

Eddic Poetry as World Literature

SOPHUS BUGGE LECTURE, 2016

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Professor Sophus Bugge is internationally probably *still* the most famous Norwegian scholar in the humanities of any period – and that more than a century after his death in 1907. Today it is difficult to image any single scholar staking a significant claim to such a variety of learned fields, including Indo-European and Scandinavian linguistics and philology, mythology and runology, classics, folklore, Celtic, and even the non-Indo-European Etruscan – and I have probably overlooked some. Not only was his range superhuman, but so was the quantity of his output, as a look at the bibliography in his memorial volume confirms (Olsen 1908: 285–294) – containing by rough count 230 free-standing titles and Magnus Olsen’s reminder (n. 1) that Bugge frequently published *within* other scholar’s works, for example, within the ballad collection of his friend Svend Grundtvig. Bugge plainly belongs to those nineteenth-century geniuses who were also workaholics. Looking into Bugge’s life a while back, I found no full biography, though many good short accounts shed light on his career (an especially good one, Holm-Olsen 1981) or on a section of his work, such as the fine appreciation of his ballad scholarship by Bengt R. Jonsson (1992). Perhaps no modern biographer has yet been fully prepared to evaluate that formidable oeuvre and also to take account of Bugge’s friendships and social connections generally. In any case, the handsome three-volume edition of his letters within Scandinavia firmly places him at the center of a lively epistolary social network.¹

Bugge’s great edition (1867) of the *Poetic Edda*, the subtitle of which reminds us it was still “commonly called *Sæmundar Edda*,” was part of the work that put Bugge in the vanguard of the “great leap forward” in Nordic and Germanic philology of about 1870 (Fidjestøl 1999: chap. 5; Harris 2016: 34–36). For a modern scholar like me, teetering on the shoulders of those giants, Bugge can take on at once a familiarity and also an uncanny quality. Wherever I go in research, Bugge is always already there.

¹ Kruken 2004. Jacobsen 1990 supplies some Continental correspondence and an appealing introduction. Another form of scholarly communication in the period was the dedication; cf. for example Sievers’s dedication of the *Altgermanische Metrik* of 1893 to Bugge and Wimmer. In the lecture (16 March 2016) underlying this print version a slide illustrated this network in a light-hearted vein.

Last summer I was in Copenhagen to study certain Old English fragments discovered in the Royal Library in 1860, but that excursion could not escape Bugge: he had been the first to see the manuscript, and his transcription and conjectures retain value for an editor. In fact, I continually follow in Bugge's ubiquitous traces through Anglo-Saxon textual studies, through ballad study, and through folklore and mythology; and he presides as a looming presence over our topic today, *norraen fornkvæði* or eddic poetry.



From the portrait of Sophus Bugge by Wilhelm Holter, 1889, at the University of Oslo, digitally revised for this context by Dr. Richard Cole.

Our focus is primarily on the thirty-odd well-known poems of the *Poetic Edda*, but for the record, I mention that the *genre* called eddic poetry also includes all the Old

Norse-Icelandic poetry which is *similar* to that of the two central eddic anthologies, the Codex Regius (GKS 2365 4to) and the Arnamagnæan manuscript AM 748 I 4to, at least some twenty-two titles, scattered among various manuscript contexts (Larrington, et al. 2016: 7–8). Contemporary scholarship in this field is very international, with an internationalism facilitated by the global spread of English and the participation of scholars from the US, Britain, and, not least, from Australia and New Zealand, but also of anglophone scholars from Scandinavia and the Continent. The field is aided by a number of recent publications, such as the important posthumous book on dating eddic poetry by Bjarne Fidjestøl (1999). Other such vital recent aids include: *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry* (Larrington, et al. 2016); *Eddukvæði* (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014); *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda* (Klaus von See, et al. 1997–2012); *The Poetic Edda* (Dronke 1969–2011). One deficiency, perhaps, in this happy picture of eddic scholarship is the relative scarcity of broadly literary-critical and comparative discussion, critical writing in the tradition of older humanists such as Ker, Chadwick, or Bowra. In contemporary academia a conjunction of eddic poetry with “world literature” might encourage such large-canvas thinking, but my approach here will be to attempt to reframe contentious issues in eddic studies from the world literature point of view. Later perhaps a Ker, Chadwick, or Bowra will come along wielding that big brush. The eddic issues I will touch on include orality, dating, relationship to the ballad, provenance, international sources, and broadly typological literary relations. But we start with some basics about world literature itself.

