

The Norse Muse Report from an International Research Project

In 1911, shortly before the First World War, the Swedish literary historian Anton Blanck published a book called *Den nordiska renässansen i 1700-talets litteratur*.¹ It was, for at least two reasons, a pioneering work of comparative literature. First of all, it was the first work that traced the influence and reception of Old Norse literature, not just in one particular country or language area but more generally in the early romantic literature of western Europe. Secondly, the book introduced a new concept, that of the Nordic renaissance, which Blanck saw as a preromantic literary movement inspired by Norse myth and eddic poetry, a movement initiated in the 1750s by the Swiss intellectual Paul-Henri Mallet, later continued and further developed by forerunners of romanticism such as Thomas Percy and Thomas Gray in England and Johann Gottfried Herder in Germany. The development of this movement in England, Germany, France, Denmark, and Sweden was outlined by Blanck until about 1800, which in his view marked the beginning of a new era: the golden age of national romanticism, epitomized in Sweden by the much admired “Norse” poetry of Erik Gustaf Geijer and Esaias Tegnér.

Blanck’s book was followed up by other Scandinavian literary historians, such as Ida Falbe-Hansen (1921), and also by some non-Scandinavian scholars interested in Scandinavian influence on their own native literature, for example Paul van Tieghem (1924), Thor J. Beck (1934), Otto Springer (1936), and Margaret Omberg (1976). Not until recently, however, has the Nordic renaissance received much attention either from Old Norse scholars or from literary historians studying the development of literary taste and critical theory in western Europe. Although the learned reception of Old Norse texts in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Scandinavia has been studied in valuable works of textual history and interpretation by such scholars as Anthony Faulkes (1977–79), Jón Helgason (1926), and Anders Grape (1962), the influence of Norse poetics on Western literature before

1. To some extent Blanck continued the work of earlier, more specialized scholars such as Richard Batka (1896–99), Frank Edgar Farley (1903), and Gunnar Castrén (1910).

the Nordic renaissance has remained largely outside the scope of modern research.

Towards the end of the 1980s, however, interest in literary theory among Old Norse scholars had increased considerably. That interest extended to the impact of medieval literary theory, both learned and traditional, upon Icelandic treatises on poetics and resulted in new studies of *Snorra Edda* and its relationship to other European works of grammar and rhetoric (e.g., Clunies Ross 1987). A number of Old Norse scholars met in Copenhagen in the summer of 1989 to discuss the possibility of starting a new international research project about the reception, interpretation, and application of Old Norse poetics in the Western literary tradition. Blanck's book about the Nordic renaissance could still be seen as a starting point for the project, but it was evident that it would have to cover a much longer period and be more concerned with fundamental theoretical questions of taste and poetic creation. For example, to what extent was the early reception of Old Norse poetry shaped by the expectations of classical rhetoric and by Aristotelian or Platonistic ideas about poetry? To what extent was the romantic "discovery" of Old Norse verse as great poetry inspired by new aesthetic theories about primitive and sublime art? It seemed more promising to focus attention on such major problems of aesthetics than to concentrate on the detailed study of sources and influences. It was also obvious that a modern project could hardly be based on the outdated prewar idea that the main function of the Nordic renaissance was to pave the way for national romanticism in Sweden or in any other particular country.

The Project "Eddornas sinnebildsspråk"

Through a generous grant from Nordiska samarbetsnämnden för humanistisk forskning (NOS-H), a research project was eventually formed with the official title "Eddornas sinnebildsspråk" [The symbolic language of the Eddas], a formulation borrowed from the Swedish poet Per Henrik Ling (1776–1839), one of the most enthusiastic proponents of a Nordic renaissance in his *Eddornas sinnebildslära* of 1819. A more common title for our project in recent years, however, has been "The Nordic Muse" or "The Norse Muse," and hence the latter title has been chosen for this report. The project was led by a Scandinavian steering committee consisting of Lars Lönnroth, chairman, and Mats Malm, secretary (both from Sweden), Bjarne Fidjestøl (Norway),² Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen (Denmark), and Sverrir Tómasson (Iceland). Two non-Scandinavian scholars, Margaret Clunies Ross (Australia) and Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Germany), were also included on the steering committee. Although they were not formally members of the NOS-H project, they and some other scholars from outside Scandinavia regularly participated in the project meetings and publications, some of them with the help of

2. After Bjarne Fidjestøl's tragic death in February of 1994, Jan Ragnar Hagland took his place as Norwegian representative on the steering committee.

separate grants from their respective countries.³ Funds were sufficient to pay a small number of research assistants on the project from time to time.

Most of the work on the project was carried out between 1989 and 1994, and some of the results were regularly presented at conferences or seminars each summer. The first took place in connection with the Snorrastefna in Reykjavík in 1990, where the project was first presented to a larger audience (Lönnroth 1992c). The second meeting formed part of the Eighth International Saga Conference in Gothenburg 1991, where several early results of the project were presented as conference papers by Margaret Clunies Ross and Judy Quinn, Jan Ragnar Hagland, Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen, and Mats Malm. The third meeting was organized by Bjarne Fidjestøl in 1992 as a two-day seminar at Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo, entitled “Nordens Muse: Snorri’s poetikk i mellomalder og ettertid” [The Nordic muse: Snorri’s poetics in the Middle Ages and afterwards]. The fourth meeting was held in Copenhagen in 1993, and the fifth and final one in Reykjavík in 1994, shortly after the Ninth International Saga Conference in Akureyri, Iceland.

Our project did not issue a publication of its own, but the papers presented at the meetings gave rise to a number of books and articles in several languages. In addition, some of the papers found their way into books or journals that also contained other kinds of material. The following books, listed in chronological order, are based largely or to a considerable extent on work done within the project:

Northern Antiquity: The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga, edited by Andrew Wawn (Enfield Lock, Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1994). A collection of essays, partly based on papers read at the Eighth International Saga Conference in Gothenburg.

Skaldemjödet i berget: Essayer om fornisländsk ordkonst och dess återanvändning i nutiden, by Lars Lönnroth (Stockholm: Atlantis, 1996). A collection of nine essays about Old Icelandic poetry and the way this poetry was later used and interpreted in the Scandinavian tradition. The last five essays in particular were produced within the project or are related to its main theme.

Minervas äpple: Om diktsyn, tolkning och bildspråk inom nordisk göticism, by Mats Malm, Ph.D. diss., Göteborgs universitet (Stockholm: Symposion, 1996). A dissertation, closely related to the project, about central problems of poetics within the Nordic Gothicist movement of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries.

Guðamjöður og arnarleir: Safn ritgerða um eddulist, edited by Sverrir Tómasson (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1996). A collection of essays, produced within the project, about the reception and literary use of *Snorra Edda* in Iceland from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century. Contributions by Sverrir Tómasson, Margrét Eggertsdóttir, Viðar Hreinnson, Bergljót Kristjánsdóttir, Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, and Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson.

The Norse Muse in Britain, 1750–1820, by Margaret Clunies Ross, *Hesperides, Letterature e culture occidentali*, vol. 9 (Trieste: Edizioni Parnasso, 1998). Produced as part of the project, this book treats the reception of Old Norse poetry and poetics in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain.

3. Margaret Clunies Ross held a grant from the Australian Research Council from 1993 to 1995 for a related project on the Norse Muse in Britain, 1750–1820.

