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## The Outlaw Poet, The Poetic Outlaw: Self-Consciousness in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*\*

### 1. Introduction

For better or worse *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* is not customarily grouped with the *skáldasögur* or “skaldsagas”.<sup>1</sup> Certainly the poetry attributed to Grettir is of a quality inferior to the productions of an Egill Skallagrímsson. Then there is the fact that the saga, most probably written about 1300, is late for the Family Saga period (roughly 1225–1325); moreover, it has elements in common with the *riddarasögur*<sup>2</sup>, for which reason it has occasionally been seen as not sufficiently Icelandic in character.

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that whether *Grettis saga* falls within the confines of the *skáldasögur* sub-genre or not is largely a function of how one chooses to formulate the definition of that group. To the extent that a skaldsaga need be about a poet-protagonist who, during the course of the narrative, is depicted in the process of composing poems and whose alleged poetic productions (or at least those of his nominally historic counterpart) are intercalated into the prose narrative, *Grettis saga* is every bit as much a skaldsaga as is *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, *Kormáks saga*, *Hallfreðar saga*, *Fóstbræðra saga*, and the like. I should stress that the following analysis is not dependent on proving that *Grettis saga* is a *bona fide* member of the skaldsaga clubhouse; rather, inclusion of *Grettis saga* under the skaldsaga heading is pertinent, for my purposes, only to the extent that the parallels between the poetics of *Grettis saga* and of universally-accepted *skáldasögur* are enlightening for critical study. My assessment of *Grettis saga*, sympathetic on the whole, shall examine ways in which the work is highly self-conscious of its linguistic and its literary status on two levels: 1) in the depiction of the protagonist, Grettir; and 2) in the constitution of the saga narrative. What specifically links these two levels, I shall argue, is that

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<sup>1</sup> All textual references are to the edition by Guðni Jónsson. Translations are taken from the Fox-Pálsson English translation, unless otherwise noted as my own.

<sup>2</sup> Especially the *Spesar þáttir* (see discussion).

both the protagonist within the story and the saga text which contains him are obsessively citational, forever glancing back at the ethos of the Icelandic world while also departing (geographically in the case of the protagonist, figuratively in the case of textual and generic considerations) from the traditional Icelandic world.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.

Now, *Grettis saga* tells, in pseudo-biographic fashion, of one Grettir Ásmundarson, the most famous of Icelandic outlaws. According to the saga, Grettir reportedly spent nineteen years in full outlawry, which is to say as an outcast who could be killed with impunity by anyone whosoever (cf. Turville-Petre). Skaldsaga protagonists are of course typically great voyagers (Andersson, p. 227), and Grettir is no exception. A glance at his wanderings reveals that he spends most of his time either abroad, or in the barren and largely unpopulated central portion of Iceland, or just off the coast, as in the case of Drangey where he meets his death. In purely geographic terms, then, Grettir is depicted as a character peripheral and hostile to Icelandic society, living on its fringes, largely unassimilated.<sup>4</sup> That this exclusion is not merely a function of Grettir's historical outlaw status is evidenced by the saga's claim that an outlaw was permitted to reenter society after twenty years. Having no basis in Icelandic law (Fox-Pálsson, 195), this claim functions rather as part of a narrative code of the outlaw hero (or anti-hero). Significantly, Grettir is killed on the eve of being permitted to return to society. A liminal, antisocial figure, Grettir must die as he has lived: an outlaw.

It is clear from the foregoing that Grettir Ásmundarson falls into the line of violent and cantankerous anti-social poets represented by Egill Skallagrímsson, Gunnlaugr ormstunga, Björn Hítðelakappi, Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld, Kormákr, and even the Sworn Brothers of *Fóstbræðra saga*.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the saga, which as is customary in the Family Sagas begins before the hero's birth and ends after his death, traces an arc of estrangement that transcends the bounds of Grettir's actual life. The first chapters, for instance, begin with Grettir's great-grandfather Qnundr; they stress Qnundr's viking raids, his quarrels with two different kings before settling in Iceland, and his physical

<sup>3</sup> The anachronistic nature of Grettir's quest has been frequently noted (cf. Óskar Halldórsson, "Goðsögnin um Gretti"; Hume, "Thematic Design", 482; Clover, "Icelandic Family Sagas", 265–66), as has the late date of the saga's composition. What needs to be done, however, is to relate the two, for both are self-consciously "looking back": the protagonist to a world of heroic conduct and the literary work to heroic literature.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hume, *passim* and especially, 472–73.

<sup>5</sup> For discussion and bibliography see Ross, 4–5 and corresponding notes, and Looze "Poet, Poem . . . *Egils Saga*", notes 1 and 3.

difference.<sup>6</sup> In these latter two respects Grettir's bloodline is reminiscent of the equally "outlandish" genealogy and physique of the Myramenn of *Egils saga*. The final chapter of *Grettis saga* (ch. 93) reiterates Grettir's own "abnormal" qualities, enumerating them as follows: first, the fact that "hann hefir verit lengst í sekð einnhverr manna"; second, his extraordinary strength; and third, "at hans var hefnt út í Miklagarði, sem einskis annars íslenzks manns."<sup>7</sup> It is therefore fitting that Grettir, the outlaw and outcast, is avenged far beyond the pale of Icelandic society, and it is the sheer geographical distance which the author seems to find impressive.<sup>8</sup>

In its beginning with Grettir's ancestors – in particular, his great-grandfather – *Grettis saga*, like so many other sagas, reveals its concern for genealogy. And as is true in several skaldsagas, so also in *Grettis saga* the genealogy of bloodlines becomes also a genealogy of poetic production. We meet Qnundr tréfótr not only as a cantankerous viking but also as a poet. In chapter three Qnundr becomes "very withdrawn" and composes the first of a series of poems which are intercalated into the saga text. Subsequently the major events of Qnundr's life – his battles and his settlement of Iceland – are immediately translated by him into verse.