The study of world literature

As an academic field, world literature is a branch of comparative literature that traces its origin to comments by Goethe, mainly in the year 1827. Its fortunes have risen and fallen over the decades, but now, since about 1990, its stock is very high in France, Britain, and especially in the US. The avalanche of books and articles on world literature can seem, with their colorful covers, intimidating to a new student, especially one who is himself an ageing philologist. But these scholar-critics write well, and the essence of this new vogue is strong ideas made accessible. Their accessibility is not unconnected with pedagogical agendas – and therefore with business agendas – at least in the US where world literature courses draw large classes and their ample anthologies, perhaps not by accident, generate income. My introduction to world literature was made easier by the opportunity to audit one of those large classes given by two of my Harvard colleagues: one of them, Prof. David Damrosch, is a founder of

the contemporary avatar of the field. To get an impression of the thriving enterprise of these contemporary scholars I invite you just to google “Institute for World Literature.” I list here a few critical books and articles that have shaped my still-developing understanding of the field: Damrosch 2003, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2014; D’haen 2012; D’haen, et al. 2011; Rosendahl Thomsen 2008; Ringgaard & Rosendahl Thomsen 2010; Berczik 1967; Petterson 2006; Prendergast 2004.

But the *industry* of world literature today, together with its *industrialists*, is easier to define than the thing itself, for *that* is bound up with – in fact, created by – the different theories of each critic. One of the prolific Scandinavian scholars of world literature, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (2008: 11-21), has usefully boiled the most important contemporary perspectives down to three, those of Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, and David Damrosch. In contrast to Moretti’s large-scale scientific experimentalism and Casanova’s sociology, Damrosch’s approach is humanistic, literary critical, focused on the individual literary work, and, all in all, the best guide for our purposes. Damrosch’s great book of 2003 is called *What is World Literature?* and in some form or other that question haunts all these heirs of Goethe.

The essentials of Goethe’s original vision of world literature are revealed in a passage from the famous book, known in English as *Conversations with Goethe in the Last Years of his Life*, as reported by his secretary Eckermann (1837):

Ich sehe mich daher gerne bey fremden
Nationen um und rathe jedem, es auch seinerseits zu
thun. National-Literatur will jetzt nicht viel sagen,
die Epoche der Welt-Literatur ist an der Zeit und jeder
muß jetzt dazu wirken, diese Epoche zu beschleunigen.
Aber auch bey solcher Schätzung des Ausländischen dürfen
wir nicht bey etwas Besonderem haften bleiben und
dieses für musterhaft ansehen wollen. Wir müssen nicht
denken, das Chinesische wäre es, oder das Serbische,
oder Calderon, oder die Nibelungen; sondern im Be-
dürfniß von etwas Musterhaftem müssen wir immer zu
den alten Griechen zurückgehen, in deren Werken stets
der schöne Mensch dargestellt ist.

From Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens 1823–32, *by* Johann Peter Eckermann. *Erster Theil*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1837), p. 325 (29 Jan. 1827).

I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise every one to do the same. National literature is now rather an unmeaning term ; the epoch of World literature is at hand, and every one must strive to hasten its approach. But while we thus value what is foreign, we must not bind ourselves to anything in particular, and regard it as a model. We must not give this value to the Chinese, or the Servian, or Calderon, or the Nibelungen ; but if we really want a pattern, we must always return to the ancient Greeks, in whose works the beauty of mankind is constantly represented. (Trans. Oxenford 1875: 213)

Just before this passage, Goethe had spoken of the wide distribution of literary talent in the world and how he looks for stimulation outside German letters. In the passage quoted here, world literature is not so much a *thing* as a *social action*, intellectual exchange among nations; yet Greek models are somewhere in the background; quality and a cosmopolitan audience are implicit; and above all world literature is *emergent*, and Goethe's audience is urged in messianic tones to hasten the day of its arrival. Marx and Engels, who wrote a bit about world literature in the *Communist Manifesto*, selected only some of these characteristics for elaboration, but probably all scholars of world literature, in their varied ways, relate back to some version of the *dialectic of national and international* and to the idea of *literary exchange* in this passage.

Goethe and his followers thus emphasize process over product; but most of us, hearing the guiding question "What is World Literature?" – not *how* or *why* but *what* – will imagine a corpus of texts, as in the ubiquitous anthologies – a kind of ostensive definition of our concept. And at one point Damrosch does satisfy this wish for a corpus by setting up for world literature three commonsense categories that we – as common readers, not experts in comparative literature – can easily accept: first, "an established body of *classics*"; second, "an evolving canon of *masterpieces*"; and third, "multiple *windows on the world*," these last being interesting especially for the insights they offer into something other than *our own* world (2003: 15).