Mythos und Geschichte: Sechs Essays zur Geschichtsmythologie Skandinaviens in Mittelalter und Neuzeit, by Gerd Wolfgang Weber, Hesperides, Letterature e culture occidentali, vol. 10 (Trieste: Edizioni Parnasso, forthcoming). This book is based partly on work done for the project.

We will refer below to additional articles, published separately or still unpublished, and to some larger works that are highly relevant to our subject, though based only to a limited extent on work done within the project. The most important of these are *The Waking of Angantyr: The Scandinavian Past in European Culture*, ed. Else Roesdahl and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (Århus 1996), *Wagner's "Ring" and Its Icelandic Sources: A Symposium at the Reykjavík Arts Festival, 29 May 1994*, ed. Úlfar Bragason (Reykjavík 1995), and *Snorri Sturluson: Beiträge zu Werk und Rezeption*, ed. Hans Fix (Berlin 1998).⁴

Our original intention was to summarize the results of the project in a book in English entitled *The Norse Muse*, written jointly by Margaret Clunies Ross, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber. We have given up this idea however, partly due to Weber's tragic death in May 1998, but also because there appears to be little demand for another book on the subject at this stage. This article will serve instead as our (preliminary) conclusion.

Pragmatic and Metaphysical Uses of Old Norse Poetry

So what did we actually accomplish? It would be tedious and not very helpful, we think, to answer this question by providing a detailed list of new results concerning the reception of Old Norse poetics in each country or period from the Middle Ages to the present day. It would also soon become obvious to the reader that we have not covered the countries and periods equally well. There are still enormous gaps in our knowledge, and much work remains to be done, enough for several more international research projects. What we can do, however, is to attempt some generalizations on the basis of the present results. To what extent has a clearer picture of the Norse Muse and her relationship to European poetics emerged since the time when Anton Blanck wrote his pioneering work about the Nordic renaissance?

First of all, it has become increasingly obvious that Old Norse poetics was not "rediscovered" by the Nordic renaissance movement of the eighteenth century: it had remained an active force in literary criticism and poetic creation throughout the entire period between Snorri and Mallet, although its influence was largely limited to Iceland and — during the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth centuries — to Scandinavia. Paul-Henri Mallet's promotion of Old Norse

4. Two exhibition catalogs should also be mentioned here: Wilson 1997 explores the influence of Old Norse mythology and poetry on European art, while Henningsen et al. 1997 documents an exhibition devoted to cultural encounters between Germany and Scandinavia from 1800 to 1914. The latter catalog contains contributions by Gerd Wolfgang Weber (44–46) and Lars Lönnroth (49–51) on Old Norse motifs in romantic art and literature.

poetry and myth in the 1750s did indeed represent a new and important turn in the reception history, since his way of looking at Old Norse verse was one of the inspirational forces of the romantic movement in several countries of western Europe. But the sources of his conceptions can be traced back to Icelandic and Scandinavian intellectuals like Magnús Ólafsson, Ole Worm, Peder Resen, and Thomas Bartholin — or even to Snorri Sturluson himself.

Secondly, it has become evident that the reception of Old Norse poetics was dependent not only on prevailing theories about poetic creation (e.g., classicistic or romantic theories) but also on the kind of use that different writers made of the Eddas.⁵ The latter aspect has been particularly emphasized by Mats Malm (1996, 29–32, 289–90), who distinguishes between “pragmatic” and “metaphysical” projects in seventeenth-century scholarship regarding the Eddas. The aim of the pragmatic projects — governing, for example, major parts of Ole Worm’s *Literatura runica* (Worm 1636) — was to translate and explain the poetic language of Old Norse verse from a classicistic perspective, thus making the kennings and other enigmatic expressions understandable and manageable for contemporary readers. On the other hand, the aim of the metaphysical projects — governing, for example, Peder Resen’s introduction to his edition of *Snorra Edda* (1665, facsimile in Faulkes 1977–79, vol. 2) — was to show that the Eddas contained higher, spiritual truths, to be apprehended intuitively but not completely translatable into ordinary language. The metaphysical point of view recurred in the romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the obscure myths and enigmatic imagery of Old Norse poetry were admired for their sublime and spiritual qualities (Malm 1996, 118–46, 292–93). However, a more rationalistic and pragmatic view of this poetry continued to coexist with the metaphysical projects of romanticism.

Pragmatic and metaphysical approaches to Old Norse poetry may in fact be said to have existed side by side from the time of Snorri Sturluson until today. In *Snorra Edda* both approaches are clearly present: the pragmatic in the form of Snorri’s practical advice to young skalds, in which poetry is presented as a craft, and poetic language as something that is perfectly translatable into ordinary language; the metaphysical, on the other hand, in the form of mythical stories such as the one about the acquisition of the mead of poetry, in which poetry is described as a divine gift containing magical or metaphysical properties (Lönnroth 1996, 9–34). An analogous dichotomy may be found in our own time between, on one hand, the pragmatic and rationalistic approach of academic philologists to the Eddas, and, on the other hand, the metaphysical approach of Ásatrúarmenn and

5. When we use the term “the Eddas” in this discussion, we refer to the (in former times) imperfectly differentiated entities now designated as the *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson (*Snorra Edda* or *Prose Edda*) and the Elder or Poetic Edda (*Sæmundar Edda*), the latter comprising a collection of mythological and heroic Old Norse poems in the common Germanic alliterative verse form. The poetry in this latter collection, now termed “eddic” or “eddaic,” was not recovered until the mid-seventeenth century, even in Iceland.

other modern sects with a religious interest in Old Norse mythology (Lönnroth 1996, 208–18).

Yet it is obvious that the ways of understanding Old Norse poetry have changed considerably throughout the centuries, as it has become known to more and more people outside Iceland, mixed with new ideas about poetry, and used in various new social contexts.

The reception history may conveniently be divided into five stages:

1. From *Snorra Edda* to *Laufás Edda* (ca. 1230–1600)
2. The Era of Scandinavian Gothicism and Baroque (ca. 1600–1750)
3. The Nordic Renaissance and Preromanticism (ca. 1750–1800)
4. National Romanticism (ca. 1800–1870)
5. The Decline of National Romanticism (ca. 1870 onwards)

We shall now attempt to summarize the main developments in each period. It should be noted that our view of what is important in these developments may well differ from that of other scholars in our project group.

From *Snorra Edda* to *Laufás Edda*

The medieval reception of Old Norse poetics may be divided into a learned and a more popular reception. The learned variety is best studied in the various texts of *Snorra Edda* and the so-called grammatical treatises, which are usually found in the same manuscripts and which also deal with theoretical problems of language and literary composition. The more popular variety may be studied in *rímur* and other types of poetry meant for oral recitation, more or less influenced by the ancient forms of skaldic or eddic verse. The following exposition draws freely on Sverrir Tómasson's study (1996b).

