Germanic religion other aspects such as the Indo-European background or the reliability of the postconversion evidence must be considered more important. Moreover, despite the unique insights into daily life offered by the sagas, North Germanic material does not often admit us into the inner religious life of real people.

¹ For example, Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By* (New York: Viking, 1972). The present article is an extensive revision, correction, and updating of Joseph Harris, “‘Goðsögn sem hjálp til að lifa af’ í Sonatorreki”, in *Heiðin minni: Greinar um fornar bókmennitir*, ed. by Haraldur Bessason and Baldur Hafstað (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1999), pp. 47–70.

² See the amusing analysis in Robert A. Segal, ‘Joseph Campbell’s Theory of Myth’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 44 (1978), 97–114; repr. in *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, ed. by Alan Dundes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 256–69; also see his *Joseph Campbell: An Introduction* (New York: Garland, 1987).

But because I come to my reading in comparative mythology burdened by a long-time interest in the tenth-century Icelander Egill Skalla-Grímsson and in his relationship to his god Odin, I am curious about how far Eliade's well-known ideas about the relationship of life to myth might capture Egill's situation and suggest a framework for interpreting the little we understand of Old Norse pagan life in general.³ Before beginning a discussion of Egill's *Sonatorrek* — an amazingly fruitful source of that elusive thing, the pre-Christian mentality, as well as a poem for lovers of poetry — let me further set up the problem, first, by a summary of the view I am identifying with Eliade and, second, by an introductory treatment of Egill and the poem.

In Eliade's meditation on the role of myth in the life of *homo religiosus*, mostly of archaic cultures, Campbell's 'myth to live by' is replaced by 'living myth', Eliade's phrase for the relationship of premodern man to his beliefs.⁴ Myth's role is famously a paradigmatic and recursive one: not *all* human actions, but all the *meaningful* ones, are imitations of a celestial model. Eliade weaves this idea through many publications, especially through what is probably his best-known book, *Cosmos and History*: 'Objects and acts acquire a value, and in so doing become real, because they participate, after one fashion or another, in a reality that transcends them'; cities, houses, temples, and territories are modelled on celestial archetypes, and this group of 'facts' is elaborated in what Eliade calls the 'symbolism of the Center'.⁵ Especially important, for the Norse material, are Eliade's 'human acts', 'rituals and significant profane gestures', which 'are repeated because they were consecrated in the beginning ("in those days", *in illo tempore, ab origine*) by gods, ancestors, or heroes'.⁶

These significant profane actions may present criticism with a vulnerable point, but the problem is only apparent and depends on point of view: 'they [the

³ The 'saga' (here something like a biographically conceived historical novel) of Egill, son of Skalla-Grímur, will be cited from *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit, 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1933). Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Mircea Eliade, 'Cosmogonic Myth and "Sacred History"', in his *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 72–87 (pp. 72–73). For concept and phrasing, cf. 'Leben im Mythos' and related wording in Karl Kerényi, *Antike Religion* (Amsterdam: Pantheon, 1940; repr. Munich: Langen Müller, 1971), esp. pp. 20, 40–41.

⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 4, pp. 6–11, and pp. 12–17.

⁶ Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, pp. 4, 5.

significant profane gestures] have undergone a long process of desacralization and have, in modern societies, become profane'; in fact, according to Eliade 'every act which has a definite meaning — hunting [...], games [...], sexuality — in some way participates in the sacred'.⁷ This has a pleasing resonance, an almost Gallic universality, but most of us in the Anglo-Saxon empirical tradition will cringe a little inwardly at the breadth of the claim. The anthropologist Malinowski, for all that his position contained broadly similar functions of myth in premodern life, had cleared a greater space for the profane and science.⁸ Eliade's book goes well beyond this theme, of course, to a profound meditation on the connections of 'living myth' with conceptions of time, history, and fate, but for the problem of human actions, as in the saga of Egill, it is perhaps enough to quote, following Eliade, from Thomas Aquinas: 'haec hominis est perfectio, similitudo Dei'.⁹

Eliade's view of 'living myth', as far as I have summarized it, would have been influenced by early twentieth-century views of myth and ritual, especially as expressed by the so-called Cambridge School, and a late myth-ritualist such as Gaster, though he introduces a terminology of 'real' and 'ideal' that seems more Platonic than religious, stands in broad agreement with Eliade. Gaster's concern with the relationship of myth and ritual (which are, for him, 'cosubstantial') is a version of the Cambridge School's classic problem — to which I would like to return in conclusion.¹⁰ But for now let me summarize the overlapping nature of the myth-ritual problem and Eliade's paradigmatic myth with a quotation from the great historian of Germanic religion. De Vries was quoting one of his own scholarly models on this overlap:

Preuß hat [...] mit vielen ethnologischen Beispielen seine Meinung, daß der Mythos einen notwendigen Bestandteil des Kultes ausmache, gestützt und zwar 'insofern ein Anfang in der Urzeit als notwendig für die Gültigkeit angesehen wird, sei es, daß die höchste Gottheit

⁷ Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, p. 28.

⁸ The most relevant essay would be Bronislaw Malinowski, 'Myth in Primitive Psychology' (1926), collected in his *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, intro. by Robert Redfield (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1954), pp. 93–148 (esp. 96–111, 'The Role of Myth in Life').

⁹ Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, p. 32.

¹⁰ Theodor H. Gaster, 'Myth and Story', in *Sacred Narrative*, ed. by Dundes, pp. 110–36 (p. 114); repr. from *Numen*, 1 (1954), 184–212, and Gaster's *Thespis: Ritual, Myth and Drama in the Ancient Near East*, foreword by Gilbert Murray (New York: Schuman, 1950). On the myth-ritual theory and the Cambridge School in the context of intellectual history, see, e.g., Robert A. Segal, *The Myth and Ritual Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) and Robert Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School* (New York: Garland, 1991).

oder ein Heilbringer oder ein einmaliges Ereignis den Anlaß zu dem jetzigen regelmäßigen Geschehen gegeben hat' [...]. Der Mythos gibt also die Berechtigung für alle späteren kultischen oder sozial-religiösen Handlungen, indem er deren Urbild darstellt; sie haben ihre Gültigkeit eben durch ihren Charakter einer Wiederholung urzeitlicher Vorgänge. Deshalb hat der antike Mensch, ob er nun Römer, Grieche oder Germane war, das Bedürfnis alles was er tut auf ein Vorbild zu beziehen, oder wie Ortega y Gasset das so einprägsam formuliert hat: der antike Mensch tritt, ehe er etwas tut, einen Schritt zurück, gleich dem Torero, der zum Todesstoß ausholt. Er sucht in der Vergangenheit ein Vorbild, in das er wie in eine Taucherglocke schöpfen kann, um sich so, zugleich geschützt und entstellt, in das gegenwärtige Problem hineinzustürzen.¹¹

[Preuß [...] supported his opinion that myth is a necessary part of cult with many ethnographic examples — that is, 'insofar as an origin in primordial times is seen as necessary for the validity [of the cult], whether it was the highest deity or a culture hero or a unique occurrence that provides the occasion for the present regular [cult] actions'. Thus [de Vries continues] myth provides the justification for all later cultic or socio-religious acts in that it re-presents their archetype. They have their validity precisely through their character as repetitions of primordial events. For that reason ancient man, whether he was Roman, Greek, or Germanic, had the need to relate everything he did to a model. Or as Ortega y Gasset so memorably formulated it: ancient man, before he does something, steps back a pace like a torero when he draws back his arm for the death thrust. He seeks a model in the past into which he can slide as if into a diving bell, in order, in this way both protected and disguised, to plunge into the present problem.]

