

INNOVATORY FEATURES IN EGILL SKALLAGRÍMSSON'S POETRY

Rasa Ruseckienė

Vilniaus universiteto Skandinavistikos katedros docentė

Egill Skallagrímsson is considered to be the greatest of Old Icelandic scalds. He lived in the 10th century¹, the story of his life is told in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*², attributed by some to Snorri Sturluson, the famous Icelandic poet and historian of the 13th century³. Egill is one of the most fascinating characters of Old Norse literature. The son of one of the most prominent settlers in Iceland, Egill was a chieftain in Borgarfjörður, a district in the western part of Iceland. The saga portrays him as a dark, ugly, bald and troll-like figure, a brutal, avaricious, overbearing personality (*ójafnaðarmaður*), nevertheless, endowed with great poetic talent. Poets are quite often depicted like that in Old Norse literature. According to M. Clunies Ross,

in early Scandinavian belief, the special gifts of the poet were associated with certain other psychic states – the ability to change one's shape, usually into that of an animal or bird, and to assume a berserk frenzy. These extraordinary

psychic states were thought to give the individual access to knowledge and powers that were unattainable by ordinary men. Such powers included the art of poetry, the practice of that form of sorcery called *seiðr* and the use of runes for magical purposes. All these powers were closely associated with the god Óðinn and were referred to as his gifts to those he favoured.⁴

Egill inherited his poetic talent from his ancestors. His father Skallagrímur was a scald and several of his *lausavísur* (individual stanzas) are quoted in the saga. Egill's grandmother's brother was Ölvir hnúfa, one of the scalds of king Haraldr Fairhaired. Egill composed his first stanza at the age of six, having killed his playmate with an axe. This first strophe is composed in irregular metre and tells about ships, sea voyages and viking raids. The saga contains sixty *lausavísur*, composed by Egill on various occasions. In them he describes battles, drunken brawls, laments the death of a friend or brother, expresses his greed for gold, gives vent to his bitter hatred, invoking the wrath of the gods

¹ According to Sigurður Nordal's estimation, Egill was born ca 910 and died after 990. See Sigurður Nordal, "Formáli", *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, ÍF II, Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933, LII–LIII.

² The Lithuanian translation of the saga: *Egilio saga*, transl. S. Steponavičienė, Vilnius: Vaga, 1975.

³ For a detailed discussion of the authorship of *Egils saga* see Nordal, 1933, LXX–XCV.

⁴ Margaret Clunies Ross, "The Art of Poetry and the Figure of the Poet in *Egils saga*", *Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays*, ed. J. Tucker, New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1989, 126–145.

upon the king and queen of Norway, Eiríkr Blodaxe and Gunnhildr. However, Egill's real talent is revealed in his three longer poems *Höfuðlausn* (Head-ransom), *Arinbjarnarkviða* (The Lay of Arinbjörn) and *Sonatorrek* (Sad Loss of Sons)⁵. The aim of this study is to discuss these three poems, reveal their innovatory features and the poet's originality, and show why Egill's poems still make a powerful appeal upon the modern reader while most of the traditional scaldic verse is considered "dead literature"⁶, nowadays attracting only scholars.

Scaldic poetry is a unique phenomenon in the history of European literature. It flourished in the Nordic countries, mostly Iceland and Norway, in the 9th–11th centuries, and survived in Iceland until the end of the 13th century, producing in this late phase a few famous poets. The scalds served as chroniclers and court poets, their principal task was to praise the ruler and his deeds. Therefore, the main genre of scaldic poetry was panegyric (*drápa*, or a simpler form *flokkr*), others being derisive verse *níð* and individual stanzas *lausavísur*. Scaldic poems have a very complicated form, both versification and poetic diction. Three quarters of all surviving scaldic verse are composed in a strict syllabic metre *dróttkvætt*, each stanza of which has eight lines, each line has six syllables, three of them stressed, three not, with variations in distribution, the cadence in each line always being tro-

chaic. The lines form pairs bound together by alliteration and two syllables in each line have obligatory internal rhyme. The first line of the pair has half-rhyme (*skothending*), where the final consonants of stressed syllables match, while the second line of the pair has full-rhyme (*aðalhending*), where both the vowel and the consonants are the same. *Dróttkvætt* stanzas are notorious for their extremely complicated syntax that makes them almost incomprehensible to the modern reader: sentences are split apart into syntactically unrecognizable units, and these are intertwined with parts of another sentence or sentences so partitioned. It was attempted to explain this most unusual intertwining of sentences. One of the theories holds that *dróttkvætt* verse was originally intended for two or more reciters, each of them supposed to perform his own part, possibly using different modulations of the voice or differences in pitch⁷. Here is a typical example of Egill's *dróttkvætt* – the initial strophe of the *drápa* in honour of the Anglo-Saxon king Athelstan:

Nú hefr **foldgnárr fellda**,
 – *fellr jörð und níð Ellu* –
hjaldrsnerrandi, harra
höfuðbaðmr, þrjá jöfra;
Aðalsteinn of vann **annat**,
allt er lægra kynfrægjum
 – *hér sverjum þess – hyrjar*
hrannbrjótr, konnungsmanni.

[Now the stirrer of battle, towering over the land, the descendant of princes, has slain three chieftains; the country falls to the descendant of Ella. Aðalsteinn has done more; everything is below the king of glorious birth; I swear this now, breaker of the fire of the wave⁸.]

⁵ The authenticity of these verses will not be discussed here. Although most of the stanzas are probably composed by Egill and were preserved in oral tradition, some could have been put together *ad hoc* in the process of the composition of the saga. For example, Jón Helgason doubts the authenticity of *Höfuðlausn*, suggesting that it is a work of a 12th century poet. See Jón Helgason, "Höfuðlausnarhjal", *Einarsbók: Afmæliskeðja til Einars Ól. Sveinssonar*, Bjarni Guðnason, Halldór Halldórsson, Jónas Kristjánsson ritstjórar, Reykjavík, 1969, 156–176.

⁶ So called by Sigurður Nordal, *Íslensk menning*, Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1942, 233.

⁷ Such an explanation is supported by the etymology of the word *dróttkvætt*, which means "recited by the *drótt* (the king's *comitatus*)". See Михаил Стеблин-Каменский, "Скальдическая поэзия", *Поэзия скальдов*, Ленинград: Наука, 1979, 96–97.

⁸ Translation from E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976, 21.

Scaldic diction is extremely wealthy and complicated; the main stylistic devices are poetic synonyms *heiti* and periphrastic expressions, called *kenningar*. Both *heiti* and *kenningar* name the main concepts of the mythopoetic world of ancient Scandinavians, such as “prince, warrior”, “battle”, “ship”, “sword”, “poetry”, etc. Kennings range from very simple ones (made of two components), as, e. g. *hjaldrsnerandi* “promoter of battle, warrior”, *nið Ellu* “descendant of Ella (an Anglo-Saxon king)”, to more complicated ones, consisting of several components, e. g. *hyrjar hrannbrjótr* “the breaker of the flame of the wave (gold), i. e. generous man” or *sára dynbáru svangreddir* “the feeder of the swan of the resounding wave of wounds”. In the latter, “the wave of wounds” is a battle, “the swan of the wave of wounds” is a raven (regarded as the bird of battle), and, finally, “the feeder of the raven” is a warrior.

Compared to exuberant poetic form, the content of encomiastic verse is rather poor, usually a simple statement, such as “the king won a battle”, “the prince is famous for his glorious deeds”, “the ruler is a generous man”, etc. The content of individual stanzas in the sagas could be even more trivial. The controversy between the overadorned poetic form and the simplicity of content could be explained by the fact that the scalds perceived themselves first of all as creators of form, but not so much of content, i. e. they would have never dared to speak about events that never happened in reality. Remarkable in this respect is Snorri Sturluson’s observation in his Prologue to *Heimskringla*, that no scald would dare praise the ruler for exploits and merits which both he and others among the audience knew were pure lies: “That would be scorn and not praise”⁹.

As the form of scaldic verse was imposed by tradition, most of the poems were quite stereotypical; the rulers praised in them lacking individual features. Kings and heroes are referred to as “oaks of battle”, “Njords of swords”, “feeders of ravens”, the battles they fought as “rattles of spears”, “feasts of ravens”, “games of valkyries”, etc. The only thing we get to know about the person praised is his name usually mentioned in the refrain, and that he is a brave warrior and a generous man. Snorri Sturluson in *Háttatal*, the third part of the *Prose Edda*, has unintentionally demonstrated the level of depersonalization in scaldic poems. To illustrate variety of scaldic metres, he quotes one hundred and two stanzas by various scalds in which different rulers are praised. But Snorri also has another purpose – to compose encomium to King Hákon Hákonarson of Norway and his foster-father, earl Skúli Bárðarson, both of whom he visited while staying in Norway. Snorri compiles this huge panegyric in a very simple way, by replacing the original names in the stanzas with the names of Hákon and Skúli¹⁰.