It is characteristic of the learned reception that it attempted to combine the skaldic tradition with the grammatical and rhetorical tradition of the Latin school curriculum. This ambition is particularly obvious in Codex Wormianus, a fourteenth-century redaction of *Snorra Edda* compiled in one of the monasteries in northern Iceland (Johansson 1997), but it may be found also in Snorri's own prologue to *Snorra Edda*, in at least some of the grammatical treatises, and particularly in the way these texts are joined together in the manuscripts (Krömmelbein 1992). Parallels between Old Norse and classical mythology are thus emphasized, attention is drawn to similarities between skaldic and Latin rhetoric, and the art of Odin is presented as a heritage from Troy, where the Norse gods (*Æsir*) in euhemeristic manner are supposed to have lived before migrating to Scandinavia after the Trojan war.⁶ Furthermore, the use of pagan myth in poetic contexts is legitimized by explaining the myths as reflections of a natural religion analogous to the

6. See esp. Thomas Krömmelbein's introduction to the *Third Grammatical Treatise* (Krömmelbein 1998, 3–34).

Christian faith. This learned, theological, and Latin-influenced reception of Old Norse poetics was probably limited to a relatively small number of Icelandic clerics and learned laymen during the late Middle Ages.

It is characteristic of the more popular poetic tradition, on the other hand, that it attempted to reduce and simplify the poetics of *Snorra Edda* in order to facilitate verse-making and to make poems more easily understood by uneducated laymen. In his pioneering religious poem *Lilja* (mid-fourteenth century), the monk Eysteinn Ásgrímsson speaks directly about the need to get away from “eddic rule” (*eddu regla*) and obscure expressions like the kennings in order to facilitate understanding.⁷ The ancient skaldic meters were gradually replaced by new, end-rhymed verse forms such as ballads and *rímur*, which made it possible for unlettered people to combine singing and straightforward storytelling in the same oral performance. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries many *rímur* still contain ornate kennings and mythical motifs, like that of the skaldic mead, which show their reliance on *Snorra Edda*, but these kennings and mythical motifs tend to be of a stereotyped and formulaic kind, indicating that the poets’ actual knowledge of the skaldic art was fairly limited. Some of the *rímur*, such as *Skíðaríma*, also evince a decidedly disrespectful and ironic attitude toward the ancient myths. The erratic rendering of skaldic poetry in late medieval manuscripts suggests that even literary people at this time had lost touch with the ancient poetic tradition of the skalds.

Toward the end of the sixteenth century, however, there was renewed interest in the skaldic art among high-placed Lutheran clerics at the episcopal see and cathedral school of Skálholt, which at this time had become influenced by the humanist movement in Denmark and the Protestant parts of Germany. Icelandic humanists such as Bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson, Arngrímur Jónsson, Oddur Einarsson, and Þorlákur Skúlason encouraged the antiquarian study of indigenous works such as *Snorra Edda*, and some of these learned men wrote works in Latin in which they presented Old Norse culture to the rest of the world and tried to convince foreign detractors of Iceland that their country possessed an ancient literature of high value, comparable even to the Greek and Roman classics. One result of this new humanism was that the priest Magnús Ólafsson at Laufás, who had studied at the University of Copenhagen, was commissioned by Arngrímur Jónsson to make a new redaction of *Snorra Edda*, the so-called *Laufás Edda* (1608–9), which was later supplemented with Magnús’s own Latin translation of 1629 (Faulkes 1977–79, vol. 1; Tómasson 1996c, 65–73; Seelow 1998, 251–52).

The *Laufás Edda* may be described as a systematized, encyclopedic version of Snorri’s work, reorganized in such a way that the myths of *Gylfaginning* are presented as a series of *exempla* (*dæmisögur*) and the various kennings of *Skáldskaparmál* rearranged in alphabetical order; the last part of the work, *Háttatal*,

7. According to Sverrir Tómasson (1996b, 18–20), Eysteinn’s ideas about the need for poetic simplicity may have been influenced by Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s poetics, *Poetria nova*. See also Foote 1984, 259–68.

is not included in Magnús's version. As a treatise on poetics, Snorri's text had thus been distorted, but it had become more convenient as a dictionary for people interested in looking up a particular myth or a particular poetic expression. Indeed, *Laufás Edda* was used quite extensively by later poets and antiquarians.

As we have already noted, the term "Edda" during this whole period means the poetics of *Snorra Edda*, not the collection of poems that we nowadays refer to as the Poetic Edda. The concept of "eddic poetry" had not even been invented at this time, and although the mythical and heroic poems that we now call "eddic" are frequently quoted in *fornaldarsögur* and used as source material for ballads and *rímur*, these poems were definitely considered a thing of the past. Insofar as learned antiquarians or authors of *rímur* during this period took an interest in the ancient verse forms of pagan times, it was the intricate skaldic poetry that interested them, not the comparatively simple and archaic verse forms that we today call "eddic."

The Era of Scandinavian Gothicism and Baroque

The *Laufás Edda* of Magnús Ólafsson exerted a considerable influence, first in Iceland and Denmark, later in Sweden, England, and other European countries. It sparked an interest in Old Norse poetry and mythology among learned scholars of northern Europe. Magnús's new redaction of Snorri's text also inspired a great deal of new poetry by himself and other poets, not only *rímur* and skaldic verses but also poems in *fornyrðislag* and in new verse forms of non-Scandinavian origin. *Snorra Edda* thus provided an interesting, new poetic vocabulary for the two most famous Icelandic baroque poets, Stefán Ólafsson (ca. 1619–88) and Hallgrímur Pétursson (1614–74) (Eggertsdóttir 1996), and also for later authors of *rímur* like the original and highly independent poetess Steinunn Finnsdóttir (ca. 1640–1710) (Kristjánsdóttir 1996). The prologue and the mythological sections of Snorri's work, on the other hand, provided material for philosophical reflection in the somewhat naive but fascinating works of an autodidactic layman, Jón Guðmundsson lærði (1574–1658) (Hreinsson 1996).

Magnús's redaction of *Snorra Edda* and the later writings of Jón lærði may have encouraged some Icelanders to believe that there had been Edda versions before Snorri, containing even more venerable knowledge, possibly emanating from the Æsir themselves, about the Old Norse world picture and mythology. When in 1643 Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson managed to get hold of the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda, which he later presented as a gift to the king of Denmark, it was at first believed that this unique collection of mythical and heroic poetry was an "Edda" compiled in the twelfth century by the legendary sage Sæmundr fróði. The contents of this so-called *Sæmundar Edda*, that is, what we today know as eddic poetry, also gradually became known to the learned world of northern Europe, but it took more than a century before academic poets and antiquarians began to find it as interesting or important as *Snorra Edda*.

During the seventeenth century, however, the most important result of Magnús Ólafsson's preoccupation with Snorri's poetics was undoubtedly that it became a major source for one of the dominant intellectual movements of that period, namely Scandinavian Gothicism. In its original and narrow sense, *Gothicism* refers to a nationalistic view of history that existed among Swedish scholars and was strongly encouraged by Swedish authorities. According to this view, the Gothic tribes that defeated the Romans had originated in Sweden, which meant that Sweden was one of the oldest countries of Europe and possessed a culture that was at least as venerable and glorious as that of the Romans (Nordström 1934; Johannesson 1982). Runic inscriptions and Old Icelandic manuscripts were thus called "Gothic" in Sweden and used as evidence of Swedish superiority in most fields of culture. A similar, although somewhat less extreme, type of nationalism also inspired Old Norse scholars in Denmark during the same period. For this reason the term *Gothicism* is used here, in accordance with Malm 1996, 25, in its wider and more general sense of a learned Scandinavian nationalism basing its claims on Old Norse and Latin sources.