Egill, whose life spanned the last century of Norse paganism from about 910 to about 990, is today perhaps the most celebrated of all pagan Icelanders. Readers of the saga, which is usually dated about 1230, typically feel that this is one, and perhaps the only, genuine Viking whom they really know as a rounded figure, warts and all, but this reaction is based on the skill of a Christian saga writer more than two hundred years removed from his subject.¹² Caution is in order, but too much

¹¹ Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, 3rd edn, 2 vols (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1970), I, 4. De Vries is referring to Konrad Preuss, *Der religiöse Gehalt der Mythen* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1933), p. 31; the citation of Ortega y Gasset is via Kerényi, *Antike Religion*, pp. 20, 40–41; de Vries also cites Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, at this point.

¹² In a survey of opinion on the authorship of the saga, Carol J. Clover concludes that 'Most scholars now suppose that Snorri [Sturluson] wrote *Egils saga*' but that '[w]e shall never have full proof to that effect'; 'Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*)', in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, 2nd impr. with new preface (Toronto: University of Toronto Press and Medieval Academy of America, 2005), pp. 239–315 (p. 245). More recently Baldur Hafstað, *Die Egils saga und ihr Verhältnis zu anderen Werken des nordischen Mittelalters* (Reykjavík: Rannsóknastofnun kennaraháskóla Íslands, 1995), esp. pp. 15–17, proceeds

caution is paralysing, and after all Egill did leave a very large corpus of poetry, in which his own voice speaks across the ages, preserved in oral tradition until recorded in writing at various times. Among the few items of Egill's surviving oeuvre that have been *reasonably* suspected of later authorship, *Sonatorrek* does not number — for most scholars.¹³

Egill's twenty-five-stanza response to a series of losses in his family was occasioned by the drowning of his beloved son Þoðvarr about 961. Genre is always our quickest (but highly imperfect) guide to a 'horizon of expectations', and I would

on the assumption of Snorri's authorship to redate the saga towards the very end of Snorri's life (1241) and comes to important (if controversial) conclusions on its literary-historical position. An earlier work on the latter subject, Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger for Egils saga* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1975), mainly argues the 'literary' (in the sense of the 'Icelandic School') origin of the saga. The most recent criticism finds extensive biblical allegory in the saga: Torfi H. Tulinius, *Skáldið í skrifinni – Snorri Sturluson og Egils saga* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag and Reykjavíkur Akadémían, 2004) and his articles cited there. In the context of the present study I prefer to avoid the authorship question, if only because Snorri's authorship of both the saga (our source here for pagan life and ritual) and also of the *Prose Edda* (our main source for myth) could raise the problem of a hermeneutic circularity which, while not unimportant, distracts from my main subject. In general, my view of the saga and its sources remains more conservative, close to that of Nordal in his edition of *Egils saga*, who, however, did assign the authorship to Snorri (pp. lxx–xcv).

¹³ *Egils saga*, ed. by Nordal, pp. v–xvi (and pp. xvi–xxv); for a summary judgement to which I would subscribe, see p. vi. On the difficulties of dating and ascription, with some special reference to Egill, see Roberta Frank, 'Skaldic Poetry', in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, ed. by Clover and Lindow, pp. 157–96 (esp. pp. 174–75). More recently Hafstað, *Die Egils saga und ihr Verhältnis*, esp. pp. 98, 99, 105–08, 111–18, and 149–75, has argued that *all* or almost all the verse, including *Sonatorrek*, as well as the prose was written by Snorri himself; and Tulinius, *Skáldið*, seems to agree although he also sees Egill himself as influenced by Christianity. In a posthumous publication, Bjarni Einarsson in his edition of *Egils saga* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2003), pp. 186–89 (Afterword), states his opinion that almost all the verse is by the saga author, namely Snorri; this brief account is based on his 'Skáldið í Reykjaholti', in *Eyvindarbók: Festskrift til Eyvind Fjeld Halvorson, 4 mai 1992*, ed. by Finn Hødnebo and others (Oslo: Institutt for nordistikk og litteraturvitenskap, 1992), pp. 34–40. For linguistic and literary-historical dating of Egill's verse before the twelfth century, see Jónas Kristjánsson, 'Kveðskapur Egils Skallagrímssonar', *Gripla*, 17 (2006), 7–35. The text of *Sonatorrek* cited here is that of Jón Helgason, *Skjaldevers*, Nordisk filologi, ser. A, 12 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1962), pp. 29–38, with some modifications from the edition in E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 24–41. See also Nordal's edition in *Egils saga*, pp. 246–56, and, especially for religious background, the most recent edition: Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Trúarhugmyndir í Sonatorreki*, Studia Islandica, 57 (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2001). The translations from *Sonatorrek* are my modifications of Turville-Petre's.

as a first approximation choose the analytic term ‘elegy’ to give a modern audience an initial conception of *Sonatorrek*.¹⁴ But *Egils saga* gives it a more exact ethnic genre label, namely *erfíkvæði*. Though this is the only occurrence of this word in the Old Norse corpus, it is clear from the narrative context, etymology, and related words that it designates a type of poem of which *Sonatorrek* is the richest surviving example, the poetic component of the funeral or memorial service for the dead.¹⁵ Bjarne Fidjestøl, the most thorough student of skaldic poetry in our time, took a stricter view of this genre than mine, but the fact that his resulting structural description is too narrow to accommodate Egill’s famous poem is alone sufficient to indicate the need for a ritual-based (rather than purely formal) conception.¹⁶ Still, it is hard to disagree when Fidjestøl writes, ‘Mit seiner ungewöhnlich persönlichen relig. Haltung ist das *Sonatorrek* ein einzigartiges Lied in der norrönen Dichtung, das nicht restlos in irgendeiner Gattung aufgeht’ (‘With its unusually personal religious approach, *Sonatorrek* is a unique poem in Old Norse literature, one which cannot be assigned in its entirety to any one genre’).¹⁷ Other attempts to give *Sonatorrek* a generic habitation and name are even less successful: neither *cri de revolte* against the gods nor *víglysing*, ‘declaration of hostilities’, comes to terms with the poem’s social and personal functions or with its intertextual relations.¹⁸ Commentators have chiefly, and rightly, fastened on its deeply religious

¹⁴ On ‘ethnic’ and ‘analytic’ genres, see Dan Ben-Amos, ‘Analytic Categories and Ethnic Genres’, in *Folklore Genres*, ed. by Dan Ben-Amos (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), pp. 215–42, and Joseph Harris, ‘Genre in the Saga Literature: A Squib’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 47 (1975), 427–36.

¹⁵ Joseph Harris, ‘*Erfíkvæði* – Myth, Ritual, Elegy’, in *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions. An International Conference in Lund, Sweden, June 3–7, 2004*, ed. by Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert, and Catharina Raudvere, Vågar till Midgård, 8 (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), pp. 267–71.

¹⁶ Bjarni Fidjestøl, ‘*Erfdrápa* (Erblied)’, in *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, ed. by Heinrich Beck and others (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1989), VII, 482–86; Harris, ‘*Erfíkvæði*’.

¹⁷ Fidjestøl, ‘*Erfdrápa* (Erblied)’, p. 485.

¹⁸ Emile Pons, *Le Thème et le sentiment de la nature dans la poésie anglosaxonne* (Strasbourg: Librairie Istra; [London]: H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1925), pp. 53–54, n. 3; Ari C. Bouman, ‘Egill Skallagrímsson’s Poem *Sonatorrek*’, in his *Patterns in Old English and Old Icelandic Literature* (Leiden: Rijksuniversiteit te Leiden, 1962), pp. 15–40 (p. 18 quoting from A. G. van Hamel, *Yslands Odinsgeloof*, Mededeelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afdeling Letterkunde, deel 82, series B, 3 (Amsterdam: Noord hollandsche uitgevermaatschappij, 1936).

