

the text of *Snorra Edda* in Jón lærði's version adds little to our knowledge of Snorri's work, while the parts written by Jón lærði have not been printed before as a whole and are of great interest and importance, to have used larger type for his contributions than for Snorri's.

There is a lengthy English summary (more than twenty pages) of the introduction, which, however, is very poorly done and seems not to have been proof-read; it is badly spelled and often ungrammatical.

It is very useful to have these two texts printed, and we look forward to editions of the remaining works of Jón lærði (especially *Tíðfordríf* and his still unpublished poems, which now seem very desirable) and maybe of some more of Björn of Skarðsá's writings too.

Anthony Faulkes

Eleazar M. Meletinsky. *The Elder Edda and Early Forms of the Epic*, trans. Kenneth H. Ober, ed. Gerd Wolfgang Weber. *Hesperides: Letterature e culture occidentali*, volume 6. Trieste: Edizioni Parnaso, 1998. 255 pages.

Eleazar Meletinsky, a distinguished scholar in the area of folklore and the early forms of literature, the author of numerous articles and eleven books treating such diverse subjects as the hero of the wondertale, the heritage of Vladimir Propp, and Dostoyevsky in light of historical poetics (one of these books, namely *Poetika mifa* [*The Poetics of Myth*], has been translated into multiple languages), published his investigation of the Elder Edda in 1968. Thirty years later, it became available to those who can read English better than Russian. Kenneth Ober also translated Mikhail I. Steblin-Kamenskij's celebrated book *Mir sagi* (*The Saga Mind* [Odense: Odense Univ. Press, 1973]), so Scandinavian philologists all over the world owe him a debt of gratitude. He takes no liberties with the text, and his translation is fully reliable. It must be added that the original edition of Meletinsky's *Edda i rannie formy epasa* teems with misprints. Ober had to correct them, look up all the quotations, some of which were given by the author in Russian, expand the bibliographical references, and make difficult decisions concerning some terms current in Russian studies but lacking counterparts in Western scholarship. He undertook and performed a most laborious task.

It can be assumed that Meletinsky was aware of the translation being made of his book and that he is the author of the summary in Russian ([251–53]). It is curious that thirty years later he chose not to add a traditional retrospect. By 1968 he had mastered the enormous comparative material (there was hardly an epic or a tale, from North America to Polynesia, he did not know) and developed the theory of early literature that guided him through several decades, but in 1998 he must have known even more. Yet he neither modified his views nor saw fit to refer to later sources. Such singleness of

purpose and unwavering loyalty to the once formulated principles of reconstruction cannot but command admiration. However, the reader should be aware of the fact that the book now offered in English to the public bears the imprint of literary and sociological ideas once either contested in Russia because of their unorthodox nature (and Meletinsky was a victim of political demagoguery more than once) or, conversely, taken for granted in that country. Sometimes the production of Soviet scholars is mined for Marxist dogmas and dismissed as trivial by its critics (the same who profess gentle pluralism in their own departments). Such dogmas were indeed omnipresent, but by the mid-sixties they had lost their ability to strangle independent thinkers, especially those among them, who, like Meletinsky, were interested in, and open to, the culture of the whole world. The commonplaces of Marxism were often ingrained, rather than enforced.

The narrative of the book is loose, and it may not be immediately obvious how novel the picture is that the author is attempting to present. He examines the triad myth–heroic poetry–wondertale (fairy tale) and addresses the perennial question about their genesis and interaction, in order to show where, in terms of typology, the Elder Edda belongs in this knot. Concepts that will be new to those who have not followed the development of Russian medieval studies are the archaic mythological epic (or epos) and the heroic wondertale (fairy tale). The idea of the heroic wondertale (*bogatyrskaja skazka*) was mainly developed by Viktor M. Zhirmunsky; the mythological epic is a category defended in Meletinsky's numerous works. Given such "impure" stages as the mythological epic and the heroic fairy tale, the entire perspective on relative chronology changes: some demarcating lines become blurred, the role of poetry and prose in older literature has to be reevaluated, and several of the extant texts considered late turn out to be old. Those who will search for the Marxist underpinnings of Zhirmunsky and Meletinsky's reconstruction will be partly gratified, because for both scholars the history of old literature is inseparable from the socio-economic formation in which it exists. In their scheme, the pivotal event is the emer-