The Goethe of 1827 would probably not have been sympathetic to including our eddic poems, with their local, ethnological interest, in his emergent *Weltliteratur*. Earlier, Herder had played a part in the roots of the concept, and his *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* could be called the first attempt at an anthology of world literature (cf. Berczik 1967). In youth Goethe, too, was enthusiastic about what he knew of older Nordic writings. But the aged Goethe has grown allergic to the Romantics, to old Germanic material, and to folk poetry; his elite literature is of the present and future. He harbors a passing curiosity for *window* poetry, which may be national (Serbian, for example), but his taste soon returns to the cosmopolitan. Contemporary

critics seem to follow the same pattern: certain classics are taken for granted, but the real interest begins with modern literature. Of all the contemporary critics I have read, Damrosch has the strongest inclination to *contradict* the “presentism” – he uses that word – inherited from this aspect of the many-faceted Goethe, and Damrosch’s *What is World Literature?* begins with a fascinating study of the *Gilgamesh* epic from the beginning of the historical period (2003: chap. 1; cf. Damrosch 2007b; Ziolkowski 2011). The modern discovery and ancient diffusion of *Gilgamesh* is indeed a brilliant story, to which the discovery and career of eddic poetry might offer admirable material for comparison. But in the current wave of writings on world literature, I find little reference to eddic poetry or to anything related. I will ask why in a moment, but first we glance at the widely accepted idea that Goethe “coined” the word *Weltliteratur*.

Eddic poetry and world literature



Over half a century earlier than Goethe, in 1773, this word was used by the Enlightenment savant August Ludwig Schlözer. And very strikingly for *our* context, Schlözer uses the word about *Icelandic* literature and specifically about “die Edda,” by which he means *both* the “eddas,” Snorri’s prose and the verse anthology. In the history of lexicography, this discovery is not unknown, and it cannot detract from Goethe’s importance in shaping and popularizing the concept of *Weltliteratur*. But for eddic scholars Schlözer suddenly becomes quite interesting:

August Ludwig von Schlözer, title page of 1773, with table of contents.

Es giebt eine eigene Isländische Litteratur aus dem Mittelalter, die für die gesammte Weltlitteratur eben so wichtig, und größtentheils außer dem Norden noch eben so unbekannt, als die Angelsächsische, Iriländische, Russische, Byzantische, Hebräische, Arabische, und Sinesische, aus eben diesen düstern Zeiten, ist. Hier sind die Grundstriche zu ihrer Geschichte.

August Ludwig von Schlözer, *Isländische Litteratur und Geschichte. Erster Teil. (Göttingen and Gotha: Dieterich. 1773), p. 2.*

Icelanders have a literature of their own from the Middle Ages that is just as important to world literature as a whole – and for the most part just as unknown outside Scandinavia – as Anglo-Saxon, Irish, Russian, Byzantine, Hebraic, Arabic, and Chinese literatures from those dark ages. Here, in this book, are to be found the basic lines of [Icelandic literature’s] history. (Schlözer 1773: 2)

A Göttingen professor and a polymath who had lived in both Sweden and Russia for long periods, Schlözer’s use of the word *Weltliteratur* comes very naturally in the context of his long-time interest in “world” or “universal” history.²

Arguably, then, world literature starts its career, not in the prophetic cosmopolitanism of the late Goethe, but as a plain-spoken listing of the literatures of the world *as they are less well known* to Europeans; and far from the presentism of Goethe and his followers, the *Weltliteratur* of Schlözer the historian is that of the “dark” middle ages. But if “die Edda” was there at the beginning, how does it happen that we hear little or nothing about it in contemporary world literature scholarship? Damrosch makes provision for such an eclipse: “A given work can enter into world literature and then fall out of it again if it shifts beyond a threshold point ...” (2003: 6), and he analyzes such shifts rather fully. There is probably a whole series of reasons for the eddic “fall,” but one too obvious to overlook might be repletion with Nordic culture after WWII. The broad outlines of the reception history leading to this international surfeit are all too well-known: adoption of Nordic material as Germanic and therefore German at least from Grimm on; nineteenth-century nationalist and racist appropriation of Nordic material, even in Britain; finally, the utter ruin of Nordic material under the Nazis. After the war, a new generation of German scholars like Klaus von See turned from Germanic to European contexts and cultures, and the former vigor-

² Goethe had read some of Schlözer’s works, but I found no evidence that he had seen this booklet.

ous reception history of eddic poetry in the nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries was much reduced; one might say, with a little exaggeration, that only Wagner survived – until recent years when “Viking” enthusiasms seem to have been resurrected, largely without the racial/national basis.³