From the beginning, then, the depiction of the cantankerous poet figure in *Grettis saga* is of a relationship to language, and is fully in the Icelandic skaldsaga tradition. With Grettir's appearance in the saga, the concern for language and man-as-language becomes paramount. Indeed the remainder of the saga depicts Grettir's attempt to control language – an attempt which necessarily must fail – for to control language would be to control one's life and the terms in which one is remembered. However, before investigating *Grettis saga's* meditation on how language is wielded by the poet, I wish briefly to consider the saga's self-awareness as a written, literary text.

### 3.

The laconic, impersonal style of the Icelandic Family Sagas is well known and has been much commented. Departures from that style draw attention largely for their status as exceptions. Among the skaldsagas *Gísla saga* is often distinguished for its emotional tone and its seeming awareness of literary artifice. Indeed, *Gísla saga* is highly self-reflexive, and artfully

<sup>6</sup> Qnundr is called "tréfótr", "tree-foot", after losing part of his leg in battle; Qnundr's own father, moreover, was called "burlufótr", "club-foot".

<sup>7</sup> "he lived as an outlaw longer than anyone else"; "that his death was avenged out in Byzantium, which has never happened for any other Icelander."

<sup>8</sup> "... hans var hefnt út í Miklagarði, sem einskis annars íslenzks manns" (ch. 93).

exploits a series of carefully constructed linguistic echos. *Grettis saga* too unfurls a self-conscious meditation on saga textuality, most noticeably through its numerous allusions to a larger cycle of written text.<sup>9</sup> Certainly it is not difficult to sketch a typology of the ways in which *Grettis saga* weaves itself into a macrocosmic Icelandic text.

There are, first of all, unacknowledged allusions to scenes known to the author and his audience from other sagas such as *Bjarnar saga*, *Egils saga*, *Njáls saga*, *Fóstbræðra saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga*, and *Eyrbyggja saga*, to name only the most important. In this vein one might also cite the anecdote, recounted in chapter eighteen, of Grettir's breaking into a mound and subduing the monster haunting it, for which there are of course numerous analogues. Similarly, the Glámr episode, also well integrated into the thematic design of the whole saga, as we shall see shortly, is clearly a traditional story pressed into new use by our author. In addition, the episode of Grettir diving under a waterfall and tackling an ogress in her underwater cave has been repeatedly cited as an analogue to Beowulf's battle with Grendel's mother in the Old English text; it is generally assumed that the *Grettis saga* author was either working from *Beowulf* or from some work, now lost, interposed between the two. Each of these last three instances – the haunted mound, Glámr, the ogress – have at the very least the minimal artistic function of showing Grettir's prowess. They are also, I would argue, part of a whole series of cross-references or "echoes" which resonate through the saga, tying it intertextually to other works and associating different portions of the *Grettis saga* text with one another.

Second, *Grettis saga* alludes overtly to other sagas by citing them specifically as texts. It defers telling particular stories by designating instead the sagas where they can be found. Such is the tactic employed regarding *Laxdæla saga*, *Bandamanna saga*, and two sagas that are no longer extant: a "saga Bǫðmóðs ok Grímólfs ok Gerpis" (Ch. 12) and a *Saga Eiríks jarls* (Ch. 19). Both reader and writer participate in acknowledging the totality of their (hi)story as a vast, written *textus*. The world of Icelandic society of the settlement period is in fact seen in terms of an encyclopedic Book of which the individual saga is merely one chapter or fascicule, a single participant, if you will, in a larger *manuscripture*.

If the *Grettis saga* author can refer the reader to other sagas, named or unnamed, for episodes not included in the work at hand, he can also do just

<sup>9</sup> The most recent extensive discussion of the cyclic horizon of composition in Icelandic sagas, and its similarity to cycles of French romances and epics, is Clover, *The Medieval Saga*, chapter 1, especially the section on "The European Context", pp. 42–60. It should be noted as well that the standard view is that though "*Grettis saga* invites comparison with Iceland's other great outlaw story, *Gisla saga* . . . [nevertheless t]he differences are considerable" (Andersson, 208). More extreme is the view of Phillipotts, p. 199.

the opposite: include a tale told in another work but defer the designation of the saga. Or the author can employ characters made familiar through other sagas and tell new adventures concerning them. These strategies give the *Grettis saga* author the means to contest or relativize other versions of particular events or characters. Both of these latter strategies are used for *Grettis saga*'s most famous intertextual exploitation: the reutilization of the sworn brothers, Þormóðr and Þorgeirr, the titular protagonists of *Fóstbræðra saga* and poet-outlaws like Grettir himself. In Chapter twenty-six, *Grettis saga* tells of a whale-carving incident involving the brothers but which does not actually occur in *Fóstbræðra saga*; the saga alludes, that is, to the Sworn-Brothers' saga without naming it outright. The intercalation of these characters also leads to the insertion of one strophe from Þormóðr's famous poem about Þorgeirr. This wink at a fraternal text (for the poem also occurs in *Fóstbræðra saga*) prepares for Chapter fifty of *Grettis saga* in which Grettir again meets up with the sworn brothers and has a hostile confrontation with them, events which are not related in their own saga.