‘anchoring’,¹⁹ the personal insight it offers, and on its uniqueness. Axel Olrik’s romantic assessment has proven very quotable:

De stærke Bølger [...] der gaar gennem Egils Sjæl, er et Vendepunkt i nordiske Menneskers Liv. For første Gang bryder Lyrikken frem i sin Vælde; det verdenshistoriske Punkt er naaet, hvor den indre Oplevelse er større end den ydre Daad.²⁰

[The strong waves [of emotion] [...] that run through Egill’s soul constitute a turning point in the life of Nordic man. For the first time the lyric breaks through in all its power. The world-historical point has been reached in which inner experience is greater than outer acts.]

Nordal wrote, ‘Jafnpersónulegt kvæði var ekki aftur ort á Íslandi fyrr en á 19. öld’ (So personal a poem was not composed again in Iceland before the nineteenth century).²¹ The poem has been considered in relation to ‘the modern’ by van den Toorn,²² pronounced a thousand years ahead of its time by Krause,²³ and lauded as an important marker on the way to modern self-presentation by Misch.²⁴ Without wishing to deny the modernity or, certainly, the appeal of *Sonatorrek*, I would like to associate myself with the salutary reminder in Wilhelm Grønbech’s rhapsodic pages on the poem — the reminder that this immediate human intelligibility

¹⁹ Bo Ralph, ‘Om tilkomsten av *Sonatorrek*’, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 91(1976), 153–65 (p. 154): ‘stark religiös förankring’ (strongly religious anchoring); cf. Klaus von See, ‘Sonatorrek und Hávamál’, *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 99 (1970), 26–33 (p. 28): ‘tief erlebte heidnische Mytengläubigkeit’ (deeply experienced faith in heathen myth); Jan de Vries, *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1964–67), I, 166: ‘Das *Sonatorrek* steht in der heidnischen Lebensanschauung fest gegründet’ (*Sonatorrek* stands firmly grounded in the mentality of heathen life).

²⁰ Axel Olrik, *Nordisk Aandsliv i Vikingertid og Tidlig Middelalder* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1907), p. 78; quoted approvingly by Bouman, ‘Egill Skallagrímsson’s Poem *Sonatorrek*’, p. 17, and by Wolfgang Krause, ‘Egil Skallagrímssons Gedicht “Der Söhne Verlust”’, *Die Sammlung: Zeitschrift für Kultur und Erziehung*, 3 (1948), 719–32 (p. 722).

²¹ Sigurður Nordal, ‘Átrúnaður Egils Skallagrímssonar’, *Skírnir*, 98 (1924), 145–65 (p. 146); repr. in his *Áfangar*, 2 vols (Reykjavík: Helgafellsútgáfan, 1943–44), pp. 103–28; and in his *Mannlysingar*, 3 vols (Reykjavík: Almenna Bókafélagið, 1986), I, 257–276; trans. into Norwegian by Magnus Stefansson in *Islandske streiflyls* (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1965), pp. 9–30.

²² M. C. van den Toorn, ‘Egils *Sonatorrek* als dichterische Leistung’, *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, 77 (1958), 46–59.

²³ Krause, ‘Egil Skallagrímssons Gedicht “Der Söhne Verlust”’, pp. 726 and 722, and n. 18; the same idea is more moderately expressed in de Vries, *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte*, I, 165 and 167.

²⁴ Georg Misch, ‘Egil Skallagrímsson: Die Selbstdarstellung des Skalden’, *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 6 (1928), 199–241.

across the cultural gulf can be only superficial, if not downright misleading.²⁵ Egill's poem may anticipate nineteenth-century lyrical sensibilities, but it, like every work of art, must also be a product of its time.

We distinguish, obviously, between the external history of the poem as reported in the saga — its composition and performance — and its internal structure and contents. In the latter Egill struggles with his pagan faith, especially with his special relationship to Odin, and, I will argue, he assimilates himself as bereaved father to the divine pattern supplied by Odin in the mythology. This imitation of events *in illo tempore* in the spirit of Eliade, though it does not account for everything in the poem, consists especially in sanctioning the presentation of the deceased sons in relation to Baldr's death and of the poet-father's view of the world as like the divine world after the death of Baldr. But before immersing ourselves in the verbal world of Egill's internal *imitatio dei*, let us consider briefly the external account. For I would argue that there is good evidence that the saga's anecdotes around Bǫðvarr's funeral similarly preserve memories of a ritual with mythic sanction.

It is generally recognized that the saga presents Egill in his old age and blindness as like his patron the aged, blind or one-eyed Odin and also like certain Odin heroes, the best known being Starkaðr,²⁶ but we are concerned only with events connected with the death of the favorite son Bǫðvarr. When Egill collected the body on the shore and laid it in the family funeral mound, he so swelled with grief that his clothing burst at the seams.²⁷ He returned to the house at Borg where without a word he went to his bed closet and locked himself in. After several days it became

²⁵ Vilhelm Grønbech, *The Culture of the Teutons*, trans. by William Worster, 3 vols (London: H. Milford and Oxford University Press, 1931), I, 26–31.

²⁶ See especially Haraldur Bessason, 'Mythological Overlays', in *Sjöttu ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni*, ed. by Einar G. Pétursson and Jónas Kristjánsson, 2 vols (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1977), I, 273–92, and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Starkaðr, Loki og Egill Skallagrímsson', in *Sjöttu ritgerðir*, ed. by Pétursson and Kristjánsson, II, 759–68; also Kaaren Grimstad, 'The Giant as a Heroic Model: The Case of Egill and Starkaðr', *Scandinavian Studies*, 48 (1976), 284–98; and cf. Joseph Harris, 'Sacrifice and Guilt in *Sonatorrek*', in *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. by Heiko Uecker, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde, 11 (Berlin: De Gruyter), pp. 173–96 (esp. p. 181, n. 26). See Hafstað, *Die Egils saga und ihr Verhältnis*, pp. 93–134, for a thorough review of this aspect of the saga.

²⁷ Knut Liestøl, *The Origin of the Icelandic Family Sagas* (Oslo: Aschehoug; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), p. 178, was apparently the first to notice the heroic reference here in the parallel to *Vǫlsunga saga* (chap. 29 from *Sigurðarkviða in meiri*), but Walter Burkert, *Homeric Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, trans. by Peter Bing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 53, puts such aggressive grief rituals in a context deeper than literary allusion.

clear that Egill intended to starve himself to death. His resourceful daughter Þorgerðr was sent for. Stating loudly that she would not eat until she could sup with Freyja, that is die with her father, Þorgerðr convinced Egill to admit her to the bed closet:

‘Faðir, lúk upp hurðinni, vil ek, at vit farim eina leið bæði’ [...] ‘Vel gerðir þú, dóttir, er þú vill fylgja feðr þínum; mikla ást hefir þú sýnt við mik. Hver ván er, at ek muna lifa við harm þenna?’

[‘Father, unlock the door; it is my wish that we both travel the same road’ [...] ‘You do well, daughter, to wish to follow your father; you have shown great love for me. What hope is there that I should live with this grief?’]

But in the darkness she tricked the old man into drinking from a horn, which turned out to contain not water but milk, and so the fast had been broken. Þorgerðr said:

‘Nú eru vit vélt; þetta er mjólk. [...] Hvat skulu vit nú til ráðs taka? lokit er nú þessi ætlan. Nú vilda ek, faðir, at vit lengðim líf okkart, svá at þú mættir yrkja erfíkvæði eptir Bǫðvar, en ek mun rísta á kefli, en síðan deyju vit, ef okkr sýnisk.’