Today eddic poetry is out of fashion relative to its pre-War status, largely missing from world literature anthologies and critical books, and taught mainly in courses based on the “Viking” theme – this despite a good supply of translations, including one by the famous poet W. H. Auden. Perhaps one factor in the eddic “fall” is competition from *Beowulf*, an “epic” that is easier to appreciate and comes equipped with a more contemporary famous translator in Seamus Heaney – one representative of early Northern Europe being perhaps *quite enough* for the anthology-makers, who have executed their own “pivot to Asia”. And if something Icelandic *should* be wanted, the saga literature stands ready to offer more familiar material that also better survives translation. That the *Poetic Edda* is itself a carefully constructed anthology drawing on very different sources may also constitute a problem for world literature scholars, but a major factor would be the sheer lack of *certainty* about categories like genre, date, authorship, public, patronage, and the world reflected in eddic poetry. *The Poetic Edda* is more confusing to read than, say, *Gilgamesh*, *Beowulf*, or the *Tain*, and even students reading in translation automatically become in some degree “researchers.”

Points of indeterminacy seldom remain uncontested. And many of those just mentioned stem from the *oral* origin of the poetry.

Where our present-oriented world literature scholars find a text, they assume an author *and*, even if implicitly, written transmission and reception by reading. The movement is only beginning to recognize oral literature – with its death of the author *avant la lettre* – and beginning, somewhat uncomfortably, to make space for orality, alongside their default position, literacy. They might well take note of the global preservation effort called “World Oral Literature Project” of Cambridge and Yale Universities as well as of the long history of textualizations of oral literature. In the history of academic world literature, there are some gestures toward folklore and the heritage of Herder, but my impression is they are few. Meanwhile, Albert Lord annually taught a course that might today be entitled “world oral literature,” and for John Miles Foley, oral traditions are ubiquitous, dwarfing the canon of textual literature in size and heterogeneity (2015: 107, citing Ong 1982 in support; also 110). But I turn to the oral/literate problem in eddic poetry itself.

³ These broad strokes on reception are based on personal perceptions, not some imagined objective research; even so, they demand the qualification that contemporary scholarship on eddic reception in all periods is a lively enterprise with much to tell, including about the post-War period.

Eddic poetry, oral tradition, and orality

Practically all eddic scholars now grant that an oral stage must have preceded the written poems, generally reasoning that traditional content and poetic language must antedate the growth of full literacy in Iceland. A small number of very well-examined passages suggest *how* oral eddic poetry was performed and consumed. What we actually experience, however – and all we *can* experience today – is the poetry as recorded in writing. And textualization is itself a process that necessarily brings changes. At least one contemporary folklorist, the late Lauri Honko (1998, 2000), had *begun* to seek an objective idea of the before and after of textualization, but for medieval texts only informed speculation is possible. What actually happened in an initial transcription from performance? And did scribes familiar with the poetic tradition unconsciously modify their written texts, as several Old English scholars (e.g., O'Brien O'Keeffe 1990; Doane 2003 and his earlier articles cited there) maintain? From Anglo-Saxon studies we can, at any rate, adopt a coinage of Foley's and speak of our manuscript-preserved texts not as "oral" but as "oral-derived." This latter term, which *sounds* like a concession, is in fact a much stronger claim because it suggests, not a *category* that either applies or does not, but rather an open-ended *spectrum*.

Consider this conundrum: if early Germanic meter and poetic language were formed out of spoken language, as mainstream scholars maintain, then Old Norse traditional poetry itself – wherever or whenever composed and however known to us – belongs on the oral-derived spectrum. One could take this thought-experiment much further, but an Old Icelandic example will make the point: The monk Gunnlaugr Leifsson translated his *Prophecies of Merlin*, *Merlínusþá*, from Latin prose into *fornyrðislag*, the oldest traditional meter with its accompanying poetic language. Whether Gunnlaugr used *Völuspá* or *Gripispá* or unknown poems as his immediate model, his prophetic poem in Old Norse remains in some degree oral-derived. Oral derivation offers a subtler model and one more in keeping with the recent interest in the mixed culture, the *Vokalität* (cf. Schaefer 1992), of medieval times and in a Nordic "oral-written continuum" traceable in texts (cf. Ranković 2010). But even scholars who are enlightened about the category of "literature" transcending communication channels, still insist on employing the simple binary "oral" or "literate" for eddic poems and on looking for evidence of written composition among them. No smoking gun for literacy has been found, however, even in *Gripispá*, the favorite nominee for an eddic poem "from the scriptorium" (cf. Gutenbrunner 1955). The most one can say is that among our oral-derived eddic poems, some stand closer than others to a *context* of writing (cf. Vésteinn Ólason 2010: 249).