Even more significant in this respect, however, are the events of chapter fifty-two. Grettir, having been captured by some farmers, is saved from the noose by Þorbjörg in dígra, wife of Vermundr inn mjóvi. Now, the same incident comprises the first chapter of *Fóstbræðra saga*. Certainly there are minor differences in viewpoint and attitude: in *Grettis saga* Þorbjörg appears to come on the situation almost by chance, whereas in *Fóstbræðra saga* she comes specifically for the purpose of saving Grettir. The tone of *Grettis saga* is also decidedly more comic, with Grettir maintaining his usual stoic, litote-laced sense of humor,<sup>10</sup> and a wider range of events are covered in the fourteenth-century text. Yet both lead to the reconstruction of the incident in poetry. In *Fóstbræðra saga* this takes the form of Grettir's poetic praise of Þorbjörg in a stanza with which the chapter closes. It is interesting to note that in that saga Grettir himself plays the role of a poet-predecessor, replacing the more traditional ancestor-poet figure, whose life story is generally a microcosm or *mise en abyme* of the main character's. But then what could be more fitting for *Fóstbræðra saga*, which is predicated on a voluntary "family" bond (the sworn fraternity), than for the precursor poet in the saga to be part of a fraternal genealogy of poets rather than a relation of flesh and blood? Be this as it may, in *Grettis saga* the development of this incident is more extensive. Vermundr's interrogation of Grettir after the latter's release becomes a dialogue between prose and poetry: Grettir responds to each

<sup>10</sup> Asked, for example, what he's up to, Grettir – with a noose already around his neck – answers, "Eigi má nú við öllu sjá; vera varð ek nokkur", "There are things beyond my control, . . . And I have to be somewhere" (trans. Fox-Pálsson). The translation of the first portion of the quotation is loose but apt.

question with a strophe, answering the queries and commemorating Þorbjörg's acumen in poetic texts.<sup>11</sup>

There may be still a further intertextual dimension to *Grettis saga*. Hallvard Lie pointed out, some years ago, the importance of the "poetic genealogy" of the Myramenn (see "Jorvikferden"); in *Egils saga* a temperament for poetry appears to be part of the genetic inheritance handed down from grandfather to father to son. I have suggested elsewhere that Helga in fagra's role in *Gunnlaugs saga* is linked to her association with a genealogy of cantankerous poets (Looze, "Poet, Poem . . . *Bjarnarsaga*", 493). Moreover there seems to be a certain echo between her metamorphosis into a poetic text at the end of *Gunnlaugs saga* and the transformation of Egill Skallagrímsson into a parody of the poetic text at the end of *Egils saga*.<sup>12</sup> Must we not then also bear in mind that Þorbjörg is the daughter of Þorgerðr – that is, of Egill Skallagrímsson's own daughter – who was herself Egill's poetic collaborator in *Egils saga*? That Þorbjörg should ransom Grettir's head seems therefore a delightful wink back both at Egill's famous "Höfuðlausn" and at the bestowal of extended life and poetic production in the earlier *Egils saga*. *Grettis saga* continues a view of poetic craft as "life-saving", a view which goes back at least as far as the "fjörlausn" ("life-ransom") the dwarves in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* bring about when they yield poetic mead for rescue from death by drowning.<sup>13</sup>

It is in this same context of intertextual play that I propose we view the most problematic episode of *Grettis saga*: the tale of Spes with which the saga ends. Since it is so clearly based on some version of the Tristan story and since it so radically departs from the apersonal, laconic style of the Icelandic Family Sagas, the Spes ending has traditionally been seen as detracting from the work, a "flaw" due perhaps to the late date of composi-

<sup>11</sup> As I have mentioned, one of the stanzas also appears as the culmination of the same episode in *Fóstbræðra saga* (*Grettis saga*, str. 41; *Fóstbræðra saga*, str. 1). It must be noted that there is some question as to which saga is alluding to which. The full series of events which comprise *Grettis saga* Chapters 50–52 occur only in the Möðruvallabók version of *Fóstbræðra saga* – which is, of course, the most authoritative version. There is also a somewhat abridged version (lacking Þorbjörg's rescue of Grettir) in MS R. In his edition, Guðni Jónsson is of the opinion that it is *Fóstbræðra saga* that borrows from *Grettis saga*. His reasoning, however, is unsound, predicated as it is on the a priori assumption that the episode is "completely irrelevant" ("alveg óvi komandi") to *Fóstbræðra saga* (p. xxvii). His logic runs as follows: the episode must then be taken from elsewhere because irrelevant, and irrelevant because drawn from elsewhere, namely from *Grettis saga*. The argument is of course circular. Moreover, the incident is hardly irrelevant to *Fóstbræðra saga*. The Family Saga typically begins with an incident which in miniature contains many features of the story to follow, and in the skaldsagas this usually takes the form (as I have argued elsewhere) of a precursor poet figure.

<sup>12</sup> It is, after all, deliciously ironic that the author of the *Höfuðlausn* fossilizes into an indestructible head at the end of the saga. See Looze, "Poet, Poem . . . *Egils Saga*", 140.

<sup>13</sup> For the passage, see Finnbogason, 100. For discussion of its relationship to *Egils saga*, see Looze, "Poet, Poem . . . *Egils Saga*", 132–133.

tion of the saga and “foreign contamination”. But, as Kathryn Hume has shown, the inclusion of the episode harmonizes well with the overall thematic design of the saga and rightfully points up the literarity of the whole (“Thematic Design”, *passim*). Among the texts to which *Grettis saga* pays intertextual homage, acknowledged or no, the Spes story is simply the most developed. Moreover, I might add that the episode takes place in Byzantium, hence far from Icelandic society, and thus a very different literary style, as well as a depiction of different customs, is perfectly in order; Icelandic culture and the literary style characteristic of it are relativized. This “defamiliarization” or “alienation effect”, as the Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky would have it, constitutes a reflection on literature and its processes while it also suggests to the reader how far away and exotic the Byzantine court is. Furthermore, this sudden switch from the literary code of the heroic Family Saga to that of continental romance speaks to the complexity and sophistication of the interpretative community of Icelandic literati ca. 1300–1325, capable as they were of moving easily between different modes of literary appreciation.