It was through the Danish antiquarian Ole Worm's *Literatura runica* (Worm 1636) that *Snorra Edda* became a major text of the Gothicism movement. Ole Worm had been in close contact with Magnús Ólafsson and other learned Icelandic humanists, who served as his informants about the Old Norse language and its literature. Worm's own ambition, however, was to demonstrate to the learned world that the runes and the Old Norse poetic language were of Danish rather than Swedish origin, thus bearing witness to the ancient literary culture of Denmark.⁸ Skaldic poems were quoted in runic transliteration with Latin translation, and the intricacies of skaldic composition were explained, using *Snorra Edda* as one of the main sources. In an appendix to the second edition (1651) Worm also included two brief essays in Latin about Norse poetry by his Icelandic informants Magnús Ólafsson and Þorlákur Skúlason. Magnús's essay emphasizes the metaphysical and magical origin of this poetry, while Þorlákur's, in pragmatic fashion, is more concerned with the technicalities of verse-making (Malm 1996, 40–42).

Worm's information about Old Norse poetry exerted a great deal of influence on other learned publications in Denmark and Sweden, for example Judichær's *Synopsis prosodiae Danicae* (1650) and *Prosodia Danica* (1671), which represent the first attempts to establish a national Danish poetics based on classicistic principles, but incorporating some features from Old Norse poetry (Malm 1996, 42–45). Even more important was Bishop Peder H. Resen's edition of Snorri's work, *Edda Islandorum*, published in Copenhagen (1665) and largely based on the Icelandic text of *Laufás Edda*, to which a Danish and a Latin translation were added; the Latin translation was the one that Magnús Ólafsson had provided in

8. Worm had been strongly provoked to take this view by the Swedish nationalism dominating the runological works of Johannes Bureus, one of the leading Swedish Gothicists. See Malm 1996, 35, and Lindroth 1975, 240–42.

1629. In his preface Resen emphasized the archaic wisdom and enigmatic but profound ethical significance of Old Norse texts, and as further illustrations he also edited separately two eddic poems from the Codex regius with translations into Latin and Danish: *Völuspá* (presented as “Philosophia antiqvissima Norvego-Danica”) and *Hávamál* (“Ethica Odini”). Resen’s own contribution to this project was thus to a large extent metaphysical and moral, and it gradually helped to shift the focus of the “Gothic” enthusiasts away from skaldic language to the mystery of myth and eddic poetry (Malm 1996, 46–50). However, outside Scandinavia in particular, the edited texts and Latin translations of *Snorra Edda* and the two poems of the Elder Edda were at least as influential as Resen’s own preface, probably more so, as they made these works available to European scholars for the first time through a medium — Latin — that they could understand.

Resen’s edition was used for various comprehensive projects by learned Gothicists in Sweden as well as Denmark. One of the most ambitious Danish projects was Thomas Bartholin’s impressive work of synthesis, *Antiquitatum Danicarum de causis contemptae a Danis adhuc gentilibus mortis libri tres* [Three books of Danish antiquities concerning the causes of the Danes’ contempt of death while they were still pagan] (Copenhagen 1689). Quoting extensively from *Snorra Edda*, the Poetic Edda, and from numerous other sources supplied to him by the great manuscript collector Árni Magnússon, Bartholin argued persuasively that the Danes (a cover term for all the early Scandinavian peoples) possessed a particularly heroic mentality and stoicism, which was encouraged and celebrated by their skalds (Malm 1996, 61–71; Clunies Ross 1998, 82–84). This attitude later made a strong impression on Paul-Henri Mallet and in general on the romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when it became more or less stereotyped as the Vikings’ defiance of death and their thirst for brave deeds in battle that would lead them straight to the drinking benches of Valhalla. Ragnarr loðbrók, in the numerous translations of *Krákumál* that proliferated in Europe at the time, was the prime example of the death-defying Viking hero, who dies laughing with the prospect of the pleasures of Valhalla (Heinrichs 1978; Heinrichs 1991, 201–3; Clunies Ross 1998, 229–36).

By far the most ambitious project of the Swedish Gothicist movement was Olof Rudbeck’s *Atlant eller Manheim* (Stockholm 1679–1702; Nelson 1937–50), an enormous work of misguided but influential historical research which introduced a new system of allegorical interpretation of ancient sources, based on the poetics of *Snorra Edda*, in order to show that Sweden was in fact the mythical island of Atlantis and that the classical culture of the Greeks and Romans was really of “Gothic” or Swedish origin. Rudbeck inculcated on his readers an understanding of the poetics of *Snorra Edda* based on the principle of metaphorical substitution. Thus, he stressed, a skaldic kenning like “ljungens fisk” [fish of the heather] should be construed as a dragon. However, Rudbeck raised this logic of substitution to the status of a hermeneutic principle, explaining for example that

the elephants mentioned in Plato's famous description of Atlantis actually refer to the wolves of Sweden, because Plato describes the elephants of Atlantis as meaner and more voracious than other animals, a fact showing that he is really, in skaldic fashion, thinking of wolves.¹⁰ Systematically using this kind of allegorical interpretation, Rudbeck had no difficulty proving that Atlantis was really Sweden. He was soon highly admired in Sweden for his ingenious and patriotic reasoning, and for several decades he had a large following in academic circles. Thus the new edition of *Snorra Edda* published in Sweden by Johannes Göransson in 1746 was still considerably influenced by Rudbeck's extreme version of Gothicism (*De yfverborna Atlingars, eller, Sviogötars ok Nordmännners, Edda*).

Around the middle of the eighteenth century, however, Rudbeck's scholarly methods were no longer considered valid even in Sweden, and the entire Gothicism movement fell into disrepute. A new generation of enlightened and sophisticated historians like Ludvig Holberg in Denmark and Olof Dalin in Sweden revised the chauvinistic claims of seventeenth-century antiquarians. Furthermore, by this time a considerable number of Old Norse manuscripts had been scrutinized and analyzed by more competent philologists such as Árni Magnússon in Copenhagen. Yet in the first volume of Dalin's new and for its time quite radical *Svea rikets historia*, published in 1747, *Snorra Edda* was still used as the main source for information about the religion and the poetry of pagan Swedes. Dalin also accepted as historical fact the story in Snorri's prologue about Odin's migration from Asia to Sweden as well as Snorri's thesis that the pagan myths reflected a sort of natural religion similar to Christianity. In fact this medieval idea of a natural religion suited Dalin's enlightened philosophy almost to perfection. He developed this idea further by trying to show — in the spirit of the Scottish deist Andrew Ramsay — that the mythology of the Eddas had basically the same structure and the same major gods as the mythologies of the Greeks, Romans, Iranians, and various other peoples (Lönnroth 1992a; 1996, 114–45).