What *kind* of oral poetry was our eddic poetry before its textualization? The very idea of different *kinds* would at one time have seemed heretical to my teacher, Albert Bates Lord, but ideas have come a long way since *The Singer of Tales* was published in 1960. In graduate school about 1962 our ideal was the illiterate Bosnian singer Avdo Međedović; much later through Prof. Karl Reichl, I met the Karakalpak singer Jumabay Bazarov (cf. Reichl 2007, 2012). Both were great modern epic singers, but we have no similar epics in Old Norse, and we had best leave Avdo and Jumabay behind.

Progress in our field has been made by attending to the Old Norse traditions themselves, even while not totally forgetting the foreign models of our youth. The evangelical thrust of Lord's Oral Theory, which seemed to imply that all oral poetry was composed in improvisation like that of the Yugoslav singers, failed to account for the Nordic situation. But if the battle was lost on the Northern front, the war itself was won: starting about 1960 awareness of an oral component has filtered into most social studies and into the consciousness of scholars. Walter Ong's excellent synthesis of 1982 begins to show just how pervasive the oral is in human societies. This is true also of their study: without the concept of orality, *literacy* could not be understood as it is today and would not figure so largely in fields such as history and sociology. In my experience, consciousness of these two *interdependent* concepts permeates the human sciences as it never did before WWII. The opposition adds subtlety and distinctions to modern thought, whether or not Walter Ong was correct in famously claiming that "writing is a technology that reshapes the mind." And given this consensus about orality and literacy, we are in a position to recognize in scholarship something we might call, adopting a favorite word from Ong, "*chirographic* illusion," which unconsciously conceives of all communication in terms of manuscripts or writing. Bugge and his age were especially prone to this hallucination (Harris 2016).

It is possible that a form of "local patriotism" for Harvard leads me to exaggerate the influence of Parry and Lord on the origin and development of the very concept of orality, but the introduction of that concept into social, historical, philosophical, and literary spheres has created possibilities for knowledge that were not present before. Studies of literacy, such as the Norwegian ones by Sverre Bagge (2001) and Jan Ragnar Hagland (2005) and the very recent Anglo-Saxon one by Peter Orton (2014), are of course heavily dependent on this concept.

Since I expressed my main ideas about *poetic* orality in the 1970s and 80s (Harris 1979, 1983, 1985), two related older notions have been revived: namely the mooted *dramatic* nature of eddic poetry and the role of music in its performance. Terry Gunnell's book of 1995 on the dramatic dimension is much admired and has gradually

been welcomed into mainstream scholarship, though individuals still interpret “the dramatic” in different ways (cf. Gunnell 2008). On the other hand, the possibility that some eddic poetry was *sung* is still not widely supported, and I agree: the case for eddic music is fascinating but difficult to assess (Harris 2003; Jón Helgason 1972).

My ideas from the 1970s on the structure and performance of oral eddic poetry differed substantially from those of Gísli Sigurðsson (1990) and from many noted scholars of orality today. On two important and related points I am somewhat less confident today than I was in 1983: one is the relative fixity of language in Nordic memorial composition and transmission; I will take this up in a moment in connection with dating. The second is the degree of variation generally. Taking performance more seriously as the life condition of eddic material (following Gunnell and his students as well as the American performance school; cf. Harris & Reichl 2012) leads to a greater emphasis on variation. But variation can mean different things and resides in the eye of the beholder: Billie Holiday is supposed to have quipped: “I never sing the same song twice”; and on the other hand, Albert Lord’s singers often claimed they *were* singing exactly the same song, i.e., just as they had heard it.

Age and origin

Dating and provenance were the interconnected prime problems of early eddic studies. (The chief reference here will long remain Fidjestøl 1999, but see the end of this section for Thorvaldsen 2016 and other more recent studies.) The preservation was Icelandic, all conceded, and Icelanders still controlled the language as no other Scandinavians did. But if, as most scholars thought, the poetry was older or vastly older than the settlement of Iceland, where did it come from? The earliest answers are tempting for their surprise and amusement value. A favorite example is Jacob Schimmelmann for whom “die Edda” is the oldest book in the world after the Bible and probably written in his own home province of Pomerania. Progress on the two problems of date and provenance proceeded hand in hand, and one famous paper by the Dane Edvin Jessen in 1871 pressed the “reset button” on both questions, thus introducing the modern period: the nationalistic claims of Norway and Denmark were ridiculed as old-fashioned; dates were pushed to the eleventh and twelfth centuries and even into the thirteenth, and the home of the poetry generally was Iceland. Bugge joined Jessen specifically on dating and was instrumental in devising a convincing linguistic argument: the poetry (or parts of it) in its thirteenth-century form yielded certain rules (“Bugge’s law”); when forms from the runic language, i.e., before the period of syncope, were inserted into relevant verse forms, Bugge’s law was broken