Now let us discuss Egill Skallagrímsson’s poetry and see what innovations he has brought to the scaldic tradition. His *lausavísur* are predominantly composed in traditional *dróttkvætt*, although we can observe that he willingly and skilfully experiments with versification and poetic diction. In one of the stanzas he enriches *dróttkvætt* with occasional end-rhyme and creates a resounding effect by repeating the last syllable of the first line at the beginning of the next line: *Ölvar mik þvíat Ölvi / öl gervir nú fölván; / atgeira læt ek ýrar / ýring of grön skýra*. “Ale is borne to me, for ale / Aulvir now maketh pale. / From ox-horn I let pour / ‘Twixt my lips the shower” (10). Egill’s diction is quite different

⁹ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson gaf út, Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1979, 5.

¹⁰ See Snorri Sturluson, *Háttatal*, ed. A. Faulkes, Oxford University Press, 1991.

from that of other scalds. Instead of using traditional kennings, he employs novel imagery, which Snorri called *nýgervingar* (“new creations”): “It is *nýgervingar* to call the sword a snake, using a correct kenning, and the scabbard its paths, and the straps and covering its skin”¹¹. In case of a *nýgerving*, the original comparison between a referent and a base-word is expanded along congruent lines, the sword is paralleled by a snake, the sheath is then represented by its path and so forth, and “the image, then takes off, so to speak, the now animated sword may be represented as going to look for blood in men’s breasts, just as a snake, by its very nature, sheds its skin and slithers off towards water”¹².

Egill’s first surviving panegyric *Höfuðlausn* “Head-ransom” was composed in very unusual circumstances¹³. Egill fell out with King Eiríkr Bloodaxe and before leaving Norway set up a pole of hatred (*níðstöng*) with runes carved on it, invoking the vengeance of the gods on Eiríkr and his wife Gunnhildr. Soon afterwards Eiríkr was driven out of the country and ruled in York. Egill’s old friend Arinbjörn *hersir* was in exile with the king. Because of a storm raised by Gunnhildr’s witchcraft, Egill’s ship was driven to the coast of Yorkshire and wrecked there. Egill went to Arinbjörn who advised him to go straight to the king and appeal for mercy. Gunnhildr wanted Egill killed immediately, but Arinbjörn persuaded the king to postpone the execution until morning. He suggested that Egill should make a poem in praise of Eiríkr, and through the night Egill composed a panegyric. In the morning he recited the poem before the king and the queen and in thus ransomed his head.

¹¹ Quoted from Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas: Iceland’s Medieval Literature*, transl. P. Foote, Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1988, 99.

¹² Margaret Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál*, Odense University Press, 1987, 76.

¹³ It is believed that the poem was composed in York circa 948.

The *drápa* of twenty stanzas was composed in a novel *runhenda* metre, and the tradition holds it that Egill was the first to introduce it into Norse poetry. *Runhenda* is a syllabic metre with regular end-rhyme that was not used in traditional Germanic poetry. It is assumed that the end-rhyme in Old Norse poetry appeared due to foreign influences, either came directly from Latin, or through English, German or Irish¹⁴. The lines of *runhenda* consist of four syllables of which two are stressed. The odd lines often have two alliterating syllables. The end-rhyme may be monosyllabic (*ver / ber, mjöð / bjöð, fet / get, hlut / skut*) or of two syllables (*segja / þegja, brandar / randar, freki / breki*).

Why did Egill choose to compose his laudatory poem in this most unusual of metres, not in *dróttkvætt* that he knew so well? It is conceivable that the poem was intended as a kind of challenge to Eiríkr. Although finding himself in a humiliating and life-threatening situation, Egill was bold enough to defy Eiríkr and show his superiority as a poet and a human being by demonstrating his superb talent. The stylistic canvas of the poem shows that it can be interpreted this way. The tone is cold and detached due to the abrupt rhythm created by prevailing short sentences and catalectic lines (i. e. lines ending in monosyllables), as e. g. *Óx hjörva glöm / við hlífar þröm. / Guðr óx of gram. / Gramr sótti fram. / Þar heyrðisk þá, / þaut mækis á, / malmhríðar spá. / Sú var mest of lá.* “Was lifted sword / ‘gainst linden-board / around the lord / as rushed he for’rd. / Was heard the roar / of raging war / as flowed wound-gore / on far-off shore” (Hfl. 4)¹⁵.