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Scandinavian advances in textual scholarship as well as the more speculative theorizing of Gothicists like Worm, Resen, and Rudbeck exerted an influence on antiquarian scholars and the literary world in Europe outside Scandinavia. In England a relatively small number of scholars, such as Sir Henry Spelman and, towards the end of the seventeenth century, William Nicolson and George Hickes, became familiar with as many scholarly editions of Old Norse texts as they could gain access to. Grammars and dictionaries of Icelandic were also in great demand but scarce. Hickes, in particular, was in contact with Swedish scholars such as Jonas N. Salan and Johann Peringskiöld (Harris 1992, 59–61) and shows a very good and sympathetic understanding of Old Norse poetry in his *Thesaurus linguarum septentrionalium* of 1703–5 (Fell 1996, 34–53). Around the same time, indeed a little earlier than

10. See Malm 1996, 73–91, esp. 82–83; an earlier English version of Malm's discussion of Rudbeck appeared in Wawn 1994a, 1–25, "Olaus Rudbeck's *Atlantica* and Old Norse Poetics."

Hickes, much more speculative and theoretical synthesizers like Robert Sheringham and Aylett Sammes began to offer the British public digests of Norse mythology and poetics based mostly on the work of Worm and Resen. Runes and their magical powers were a popular subject in Britain, as was a theory that the origin of rhyme in modern verse lay in medieval Scandinavia (Quinn and Clunies Ross 1996, 195–204). However, in this period only a small number of individuals had a close acquaintance with Old Norse poetry and myth, and no one in England rivaled George Hickes in knowledge and appreciation of the subject.

The Nordic Renaissance and Preromanticism

Eighteenth-century poetry in Scandinavia was for a very long time strongly influenced by French models of classicism, which did not encourage the use of Old Norse poetics. Even in Norway, where the Old Norse heritage was being rediscovered toward the end of the century as a major source of nationalistic pride, poets like Johan Nordahl Brun (1745–1816) and Christen Pram (1756–1821) preferred to celebrate their Old Norse heroes in classicistic genres and classicistic verse forms. Although the mythology of *Snorra Edda* was introduced in a book by the Norwegian priest Hans Jacob Wille, *Udtog af den nordiske mythologie, eller Othins gude-lære* (Copenhagen 1787), it took considerable time before these myths influenced the literary language of his countrymen (Hagland 1994).

It was only in Iceland that eighteenth-century classicism and Enlightenment could be combined with indigenous forms of poetic composition. There it was actually possible to use the Old Norse verse forms for various types of modern poetry while maintaining, at the same time, that literature had reached its highest and most enlightened level in classical Greek and Roman culture. Leading Icelandic classicists like the brothers Jón and Eggert Ólafsson or Benedikt Jónsson Gröndal even found it natural to translate Roman poetry as well as English poems by Pope and Milton into the Norse eddic meter *fornyrðislag* (Óskarsdóttir 1996). In the next century this method of adapting classical texts to eddic meter was continued in Sveinbjörn Egilsson's celebrated translations of Homer. But such unorthodox blending of classical texts and Norse forms would have been unthinkable in Denmark, Sweden, or Norway, where the Norse tradition was not as strong and the respect for the poetic rules of French classicism much more rigorous.

Ironically it was not a Scandinavian but Paul-Henri Mallet, a Swiss professor of French living in Copenhagen, who energized the Nordic renaissance in Europe by first challenging these rules and presenting Norse poetry as an unpolished but more exciting alternative to the classicistic tradition. Mallet would hardly have been able to do so, and his books¹¹ would certainly not have become as influential

11. *Introduction a l'histoire de Dannemarc, ou l'on traite de la religion, des loix, des mœurs et des usages des anciens Danois* (Copenhagen 1755) and *Monumens de la mythologie et de la poesie des Celtes, et particulièrement des anciens Scandinaves, pour servir de supplement et de preuves a*

as they did, if the educated avant-garde of western Europe had not in the 1750s become enthused with Rousseau's "noble savage" and the new preromantic concept of the sublime. For the sublime was at this time no longer just regarded, as in the poetics of Longinus or Boileau, as the height of beauty or the most noble form of beauty but often as something entirely *different* from classical beauty (Monk 1960; Weiskel 1976; Ashfield and de Bolla 1996). Sublime art was terrible, violent, and awe-inspiring, like thunderstorms, enormous threatening mountains, endless deserts, nightmares, madness, divine revelations, and visions of hell. The dark and enigmatic language spoken by the prophets of the Old Testament or the Apocalypse of the New Testament was sublime. Sublime too was the barbaric and archaic poetry of wild and primitive people not yet tamed, domesticated, and corrupted by modern civilization. It was this new aesthetics that made it possible for Mallet and his followers to present Old Norse poetry as particularly sublime (Omberg 1976; Lönnroth 1995).

It is interesting to note that Mallet was still primarily a classicist when he wrote the 1755 version of his *Introduction*. His description of Old Norse poetry thus followed Scandinavian authorities like Ole Worm in emphasizing the intricacies of skaldic language and verse-making rather than the sublime nature of eddic myth. However, in the second edition of his *Histoire de Dannemarc* (1763) Mallet has become converted to the new preromantic aesthetics of Rousseau and Edmund Burke. Now it is the "primitive" but obscure images of mythological eddic poetry that he particularly admires, and he praises the Norse poets because of their mythical imagination, inspired by passions "not impaired by the constraint of laws and education" (Lönnroth 1994; the translation is by Thomas Percy).

This view of Norse poetry as wild, passionate, and sublime, which soon became characteristic of preromanticism, strongly influenced not only Mallet's choice of Old Norse poems but also his selection of passages from *Snorra Edda* for translation into French. The texts he chose to translate were, on the whole, melodramatic poems with a mythical content like *Krákumál* and *Hákonarmál*, and from Snorri's work Mallet selected the mythical sections of *Gylfaginning*, not the technical rules of *Skáldskaparmál*. As a result, public attention was now focused on the obscure symbolism and bold imagery of eddic myth, not for the most part on the technicalities of skaldic meters or the intellectual intricacies of the kenning system, though these latter were of interest to some British translators of Norse and Celtic poetry like Thomas Percy and Evan Evans (Clunies Ross 1998, 65–70). Furthermore, from now on Old Norse poetry would be received by most readers of the preromantic age in the "metaphysical" vein of Peder Resen's preface to *Snorra Edda* (Malm 1996, 100–103, 118–30).

Mallet's books were very popular and extremely influential, not only in France (Dillmann 1996) but throughout western Europe, and they were quickly

"*L'Introduction a l'histoire de Dannemarc*" (Copenhagen 1756). In 1763 an enlarged second edition of Mallet's *Histoire de Dannemarc* was published in six volumes in Geneva.

translated into both German and English. An anonymous German translation with a preface by Gottfried Schütze appeared in three parts between 1765 and 1769,¹² while Thomas Percy published his *Northern Antiquities* in London in 1770. In Germany and Britain the works of Mallet and Resen were chief sources for the reading public's knowledge of Old Norse poetry and myth, and Mallet provided, in addition, a holistic interpretative framework against which ordinary readers and creative writers could assimilate this new exotic primitivism to which they could claim an ancestral relationship. There is evidence from both Britain and Germany that women readers and poets found a particular source of inspiration in the female characters of Norse mythological and heroic poetry (Krömmelbein 1997; Clunies Ross 1998, 26, 33, 183).