At the (macro)textual level, then, *Grettis saga* skillfully appropriates and redeploys the discourses of both indigenous and continental materials, situating itself within the vast weave of these different works and commenting upon, correcting, and contesting other works as it sees fit. This pan-European horizon has important implications for our understanding of the evolution of literary taste in late medieval Icelandic society. Moreover, since what happens at the macrotextual level often recurs within the individual sagas themselves, as Carol Clover has shown in her discussion of interlace,<sup>14</sup> we might do well to look for a similar system of cross-referencing at the microtextual level as well.

#### 4.

Such an investigation is well repaid, for it shows that recurrence of episodes and verbal echoes resonate through the *Grettis saga* text and are integral to the concept of language and the poetic process which the saga puts forth. Many are of a comic nature: the bleating of the sheep on the roof of a house at night – bleating which terrifies Grettir – is an ironic echo of the monster Glámr who also rode a house at night before being vanquished by the protagonist. So, too, the very name Glámr perhaps finds an echo later in the

<sup>14</sup> The application of the art-historical term “interlace”, originally used to describe the geometrical patterning of the (primarily) insular visual arts, has been extended metaphorically to describe a similar intertwining in medieval literature. The seminal article is Leyerle’s “The Interlace Structure”. Cf. also Clover, chapter 2.

name of the vagrant Glaumr who betrays Grettir at the saga's end; it was, after all, Glámr's curse that brought about Grettir's downfall. This minimal linguistic pair (Glámr/Glaumr) established "at the level of the signifier", one might say, an association between the remote and the immediate causes of Grettir's death.

Even more striking is that Grettir's brief and playful appropriation of the name Gestr (the traveler, the stranger) in chapter sixty-four recurs in chapter seventy-two when Grettir dons the name again for much more important reasons. Nor are these instances of redeploying names due simply to the high percentage of repetition of names among Icelanders, I would suggest, but rather they should be seen as part of Grettir's whole approach to language which is one of an appropriation and reutilization of a preexisting discourse. Grettir is forever turning old discourses to his own witty ends, often with considerable deflation of a longstanding ethic. This is to say once again that what Grettir does within the social world of the *Grettis saga* story mimes what *Grettis saga* does as a literary text within the context of the world of Icelandic letters, and in this context it is noteworthy that the saga is a twilight production of the Family Saga period.

In its self-reflexive and ironic stance *Grettis saga* can be read as pre-eminently a drama of language – in particular, as a study of Grettir's attempt to gain control of "the discourse in which he is situated", to give a loose translation to Paul Zumthor's well-known formulation.<sup>15</sup> Naturally, the Icelandic world being what it is, this attempt to escape the dominion of discourse can only fail, which means that Grettir's life will end tragically. What is more, just as Grettir the protagonist cannot live outside the bonds of his society forever, so also *Grettis saga's* embrace of foreign continental models cannot long endure and is finally shattered by the return of that most Germanic of literary features, the blood vengeance.

It is no surprise, then, that as with other "troublesome skalds" in the skaldsagas Grettir is defined from the first in terms of his relationship to language: "hann var mjök ódæll í uppvexti sínum, fátalaðr ok óþýðr, bellinn bæði í orðum ok tiltekðum", "He was very difficult in his youth, given little to talking and unfriendly, mischievous both in words and in actions" (ch. 14, translation mine).<sup>16</sup> Like the text which contains him, Grettir is depicted as highly skillful in the appropriation and reutilisation of others' discourses. Significantly, Grettir tends not only toward the poetic but also toward the proverbial. This orientation is particularly evident in his upbringing which is presented as a string of malicious deeds, paralleled in each instance by

<sup>15</sup> "Le poète est situé dans son langage plutôt que son langage en lui", *Essai*, p. 68.

<sup>16</sup> Though Grettir's taciturnness might seem to contrast with the "very talkative" natures of Egill and other skalds, the resemblance is underscored by the similar verbal dexterity and the predilection to direct it, like Gunnlaugr, in venomous *ormstungu* fashion.



audacious verbal dexterity. Consider, for example, the testy relationship Grettir has with his father, best illustrated by the altercations between the two in chapter fourteen. The actual catalog of tasks the young Grettir is given to perform is insignificant. To be sure the incidents portray Grettir as an outsider to the first social unit, the family, and hence we have the makings of Grettir the outlaw.

More germane, at least for the present purposes, is that we also have the makings of Grettir the poet. Grettir turns each confrontation with his father into verbal sparring; the events become mere “pre-texts” for verbal wit and poetry. Grettir responds to his father’s questions and admonitions either with an impromptu poem or with maximic proverbs. Asked about the goslings he has killed, Grettir declaims a *helmingr* that acknowledges that he has wrung their necks “enn þótt ellri finnisk, / einn berk af sérhverri”, “and I can also vanquish / fully grown birds.”<sup>17</sup> The poem displaces patricide to the realm of wish-fulfillment fantasy and verbal witticism.

Even more interesting is the use of proverbs in Grettir’s responses to his father. Grettir can suggest, through an appropriated discourse, that which he might not dare express directly. The same passage continues:

“Ok skaltu eigi lengr af þeim bera”, sagði Ásmundr. “Vinr er sá annars, er ills varnar”, sagði Grettir. “Fásk mun þér verk annat”, sagði Ásmundr. “Fleira veit sá, er fleira reynir”, sagði Grettir, “eða hvat skal ek nú gera?”<sup>18</sup>

As Barbara Hernstein Smith has pointed out in *On the Margins of Discourse*, proverbs enable a speaker to disclaim responsibility for the meaning of an utterance, while communicating the message nevertheless, since the meaning floats along with the proverb, divorced from any one speaker or situation. In sum, then, Grettir’s upbringing is depicted as an indoctrination into the manipulation and appropriation of the longstanding discourses of Icelandic society, both poetic and proverbial – discourses which Grettir exploits with self-conscious and witty irony.