¹⁴ Kristján Árnason, *The Rhythms of Dróttkvætt and Other Old Icelandic Metres*, Reykjavík: Institute of Linguistics, University of Iceland, 1991, 164.

¹⁵ The English translation is from Lee M. Hollander, *The Scalds. A Selection of Their Poems*, with Introductions and Notes, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1975.

The poem has a traditional structure of the *drápa*. In the beginning (*upphaf*), the poet addresses the king and his *comitatus*, asking for silence since he came “bearing Óðinn’s lore / to England’s shore”. Then comes the main part of the poem, *steffjabálkr*, broken (*drepinn*) into parts by two refrains (*stef*), in which Eiríkr’s name is mentioned: *Orðstír of gat / Eiríkr of þat* “Great honor him gat / Eiríkr by that” and *Bauð ulfum hræ / Eiríkr of sæ* “When them corpses gave / Eiríkr by the wave”. Throughout the poem the king’s victorious battles and fame are glorified, but his image is depersonalized and the events unspecified (no localities mentioned). In fact, the content of the stanzas is the same: “Eiríkr won glorious battles overseas”. This simple content is wrapped up in numerous ornamental kennings. Eiríkr’s battles are described as follows: *Óx hjörva glöm* “the rattle of swords was growing”, *þaut mækis á* “the river of swords flowed”, *þar heyrst þá / málmhríðar spá* “the prophecy of the metal-storm was heard”, *beit bengrefill, / það vas blóðrefill* “the hiller of wounds (sword) was biting, it wove the cloth of blood”, *jöfur sveigði ý, / flugu unda bý* “his yew-bow he bent, / the bees of wounds (spears) he sent”, etc. This juggling with kennings helps Egill disguise his real attitude towards Eiríkr and enables him to keep a distance between himself and the king he is forced to praise. The lack of concreteness, emptiness of the content shows a well-considered secret irony directed at Eiríkr.

In the last part of the poem, called *slæmr*, Egill, as it was customary to the scalds, praises the king’s generosity and asks for a reward. Egill doesn’t spare nice words to the king, calling him *hringbrjótr* “the breaker of rings”, *baugskati* “a generous man”, one who *gláðar flotna fjöl / við Fróða mjöl* “with Fróði’s flour (gold) / his friends doth shower”. But his words do not sound sincere, and the last stanza reveals Egill’s real intention: *Bark þengils lof / á þagnar rof. / Kann*

mála mjöt / of manna sjöt. / Ór hlátra ham / hróðr bark fyr gram. / Svá fór þat fram, at flestr of nam. “My praise I outpoured / to the prince, my lord, / from laughter’s chest-hoard, / nor was I ignored. / Had I words at my call, / and craft, to enthral: / was I heard by all / the heroes in hall” (Hfl. 20). The kenning *ór hlátra ham* “from laughter’s home” does not seem accidental here. Although risking his head, Egill shows his courage and human superiority hinting to the audience that the encomium was a big joke.

Another laudatory poem *Arinbjarnarkviða* is dedicated to Egill’s life-long friend hersir Arinbjörn Þórrisson who stood by the poet in difficult situations and saved his life during the incident in York. The poem was composed on the occasion that Arinbjörn got a high position at King Haraldr Eiríksson’s court. This poem is much more personal than the previous one, and Egill has chosen the simplest of scaldic metres, *kviðuháttur*, which allows him to express himself freely, to voice his thoughts and emotions. *Kviðuháttur* is based on Eddic metres, however, it is syllabic, with three syllables in the odd lines, and four in the even lines. The lines are bound by alliteration, but have no internal rhyme.