[‘We’ve been tricked now: that’s milk! [...] What plan shall we two make now, since this intention is finished? I would wish now, father, that we prolonged our life so that you could compose a funeral poem about Bǫðvarr, and I will inscribe it on a rune-stick. But after that we can die if that seems right to us.’]

Egill said it was unlikely that he could compose now, but he began to cheer up as the poem progressed. When it was finished, he recited it to the household, got up from bed, and resumed the high seat. He called the poem *Sonatorrek*, ‘Irreparable Loss of Sons’. Afterward he held a funeral feast according to the old custom.²⁸

In summary, then: An old man has lost his only or most beloved son in a death which cannot be avenged. The old carl takes to his bed to die, and would have died had he not been saved by the soteriological function of his elegy for his son. But this description also fits the episode of *Beowulf* called the Old Man’s Lament and, *mutatis mutandis*, its framing narrative, the grief and death of Hreðel, king of the Geats. The Hreðel episode is certainly a heroic form of the myth of Baldr’s unavengable death and Odin’s unfathomable grief,²⁹ but underlying all three

²⁸ *Egils saga*, ed. by Nordal, pp. 243–45, 256–57. The word *torrek* occurs once in a poem of about 1030 where it must refer to loss and not to revenge; see Finnur Jónsson, *Lexicon poeticum antiquae linguae septentrionalis*, 2nd rev. edn (Copenhagen: S. L. Møller, 1931; repr. Copenhagen: Lyngé, 1966), s.v.

²⁹ See discussion and references in Joseph Harris, ‘Myth and Meaning in the Rök Inscription’, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, 2 (2006), 45–109 (pp. 79–82).

stories would seem to be the myth of the first *erfíkvæði* or at least of the narrative situation that produced it. The situation in *Egils saga* has several other parallels from the sagas, and in addition there is an amazing connection between the ideological content of *Sonatorrek* and the *Beowulf* passage that seems to consist in their similar treatment of one and the same gnome, a thought that would seem to belong at the core of paternal mourning.

But since I have already written in detail about these connections and talked about them often before,³⁰ I would on this occasion like to step back and try to articulate a general explanation in the spirit of Eliade. I would hypothesize, then, that since in the mythology the death of Baldr was the archetypal death and the archetypal sacrifice,³¹ the pattern set there by Odin formed the model of paternal grief in real life, at least in circles of Odin worshippers. This hypothesis goes only a little beyond de Vries, but I would add the further conjecture that this is also the mythic model for the funeral elegy — though Snorri and other mythographic sources offer no direct recognition of such an origin. If this hypothesis seems cogent, then the relationship of mythic model and actual ritual acts can be dated as reaching far enough back in time to constitute a distant source of *Beowulf* as a text. What may have been understood of these relationships by the audience of the *Beowulf* poem in Christian Anglo-Saxon England of the eighth, ninth, or tenth century can only be guessed. In any case, the Old Man's Lament seems to come close to representing the myth of the origin of funeral elegy in a direct form. The thirteenth-century texts that report similar ritual behaviour of pre-Christian Icelanders, above all *Egils saga*, would then, according to the hypothesis, be basing themselves here on old, half-understood anecdotes, or on a general knowledge of pre-Christian times, or on both.

Nordal has written brilliantly on Egill's religion, but whether or not we subscribe to his argument that Egill was a convert to Odin worship, the poet certainly composed from within a deep immersion in Odinic myth.³² The poem itself repeatedly echoes the god's words in *Hávamál*, and even Egill's suspicion of his god belongs

³⁰ Joseph Harris, 'A Nativist Approach to *Beowulf*: The Case of Germanic Elegy', in *Companion to Old English Poetry*, ed. by Henk Aertsen and Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994), pp. 45–62; Harris, 'Sacrifice and Guilt'; see the latter, p. 174, n. 4, for an account of the age and development of the present article.

³¹ Jan de Vries, 'Der Mythos von Baldrs Tod', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 70 (1955), 41–60.

³² Nordal, 'Átrúnaður', and *Icelandic Culture*, trans. by Vilhjálmur T. Bjarnar (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 1990), esp. pp. 123–25.

to the milieu of Odin worship.³³ The Odinic language, the ritual occasion of performance, and the situation itself suggest that Egill's own grief was a *re-presentatio* of the first death and grief, that his poem and actions were modelled on a traditional paradigm wherein he cast himself as a shadow of Odin and his lost sons as reflections of Baldr. And we encounter this relationship between myth and life from the very beginning of the poem.

Stanza 1 is built on the idea, echoed in the saga's prose, that Egill has great difficulty in composing or, at least, in beginning his poem:

Miðk erum tregt
tungu at hræra
eðr loptvæi
lióðpundara.

[It is very hard for me to stir my tongue or the steel-yard of the song weigher.]

The difficulty of beginning is first presented somatically and located in the body part usually understood as most responsible for the difference between speech and merely oral sounds, the tongue. Immediately, though, the image is shifted, and the tongue is analogized to an instrument for meting out song as a merchant measures out trade goods such as gold. Probably the merchant's reluctant precision in dispensing his goods is to be understood as paralleling the poet's inertia. In any case, the mercantile metaphor is short-lived, changing in the second half-stanza to a more tradition-based image from the mythology:

era nú vænlegt
um Viðris þýfi
né hógdrægt
ór hugar fylgsni.

[The prospects of the theft of Odin are not hopeful now, nor is it easily drawn from the hiding-place of thought.]

Myth, of course, told a long history of a liquid which at once *was* poetry and *inspired* poetry, and Egill refers here to the moment in the story when Odin stole the mead from its mountain Fort Knox.³⁴

Stanza 2 repeats, in essence, the first stanza's allegory:

Era auðþeystr,
því at ekki veldr,

³³ Von See, 'Sonatorrek und Hávamál'.

³⁴ De Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, II, 66–73; in connection with Egill, see Bessason, 'Mythological Overlays', pp. 282–89.

høfuglegr
ór hyggiu stað
fagnafundr
Friggiar niðia
ár borinn
ór iotunheimum.

[The joyful find of the kinsmen of Frigg, brought long ago from the world of giants, is not easily moved from the home of thought — heavy grief causes this.]

Here, however, the tone is changed: the betrayal and death entailed in the myth of theft show up in this stanza as the joyful find that poetry has become in the hands of man. In other words, ‘joyful’ is justified by nothing in the mythic life of the gods but is purely anticipatory of the later existence of poetry in the human realm, and the shift from ‘theft’ to ‘find’ is clearly exculpatory for the eventual heirs, the skalds. Rhetorically this move anticipates the conclusion and main idea of the whole poem, the consolation of poetry in st. 24, but it also enacts a direct, not merely paradigmatic, form of the influence of myth on life.

Thus the composition of poetry here on earth in ‘our’ time is metaphorically equated with the action of Odin, god of poets, in primeval times and superhuman worlds. But, as we have already glimpsed, the situation goes beyond allegory and metaphor, for human poetry is actually consubstantial with the divine mead; and the theft ‘long ago’ (*ár*, 2,⁷) happens again in the ‘now’ (*nú*, 1,⁵) of the poem. Elsewhere skalds speak often of composing as vomiting up the mead of poetry,³⁵ just as Odin did near the end of the myth; but whether regurgitating or stealing, the skald goes beyond *imitatio* or drama to the actual reliving of a sacral moment. I hope I will not offend anyone if I recall the relation between life and myth in the Transubstantiation of the Body and Blood of Christ, but I do want to add that *representatio* does subside into a skaldic convention in some poems, especially in later ones.³⁶

³⁵ See Carol J. Clover, ‘Skaldic Sensibility’, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 93 (1978), 63–81, who discusses the opening of *Sonatorrek* in similar terms (pp. 71–72).