We recognize the technique, familiar to readers of *Bjarnar saga*, *Kormáks*

<sup>17</sup> A more literal translation would be, “But if nevertheless an older one is found, I [can] vanquish any such one.” The reference, as the Fox-Pálsson translation makes clear, to an “older one” is to Grettir’s father.

<sup>18</sup> “You are not to vanquish any more of them”, said Asmund.

“He is my friend who keeps me from evil”, said Grettir.

‘Another task will be found for you’, said Asmund.

“The more one tries, the more one knows”, said Grettir, ‘and what am I to do now?’”

The double quotation marks in the Fox-Pálsson translation do not, of course, exist in the original manuscripts, nor do even the single quotation marks of Jónsson’s edition. The Fox-Pálsson punctuation is designed to point up to the non-Icelandic, modern reader what would have been evident to a fourteenth-century Icelandic audience: namely that Grettir is indeed “quoting” from a pre-existing discourse, the vast wealth of proverbs.

saga, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Hallfreðar saga*, by which the protagonist-poet's conflicts are translated into purely linguistic hostilities. However, just as Grettir's outlaw status implies that he is in conflict not just with members of society but with the *whole* of society, so also Grettir is not battling another poet *through* language, but he ultimately takes on language itself. Though the first portion of the saga depicts strife between Grettir and other characters, the latter portrays his struggles with language itself as he falls prey to, as much as he exploits, the character of language. As with many other skalds (one thinks of Björn, Gísli, Hallfreður, Gunnlaugr, Kormákr) Grettir's exploitation of the power of language to direct the course of events is married to a fear that he will be captured in another's web of words.

Grettir's fear as well as his poetic skill – like the fears and skill of Gísli Súrsson and Gunnlaugr ormsunga – bear witness to the duality inherent in language. We have already seen how it operates in Grettir's confrontations with his father. By speaking in proverbs he both does and does not make threats against Ásmundr. Somewhat similarly, on a crossing from Iceland to Norway, Grettir, who refuses to do work and lampoons the sailors with sarcastic verse, is approached by the captain Hafliði who proposes that Grettir compose a poem such “at fegri sé vísan, ef grafin er, þótt fyrst sé eigi allfögr” “that the verse be very nice if [the sense of] it is unearthed, although at first it doesn't seem at all pleasant” (Ch. 17, translation mine). The suggestion is of a two-tiered reception of poetic verse and of poetry as presenting a hermeneutic challenge to its audience: what seems slander may prove to be praise, and vice-versa. As with his father, here too Grettir both does and does not insult.

A more developed example is provided by Grettir's handling of the berserk brothers Þórir þomb and Ögmundr illi who arrive at Þorfinnr's manor – where Grettir is staying during the Christmas period – intending to rob, rape, and plunder (Ch. 19). Recognizing the impossibility of direct physical confrontation, since only the womenfolk and a few servants are at home, Grettir takes the Odyssean tack of verbal seduction and seems to aid the berserks. Yet Grettir, unlike Odysseus, does not rely on the ruse of the lie – that is, the age-old conflict of truth and falsehood in language – but rather more subtly on a duality of interpretation, on the possibility that more than one interpretation is often possible for any given statement.

That Grettir, who is characteristically taciturn, suddenly becomes loquacious in the berserks' presence is a clue to the reader that language is being used to a particular end. Not only does the saga specifically mention several times that “Grettir var þá málreifr mjök”, “Grettir was very talkative”<sup>19</sup>,

<sup>19</sup> Cf. also the reference in the same passage that “Grettir lét ganga töluna”, “Grettir went on talking”, (translation mine) and Þórir's remark to Ögmundr that “þurfu vér eigi at togask eptir orðum við hann”, “we don't have to drag every word out of him [Grettir].”

but Grettir himself twice calls specific attention to the importance of weighing one's words before speaking: once when declining a vow of friendship with the berserks on the grounds that, having drunk much ale, they are not in a position to consider carefully enough what they are saying; and once immediately after the berserks' arrival when, in response to Þórir's comment on how eager Grettir is to speak, Grettir pointedly replies, "Orða sinna á hverr ráð", "Every man chooses his own words."<sup>20</sup> This *caveat* is revealing of his linguistically self-reflexive stance. Moreover, through his verbal cleverness, Grettir manages literally to disarm the berserks, after which he traps them in a tower and slays them.

Grettir's elocution, which is extraordinary enough to persuade the berserks to lay aside their arms, demonstrates the extent to which Grettir's most valuable weapon is in fact language itself. As in other sagas (one thinks of *Bjarnar saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, *Hallfreðar saga*, *Kormáks saga*), verbal skills have a certain martial dimension, an association reinforced in this scene by the fact that four servants who start haggling about their weapons prove to be of no use to Grettir at the crucial moment of slaughtering the berserks and they flee in fear: the breakdown of language leads to martial impotence.<sup>21</sup> Nor is it any surprise that Grettir makes language his most effective weapon; after all, he has hitherto twice been denied an actual sword, once by his father when he first left home, and once by the very Þorfinnr whose womenfolk he saves in this scene. Thus he proves that he can achieve with language what the bravest of men do with swords, and the incident fittingly culminates both in a poem by Grettir on the subject and, significantly, the gift of a sword by Þorfinnr.

Grettir's exploitation of language and the "horizon of expectation" of his audience in this scene is very delicate and conforms to the code of honor that is supposed to dictate Icelanders' physical combats. Clearly, Grettir is interested in the polyvalence of language. Rather than lie outright, however, he chooses to speak to the berserks in an enigmatic fashion that is open to two different interpretations, as he also did when he composed the ambiguous strophe about Hafliði. Again we are confronted with the ambiguity of the riddling voice which Grettir used to taunt his father. Grettir warns the berserks to be attentive to language precisely when they are tempted to think he is not; furthermore, Grettir's refusal to swear friendship turns out to be

<sup>20</sup> Literally translated the line says, "Each man has the counsel [regarding what is advisable] of his own words", the sense being, "Each man does as best he thinks with his words."