In the opening stanza of the poem Egill presents himself as a straightforward and proud person who never plays up to unworthy people or praises stingy rulers, but is always willing to glorify the deeds of noble and generous men and his friends: “Quick I am / a king to praise, / but silent about saving princes – / outspoken / about splendid deeds, / but fawn not / on false greatness. // With braggarts / I can bear nowise. / Good friends, though, / I gladly loud. / Sought have I / the seats of kings / with unfeigned / flood-of-Óðinn” (Arkv. 1,2). Then he remembers his encounter with King Eiríkr in York, the animosity of the king and his court: *Né hamfagrt / höldum þótti / skaldfé mitt / at skata húsum.* “Unhandsome / to the hird did seem, / the poet’s meed /

in the prince's hall" (Arkv. 7). He speaks about a great moral support and friendship that Arinbjörn has shown him: *Par stóð mér / mörgum betri / hoddfiöndum / á hlið aðra / tryggvinn minn, / sás trúa knáttak, / heiðþróaðr / hverju ráði* "By me stood, / strong as a host, / shielding me / shoulder to shoulder, / my own friend, / whom I could trust" (Arkv. 10). Egill praises Arinbjörn's virtues – his loyalty and generosity, his friendly heart and readiness to help people solve their problems, no one has left Arinbjörn's house empty-handed, that is why he is loved by the gods and men. Arinbjörn's generosity is described by using antithesis: *Hinn 's fégrimmr, / es í Fjörðum býr, / sá's of dolgr / Draupnis niðja, / en sökunautr / Sónar hvinna, / hringum hætt, / hoddvegandi*. "A foe is he / to Fróði's meal¹⁶, / who deals out / Draupnir's-offspring¹⁷ – / he who routs / the robber-of-Son¹⁸, / he who hates / the hoard of rings" (Arkv. 22).

It is noteworthy, that in this poem Egill speaks much about himself, describing, as it was mentioned above, his straightforward manner and appearance which he presents with a great deal of self-irony. He says that his poetry helped him to ransom "his ugly lump of the hat (head), wolf-grey all" (*bás ulfgrátt / við Yggjar miði / hattar staup / at hilmí þák*; Arkv. 7). Further on, he jokes that his head is more precious to him than gold: *Við því tók, / en tvau fylgðu / sökk sámleit / síðra brúna*. "With it came, / of kindred hue, / both my eyes / 'neath brows shaggy" (Arkv. 8).

¹⁶ A kenning for "gold".

¹⁷ Óðinn's ring Draupnir every ninth night lets fall eight other rings of equal weight.

¹⁸ Son is one of the three kettles in which the mead of poetry was kept. It was stolen by Óðinn and his accomplice, the giant Baugi. But *baugi* also signifies "ring". Hence, by an interchange of words, "he who routs the robber-of-Son" is equivalent to "the router (squanderer) of rings, i. e. the generous lord". Thus interpreted the whole stanza consists of a fourfold variation of the same theme – the praise of Arinbjörn's liberality. See Hollander, 1975, 84.

The poet's self-perception is another important theme in *Arinbjarnarkviða*. Poetry is referred to as *bólstrverð maka hæings markar* "the pillow-price of the mate of the forest's fish"¹⁹, *Yggjar mjöð* "Ygg's (Óðinn's) mead" (Arkv. 7), *Viðurs full* "Viður's (Óðinn's) beaker" (Arkv. 13), *bratt stiginn / bragar fótum* "the hard-climbed / hill-of-praises" (Arkv. 14). The metaphor of poetic art as Óðinn's drink suggests that the poet was regarded as an inspired man in compact with higher powers²⁰. Egill boasts that it is easy for him to polish the raw timber of praise with his voice-plane: *Erum auðskæf / ómunlokri / magari Þóris / mærdar efni*. "My voice-plane (tongue) / will polish quickly / the thrilling themes / of Thorir's son" (Arkv. 15). In the final stanza he proudly declares that his poetry will be appreciated forever: *Hlóðk lofköst, / þannslengi stendr / óbrotgjarn / í bragar túni*. "High I heaped / a hill of praise / on song-fields, / which not soon fall" (Arkv. 25), the words strangely echoing Horace's *Exegi monumentum aere perennius*²¹.

The diction of *Arinbjarnarkviða* is extremely rich and expressive. The poet often discards traditional kennings and gives way to imagination, creating quite a few original images. One of the most fascinating *nýgervingar* in the poem is the image of King Eiríkr Bloodaxe sitting on the throne in his palace in York: *Vasa þat tunglskin / tryggt at líta / né ógnlaust / Eiríks bráa, / þás ormfánn / ennimáni / skein allvalds / ægigeislum*. "That moonlight was not / safe to gaze at / nor without dread / from Eirik's brows, / when

¹⁹ The "forest's fish" is the snake, the form which Óðinn took when he bored through the rock to claim the mead of poetry; his mate is the giant's daughter Gunnlöð, with whom he slept to gain the mead.