³⁶ Germane to this discussion is Bo Ralph, ‘En dikt av Steinþórr, islänning’, *Scripta Islandica*, 26 (1975), 46–53 (p. 51); concerning the decline from consubstantiation to convention, Ralph summarizes: ‘Denna identitet tycks vara medveten för skalderna, åtminstone de äldre; i yngre tid används ofta betydligt blekare diktkenningar’ (This identity seems to be a conscious one for the skalds, at least for the older ones; in later times significantly weaker poetic kennings are employed). For a ritual theory of the origin of skaldic verse, especially *erfikuæði*, see Åke Ohlmarks, ‘Till frågan om den fornnordiska skaldediktningens ursprung’, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 57 (1944), 178–207, with consideration of *Sonatorrek* (esp. pp. 188–89).

These stanzas parallel the myth in a less mysterious way too. In his version of the myth Snorri tells us that when the Æsir first learned that Baldr was dead, they could not speak:

Þá er Baldr var fallinn þá fellusk öllum Ásum orðtök ok svá hendr at taka til hans, ok sá hverr til annars, ok váru allir með einum hug til þess er unnit hafði verkit. En engi mátti hefna, þar var svá mikill gríðastaðr. En þá er Æsirnir freistuðu at mæla þá var hitt þó fyrr at grátrinn kom upp svá at engi mátti öðrum segja með orðunum frá sínum harmi. En Óðinn bar þeim mun verst þenna skaða sem hann kunnir mesta skyn hversu mikil aftaka ok missa Ásunum var í fráfalli Baldrs.³⁷

[When Baldr had fallen, language failed all the gods and hands to reach to him also failed them. And no one could take revenge, so great a sanctuary was it there. But when the gods tried to speak, tears came out instead so that no one could speak his grief to another. But Odin bore this loss worst of them all, for he had the most understanding of how great a diminishment and loss for the gods lay in the death of Baldr.]

The shocked silence of the gods and their difficulty in speaking calls for comparison to both the saga's description of the situation and to the opening of the poem. The saga author knew at least parts of the poem, including the opening, but both the myth and the real-life incident would ultimately be products of the same human psychology. In the poem, however, the emphatic treatment of overcoming silence may be grounded, to a greater degree than expected, in the world of traditional ideas rather than in real life. The modern reader will legitimately think of the slow beginning and sense of effort in Milton's *Lycidas* — similarly an elegy that steers between paradigmatic myth-like conventions, individual thoughts, and patterns from religious myth — but it is important to note that Egill's opening with the difficulty of breaking silence does not seem to be a mere topos of early skaldic verse.³⁸ If anything, skalds were proud of their fluency; the opening of Egill's *Arinbjarnarkviða*, for example, also deals with the topic of beginnings, but emphasizes the skald's readiness with words of praise for a generous lord or friend.

Stanza 3 begins obscurely, apparently continuing the topic of the mead of poetry. It is 'blameless', anticipating the 'immaculate' gift of poetry in the penultimate stanza of the poem. In the second helming of st. 3, this liquid theme

³⁷ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 46 (chap. 48).

³⁸ Clover, 'Skaldic Sensibility', p. 71, cites one partial parallel, also involving grief; and see Harris, 'Nativist Approach', p. 53, for analogues to the saga anecdote: the prehistory of Völu-Steinn's *Qgmundardrápa* can be interpreted as a way of overcoming the difficulty of beginning such a funeral elegy.

modulates into blood from the body of the primordial giant Ymir which originated the seas in the native cosmogony and supplied a kenning for the sea. (The mead of poetry was actually blood mixed with honey.) The quotidian reference is presumably to the stormy waters off Borg where Bǫðvarr drowned,³⁹ but it is literally impossible to distinguish the profane H₂O of the poem's here and now from the sacred referent, the monster's blood *in illo tempore*. (But this stanza is rich and difficult and needs more work.)

Stanzas 4 and 5 are based, I think, mainly on traditional elegiac imagery; though there is a parallel for the lone tree of st. 3 in the Odin poem *Hávamál*,⁴⁰ I do not think that these stanzas contribute to the mythic process we are examining. In sts 8 and 9 the grieving father at Borg is as helpless to effect revenge as were the fathers we noticed in *Beowulf* and as Odin in the mythology. The echoes of Odin are not chiefly verbal but functions of the situation, yet these take on verbal form to some extent: the adjective *gamall* in st. 9 is typical of Odin; the public nature of Egill's 'lack of support' (*gamals þegns / gengileysi*, 9,⁷⁻⁸), played out before 'all the people' (*alþjóð*, 9,⁵) is not in itself an Odinic feature, but in the context of its semantic and structural parallel in st. 15,³⁻⁴ (discussed below), a weaker form of the cosmic drama of st. 15 is perhaps also suggested here; the diction of st. 8 reminds somewhat of the language of frustrated hostility in *Lokasenna*, though not of Odin's share only. Perhaps what deserves emphasis here is the sheer fact of narrative invention behind Egill's grief. Revenge poses an insoluble problem to Odin, Hreðel, and the Old Man of *Beowulf*. This supplies Egill with precedent for seeking out in imagination unreachable foes, the sea god and goddess, and in a sense the mythic model creates the helplessness of the historical man. Logically, even logically within Egill's cultural *sitz-im-leben*, other postures towards loss of a son would have been possible, but Egill needed to see himself as following the sacred pattern.

Turning to the figure of Baldr, we find that Magnus Olsen has cleared the way by demonstrating convincingly the profound and moving projection of another early *erfíkvæði*, *Hákonarmál* (c. 961), against the background of the Baldr myth, and Olsen offers also a somewhat less certain allusion to this myth in a later Christian

³⁹ Hallvard Lie, 'Sonatorrek str. 1-4', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 61 (1946), 182-207, seems to reduce the metaphorical referent to this realistic meaning; in any case I cannot subscribe to his transposition of st. 3 to follow 4.

⁴⁰ *Hávamál*, st. 50; cf. *Guðrúnarkviða II*, st. 40; *Hamðismál*, st. 5, among other analogues. Eddic poems are cited from *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. by Gustav Neckel, 4th edn, rev. by Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg: Winter, 1962), here pp. 24, 230, and 269.

erfíkvæði for Saint Ólafr by Sighvatr (c. 1040).⁴¹ This pattern demands to be extended to include the two other most important royal *erfíkvæði* of the pre-Christian and early Christian period, and for that reason I must briefly digress from *Sonatorrek*. In the earliest of these royal funeral poems, the fragmentary *Eiríksmál* (c. 954), the dead king is assimilated to Baldr as he arrives in Valhalla, while the third poem in this sequence, Hallfreðr vandræðaskald’s *erfídrápa* for King Ólafr Tryggvason, despite its Christian setting in 1001, stands in a direct line of development from the pagan *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*, although Hallfreðr’s Baldr allusions are more oblique.⁴²