<sup>21</sup> As well as an association between military and poetic processes, *Grettis saga* proposes the collocation of poetic and sexual virility, familiar from many other works, Icelandic, French, and English. In Chapter 75 Grettir's reaction to a maidservant's comment on the small size of his penis is twofold: he takes her sexually by force while at the same time declaiming two strophes on the subject. Not insignificantly he refers to his penis as a "sverð í hári", a "sword in hair" (str. 64).

motivated less out of concern for how the berserks treat of language than to avoid perjuring himself. It is thus their own fault that they assume he is of their number, that they misinterpret his statement, and that they walk into his verbal trap just as they willingly walk into the tower in which he locks them. They should, after all, have interpreted his statements differently. Furthermore, this lesson in hermeneutics, which costs the berserks their lives, is also intended for Porfinnr and his wife, especially the latter who thinks Grettir a traitor when he is so cordial to the berserks. In reply to her relieved thanks after the raiders are dead, Grettir says simply, “Ek þykkjunnú nú mjök inn sami ok í kveld, er þér tölðuð hrakliga við mik”, “I seem to myself much the same man as I was in the evening, when you were heaping abuse on me.”

In the same light we must consider Grettir’s participation in a wrestling match at the Hegranessþing, well after he has been outlawed. His face half covered to conceal his identity, the outlaw Grettir sits incognito for most of the day. When asked who he is Grettir replies honestly but ambiguously that his name is “Gestr”, “a word which means not only “alien, stranger”, like the Latin *hostis* to which it is related, but also, like its modern German counterpart “Gast”, can also denote a “guest”<sup>22</sup>. The appellation is thus a correct designation of the outsider, the outlaw-poet, and Þorbjörn ǫngull even puns on the name, calling on Grettir/Gestr to join in the entertainment since he is such an “aufúsgestr” or “welcome guest”. Grettir/Gestr demands in return a guarantee of safe conduct after the match. Once the guarantee is granted, he throws off his robe and reveals himself to his enemies. Having spoken truthfully, although in a fashion that gave rise to two different interpretations, Grettir has every right to hold the other men to their word and is thus untouchable; he forces them to accommodate their mortal enemy as precisely what Þorbjörn has called him: a “welcome guest”. He has trapped his enemies with language and, like Egill at the court of Earl Eiríkr, escapes with his life intact. Moreover, the incident, which Grettir of course immediately translates into poems on the subject, provokes a dispute among the farmers. Once again, Grettir achieves in words and in poetry what arms could never accomplish, and the bondsmen’s inability to take action, like the servants’ inaction in the berserk episode, is equated with verbal disharmony.

## 5.

If Grettir uses language to triumph over men, he nevertheless cannot triumph over language itself, and it is in fact language that ultimately defeats

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Harris, “Gestr’s ‘Prime Sign’”, for a careful analysis of the “disguise-revelation” nature of “Gestr” stories. *Grettis saga* is consonant with this tradition.

him. The turning point in Grettir's fortunes comes in the episode with Glámr.

Glámr is the ghost of a pagan Swede who is haunting the farm of a man named Þórhallr. Jökull Bárðarson, Grettir's closest blood-relative and possessed of the same cantankerous temperament as Grettir himself, tries to discourage his kinsman from going after Glámr. Their altercation ends as a conflict of proverbs, each applying to the other proverb-predictions of disaster which, in both cases, will come true. That the chapter closes textually and thematically on the word *spár* ("the prophetic") is indicative of the pivot from Grettir's appropriation and exploitation of proverbial discourse to his becoming subject to the charged language of others.

Up until this point, Grettir, though cantankerous, has been largely ascendent in his fortunes. Indeed, he even defeats Glámr, as he intends but in Grettir's moment of triumph Glámr puts a prophetic curse on him, against which Grettir's power will not avail. He announces first that Grettir would have achieved twice the physical strength he has, had he not attacked Glámr; significantly, this halving of Grettir's physical prowess is accompanied by Glámr's making Grettir a slave to prophetic language by proclaiming that though Grettir's prowess has hitherto brought him fame "heðan af munu falla til þín sekðir ok vígaferli", "from now on outlawry and slaughter will come your way." Glámr finishes with a curse that Grettir will find solitude unbearable, for Glámr's eyes shall ever be before him.

Grettir's subsequent linguistic triumphs, such as his cleverness in the Gestr episode, must thus be seen as qualified by the knowledge that he is laboring always under a curse. That the prophecies have indeed taken a toll is demonstrated by Grettir's increasing inability to be alone; when he moves out to Drangey, for example, he takes his brother Illugi with him precisely because he cannot bear the solitude.

Grettir's death is similarly seen as the imposition of another's language on him. Now, this fear of prophecy is also characteristic of other skalds. Egill, for example, is as much prey to another's curse (Queen Gunnhildr's in particular) as he is able to lay his own on another. Similarly, Grettir is defeated by another's curse, this time also inscribed in runes, for the written charm which has greater durability also has greater impact. Two incidents involving runes precede the runic curse that brings Grettir down. First is a poem by Hallmundr "Lopt" ("Air"), a fellow poet who betters Grettir both in poetry and in physical prowess. His poem celebrates Grettir's greatness and is inscribed in runes as Hallmundr's last testament when he is on his deathbed (Ch. 62). The fact that Hallmundr has his final poem inscribed, and by a woman, may be another of *Grettis saga's* intertextual glances, for it was precisely for "rememberance" that Egill Skallagrímsson also had his final poem taken down in runes by his daughter. Second is Grettir's own

carving of a poem in runes (Ch. 66). From this we can gather that Grettir is familiar with the durability of the written, runic text; though not normally used by the Icelandic poet each time he composes poetry, it can provide a kind of afterlife for the poet, as we see in the case of Hallmundr. When turned against the poet in the form of a curse, however, the runic inscription can cut the poet's life short.