²⁰ Peter Hallberg, *Old Icelandic Poetry: Eddic Lay and Scaldic Verse*, transl. P. Schach and S. Lindgrenson, Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1975, 133–34.

²¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 135.

serpent-glittering / a forehead-moon / shone with a ruler's / terror-beams" (Arkv. 5). Here we have a metaphor spreading throughout the entire stanza. The raging king's *ennimáni* "forehead-moon (eye)" radiates *ægigeislar* "terror-rays", the epithet *ormfránn* "serpent-gleaming" intensifies his awe-inspiring gaze. Another interesting *nýgerving* is the kenning of Arinbjörn, by which he is called *bjóða björn birkis ótta* "edge-bear of the birches'-fear", where "birches'-fear" (*birkis ótta*) means "fire", "the edge of the fire" (*bjóða*) is the hearth (*arin*), "the bear (*björn*) of the hearth" is Arinbjörn.

The poem *Sonatorrek* (Sad Loss of Sons)²² is, no doubt, the most powerful of Egill's verses. The saga tells us that Egill tragically lost two of his sons. Gunnarr died of fever, while Böðvarr, his eldest and the favourite one, drowned in the sea. Egill found the body of his son, carried it to the family burial-mound, and laid him beside his grandfather, Skallagrímr. He returned home very gloomy and reticent, locked himself in his bed-closet, and decided to starve himself to death. Soon afterwards his daughter Þorgerðr came to the house, declared that she had no wish to live after her brother and joined Egill in the bed-closet. Egill noticed that she was chewing something; she said that it was dried seaweed, and that it would hasten her death. Egill chewed some too and became very thirsty. He asked for some water to drink and was given a horn. He gulped greedily from the horn, and understood that he had been tricked, because the horn contained milk, not water. Egill was very angry, but Þorgerðr persuaded him before dying to compose a lay in memory of his sons and she would carve it on a rune-stick. Egill started composing and regained his spirits as the poem went on²³.

²² *Torrek* originally means "difficult revenge".

²³ *Sonatorrek* was composed circa 960 or a little later, when Egill was around fifty years old. The complete text of the poem survives only in the late MS. *Ketilsbók* (16th c.).

As the previous poem, *Sonatorrek* is composed in *kviðuhátt*, the simplest of scaldic forms, which is used somewhat freely, and this gives the poet freedom of expression. Here we can discern some important innovatory features of genre which Egill introduced into scaldic poetry. Traditionally, this poem is regarded as *erfidrápa* "a commemorative lay". We have several examples of this genre among the surviving scaldic poems, such as *Ynglingatal* or *Háleygjatal*²⁴, in which dead ancestors of some rulers are enumerated and their deeds mentioned. However, *Sonatorrek* is unique, because there is no other poem in the scaldic tradition that is so personal and lyrical, permeated with human sorrow and wisdom stemming from personal experience. The poem has many features of elegy, the genre totally strange to the native Old Norse tradition. It is held that Egill familiarized himself with new poetic forms and genres in England, while serving at the court of King Athelstan. But there is an essential difference between *Sonatorrek* and Old English elegies. In the latter, human suffering and wisdom is described by gnomic maxims, condensed general truths, while in Egill's poem personal and lyrical elements prevail.

Contrary to *Arinbjarnarkviða*, where Egill prides himself on his skill as a poet, boasting that he is quick to compose praise, *Sonatorrek* starts on a very gloomy note. Egill complains that it is very difficult for him to start moving the tongue (*Mjök erum tregt / tungu at hræra*), that his tongue is like a "steel-yard of the song-weighter" (*loftvæi ljóðpundara*), that he does not hope because of deep sorrow to extract so easily Óðinn's theft (poetry) from the hiding-place of thought (*era nú vænlegt / um Viðris þýfi, / né hógdrægt /*

²⁴ *Ynglingatal* was composed by Þjóðólfr Hvinverski, *Háleygjatal* by Eyvindr skáldaspillir, both 10th century Norwegian scalds.