In both countries, the influence of Mallet and of other writers like Bartholin can be detected in literary texts of the preromantic period very early on. The popularity of the supposedly ancient Gaelic poetry translated by James Macpherson was another spur to the production of poetry inspired by Norse themes, as was the new general interest in ethnic and oral poetic traditions. In Germany, the first to make use of Norse poetry in his own work was Heinrich Wilhelm Gerstenberg. The influence of Mallet and especially Bartholin is apparent in his *Gedicht eines Skalden* (1766), with its Bartholinian theme of heroic defiance of death and the apotheosis of friendship and *Todesbund* (Krömmelbein 1995, A452). In England, Thomas Gray became familiar with Mallet's books almost as soon as they were published and had an excellent knowledge of all the other major and minor authors on Old Norse, including Resen, Bartholin, Torfaeus, and Keyßler, as his letters and *Commonplace Book* reveal. Gray's two Norse odes, *The Fatal Sisters* and *The Descent of Odin* (1768), based on *Darraðarljóð* and *Baldrs draumar* respectively, were probably the most influential of all Norse translations into English in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Clunies Ross 1998, 105–66; see the illustrations to Gray's *Descent of Odin* by Henry Fuseli reproduced in fig. 1 and by William Blake reproduced on the front cover of this journal issue). Like his Austrian counterpart Michael Denis (1729–1800) in his *Lieder Sineds des Barden* (Vienna 1772), Gray provided learned commentary and notes to accompany his poetic versions of Norse poetry, as did Thomas Percy in his *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* (London 1763). Herder and Friedrich David Gräter also show the same combination of literary and scholarly interests, a characteristic particularly prominent in Gräter's anthology *Nordische Blumen* (Leipzig 1789), in which he published eight of the mythological poems of the Elder Edda translated from the first volume of the Copenhagen Edda (1787), together with three studies on norns, valkyries, and Valhalla (Heinrichs 1986, 19–20; Krömmelbein 1995, A453–55; Weber 1996, 82–83). Thus while many of the early romantic poets of both Britain and Germany drew on the versions of Norse poetry and myth popularized by

12. For bibliographical details and the reception history of Mallet in Germany, see Krömmelbein 1995. For the British reception, and details of Percy's version of Mallet, see Clunies Ross 1998.



Fig. 1. Henry Fuseli (Johann Heinrich Füssli), *Odin empfängt die Weissagung vom Tod Balders* [Odin receives the prophecy of Baldr's death], illustration to Thomas Gray's poem *The Descent of Odin*. Pen and sepia wash, 272 × 397 mm, drawn in 1776. Stockholm, Nationalmuseum, Sergel Collection, inv. no. 1686/1875 (T517). (Schiff catalog no. 487.)

Mallet and his translators, later supplemented by the Copenhagen Edda (Legatus Arna-Magnaeus 1787), as sources of inspiration for their own poetry, they were also interested in the study of early Norse poetry and myth for its own sake. In England, Coleridge contemplated writing a "Poem . . . in the manner of Dantè on the excursion of Thor," while his friend Robert Southey wrote a dedicatory epistle to Amos Cottle's 1797 verse translation of the poems in the first volume of the Copenhagen Edda (Clunies Ross 1998, 167–68).

Nordic poetry and myth came to be seen as a viable alternative inspiration to Greek and Roman antiquity and classical mythology for these writers and for a number of painters and sculptors from Britain, Germany, and Scandinavia. Many regarded classical culture as effete and decadent, yet it was still an uphill battle to acquaint the general reading public with sufficient background in Norse poetry and myth, however sublime it may have been considered, to cause them to abandon the classical mainstream. A renewed interest in Italy and then Greece caused many to develop their interests in the Middle Ages not in the North, but in the medieval Christian-classical traditions of southern Europe and the Holy Roman Empire.

It is symptomatic that the eighteenth-century translators of Norse poetry only occasionally tried to imitate Norse verse forms (*fornyrðislag*, *ljóðaháttur*, etc.) and generally preferred to present their translations either as rhetorical prose or in

more conventional rhymed meters of the kind used by most European classicists. The first method was used by Mallet and Percy, the second by Gray and some later poets in Germany and Scandinavia. Another, only slightly more faithful method of translation was used by Herder and in Sandvig's Danish translation of the Poetic Edda, where the poems were presented in a sort of free-verse imitation of Old Norse meters without regular alliteration (Sandvig 1783–85).¹³ (On translators and metrics, see in particular Malm 1996, 147–239.) When the Swedish classicistic poet Gudmund Jöran Adlerbeth (1751–1818), who had been inspired by Mallet and Percy, wanted to demonstrate the poetic beauty of Norse poetry to the Swedish Academy in 1786, he used an extreme version of the second method by transforming Eyvindr Skáldaspillir's *Hákonarmál* into a strictly formal “funeral ode” in rhymed alexandrines and a high-flown rhetoric totally foreign to the Icelandic original (Lönnroth 1996–97). It was thus not the verse nor the diction but the bold imagery and heroic content of the poems that originally impressed their eighteenth-century admirers. During the era of national romanticism, in the nineteenth century, Old Norse metrics gradually became accepted by translators and poets alike.

National Romanticism

One of the most important ideological developments that took place alongside the recovery of the early medieval poetic traditions of Europe was the identification of this supposedly ancient poetry as the true national literature of the respective language groups. People came to identify with medieval literature as the primitive expression of their own culture in its earlier phases. In this context, partly because of the wealth of extant Old Norse poetry and myth of pre-Christian character, and partly because its modern Icelandic and Scandinavian interpreters and editors had made the texts more accessible to the reading public than was yet the case with medieval Celtic and Romance texts, Old Norse poetry took on a special ethnic significance, not only for Scandinavians, but also, vicariously, for the other Germanic-speaking nations of Europe, in Britain, the Netherlands, and Germany.

The situation in Britain was somewhat different from that in Germany. Influential literary theorists like Thomas Percy and Thomas Warton argued strongly for Old Norse poetry as the true origin of the medieval romance, which they regarded as the foundation of medieval English verse and thus of the English poetic tradition after the Middle Ages. In Percy's view, this tradition was transmitted by a class of oral itinerant minstrels, descendants of the Norse skalds, who “continued a distinct order of men for many ages after the Norman Conquest; and got their livelihood by singing verses to the harp at the houses of the great” (Percy 1765,

13. Percy also used free verse in the unpublished translations of Old Norse poems in his notebook (now MS Bodley Percy c. 7), though never in his published versions. On possible reasons for his varying practices, see Clunies Ross 1998, 94.

1:xvi). The ballad singers and broadside artists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, whose products Percy published and popularized in his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) were regarded as the latter-day descendants of the itinerant minstrels who had entertained the noble classes during the Middle Ages.