The ‘backstory’ of *Eiríksmál* is well known: how the fratricidal older son of Haraldr Hairfair was expelled from Norway after the return from England of his younger Christian half-brother Hákon Fosterson-of-Athelstan; how about 948 Eiríkr Blood-Axe was compensated with the Norse kingdom of Northumberland under the English king; how the warlike Eiríkr raided in English lands and was killed in battle in 954; finally how in the same year his widow, Gunnhildr, commissioned an unknown skald to compose a poem about him (*yrkja kvæði um hann*), presumably for his funeral.⁴³ Like his direct imitator, Eyvindr skaldaspillir, poet of the *Hákonarmál*, the *Eiríksmál* poet projected the reception of his king into Valhalla against the background of the Baldr myth. Baldr’s death had been closely connected in the mythology, and presumably in belief, with Ragnarøk, and both of these events were associated with the idea of a return of Baldr to the world of the gods — as, for example, in *Völuspá*, st. 62. In *Eiríksmál*, the poet-god Bragi hears the thunder of armies of the dead riding to Valhalla and draws the false conclusion that it may be Baldr’s return from Hel, but Odin and Bragi both know that to be an impossible thing. Instead the noise is caused by Eiríkr, who has been ‘taken’ by Odin despite and, in fact, because of his greatness as a warrior. For Ragnarøk may not be far away, as Odin hints in a pregnant anacoluthon: ‘því at óvíst er at vita’ (7,3). At the end of the fragment Eiríkr appears in Valhalla with a following of five

⁴¹ Magnus Olsen, ‘Om Balder-digtning og Balder-kultus’, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 40 (1924), 148–75, and ‘En iakttagelse vedkommende Balder-diktningen’, in *Studier tillagnade Axel Kock* [= *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, n.s., suppl. to vol. 40] (Lund: Gleerup, 1929), pp. 169–77.

⁴² *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* are cited from Helgason, *Skjaldevers*; references to Hallfreðr’s poetry and other skaldic poems are to *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson, vols A.1–II: *Tekst efter håndskrifterne*; vols B.1–II: *Rettet tekst* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal; Kristiania: Nordisk forlag, 1912–15).

⁴³ *Fagraskinna – Nóregs konunga tal*, ed. by Bjarni Einarsson together with Ágrip af *Nóregskonunga sögum*, Íslenzk fornrit, 29 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1985), p. 77.

kings (9,¹). The number and identity of these kings have plagued historians from the thirteenth century to the present,⁴⁴ but in the context of *Eiríksmál* and its Baldr myth the five kings could be an allusion to the five armies of dead men which rode over the bridge of Gjallarbrú on the way to Hel on the day of Baldr's funeral, as the *Snorra Edda* reports probably on the basis of lost poems:

Móðguðr er nefnd mæðr sú er gætir brúarinnar. Hon spurði hann [Hermóð] at nafni eða ætt ok sagði at hinn fyrri dag riðu um brúna fimm fylki dauðra manna.⁴⁵

[The name of the maid who guards the bridge is Móðguðr. She asked Hermóð for his name and lineage and stated that the previous day five armies of dead men had ridden over the bridge.]

Thus while the historical tradition of *Egils saga*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Heimskringla* might tempt us to compare the fratricide Eiríkr 'of the bloody axe' with the brother-killer Hǫðr in the myth (or with the warlike Hotherus of Saxo Grammaticus's parallel tale), the pro-Eiríkr tradition of the memorial poem seems to cast his death and entry into Valhalla against the archetypal Viking funeral of Baldr, that god's thunderous journey to Hel, and the distant prospect of his return — at Ragnarǫk. Just as in the *Hákonarmál*, the poetic function of such allusions in *Eiríksmál* would be the assimilation of the dead king to the Baldr schema. This is not, I think, a royal apotheosis in the fullest sense, but an instance of private myth-making that relies on the power of poetry to establish couplings, to make a unity through equivalences. The historical question for the origin of elegy, however, is to what extent the equivalence was traditional and constitutive of the consolatory function.

The third great *erfíkvæði* of the early period is that of Hallfreðr vandræðaskald for King Ólafr Tryggvason. Hallfreðr was nominally a Christian at this time (c. 1001), though notoriously unsteady in his faith, and his poem is, of course, in memory of a Christian king. (But Eiríkr and Hákon were also Christians.) It stands to reason that if there is a Baldr undertone here it will be muted even if — as is obvious — the poem does descend from the tradition of *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*.

⁴⁴ Axel Seeberg, 'Five Kings', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 20 (1978–79), 106–13.

⁴⁵ Snorri, *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes p. 47. It is regarded as established that this section of *Gylfaginning* (pp. 46–48 (chap. 49)) is based on one or more lost poems; see de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, II, 216–17. Also see Franz Rolf Schröder, 'Balder-Probleme', *Beiträge zur deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, 84 (1963), 319–57. According to *Vǫlsunga saga*, chap. 29 (from the lost poem known as *Meiri*), Sigurd had killed five kings, and it is likely that Brynhildr in this passage has in mind that the five will accompany Sigurd to Hel; cf. *Sigurarkviða in skamma*, sts 60–70 (*Edda*, ed. by Neckel, pp. 216–18), where, according to Brynhildr, five bondmaids and eight noble attendants will follow him in death.

In his last stanza (29), however, Hallfreðr refers fairly directly to the complex of ideas found especially at the conclusion of *Hákonarmál*:

Fyrr mun heimr ok himnar,
 hugreifum Áleifi,
 (hann vas menskra manna
 mest gótt) í tvau bresta,
 aðr an, glíkr at góðu,
 gæðingr myni fæðask;
 kœns hafi Krístr enn hreini
 konungs ǫnd ofar lǫndum.

[Heaven and earth will burst in two, before a prince will be born equal in goodness to the courageous Ólafr; he was the most ‘good’ of human men; may Christ the Clean have the soul of the bold king up above the earth.]

Compare *Hákonarmál* st. 20:

Mun óbundinn
 á ýta siqt
 Fenrisúlfr fara,
 áðr íafngóðr
 á auða trǫð
 konungmaðr komi.

[The Fenris-Wolf will get free and storm the seats of the gods, before an equally good king will come on the deserted way.]

In both stanzas the thought is this: Ragnarǫk (or the end of the world) will arrive before a king as ‘good’ as this one will come into the world. Thus Hákon and Ólafr are blended with or superimposed upon Baldr, whose return would be signalled by Ragnarǫk but easily became a kind of *adynaton* or impossible occurrence, as in *Eiríkismál*. Notice, too, that Ólafr is conspicuously called ‘the good’ in this stanza and elsewhere in the poem; in fact, Hallfreðr triples his allusion to this word with what might be called *plöce* in classical verse, a play on etymologically related words: *mest gótt*, *glíkr at góðu*, and *gæðingr*. And, as I pointed out, Olsen demonstrated conclusively how this title associated Hákon with Baldr ‘the good’. Though the last two lines are perfectly orthodox in their Christianity, it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that Hallfreðr has juxtaposed these Baldr allusions to *Krístr enn hreini* through some loose association of the two white gods. In the light of this last stanza, other phrases of Hallfreðr’s *Ólafsdrápa* emerge fairly clearly as allusions to Baldr.⁴⁶ The

⁴⁶ This is not the place for a full analysis, but the phrases that may be thought to cast Hallfreðr’s elegy for Ólafr Tryggvason against the background explored in this article include the following:

poem also seems to have a more personal tone than at first appears. But enough has been said, I hope, to establish the general argument: it appears from the evidence available that the Baldr myth is a fundamental part of the thought-world of early *erfíkvæði* outside *Sonatorrek*. We return now to the Baldr theme in *Sonatorrek*.

Egill's son Bǫðvarr was, like Baldr, innocent and beloved; the Baldr epithet 'the good', however, appears only in the form of negative litotes — a rhetorical strategy that seems characteristic of Egill. The last clause of st. 11 presents problems, but Egill is here basically affirming that Bǫðvarr lacked the makings of an evil man, and everyone (not Egill alone) would have known this fact if Bǫðvarr had been able to grow to manhood:

Veit ek þat síalfr
at í syni mínum
vara ills þegns
efni vaxit,
ef sá randviðr
røskvask næði
unz her-Gauts
hendr of tæki.