(Bugge 1879). Therefore, no poetry in the meters under discussion could be older than c. 800, and these results were generalized to a consensus dating to the Viking Age or later. Over time, faith in the linguistic test has deteriorated, though the dating consensus holds. In our context, the striking thing is the way of thinking about poetry in an oral environment, with an implication of invariance largely at odds with what is generally believed today.

In my early writings on eddic orality, I was concerned to move beyond the South Slavic model and to replace it with a memorial tradition on the skaldic model, combined with formal assumptions from Heusler and his school. This gave a satisfying solidity and the possibility of an “author,” so that normal literary criticism could be employed. Applied to dating, this would eliminate the perpetual flow of the Oral Theory, which makes linguistic dating impossible. Meanwhile, Bjarne Fidjestøl’s great book put all the scientific dating tests from Bugge through Kuhn and de Vries in question. Today my earlier faith in “contemplative composition” and memorial transmission is somewhat weakened in view of a stronger recognition of all-important performance with its entailed variation. Still, it might be reasonable to consider a tightly unified eddic poem, such as *Atlakviða*, as preserving, to a large extent, the reflection of one outstanding performance, while layered stretches of text like *Fáfnismál* might reflect several or numerous performances as well as the annotations of a collector or perhaps traces of an oral prosimetrum. Where all this leaves dating remains less than clear, but a hopeful platform for further study integrating the poems’ oral nature into the effort to date them is to be found in a transitional section of Fidjestøl’s book (1999: 187–203). Several insightful studies by Bernt Ø. Thorvaldsen offer further hope (2016, 2013, 2008; also see Harris 2016), and there are other recent dating studies (Vésteinn Ólason 2005; Andersson 2003). A prerequisite to progress on dating would seem to be a satisfactory theoretical model and consensus on eddic poetry’s oral life before our textualized forms.

Excursus: eddic poetry and the ballad

A brief digression into a line of research I have been pursuing in almost total isolation will be relevant, I hope, to the oral life of eddic poetry, its afterlife, and perhaps also to dating: namely the ballad analogy.⁴ The two genres, eddic poetry and the European

⁴ Fidjestøl had begun a “note on the Scandinavian ballad and Eddic poetry” (1999: 323), and the origin of my effort was a suggestion by Fidjestøl’s posthumous editor and colleague Odd Einar Haugen that I take up this topic since I had already written on Wolfgang Mohr’s pre-War research and on anglophone ballads, as well as edited Bengt Jonsson’s most important contribution on the origin of Scandinavian ballads (1991).

ballad, offer similarities that deserve a general treatment, but the sheer size and complexity of the Scandinavian ballad tradition, with its 838 types and its linguistic difficulties, persuaded me to make a modest start with the handful of instances where ballads seem to constitute the direct afterlife of specific eddic poems. Here, however, it is appropriate to begin with the general views of two great ballad scholars.

Skaldedikting og eddadikting, i det heile dei gamle allittererande vers, må lenge ha gått jamsides med dei nyare versemåla som var komne inn sønnafrå. Det er då naturleg at det gamle på ymse måtar kom til å verka på det nye. Det nyre tok over ein norrøn arv, så det vart ikkje så skarpt eit brot som ein kanskje kunne venta. Men denne arven er komen frå dei meir einfelde, ein kan vel seia folkelege formene av dikting, mindre frå den eigenlege skaldediktinga. Dette er interessant, for det viser den makt som det endå var i dei mest einfelde og vi torer vel tru mest utbreidde formene.
(Liestøl 1970: 7).⁵

Thus Knut Liestøl agreed with the scholarly consensus that the generic model for the ballad came from “the south,” but he postulates a period when oral eddic poetry lived side by side with oral ballad poetry, with influence from the older form on the newer and transition rather than a sharp break. The older layer, however, is not what we know as courtly skaldic or even eddic verse but a simpler, more widespread congener of the preserved eddic type.