gence of the state; both distinguish between the songs and tales created in tribal (or clan) societies and those going back to the period of early statehood. (The same principle dominates Zhirmunsky's works on historical linguistics and Propp's on Russian heroic poetry.) Here they follow Engels; the validity of Engels's pronouncements on the rise of private property, the family, and the state was never questioned in the Soviet Union. This circumstance is important for understanding the phrase "early forms of the epic" constantly occurring in the book. Meletinsky compares the Elder Edda with the epics of many nations and often says that such and such a feature of the Edda is primitive from a stadial or typological point of view because it is strongly reminiscent of, or even identical with, something in the poetry of the Yakuts, Polynesians, Slavs, etc. How does he know that the myths and heroic tales of the Yakuts and the rest of them were "primitive"? The answer is clear: the traditions he refers to were shared by people who knew no statehood.

A more ambiguous concept is that of folklore. Meletinsky distinguishes between "folk" tales and learned, "bookish" works and strives to expose the popular roots of the Elder Edda. He does not define folklore, which (if I understand Meletinsky correctly) emerges as the "unintentional" oral output of a given community; he consistently opposes mythological/heroic and gnomic, didactic poetry. It will be seen that neither literacy nor authorship is at issue here. Meletinsky speaks about the closeness of literature and folklore in the Viking period (that is, long before the introduction of literacy), the defolklorization of the initial plot evident in the treatment of such heroic figures as Gilgamesh and Achilles, the syncretism of lyric and epic elements in folklore, and so forth, but he never mentions the different types of authorship familiar to the readers of Steblin-Kamenskij's writings.

The book consists of an introduction and three chapters: (1) "Folk-Poetic Elements of the Eddic Style" (repetitions, parallelisms, *loci communes*, decorative epithets), (2) "The Mythological Lays of the Elder Edda and Early Forms of the Epic," and (3) "The Heroic Lays of the *Elder Edda*

and Early Forms of the Epic.” These are followed by a succinct but useful conclusion. The meticulous analysis of the eddic style has been undertaken to show that it is full of features typical of genuine “folklore.” The demonstration is convincing, except perhaps for one circumstance. The earliest lays of the Elder Edda were composed at a time when the “folkloric” style was about the only one in existence in Scandinavia, whereas the later lays that, from the start, coexisted with the learned Latin tradition could have been stylized according to the universally known models. Meletinsky insists that the ancient Scandinavians knew an archaic type of epic poetry, namely the mythological epic, which was, among other things, characterized by the mixture of poetry and prose (here he draws on the oral literature of other “primitive” cultures). He considers *Hymiskviða*, *Brymskviða*, and some of Snorri’s retellings of the adventures of Þórr, Óðinn, and Loki (as well as the tale of Baldr’s death) to be classic specimens of this mythological epic. He says: “Here the same thematic structure, the same poetic ‘world model’ appear. The world is dually polarized — the *æsir* and the giants or the dwarfs. The giants are represented by one character, the dwarfs by a pair, the *æsir* by Þórr and Óðinn (alternatively) and their companions, most often Loki. A struggle is carried on for women or goddesses (the object of the giants’ lust) and for magical blessings (the object of the *æsir*); the giants are the guardians, and the dwarfs are the manufacturers, of various blessings (magical objects). In the ‘mythology’ of these stories, there is no vertical characterization of the world (the ash Yggdrasill), there is no temporal consistency (the giants give birth to the *æsir*; etiology is supplemented by eschatology; the idea of fate and the images of the Norns) and other peculiarities of the mythology of the dialogic gnomic lays are lacking. The world arises, not out of the parts of the body of the sacrificed giant Ymir (an analogue of the Indian Purusha, the Babylonian Tiamat, and others), as in the gnomic lays, but by means of raising the serpent of the Middle Earth from the bottom; the sacred mead, the gift of wisdom, is not received by Óðinn as a result of a ritual ordeal (hanging on the tree in *Hávamál*), but by theft from

the giants. Such themes are typical of very old etiological myths, in which the origin of nature and culture objects are linked with their theft by culture heroes from giants or their manufacture by demiurge-smiths or potters. ‘Theft’ and ‘manufacture’ — two variants, at different stages of development, of the same theme — are often combined (for example, the preparation of Kvásir from blood or saliva, the theft of the mead by Óðinn from Suttungr). This is one of the oldest means of thematic composition” (231–32).