úr hugar fylgsni; Snt. 1). Then he begins counting his losses, laments the end of his kin which is compared to “the withered stump of the forest maple” (*sem hræbarnar / hlinnar marka*)²⁵, and draws a conclusion that unhappy is the one “who bears the corpse / of dear kin / from his dwelling place” (*era karskr maðr; / sá er köggla berr / frænda hrørs / af fletjum niðr*; Snt. 5). Egill remembers his mother’s and father’s death, the fall of his brother Þórólfr, and the deaths of his two sons. From stanza 8 his tone changes and his lament turns into a call for revenge. He names the villains who robbed him of his beloved Böðvarr. They are the sea-god Ægir, his wife Rán (lit. “plunderer”), and ultimately Óðinn himself, the instigator of his misfortunes, whom Egill considered his guardian, but who betrayed him and took away his sons. Egill would like to seek blood-revenge (*Véistu um þá sök / sverði of rækak / var ölsmið / allra tíma*. “If my suit / with sword I could press, / all over / for the ale-smith (Ægir) were it”; Snt. 8), but he realises that this is impossible, since he cannot fight the gods. This evokes Egill’s self-pity: he laments “the old man’s lack of support” (*gamals þegns gengileysi*; Snt. 9), despairs of becoming “flightless as friends grow less” (*verð ek varfleygr / er vinir þverra*; Snt. 14).

The poem tells a lot about Egill’s character and his views on family and society. He is a real patriarch, his kin is to him a *frændagarðr* “enclosure of relatives” (Snt. 6), tied by strong family bonds, that’s why it is so painful to see unfilled and gaping breach left by the dead son. Grim and unruly in his youth, aging Egill becomes misanthropic and distrustful of other people: *Mjök er torfyndr / sá er trúa knegum / of alþjóð / Elgjar galga*. “It is very hard / to find one whom I can trust / among the people / under Óðinn’s

²⁵ The line in the manuscript is corrupted and cannot be understood without alteration. The interpretation supplied is Turville-Petre’s, 1976, 31.

gallows²⁶” (Snt. 15), or *Erumka þekt / þjóða sinni / þótt sérhverr / sátt um haldi*. “The company of men / is not pleasing to me, / even though each one / keeps the peace” (Snt. 18). He sticks to traditional values of pagan society. According to him, the killing of a family member should be washed by blood, not paid off with money: *þvít niðrflgóðr / niðja steypir / bróður hrör / við baugum selr* “for it is an evil / destroyer (betrayed) of kinsmen / who sells his brother’s / body for money” (Snt. 15). But Egill can have no revenge, because his enemies are out of reach and no one can replace his loyal sons and brother who stood by his side in the raging battle. Therefore, Egill’s sense of isolation and frustration is growing: *máka’k upp / jörðu grímu, / rýnnis-reið, / réttri halda*. “I cannot hold up / the land of the face, / the chariot of thought” (Snt. 19).

In the final stanzas the poet settles scores with Óðinn, his guardian whom he grew to trust, but who broke their friendship, taking away Egill’s loved ones to Valhöll and leaving him alone to lament the losses. Although unwillingly, Egill resolves to continue sacrifice to Óðinn, because he has given *bólva bætr / ef hit betra telk* “recompense for my harms / if I count better” (Snt. 23), which is his unusual poetic talent, and also intelligence that helps him discern villains and plotters (*ok þat geð, / es ek gerða mér / vísa fjandr / af vélöndum*; Snt. 24). The last stanza of the poem shows Egill’s resignation to his fate. An old man beholds Hel, the goddess of death, awaiting him on the headland, and accepts his destiny with good heart and spiritual strength: “Hard my lot, / for Herian’s-foe’s / stern sister / stands on the ness. / Gladly, though, / and ungrudgingly, / with light heart / Hel I bide” (Snt. 25).

The poem is unique among the corpus of Old Norse poetry in that it provides a deep psycho-

²⁶ Óðinn’s gallows is a kenning for the world-tree Yggdrasill.

logical insight into the spiritual world of the most outstanding of Icelandic scalds. The diction is very simple and sincere, revealing the poet's unfeigned suffering and reflection on human destiny. Stylistic devices are used sparingly, the kennings denoting mostly Óðinn and his gift, the mead of poetry. The choice of kennings is well motivated. Throughout the poem Óðinn is referred to as *her-Gautr* "war-Gautr", *Gauta spjalli* "friend of Gauts", *geira dróttinn* "lord of spears", *sighöfundr* "giver of victory", *bróðir Vilis* "Vilji's brother", *goðjaðar* "guardian of gods", but in the final stanzas, when Egill's resignation and premonition of death grow stronger, some eschatological kennings appear. Óðinn is called *Míms vinr* "the friend of Mímr" and *ulfs bági* "the enemy of the wolf", an implication that Óðinn himself will be doomed at *ragnarök*, the events of the end of the world. All the time Egill remains conscious of his poetic talent, referring to poetry as *Viðurs þýfi* "the theft of Óðinn", *fagnafundr Friggjar niðja* "the joyful find of the kinsmen of Frigg", *bólva bætr* "recompense for harms", *íþrótt vammí firða* "the skill devoid of faults". But the most impressive is the image of poetry as a reviving power, bringing *catharsis*, forcing the dying family tree (*kynvið*) to burst into leaf again through the power of words²⁷:

²⁷ Cf. Carolyne Larrington, "Egill's longer poems: *Arinbjarnarkviða* and *Sonatorrek*", *Introductory Essays on Egils saga and Njáls saga*, ed. J. Hines and D. Slay, London: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 1992, 58.

Þat berk út / ór orðhófi / mæðar timbr / máli laufgat. "I bear these / timbers of praise, / adorned with the foliage of speech, / from the temple of words" (Snt. 5).

To conclude, Egill Skallagrímsson, the first and the greatest of Icelandic scalds, should be regarded as innovator of scaldic poetry. In his *lausavísur*, Egill more or less adheres to the tradition, although we can see him experimenting with metres and introducing new stylistic features into scaldic diction. Egill's unique poetic talent is revealed in his longer poems. In *Höfuðlausn*, he was the first to use a novel metre with end-rhyme, and is thought to be its inventor. His poems *Arinbjarnarkviða* and *Sonatorrek* are very personal, opening to us the scald's inner world and the depth of his feelings and reflections. While the scaldic tradition concentrates mainly on poetic form, most of the poems being lavish descriptions of battles and praise of rulers, Egill turns to personal and individual, introducing lyrical and elegiac motifs into his verse, discarding strict formal rules and traditional imagery of scaldic poetry, creating his own original poetic style. Together with the saga, Egill's poetry has preserved to us a complex and vivid portrait of the most talented poet of the Viking Age. The saga portrays Egill as a cruel and overbearing viking, while his poems show him as a vulnerable and emotional person, praising true friendship, grieving over the loss of his kinsmen, pondering on inevitability of ageing and death.

EGILLIO SKALLAGRIMSSONO POEZIJOS NAUJOVĖS

Rasa Ruseckienė

Santrauka

Straipsnyje aptariama X a. islandų skaldo Egilio Skallagrímsono poezija, jos naujovės lyginamos su tradicine skaldų poezija. Pagrindinė skaldų žanrinė forma yra panegirika valdovui (*drápa*), kuri dažniausiai kuriama sudėtingu silabiniu drotkveto metru. Jos bruožai

– pastovus skiemenų skaičius, aliteracijos ir vidiniai rimai. Palyginti su hipertrofuota menine forma, panegirikų turinys gana skurdus: apdainuojama valdovo drąsa ir šlovė, jo pergalės. Skallagrímsono poezija yra išsaugota *Egilio sagos* tekstuose. Šalia „atskirųjų pos-

mų“ (*lausavísur*) išliko trys poemos, kuriose atskleidžia poeto talentas. Poema *Galvos išpirka* sukurta naujovišku metru *rínhenda*, kuriam būdingas galūninis rimas, nevertotas senosios islandų poezijos. Šią panėgiriką skaldas kūrė priverstinai, todėl ji skamba kaip iššūkis valdovui, jos kaptas ritmas bei tradicinių poetinių figūrų (keningų) gausa sukuria distanciją tarp poeto ir šlovinamojo. *Giesmė Arinbjornui* ir *Skaudi sūnų netektis* irgi įdiegia tam tikrą naujovių. Poetas

atsisako griežtų metrikos kanonų, renkasi maksimaliai laisvą poetinę formą, kad galėtų išsakyti savo mintis ir jausmus. Skaldų poezija dažniausiai krypsta į išorinį subjektą, o Egilis šiose poemose atsigręžia į save: šlovina draugystę, aprauda savo giminės išnykimą, apmąsto nueitą gyvenimo kelią ir artėjančią mirtį. Egilis pirmasis skaldų poezijoje pavartojo lyrinius ir eleginius motyvus, atsisakė tradicinių keningų ir sukūrė savitą poetinį stilių.

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Autorės adresas:
Skandinavistikos katedra
Vilniaus universitetas
Universiteto g. 5
LT-01513 Vilnius
El. paštas: rasarr@omni.lt