The second general view is that of Bengt Jonsson, who had established a strong argument that the originary French influence leapfrogged to Norway via Angevin Britain and who puts the birth of the Scandinavian ballad in thirteenth-century Norway as part of the international culture associated, first, with the royal hall, Håkons-hallen, in Bergen, then with the Akershus in Oslo. Jonsson’s ideas, encapsulated in an English-language article, constitute the dominant model at present. On the topic of the eddic-ballad interface, Jonsson’s thoughts parallel Liestøl’s: “As eddic poetry also was an oral genre, the transformation from eddic lay to ballad represents an encounter between two genres of oral poetry, one older and one younger, two different systems of making verse with some formal elements in common” (1991: 157).

So far, I have studied just three ballads with eddic connections.⁶ The results do not substantially change the dates of the relevant eddic poems but do modify their literary histories by the introduction of oral common source traditions. On

⁵ Liestøl’s general historical hypothesis is further set out on p. 14.

⁶ In four articles: Harris 2012, 2013, 2014, and in-progress (on *Gripisspá*).

Drymkviða, I was able – through the good offices of Olav Solberg – to acquire a rare article by Bugge’s daughter and son-in-law, which gives some support to the kind of oral Norwegian proto-form I had already arrived at (Berge & Berge 1914); Vésteinn Ólason had also come to similar conclusions (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014: I, 244–245). My assumptions, methods, and conclusions are, however, best expounded in the articles about *Svipdagsmál*. In these three studies, Norway with its pre-balladic verse – what Liestøl referred to as “simpler and more folk-like forms” – figures as source-donor of what we now experience as relatively polished Icelandic eddic verse.

Provenance and international connections

If we turn back to the more general question of what Bugge, at the end of the nineteenth century, called “the home of the eddic poems” (1899), we find more variety and less national passion than in the nineteenth century. Today good arguments are made for the oral path of individual poems to Iceland – for example, John McKinnell on the Northumbrian origin of *Völundarkviða* (1990) – but not much enthusiasm for comprehensive claims. The migration of the central Völsung material from the Continent survives along with some of Hans Kuhn’s search for linguistic continuity (1939). But I want briefly to call attention to the brilliance of Bugge’s Western origin theory: many poems were accounted for as Norwegian but composed in England or the Western Isles; this satisfied national *and* international desires and provided a stage for Bugge to use his encyclopedic knowledge of Christian and classical sources and his gift for combinations to provide a dramatic new perspective (e.g., 1899, 1901). Little of all this has survived the test of time though Bugge’s fingerprints on our field are everywhere indelible. I have to add, though, that suspicions of Christian sources do go back in scholarly tradition far beyond Bugge, beyond even Schimmelmänn. The most important focal point of such source-study has always been *Völuspá*, but the seminal study in modern times was by Bishop Anton Christian Bang of Oslo in 1879/80, immediately supported by Bugge (1881). The connections they made with the Sibylline Oracles live on as a vital but controversial topic (Gunnell & Lassen 2013). On the sources of *Völuspá*, however, I line up generally, if not in detail, with the measured skepticism of my teacher Ursula Dronke (1969–2011: II, 27–30; 1992), and in the rest of the corpus, I have found few if any outside written sources fully convincing (cf. Larrington 1991; McKinnell 2014).

But these were and remain the internal skirmishes of Nordic philologists. What would be the view from world literature? Since *exchange* and “the republic of letters”

are key terms, the existence of sources and influences for eddic literature merely shows that it *is* literature, normal world literature. Damrosch discusses the Egyptian Nile Valley as having developed literature in almost complete isolation, perhaps the world's only case of such autochthonous development. Obviously Scandinavia was *not* a second case.

Even if the view from world literature is less than helpful on matters of orality and literacy, its wider perspective might suggest that this question, so central to ethnically based eddic studies, along with the details of dating, are simply not so important for literary value as a putative member of the “evolving canon of masterpieces” or even for its value as “a window on other cultures.” The student of world literature would presumably be more interested in larger literary meanings, perhaps in an ethos or mentality of eddic poetry. Readings from *outside* professional eddic studies, as from the ambit of world literature, might have much to teach us, while criticism coming from *within* rarely achieves a distance requisite to such broad interpretation: the eddic corpus just seems to us too heterogenous to allow for much confident generalizing. One worthy exception that comes to mind is an almost book-length essay by Alois Wolf (1999), which finds the key idea of *The Poetic Edda* in *fræði* or *native lore*; more briefly, a recent article of Vésteinn Ólason's identifies simple *perdition* as the red thread of the collection (2010: 234). In the effort to reach more powerful general interpretations with international linkages, such themes and genres might be important stages.