[This I know myself that the elements of an evil man had not grown in my son, even if that shield-tree had been able to ripen before the hands of Odin took him.]

This way of expressing Bǫðvarr's goodness compensates for the difference between him and the *positively* good Baldr, who was an adult, and it also apparently serves to establish Odin's theft of Egill's son (though the interpretation of the last two lines is not certain).⁴⁷ The technique of negative litotes is used in connection with Baldr in the Odin poem *Grímnismál* (st.12: Baldr's domain has 'fæstir feiknstaðir' (fewest evils)) and again in *Sonatorrek* as I shall mention. Yet Egill's further

st. 10 (cf. the thought of st. 29 and its connections as set forth above); st. 13 (perhaps the same thought with further reference to Ragnarøk); st. 18,⁷⁻⁸ (*góðr gramr*); st. 19 (cf. *Hákonarmál*, sts 20–21); st. 20 (analogy, perhaps to doubts about return from the dead and uncertain news of the dead; cf. *Eiríksmál*); st. 21 (general similarities) and 21,³ (*ljóðum firðr ok láði*; cf. *Hákonarmál*, 21,³); st. 22,⁴ (*lestyggs sonar Tryggva*), 22,⁷⁻⁸, and 23,⁷⁻⁸ (cf. the contradiction of false hopes in *Eiríksmál*); st. 25,⁴ (*und lok*; cf. Kveld-Ulfr (*Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson, B.I, 26)) and 25,⁵⁻⁶ (*dauði góðs grams brá gæði ófárar þjóðar*); st. 27,⁶ (*skalmǫld*) and 27,⁷⁻⁸ (*flestum es mest vil ok dul vatta virða dróttins*; cf. esp. *Eiríksmál*); st. 28,⁵⁻⁸ (*munk aldri biða bótir*; cf. Harris, 'Nativist Approach').

⁴⁷ On this stanza, see Joseph Harris, 'The Rök Stone through Anglo-Saxon Eyes', in *The Anglo-Saxons and the North*, ed. by Matti Kilpiö and others, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2009), [pages](#) (p. 43, n. 81).

characterization of Þoðvarr is in terms of support in agonistic situations (st. 12), and Egill's mind goes on in sts 13 and 14 to dwell on his own vulnerability, especially since the loss of his brother. We can deduce from the mythology in general that Egill is reasoning the way the paranoid Odin would in his position, but Egill's loss is ultimately Odin's gain, and a gain in kind, namely support in the coming final war. Egill too expects an attack (sts 13–14); in sts 15–18 this mood modulates into a criticism of the decadent present: he trusts no one in the world (st. 15) and likes no one (st. 18); greed has undercut ancient morality (sts 15–16).

The myth offers parallels to this decadence, but before we turn to that, let us consider the reduplication of the Baldr allusion in reference to the death some years earlier of Egill's other son, Gunnarr: although Gunnarr died of a fever (and not in battle), Egill presents this as another Odinic theft of another Baldr-like son. Stanzas 19–20 may be paraphrased: I have not been able to hold up my head since the vicious fire of sickness snatched from the world the son who avoided evil speech, on his guard against faults. So Gunnarr, again with typical negative litotes, is characterized by his fair speech in 'avoided evil speech' ('varnaði við vámalí', 20,^{7–8}), while in myth Baldr is positively 'the most fair-spoken of the gods and the kindest' ('fegrst talaðr ok líknsamastr').⁴⁸ Gunnarr was also 'vamma varr' (on his guard against faults, or against stains). (*Vamm*, like Latin *maculum*, has both a visual and a moral aspect; Turville-Petre's translation 'on guard against faults' can represent only the latter. The emendation of MS *varr* to *vanr* is appealing in view of the same phrase in *Hávamál* 22 and *Lokasenna* 30.) But of Baldr, Snorri reports, 'there is only good to tell' ('gott at segja'); his countenance is so fair and bright that he emits light ('svá fagr álitum ok bjartr svá at lýsir af honum'). In other words, Egill contrives to compress the moral goodness and the physical whiteness of Baldr into a single, ambiguous phrase.

Baldr's death ushered in the beginning of the end for the gods; having lost their best and brightest, the Æsir are unsure of themselves, and Odin gathers forces against the coming of the wolf, just as Egill dwells on his vulnerability in an increasingly threatening time. In Egill's satire on the times in sts 15–16 we seem to hear tones of some pagan analogue of the Fifteen Signs of Doomsday. Among the mythic texts, *Völuspá* 45 is the classic statement of the deterioration of the human condition and the ethical world before the last days:

Bræðr muno beriaz oc at þōnom verðaz,
muno systrungar sífiom spilla;

⁴⁸ Snorri, *Edda*, p. 23 (chap. 22).

hart er í heimi, hórdómr mikill,
 sceggǫld, scálmǫld, scildir ro klofnir,
 vindǫld, vargǫld, áðr verold steypiz;
 mun engi maðr ǫðrom þyrma.

[Brothers will fight against brothers and become each others' slayers; near kinsmen will shatter the bonds of the family; there will be evil in the world, great whoredom, axe-age, sword-age, when shields will be cleft, wind-age, wolf-age, before the world is destroyed; no man will spare another.]

Egill's kenning for 'anyone' in the context of the decadence he sees around him is *alþjóð Elgiar galga* (15,³⁻⁴), literally meaning the 'whole folk of the gallows of Odin', that is, all the peoples within the cosmic tree Yggdrasill. Instead of using this high-flown language here, Egill could have said more simply 'in the world' or more realistically 'in Iceland' or 'in Borgarfjörðr'. The image from myth is chosen, it seems, to keep us aware of the Odinic world of the subtext and to have Egill's own drama played out on the cosmic stage by conflating the punctual here and now with the preterpunctual pattern.

Egill needs to gather supporters like Odin, but unlike Odin he cannot collect *einherjar*; instead he finds himself in the decadent human world of *Völuspá* 45. This world of the approaching Last Days is especially characterized by the failure of family loyalty. Egill's 'niflgóðr niðia steypir' (15,⁵⁻⁶) (evil destroyer of kinsmen) is at home in the world of *Völuspá* 45; he is, in effect, one of the brothers who will fight with brothers and become each other's slayer. The word choice in *steypir* perhaps betrays a verbal echo of *steypiz* in *Völuspá*, the cosmic allusion again serving to identify the decadent world of Egill's Iceland (as he sees it) with the mythic time when the world (or age of man) will be destroyed. More certainly, the adjective *niflgóðr* conjures up for us a kinsman who is darkly good, that is, evil, or else good with respect to (*Nifl-*)*Hel* and death, therefore a contrasting mirror image of the good and white god Baldr, and of his imitators Bǫðvarr and Gunnarr — in some sort an anti-Baldr. The action taken by the 'evil destroyer of kinsmen' fits these decadent times in a more general way, the tone of the reference implying the disgraceful and degenerate readiness to leave a kinsman unavenged in return for lucre. For Egill such decay of family solidarity must indeed have seemed the prologue to Ragnarǫk.