If Grettir traps Þorbjörn ǫngull with words at the thing, Þorbjörn manages to pay Grettir back in full. Indeed, it is the opinion of both Grettir and Illugi that the curse Þorbjörn's foster-mother Þuríðr pronounces is what finally defeats Grettir. This thesis is in fact reiterated several times in the saga. When the sorceress first pronounces a curse, Grettir remarks, "við engi orð hefir mér meir brugðit en þessi, er hon mælti; ok þat veit ek, at af henni ok hennar fjölkynngi leiðir mér nokkut illt", "No other words have ever effected me as much as hers, and I know for certain that through her and her sorcery I shall suffer greatly" (Ch. 78). Þuríðr furthermore compounds her initial curse with the more formal erection of a sort of *níð-stǫng* carved runic charms and pushed out to sea; Grettir's death follows soon afterwards. The prevailing view, articulated by Illugi and borne up by the subsequent condemnation of Þorbjörn ǫngull at the next Althing, is that "galdrar ykkir ok forneskja hafa drepit Gretti, þó at þér bærið járn á hann dauðvána, ok gerðuð svá mikit níðingsverk ofan á fordæðuskap", "Grettir was killed by your sorcery and witchcraft, although you brutally assaulted him with weapons when he was dying, and so added brutal cowardice to your sorcery" (Ch. 82). The presentation is of a man killed by a curse, the subsequent physical blows not really constituting the cause of death.

## 6.

I have mentioned that throughout the saga Grettir translates events into poetry in the manner typical of the skaldsagas. Of note, however, is the development of a "society of poets", a feature which also characterizes *Egils saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*. If Grettir is an outsider socially, he nevertheless very much belongs to the subculture of poets. To be sure, his dealings with other poets – even with ones who, like himself, are cantankerous – are more harmonious than is the norm for Grettir; he even manages to winter one year with the equally arrogant Sworn Brothers without the acknowledged animosities ever breaking into violence.<sup>23</sup>

The "poetic friendships" established within this subculture and the impli-

<sup>23</sup> Cf. also the wintering of Þórðr and Björn in *Bjarnar saga* of which the *Grettis saga* episode may contain an echo.

cations they have for the depiction of the poetic process are of great importance. For, indeed, *Grettis saga* portrays the world of poetry as the domain of a select few and the composition of poetry as almost a private language shared by them; one has the impression that Icelandic poets are primarily talking to, and composing poetry for, each other. There is a complicity established by their shared perception, and the general public is largely excluded from the finer points of their aesthetics. If the poet tends to be, literally or metaphorically, an outsider/outlaw figure, he in turn banishes society at large from the chosen community of the practitioners of his craft.

We have already seen this in the two-tiered reception of the poem Grettir composes at Hafliði's request. To the chosen few – in this case Grettir and Hafliði who himself suggests the idea – there is available a second realm of meaning, one which in fact overturns the first and more easily recovered level. A kind of “natural” nobility is posited – not an “aristocracy of the heart”, as in troubadour circles, but rather one of purely poetic sensibility. The average Icelander can only interpret the poem in the most gross manner; by contrast, the person capable of perceiving the more subtle meanings is by definition one of the chosen members of the poetic circle, and vice versa. Other *skáldasögur* present similar instances: the possibility that Egill perhaps intends something more subtle than what Earl Eiríkr sees in the *Höfuðlausn* of *Egils saga*; Auðr's unraveling of the deeper implications of one of Gísli's stanzas in *Gísla saga*; the deep communication between Hallfreðr and Gunnlaugr as they cite to each other their poems in *Gunnlaugs saga*. The poetic process thus divides the world in two: into the poets and the non-poets. The general public never really participates in the real communication between the poetic utterance and the hermeneutic act of reception; though a primary level of meaning may be encoded as a kind of *appât* for the general public, the real discourse is between poets and takes place, as it were, under the noses but over the heads of the average citizen.

For this reason the poet(ic) friendships, like the antagonisms between poets, are intense affairs, and are given expression in poetry. For this reason also they often leave the general public bewildered. The Hafliði-Grettir alliance is only one example of several in *Grettis saga*. The Hallmundr-Grettir friendship is another: according to the pattern of events in Grettir's life, only hostility and perhaps a battle should result from Grettir's attempt to rob Hallmundr. However, the physical contest soon is translated into poetic riddling. A bond is established, and when Grettir next meets Hallmundr he finds Hallmundr has been quietly defending him from men who tried to attack him from behind (Ch. 57). As thanks, Grettir composes poems of praise for Hallmundr, and Hallmundr on the point of death responds by composing, as we have already seen, a poem about Grettir which is then taken down in runes (Ch. 62).

Much the same is true of the events in Chapter 47 when Grettir steals a horse from a man named Sveinn. Sveinn gives chase, and the pursuit immediately becomes a dialogue of poems composed by the two during the day, three each. Grettir leaves the verses he composes in the keeping of the people he meets along the way, as a kind of literary path for Sveinn to follow. When they finally meet up with each other, they talk over the incident in a seventh strophe split evenly between them, one *helmingr* each. Sveinn demands:

Hverr reið hryssu várri;  
 hver verður raun á launum;  
 hverr sá hvinn et stœrra;  
 hvat mun kufibúinn dufla.

(“Who rode my mare? / What will my payment be? / Who has seen a bigger thief? / What’s the skulker plotting?”)