In Germany, Herder had read Old Norse poetry as “folk literature” and thus as something fundamentally different from the poetry created by educated intellectuals of his own time. Folk literature was, in Herder’s view, an expression of each nation’s quintessential “folk spirit” (*Volksgeist*) and also of its earliest history, but his original interest in the literary manifestations of the folk spirit had been aesthetic and anthropological rather than political. When his ideas were given a political twist, however, which happened in many countries of northern Europe during the Napoleonic wars, the early *Sturm und Drang* romanticism was transformed into national romanticism, and the Eddas again became a concern for Germanic, and Scandinavian, nationalists. The mythical and heroic poems of the Edda were now not only considered sublime from an aesthetic point of view but were also thought of as a political heritage, expressive of the early nation’s noblest aspirations and dreams.¹⁴

In some German variants of national romanticism, Herder’s view of *Volksdichtung* and *Volksgeist* was combined with Fichte’s activist philosophy, which exhorted young intellectuals to build a new German nation, liberated from the French troops of Napoleon and from foreign influences in general. The Norse myths were later interpreted by German nationalists as German or Germanic and used in the construction of utopian dreams of a new Germania. In some particularly metaphysical projects the myths were reinterpreted in light of Schelling’s philosophy of nature, according to which myths contain obscure but profound symbolic messages indicative of unconscious spiritual forces inherent in nature, forces which only superior beings can perceive and utilize for the good of the nation. Some German romantics thought more or less religiously about the Scandinavian past as a chiliastic future, when promises of national greatness would be fulfilled — an interpretation of history somewhat reminiscent of medieval typology. Many of these ideas also spread to Scandinavia and Iceland, but they were not generally adopted with the same metaphysical fervor as in Germany, partly because the political situation there was different, partly because Old Norse material was more familiar to the Scandinavians and particularly to the Icelanders (Weber 1996).

As an intellectual movement, national romanticism may be said to have started in Germany with poets like Gottfried August Bürger (1748–94) and continued in the early nineteenth century with the folkloristic and literary activities of the so-called Heidelberg romantics (most prominent of whom were Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano) and the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. In

14. For a recent discussion of the philosophical roots of national romanticism in German and Scandinavian art and literature, see Zeitler 1992.

Denmark it started shortly after 1800 with the poets Adam Oehlenschläger (1779–1859) and Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783–1872); in Sweden around 1810 with the poet Per Daniel Amadeus Atterbom (1790–1855) and the members of Götiska förbundet, of whom the best known were the poet and historian Erik Gustaf Geijer (1783–1847), the poet Per Henrik Ling (1776–1839), and the poet Esaias Tegnér (1782–1846). In Norway the national romanticism movement began in the 1830s with the historian Rudolf Keyser (1803–64), the historian Peter Andreas Munch (1810–63), and the poet Henrik Wergeland (1808–45) (Zeitler 1992, 11–19; cf. Weber 1996, 85–96). In Iceland it also started in the 1830s with the so-called Fjölnismenn: the poet Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–45), the priest Tómas Sæmundsson (1807–41), and others (Egilsson 1996).

In all of these countries national romanticism was associated, for a shorter or longer period, with a nationalistic revival, in which young students and academic teachers tried to raise their countrymen's consciousness of their own heritage in order to muster their support against some foreign oppressor or threat (in Germany the French, in Sweden the Russians, in Denmark the Germans, in Iceland and Norway the Danes or the Swedes, etc.) or against some decadent source of corruption, in Scandinavia frequently represented by the Catholic or Roman culture of southern Europe. But it should be noted that nationalism was not militant except in brief periods of war or political turmoil (in Sweden, for example, after the war against Russia 1809–10, in Denmark during the wars against Germany 1848 and 1864). During these periods mythical Viking warriors were held up as national heroes, but when peace was achieved, the heroism receded and was transformed into a mild form of folklorism.¹⁵ It was only in Germany that the nationalistic fervor continued more or less unabated throughout this period.

Although the academic leaders of national romanticism eagerly collected "folk poetry" and frequently spoke in the name of their folk, they were quite elitist in their view of the people. In Oehlenschläger's famous nationalistic poem *Guldhornene* it is thus made clear that only a few select and superior geniuses have the gift to perceive and understand the great wonders of the nation's glorious past. The Swedish Götiska förbundet, which admired the Eddas as perfect examples of "folk poetry," was not open to common people but only to a small number of particularly gifted poets and academic experts on Old Norse culture. According to Rudolf Keyser, the national folk culture manifested itself most clearly not in ordinary people, whose minds were thought to be too muddled and confused to appreciate its finer values, but rather in a few enlightened and superior spirits, who were able to give this culture a more noble form in which it could be radiated back to the masses. This view of the elite as the legitimate spokesmen and ideal interpret-

15. In this report we make no attempt to address the question of whether the British resorted to a version of national romanticism in the nineteenth century. We await the comprehensive study by Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, forthcoming).

ers of the people partly explains why some early editions of Scandinavian ballads contained texts that had in fact been revised and partly rewritten by the editors to conform with their ideals of national “folk literature.”¹⁶ The same practice can be observed in British editions of ballads and folk songs from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

One project that for many years engaged some adherents of the national romanticism movement was the attempt to allegorize the Eddas by creating a new symbolic language for contemporary poets based on Norse mythology. In 1800 the University of Copenhagen had set a new topic for a prize essay: “Would it be fruitful for poetry in Scandinavia if ancient Norse mythology were to be introduced and commonly accepted by our poets as an alternative to Greek mythology?” The winner of the contest answered no, but the young Adam Oehlenschläger, who won the second prize, answered yes, and a few years later, in 1804, he indeed produced a series of brilliant poems based on eddic myths. However, the most ambitious attempt to create a new poetic language based on these myths was carried out by N.F.S. Grundtvig. In *Nordens mytologi* (1808) he construed the entire mythology as the creation of a great poet, whose philosophical ideas about the world were expressed in symbolic form. In his later, thoroughly rewritten version of this work (Grundtvig 1832) he presented the myths as a “Symbolic language historico-poetically explained and enlightened” and commended them for use in ordinary life “to revive all our knowledge of human nature and to adorn our life.” In fact Grundtvig used his newly discovered — or rather invented — “symbolic language” to preach his own idealistic, nationalistic, and highly romantic philosophy of education, which he presented as a democratic alternative to the elitist classical learning taught by the universities. *Nordens mytologi* of 1832 served as a basis for some of Grundtvig’s own poetry and later as a tool of religious and political agitation by some of his most ardent followers in the folk high school movement. Yet except for a small group of enthusiasts, Grundtvig’s attempt to replace classical mythology and create a new symbolic language never really caught on, partly because the Norse myths were not sufficiently well known to the public, but also because the whole project was ridiculed by more rationalistic intellectuals such as the influential Danish critic Georg Brandes (1842–1927). Indeed, Grundtvig’s own mythological poems have survived even less well than some of his other works (Lundgreen-Nielsen 1994; Lönnroth 1979, 1988).

Grundtvig’s attempt to create a consistent system of symbols based on the Edda was at least partly anticipated by the Swedish poets P.D.A. Atterbom and P.H. Ling. In 1811 Atterbom published a long mythological poem, *Skaldar-mal*, together with an extensive commentary based on Dalin, Schelling, and other theoretical authorities, in which he explained the gods of Norse mythology and their

16. See Lönnroth 1992b. Also in Iceland the leading national romantics — Jónas Hallgrímsson et al. — had a paternalistic, not to say supercilious, attitude towards the uneducated “folk” whose native literary traditions they were supposed to represent; cf. Glauser 1994.

various attributes as symbols of abstract entities. For example, Thor was described as “a symbol of God’s male principle, Light or Reason, which impregnates the Natural ground or the original Imagination” (Malm 1996, 135–37; Lönnroth 1992a). In *Eddornas sinnebildslära* (1819) P. H. Ling presented a series of allegorizations of the Norse pantheon, intended for use by other Swedish poets as a patriotic alternative to similar allegorizations of Greek and Roman mythology. But neither Atterbom nor Ling had much following, even among the members of *Götiska förbundet*, the most influential Swedish group of intellectuals devoted to national romanticism. Their ideological leader, Erik Gustaf Geijer, even sharply criticized such attempts to substitute Norse mythology for classical mythology in art and literature (Grandien 1987, 56–58).