According to Meletinsky, the heroic wondertale (that is, the protoform of heroic literature) is represented in the Elder Edda by the Helgi lays and *Völundarkviða* (the latter “with certain relics of the mythological epos”). In the Helgi lays, “one detects . . . the genre structure of the heroic fairy-tale song, which, like the oldest mythological epos, is essentially an ancestral form of the heroic epos . . . In [them] the motifs of the poetic biography of the hero, characteristic of this genre variety, stand out sharply (birth by a fairy-tale beauty, bestowal of a name, the first exploit in the form of revenge for a father, heroic courtship), as do an outline of the heroic character of the champion and a glorification of his virtues. The three Eddic Helgi lays are apparently not so much the fruit of very late contamination or an explanatory story to the cult of the Semnones as they are three variants, folkloric in their genesis. The most archaic is *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, especially in the episodes of warrior initiation” (233–34). “At the root of the three lays most likely lie three folkloric variants which were subsequently subjected to a literary reworking” (183). In the Sigurðr cycle, Meletinsky recognizes a strong influence of folklore, with its nondiscrimination of the lyric and the epic, and suggests the decisive influence of laments on them.

At the end of the book, Meletinsky states that his goal was to bring out the “folkloric-epic basis” of the Elder Edda. It is the place of the Edda in the hierarchy of the epics of the world that interested him. He makes a special point of the fact that he never meant to divorce the Edda from the rest of Icelandic literature or deny its ties with ballads and skaldic poetry. He says:

“The author of the present book does not by any means intend to hurl a nihilistic challenge to contemporary Scandinavian studies. Without attempting to strike out the achievements of the twentieth century in the study of the history of Old Scandinavian literature, he has sought, however, by utilizing modern methods of research, to show the significant share folklore has had in the formation of the Old Scandinavian epos, both at the pre-historic stage and later, when folklore was already interacting with literature; and to demonstrate the unbroken and continuous connection of some of the Eddic lays with very old genres that had already taken shape in the clan society. Individual literary creativity apparently remained for a long time within certain limits fixed by folkloric tradition, and did not destroy their genre nature. This was facilitated, of course, by the fact that the folk-poetic form of the epos was preserved side by side with the literary form and interacted with it” (236).

True, the book contains no “nihilistic challenge,” but a challenge nevertheless. It is to be hoped that medievalists in the West will take up the gauntlet, however courteously flung. Such a move would be in the best traditions of mythological and heroic poetry, and not only in Scandinavia.

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Helgi Guðmundsson. *Um haf innan: Vestrænir menn og íslensk menning á miðöldum*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1997. 413 pages.

Helgi Guðmundsson, professor of linguistics at the University of Iceland, has written a thick book of ten chapters on cultural contacts between Gaelic and Norse people in the British Isles, knowledge of the British Isles in Old Icelandic sources, ideas about *papar* in Iceland, Irish Christianity, Gaelic loanwords, names, and place-names in Icelandic and other West Nordic languages, as well as a separate discussion of *Orkneyinga saga* and other works and authors which he connects with the subject.

Um haf innan is not, however, as some might think, a thorough treatment of all the sources and problems involved with them, with references to the scholarly work which has been done in the field in the past few decades. Rather, it presents an overall theory, beautiful and ingenious in many respects, about how the apparent cultural contacts between the Gaels and the Icelanders during the settlement period in Iceland can be explained away. Helgi Guðmundsson claims that even though the Gaelic loanwords in Icelandic are more numerous than in the other West Nordic languages, they are not the product of any particular Gaelic influence in Iceland but rather characteristic of the Norse language spoken in the North Atlantic during the Viking Age. Neither do Gaelic names and knowledge about Gaels and the Gaelic world in Icelandic written works derive from the settlement period, about which Icelanders in the thirteenth century knew nothing according to Helgi Guðmundsson — an insight for which he provides no evidence: “Þannig er þess oft getið í Íslendinga sögum, að menn hafi siglt. Höfundar þeirra á 13. öld gátu ekkert vitað um skipaferðir mörg hundruð árum fyrir þann tíma” [Thus it is often mentioned in the sagas of Icelanders that people sailed abroad. Their authors in the thirteenth century could not know anything about sea voyages hundreds of years before that time] (42). In order to explain these illusionary Gaelic contacts,