Grettir answers:

Heim reiðk hryssu at Grími,  
 hann’s gildir hjá kotmanni;  
 þat mun ek launa lítlú;  
 láttu okkr vesa sáttá.

(“I rode the mare / to Grim’s large farm. / I’ve no payment to offer, / but let us be friends.”)

To the average Icelander this might seem meager payment. To the poet Sveinn, however, things seem different. He responds, “Svá skal jafnt vera, . . . ok er fulllaunuð hrossreiðin”, “And so it shall be, . . . for I have been fully compensated for your ride on my mare.” On one hand this conclusion recognizes the economic aspect of the poetic text, but even so the poem should not be considered payment according to rules operative in the society at large, because it is not a poem of praise by Grettir of the *flokkr* or *drápa* sorts and because Sveinn is as much the author of the poem as Grettir is. The point, however, is that the poet and poetic composition transgress the codes of the society. The poetic process has been furthered, provoked initially by a crime, as is so often the case in Icelandic sagas; the concluding concordance is then expressed as a poem which, thematically *and* textually, makes friends and equals of the two men. They recite the whole series of verses, give the collection a name, and “part as friends” (“skilðusk þeir Grettir vel”).

The Icelandic poet thus composes poetry because he is born receptive to the processes of language and poetry, and he is naturally receptive to these processes because he is a poet. The circularity of this poetic “circle” does not bother the Icelanders at all. For this reason the poets are characterized from



their childhood as having a privileged relationship to language. And for this reason also others cannot voluntarily join the ranks. Þorbjörn ǫngull, for example, finds this to be the case. He declaims one strophe celebrating his victory over Grettir when he brings Grettir's head to Ásdís, Grettir's mother, but she immediately bests him in a stanza which robs him of his victory. As she suggests in her poem, he will not gain support or respect for Grettir's killing, and indeed he does not. Furthermore Þorbjörn ǫngull is unable to control his own speech; when in Byzantium he falsely boasts of his prowess in having killed Grettir, Þorbjörn fails to notice Grettir's brother Þorsteinn among the men. Þorbjörn reveals himself as the murderer – not through any subtle allusion as in the case of Gísli, but purely through careless boasting – and when he passes around to the admiring men the sword that cut off Grettir's head, Þorsteinn promptly kills him with it.

The tradition of hermetic poetry which lives on, just as the poet lives on, in the poet-descendants with which skaldsagas usually end, is not vitiated by the Spes episode with its exotic Byzantine setting. Indeed Þorsteinn “inherits” in a certain manner his brother's gift, much as in *Fóstbræðra saga* Þorgeirr only fully discovers his calling as a poet after Þormóður's death when he composes verse in commemoration of his “swornbrother”. Þorsteinn in fact declaims the final strophe of *Grettis saga* – a strophe that celebrates Grettir's heroic strength even after he had been killed.

Moreover, the depiction of the reception of Þorsteinn's final poem is very à propos. The saga author tells us that when Þorsteinn had spoken the stanza, “‘Mikil ágæti eru slíkt,’ sǫgðu þeir, *er skilðu vísuna*”, “‘What great glory!’ said those *who could understand the stanza*” (Ch. 87, emphasis mine). Once again, the hermeneutic circle of poetic sensibility is not available to everybody. In death (that is, in Þorsteinn's poem) as in life, Grettir *qua* poetry is again intelligible only to the initiated – to those capable of discerning (*skilja*) Þorsteinn's meaning. Furthermore, the saga author seems here to be playing an analogous game: for the saga reader may well wonder whether the reference to the difficulty of interpretation is simply to the fact that in Byzantium Icelandic-language skaldic verse would hardly be intelligible or whether there is also a second, richer level of meaning waiting to be discovered. As with the ambiguous meanings of skaldic verse itself, one can only recover the full meaning if one is alerted to expecting multiple meanings and, presumably, if one is part of the select world of literary discernment.

## 7. Conclusion

To sum up. *Grettis saga* portrays the protagonist as a man born into the society of poets – that is, born into a discourse that descends with blood

generations of his family and the series of poems intercalated into the saga text. But to be part of the circle of poetic composition is to be estranged from society and its norms. Grettir is an outlaw for both his physical acts and the poetic texts which they become. He is an “in-law” however within the select world of the practitioners of the poetic craft, and situates himself within the Icelandic poet’s persistent, if ultimately doomed, struggle to control through language the discourse which also controls him.

Moreover, *Grettis saga* is a highly articulate literary production which is self-consciously aware that it comes at the end of a long tradition. It hearkens back to a heroic world which exists no more and to a literary vogue for narratives of that heroic world which are being displaced by newer continental models. It presents a protagonist who is an extreme version of the cantankerous skald, so much so that he gets outlawed for life. This concern for the poet who becomes a “gestr” – a stranger, an outsider – to his own country is equally true at the level of the saga text. For what has *Grettis saga* been accused of if not of being a stranger and foreigner discovered in the midst of the true Icelandic sagas?

Both Grettir and *Grettis saga*, then, look back to the old material and the old ways; both cite those discourses incessantly, ironically aware of their own difference. Grettir is banished from the world of Icelanders and *Grettis saga* from the world of fully “Icelandic” sagas. Indeed, character and saga text make similar pilgrimages. In particular, the saga’s geographical pilgrimage from Iceland to Byzantium is a consummate expression of the generic transition from the epic world of martial encounters to romance and love (in the oft-denigrated Spes episode). In the saga itself we move from the Family Saga period with its intensely Icelandic and genealogically-oriented plots of the thirteenth century to a new opening on international literary models – particularly those of the romances derived from continental models – and other lands. No wonder then that Grettir, the old type of the cantankerous poet, gives way to a new type of narrative hero, Þorsteinn, hero and poet of love.

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