Geijer, Oehlenschläger, and most other leading romantics in Scandinavia used the eddic myths more sparingly, and after their most ardent nationalistic fervor had cooled, their concern for the Old Norse heritage was balanced by a strong aesthetic appreciation of classical culture. Although they often derived their poetic motifs and images from the Poetic Edda or *Snorra Edda*, they generally did not try to use Old Norse meter or to imitate the intricate kennings of the skalds. They preferred to write in a more contemporary, European style, using such “foreign” meters as Shakespearean blank verse or Italian ottava rima. Sweden’s most celebrated work of national romanticism, Bishop Esaias Tegnér’s narrative poem *Frithiofs saga* (1824), took its plot and some of its poetic images from a mythical *fornaldarsaga*, *Friðþjófs saga hins frækna*, but its verse, poetic diction, and sentimental love story are certainly more typical of German or English romanticism than of Old Norse texts. Tegnér even lets his mythical saga hero Frithiof visit the classical ruins of Greece in order to become less of a Viking and more of a polished gentleman. The genteel nineteenth-century flavor and romantic tone of this “Viking” poem secured its unprecedented success in Victorian Britain (Wawn 1994b). In Scandinavia *Frithiofs saga* was widely read and admired as a classic even in the twentieth century by Anton Blanck’s generation, but it probably would not have been as popular if it had not represented a rather mild and humanistic version of national romanticism, in which the Old Norse elements had been much diluted.

An extreme and semireligious version of national romanticism remained virulent in only one country, Germany, where it may be said to have culminated in Richard Wagner’s *Ring des Nibelungen* (1854–74), the most successful work of the entire movement.¹⁷ Here the symbolic images and even the alliterative verse of eddic poetry are used to express a political philosophy, or eschatology, according to which the Germanic hero’s metaphysical destiny and utopian mission is to defend everything that is noble and beautiful in this world against the evil forces of capitalism and modern civilisation (Weber 1996, 74–75). As in Atterbom’s *Skalda-*

17. Concerning Wagner’s use of Norse sources and of forerunners like Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué (*Der Held des Nordens*, 1808–10), see in particular Krömmelbein 1982 and Spencer 1995.

mal, the Norse gods represent profound philosophical ideas: thus Wotan/Odin is a personification of the world spirit, the masculine principle of will and conscious intelligence that will transform nature, while the *vǫlva* Erda corresponds with the Earth Mother or Mother Nature herself, possessing the unconscious wisdom of the primeval world. Wagner's presentation of Norse myth is based on the aesthetics of the sublime; there are many scenes of terror, mystery, and wild passion. But it is the underlying metaphysics which gives the drama a "higher" meaning as ritual and Germanic manifestation (Lönnroth 1995).

The Decline of National Romanticism

During the second half of the nineteenth century Old Norse culture became immensely popular, not only in the Scandinavian countries but also in Germany and Victorian England. The sagas and the poems of the Edda, together with romantic adaptations such as Bishop Tegnér's *Frithiofs saga*, were translated into many languages, and a more or less artificial "Viking style" became fashionable in architecture, interior decorating, dressmaking, and many other areas of bourgeois life (Wawn 1994b; Grandien 1987). At the same time, however, many radical artists and intellectuals who identified themselves with the "modern breakthrough" of Scandinavia turned away from national romanticism, both as an ideology and as a form of art, in favor of social realism, naturalism, or some early version of modernism. Quite a few adopted a critical or even contemptuous attitude towards the Viking kitsch promoted by overenthusiastic admirers of Old Norse culture.

Thus "Viking culture" in its romantic and nationalistic guise became an integral part of bourgeois culture or even of mass culture, while it declined as an intellectual movement and as an innovative force in art and literature. Only a few late romantics of the late nineteenth century, such as the Englishman William Morris (1834–96) or the Swede Viktor Rydberg (1828–95), still made serious use of eddic myth and Old Norse verse forms, but their nostalgic antiquarianism attracted few followers among younger and more modern poets.

In the twentieth century the gap widened considerably between the popular and the avant-garde attitude to Old Norse culture. The popular attitude was largely shaped by the nationalistic mass movements of northern Europe, while the avant-garde attitude was modernistic and characterized by hostility towards any form of Germanic nationalism or antiquarianism. The symbolic language of the Eddas was thus only occasionally used by prominent Scandinavian modernists such as Gunnar Ekelöf (1907–68),¹⁸ but it was extensively exploited in the ideological rhetoric of various populist groups, among which the National Socialists of Germany eventually became the most influential and the most infamous. As a result, the Norse myths and the poetic heritage of the skalds became tainted with

18. For a comparison of Ekelöf's modernistic use of eddic myth and imagery with the more traditionally romantic one of Viktor Rydberg, see Lönnroth 1996, 169–207.

racist ideas that made them virtually impossible to use in the leading intellectual and literary circles of Europe after the fall of the Third Reich. Although the taint has faded during recent decades, it is still there, effectively precluding the emergence of a new Nordic cultural renaissance. However, in New Age sects and in subcultures hostile to modern civilization and often devoted to some obscure version of neofascism, Norse myths are very much alive (Schnurbein 1992), as they are in various genres of fantasy and creative reenactment that have become very popular in the second half of the twentieth century, especially among young people in Europe, North America, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand.

In general, a pragmatic approach to Norse poetry now prevails again over the metaphysical one in academic and literary circles. When the Poetic Edda or *Snorra Edda* are studied today, usually in a classroom situation, the poems are thus no longer read as sublime revelations but as texts rationally constructed in accordance with specific rules that are no longer used by contemporary poets. There is an interest in the diction and verse forms of the poetry and in the conceptual world, Christian, pagan, or both, that the poems reveal. In a sense, we have come back full circle to the “learned” reception of medieval grammarians such as Óláfr Þórðarson or the redactor of Codex Wormianus (see above, 8–9)

So far, the reception process of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been only superficially studied in our project. This is obviously an area where much research remains to be done. Nevertheless it should be possible to draw some general conclusions not only about the birth of the Nordic renaissance but also about its demise as an active force in the Western literary tradition.

The original inspiration of the Nordic renaissance had been individualistic and revolutionary rather than nationalistic or nostalgic. Eighteenth-century intellectuals like Mallet and Gray admired Norse poetry primarily because it seemed to them a sublime and passionate expression of the human heart, an exciting fresh alternative to Roman classicism, and only secondarily because it was the symbol of a particular race or nation. National romanticism, however, transformed this admiration into a nationalistic enthusiasm which in the long run proved to be fatal, even if it made the Eddas much more popular than before among ordinary readers in northern Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Scandinavia the nationalism remained largely harmless, but in Germany the Nazi tendency to project Norse myth as a chiliastic future for the Aryan race (Weber 1996) became so destructive that the poetry itself was compromised.

We can thus hardly agree with Anton Blanck in regarding the Nordic renaissance as the inauguration of a golden age, that of national romanticism. Instead we can today see it as a discovery of poetic forces that were originally liberating, because they tended to overturn the rules of classicism, but potentially destructive as soon as they merged with the forces of nationalism.

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