Sonatorrek's conclusion should also be read as a part of the Baldr-Ragnarǫk pattern we have been unearthing: the periphrases for Odin in the last three stanzas constitute a progressive allusion to that god's last days. In st. 23,² he is simply 'bróður Vílis', a title alluding to Odin's early days. His next epithet 'goðiaðar' (23,³) (protector of gods) conveys a vague sense of threat, a hint of the precarious position

of the gods in the face of their enemies. Then in 23,⁵ Odin becomes 'Míms vinr', and we remember that the special moment of Odin's association with Mímr is at the beginning of Ragnarök. In the penultimate kenning of the series, in st. 24,²⁻³, Odin becomes 'úlfs of bági vígi vanr' (the battle-accustomed enemy of the wolf); in other words the god is characterized by his relation to his enemy at Ragnarök. And finally, in 25,²⁻³, a simple *heiti* for Odin is swallowed up, as it were, within a kenning for the death goddess or for death personified: 'Tveggja bága niqrfa nipt' (the sister of Narfi, enemy of Tveggi (Odin)). Is it carrying literary criticism too far to see this as a re-enactment at the level of diction of Odin's actual death?⁴⁹

The concluding vision of Hel, the death goddess, and Egill awaiting her approach unafraid presents his personal analogue of Ragnarök, where the forces of death and evil foregather for their ordained encounter with the gods. This conclusion gains its 'sense of an ending' from its place in the trajectory of the whole poem with its movement from silence to expression of grief after the loss of a favourite son, on to the surviving father's sense of isolation in an increasingly threatening world, to the decay of ethics and especially of family solidarity in that world, and finally to the preparation of the forces of death. This trajectory, I think, convincingly calques that of the mythic pattern which moves from the shocked silence and lamentation at Baldr's death, to Odin's fears and search for supporting heroes, to the last decadent days of mankind, and finally to Ragnarök. Several of the elements of this mythic complex are also present in the other early *erfíkvæði*, especially the allusions to Ragnarök (or its Christian counterpart). These parallels, along with that of the *Beowulf* passages, support the Baldr-Ragnarök pattern I have tried to demonstrate in *Sonatorrek*, but from the internal evidence of the poem alone, I think, the allusions are clear enough. Olsen spoke of the agreement Egill felt in various ways between Odin's fate and his own and of Egill's unique empathy with Odin.⁵⁰ I agree; in all this Egill consistently plays roles of Odin. As Odin-poet he struggles to overcome silence; as Odin-father he suffered worst under the loss; as Odin-visionary he recognizes more than others that the filial losses are associated with a far-reaching decadence ('En Óðinn bar þeim mun verst þenna skaða sem hann kunni mesta skyn hversu mikil aftaka ok missa Ásunum var í fráfalli Baldrs').

Such allusive patterns gain in plausibility for the modern scholar and in effect for the ancient audience (I suggest) as the number of allusions increases. Both critical understanding and the affects are, at first, engaged only little by little in

⁴⁹ Magnus Olsen, 'Commentarii Scaldici. I. 1. Sonatorrek', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 52 (1936), 209–55 (pp. 249–50), anticipates the thrust, if not quite the full extent of this argument.

⁵⁰ Olsen, 'Commentarii', p. 250.

literature that utilizes what T. S. Eliot called the mythical method. It seems, in fact, inevitable that in a play such as *The Cocktail Party*, the hinting ‘myths and images’ — in terms of which alone, according to Eliot, the most important things in life may come to word (*The Cocktail Party*, Act III) — will grow more concentrated, reaching a critical mass as the work moves to closure. *Sonatorrek* is not an allegory, but its original audience, so much closer to the religious bases of the poem than we, will have been quicker than modern scholars to recognize its allusive plan. Perhaps their experience of the poem (like my own at first seeing Eliot’s play) was of a building tension and a rush of recognition at the discovery of the sacramental repetition of mythic pattern in the life of man.

There are many more facets of *Sonatorrek* than I have been able to suggest in this brief, one-dimensional treatment of the poem, and I particularly regret having to leave out the important ideas around the replacement of a son by rebirth or adoption and around sacrifice and attendant notions of guilt. But some material on these aspects of Egill’s thought and on the background of the poem is treated in other published articles on *Sonatorrek* or *Sonatorrek* and *Beowulf*. In conclusion, I wish to return to the relationship of myth and ritual as a general problem to suggest that this Icelandic material helps to build up answers to the broadly theoretical question, ‘How does poetry in general express the connection between myth and ritual?’⁵¹

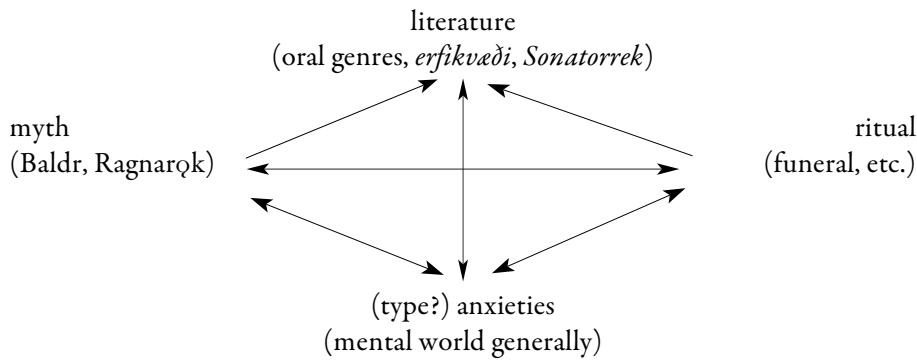
The most successful modern formulation I know of the old question of the relationship of myth and ritual is that of the anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn, who based himself on Navaho fieldwork and introduced some ideas from psychology. According to his refinement of the Cambridge School and its successors and critics, ‘myths and rituals tend to be very intimately associated and to influence each other [...] The explanation [of their “observed connection”] is to be found in the circumstance that [both] myth and ritual satisfy a group of identical or closely related needs of individuals’. These ‘needs of individuals’ resemble each other so much in any given cultural time and place that it is justified to speak of a ‘type anxiety’ of the group.⁵² Kluckhohn’s picture of interdependent myth and ritual is confirmed in a more recent work, Walter Burkert’s brilliant *Homo necans*; but Burkert convincingly argues the historical priority of ritual (which ethology shows in animal behaviour), and his reservations about ‘ideas’ and ‘emotions’ as shaping

⁵¹ Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 10.

⁵² Clyde Kluckhohn, ‘Myths and Rituals: A General Theory’, *Harvard Theological Review*, 35 (1942), 45–79 (p. 65, p. 72).

forces on ritual (rather than the reverse) seem a strong caveat to 'type anxiety' as well.⁵³

In addition, a literary person will notice that Kluckhohn's model omits the vehicles, the media, the realizations, chiefly literary, through which we know myths at all, and this is one of the surviving values of the Cambridge School for me: as classicists they necessarily dealt with texts and tended to locate such literary expression at the nexus of myth and ritual, a point of convergence from Kluckhohn's two 'cultural storehouse[s] of adjustive responses'.⁵⁴ The resulting hybrid model might be represented in diagram form like this:⁵⁵



In this paper we have chiefly been following the arrow from myth to literary expression in *erfikvæði*. Less is known about ritual in the pre-Christian North, but if the whole complex of actions around the *erfikvæði*, especially *Sonatorrek*, may be taken as the ritual in question, then we have been able to catch some glimpses of how the myth affected the ritual and how both myth and ritual shaped literary expression in *Sonatorrek*. For the Navaho, Kluckhohn could find independent verification of native type anxieties in his fieldwork; in a dead culture any such psychological dimensions have to be extrapolated from preserved texts, but we have touched upon some of these psychological motors that seem to lie at and just below the surface of Egill's poem. Finally, we may wonder, in a time when it is widely recognized that major elements of culture are in some sense constructed from discourse, whether the one-way arrows of the diagram should not be bi-directional, in recognition of the interdependence of all the elements.

⁵³ Burkert, *Homo necans*, pp. 27–34.

⁵⁴ Kluckhohn, 'Myths and Rituals', p. 70.

⁵⁵ This diagram has evolved somewhat from its parent in Harris, "Goðsögn" and Harris, '*Erfikvæði*'.