Elegy: timeless, global, still relevant

Loss and memory are elements of one such theme (or genre) with very wide international connections. Perhaps such a sensibility is not universally expected of the fierce “Vikings,” but the existence of an elegiac mode in both Old English and Old Norse is an old, old song. Heusler and his school tried to date eddic poetry by the quotient of such sentiment (cf. 1906), while some of my writings cast doubt on such a dating and put forward the idea of an old, Common Germanic oral-literary genre principally associated with death and grieving (1982; 1988). Elegiac survivals in various forms seemed to invite both reconstruction and also literary criticism. Then, in 1997, Daniel Sävborg published a long dissertation principally disputing dating claims based on such cultural features as “sorrow.” Sävborg's works on “elegy” and mine have been controversial, a condition in which the literature on this genre and related matters has flourished.

Our topic is, however, by no means exhausted and must not be restricted to dating. The human response to loss – especially our *verbal* response to loss – is too important, too widespread in the world’s literatures, and too valuable to us all to be given such narrow interpretation. The historical aim of studying the early Germanic elegiac should be descriptive and analytical, with mapping of its occurrences, variations, and relation to other modes, but more literary-critical goals are also legitimate: to set, for example, Viking Age elegiac elements in conversation with the elegiac of other ages and climes, including of our own age.

Elegiac aspects of eddic poetry could be invoked as examples at this point, but I wish instead to draw on an illustration more appropriate to a Bugge lecture, namely the famous Rök inscription. Of course, the inscription – now dated after 801 or the first half of the ninth century more generally – does actually contain a stanza in an eddic meter; but its appropriateness here comes from the fact that in dealing with that longest of all runic inscriptions, any contemporary scholar is heavily indebted to Sophus Bugge. All his important runological successors – including Otto von Friesen, Otto Höfler, Elias Wessén, and Ottar Grønvik – ultimately build on Bugge. For my part, I built my literary interpretation in varying degrees on *all* these and others, but I was emboldened to attempt it at all by the example of Lars Lönnroth (1977), like me, a literary historian rather than a runologist.

Many rune stones are widely agreed to be “commemorative” (e.g., Zilmer 2010). In my slightly more “literary” interpretation, they evince “elegiac” features, while Rök itself turns out to be a kind of elegy in stone, but more subtle and complex than anything comparable.⁷ The opening “formula” of dedication is followed by a small anthology of three stories, the funeral offering of a father to his “early-dead” son; the selected stories are not *narrated* but refracted into allusions – a technique we find conspicuously used in the Old English poems *Deor* and *Widsith* (Harris 2009). The Rök allusions are set, however, within a playful question-and-answer routine, where heroic legend supplies the content of the first two sections, while the third embodies a myth – we might compare *The Poetic Edda* for proportion of mythological and heroic material. But the Rök inscription yields more readily a single literary-philosophical meaning since each section deals thematically with the continuity of life despite the reign of death, and the Hegelian structure of this thought mirrors what any good Levi-Straussian might have predicted, namely: myths good to think with.

The elegiac aspect of Rök lies not only in the obviously memorial function and in the meaning of the inscription as a whole but in the relationship of the real-life fa-

⁷ Most of my references to Rök in the following paragraphs are accounted for in Harris 2006c; the other references in this sentence are to Harris 2006a and 2000 (cf. Jón Helgason 1944).

ther and predeceased son to the content of the culminating myth, also a father-son tragedy but with consolation through a new birth in the family – a myth I tentatively interpret as a local East Scandinavian version of the story we know as that of Baldr. Within Old Norse and early Germanic verse, the elegiac reading invites comparison with Egill Skallagrímsson's *Sonatorrek* (which has striking verbal and syntactic similarities to the Rök passage) and with a semi-autonomous section of *Beowulf* known as "the Old Man's Lament," further with the *erfíkvæði* or funeral poem as a mainly skaldic genre (Harris 2006b).

Following out these connections would yield a train of interpretations that we have no time for, but the viewpoint from world literature does free the mind to associate Rök and *Sonatorrek* with, for example, musical elegy, as in *Torrek* by the Icelandic composer Jón Leifs, and with any number of laments and elegies worldwide in various artistic forms or channels of communication. And why should not readers of world literature know that Norwegian and Icelandic oral-derived literature and a Swedish masterpiece exist comparable to the greatest elegies in English and a part of a globe-encircling genre that shows humanity at its best?

Sophus Bugge was an extraordinary polymath, but his sensibility was scientific; and one field he seems studiously to have avoided is what we call literary criticism: having written none or very little, he has little or nothing to recant. But I imagine his spirit like Ibsen's Gjenganger returning to regret his disciple's deviations from pure philology into, of all things, world literature.

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